“Not an equal, but a greater payback”: Guilt and Character in the *Vorgeschichte* of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the character of Oedipus’ action *narrated* on the stage, namely, the *Vorgeschichte* of the stage action. Two realms of action are considered separately: first, Corinth and Delphi, where the words of the drunk at the banquet was at issue, and second, the crossroads, where fatal meeting between Laios and his young son occurred.

As for the first realm, I argue that what the drunk said was not only false, but implied a grave abuse against the assumed mother of Oedipus, Merope, and Oedipus had good intellectual and moral reason for not taking him seriously and not connecting Pythian oracle with the libel.

As for the second, I argue that his story of the crossroads is full of indeterminacies which made it impossible to determine the culpability of his action. What is more, whether Oedipus was morally culpable or not is irrelevant to the tragic outcome at the crossroads as far as he followed the principle of exceeding, one of the basic virtues of the heroic tradition.

However, to conclude that it is this heroic principle of exceeding that is denounced in this tragedy because it is inconsistent with the democratic principle of classical Athens is to oversimplify the matter implied in this tragedy. This principle was still felt positively for a spectator who could imagine himself to be in such a situation as a crossroads where it is not sure one can rely on any legal authority. Oedipus was, in this sense, “like us” and that is why his fall caused “pity” of the spectator.

Introduction

In spite of E. R. Dodds’ strong assertion half a century ago that seeing a moral flaw in the character of Oedipus is one of the major misunderstandings that “are demonstrably false” (1966: 38), the
search for guilt(1) in his behavior on-stage and its *Vorgeschichte* has been one of the most favored interpretational projects concerning the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Oedipus still is accused of pride and over-confidence, and of "unjustified suspicions against Teiresias and Creon"(Dodds 1966: 38).

I have argued in detail that the ascription of a moral or intellectual flaw in Oedipus’ behavior on stage is unfounded and his character on stage is, as far as we accept the Aristotelian concept of character, basically good(2). Nor can we ascribe him an intellectual flaw in believing that Teiresias and Creon are conspiring against him. His abductive inference is indeed almost flawless except for the assumption that he himself is not a regicide. He did not know himself in this respect. *Oedipus Tyrannus* is, after all, a drama of the search for one’s true self and the hero *bona fide* carries out this search.

In this paper, I will consider the behavior of Oedipus in the *Vorgeschichte*, namely, before he came to the rule of Thebes, whose story he told in ll. 771-833. Two realms of action in this story should be considered independently. First, his responses to the drunk at the banquet who told that he is a fabricated child to his father and to the Pythian Oracle that predicted that he would commit patricide and incest. And second, his responses to Laios and his entourage at the Crossroads where three roads meet.

1 Pythian Oracle and the Drunk at the Banquet

Among the many critics whose accusation of Oedipus is based on his actions before the play begins, few cite the marriage with Jocasta itself as an instance of his moral guilt, which, it seems, was accessory to the gift of kingship from the Thebes. His fault lies, they assume, in the carelessness concerning both the libel of the drunk at the banquet and the oracle at Delphi telling him that he would kill his father and marry his own mother. It is rather an intellectual fault than a moral guilt. Oedipus should have, they argue, associated the oracle with the libel that he was not the true son of his father and should have avoided marrying a woman who was old enough to be his mother(3). I shall consider if this accusation is reasonable.

In his confession to Jocasta and the chorus, Oedipus tells the story of the banquet and the drunk.

At a banquet, a man, fully drunken, over his wine said to me that I am a fabricated son of my father. I was distressed and just barely held back for that day, but on the next day I went to my mother and father and asked them. They were very angry with the man who launched that word of taunt. I was pleased by their reaction, but nevertheless, the matter continued to distress me because the rumor crept about widely. So I went to Pytho unnoticed by mother and father. Phoebus, however, did not send me the honor for which I came,

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(1) Cf. Lurje (2004) for the historical survey and contemporary examination of this search.
(2) Kitano (2014), not yet published.
but declared clearly the other things that is full of horror and sorrow to me the miserable:
that I was fated to have sex with mother and to reveal to the people a race that they cannot
endure to see, and that I would be the murderer of the father who begot me (779-793)(4).

The drunk said neither that Oedipus was a bastard, nor a stepson. He said he was a ‘fabricated’, or
‘supposititious’ son (πλαστός) of his father. As F. Ahl has explained, fabricated son (πλαστός πατρί) is
“an infant imported by the mother and ‘passed off on his father’ ” (1991: 143).

A typical type of the fabricated son is, according to Ahl, available from the Euripidean version of
the Oedipal tragedy. In the prologue of Phoenissae, Jocasta tells the story of her son’s entrance into
the Corinthian palace.

And having sowed, as father/ recognising his error and of the god’s command,/ at the
meadow of Hera and the crag of Kithairon/ he gave the infant to herdsmen to expose./ …
But the herdsmen of Polybos took him up,/ carried him home and placed him in the hands
of/ their mistress. The painful result of my labour/ she set to her breast and persuaded her
husband she had given birth (22-25, 28-31) (5).

In Phoenissae, the queen of Corinth made her husband believe that Oedipus was their own son, who
in reality is a son of neither of his assumed parents. Oedipus was really a πλαστός in this version.
“The only way one could normally pass off a supposititious child was if the mother tricked the fa-
ther into thinking that the child was his when it was not (Ahl 1991: 176).” In the patriarchal society
of Athens, where girls had no claim for the inheritance of the family estate, a supposititious son was
familiar enough for the comic poet Aristophanes to mention and explain one of its modi operandi in
his Thesmophoriazusae (502-516).

The phrase “You are a fabricated son of your father” implies not only that Polybus is not the true
father of Oedipus, but also that Merope deceived her husband into believing that Oedipus was his
ture son. The claim that Oedipus should have associated the drunk’s words with the Delphic oracle
assumes that his accusation was trustworthy, which was not only false (as he was a foundling and not
a fabricated son) but also contained a grave slander against his mother. There is no serious reason for
Oedipus to care about the truth of his words. Oedipus consulted Delphi not because he had a serious

(4) All the translations of the texts not in English are, unless stated otherwise, my own.
(5) I used the translation of E. Craik (1988), but followed F. A. Paley (1879) and others who have deleted ll. 26-27, where the
piercing of his ankles and the origin of Oedipus’ name are told. Cf. Mastronarde (1994: 149-152) for the discussion of the
emendation. (He argues against the deletion.) My main reason for this deletion is that it seems to me very improbable that
the queen could have succeeded in persuading her husband that the baby whose ankles were pierced was their newly born
child. As for the origin of Oedipus’ name, Jocasta’s prologue seems to tell another story (42-43), according to which the
colts of Laius’ entourage “blooded him with the tendons of his feet”. In Greek tragedy, it was not exceptional to associate
the hero’s name with the deed he did after the name had been given, and not before. Cf. Ajax 430-31, Ion 830.
doubt about his origins, but because “the rumor crept out deeply\(^6\),” that is, Corinthian people began to believe it. What he wanted Phoebus for is the denial of the rumor that he was a fabricated son. As the oracle the God gave was both surprising and serious, Oedipus decided not to return to Corinth because he believed Polybus and Merope to be his parents.

2 The ambiguity of the murder at the crossroads

Having established that what happened at Corinth or Delphi does not show the intellectual flaw of Oedipus, we should go to the crossroads where three roads meet. Many critics find the murder at the crossroads morally flawed. Of course, it is clear that he did not kill his father intentionally. However, if he had killed innocent men with malice, he would not be morally justifiable in any sense, and the fact that the victim was his father would only increase the revulsion against him and his fall would be φιλανθρωπόν\(^7\), which causes the moral satisfaction of poetic justice and not tragic pity and fear. Tragic pity is, according to Aristotle, caused by “undeserved misfortune” and tragic fear by “that of one like ourselves” (Poetics 1453a5-6). Our appreciation of his character and our response to Oedipus Tyrannus depends crucially on how we evaluate the murder at the crossroads.

For some critics, it is Oedipus who was completely responsible for the quarrel itself and the massacre it resulted in. For others, Laius started and was therefore responsible for the quarrel and the subsequent physical battle. It is here at this crossroads that every action becomes ambiguous and what really happened is cautiously beyond the reach of the audience.

Lady, I will tell you the truth now. When I walked and came near the three-forked road, I met with a herald and a man riding on a carriage drawn by colts, as you have said. The guide and the elderly man himself tried to drive me away violently from the road. And the one who pushed me aside, that is, the driver, I struck him in anger. The elderly man, as he saw this, watching me passing by the carriage, brought a horsegoad with two sharp points straight on my head. Yet he paid not an equal but a greater payback: swiftly struck with the staff of this hand, he immediately rolled out from the center of the carriage on his back. I killed all of them (800-812).

The fact that this confession has been so variously interpreted and used to demonstrate both the innocence and guilt of Oedipus might suggest its essential ambiguity.

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(6) Some critics, however, have interpreted ὑφεῖρπε γὰρ πολύ as “it crept under his skin deeply” and thought that it expresses Oedipus’ growing doubt about his own origin rather than his concern that the rumor was spreading among the people. There is no decisive evidence to support one’s preference.

(7) Cf. Schadewaldt (1955: 135) for this interpretation of the φιλανθρωπία.
2-1 Oedipus the swollen foot?

Before establishing our claim that the point of this recollection lies in its ambiguity, we have to deal with a relatively little discussed element that does not fit with rest of the play: the staff of Oedipus. Is Oedipus lame and does he use a staff to assist his walk on the stage?

Teiresias’ exit speech tells us that Oedipus “will make his way to a foreign land pointing the ground before him with his staff (455-456)” and it implies that he was not using staff at that moment\(^\text{(8)}\). Further, his answer to the riddle of the Sphinx about the foot suggests that he connects the staff, the third foot, only with old age\(^\text{(9)}\). Although the riddle and answer were not directly mentioned in this play, it seems ridiculous to assume that Sophocles should have intended any other versions of the riddle than the one which concerns one being with four, two, three feet. Both the exit speech of Teiresias and the riddle of the Sphinx imply that Oedipus walks without the help of the staff on the stage.

But at least his name implies that he has always been a “swollen foot”, one might assume. Not necessarily. In fact, two possible origins of his name were suggested in this play. The first, “the swollen foot”, derives from the piercing of his feet by his Theban parents to ensure his death. “From that fortune you were named with the name you still have (1036),” says the Corinthian messenger. It is, as R. D. Griffith (1996: 71) has pointed out, his Corinthian parents who named Oedipus as “οἰδεῖ πούς, ‘Your foot is swollen’.” However, when the Corinthian tells of the foot piercing of the baby, the story seems to be new to Oedipus. “Indeed, a dreadful shame wrapped me in my cradle (1035),” he says.

Moreover, it is impossible to assume that when he mentions his name before the suppliants in the prologue to answer their prayer, he uses his name in this sense.

My children, thinking that it is not just to hear the reason [why you are gathering] from heralds, that is, from others, I myself came here, the renowned Oedipus with which name you all call me (6-8).

Nor in his quarrel with Teiresias, where he denies the prophetic authority of the latter.

But clearly you did not have the art [of prophecy], either from birds or known from some god. Rather, it was I who came, the know-nothing Oedipus, and stopped her (395-398).

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(8) He may have a scepter with him, as the symbol of his royal authority.

(9) S. Benardete (1966: 111) is one of the few critics who made Oedipus appear disabled and with the staff to help walk on stage. It is natural, then, that she excluded Oedipus himself from his answer to the riddle. Oedipus, in her interpretation, had been ‘three-footed’ throughout his career. When he was baby, his two feet were pierced together and he did not have four feet. And all the rest of his life, he could not walk without the staff. However fascinating this interpretation may be, it does not correspond with the words of Teiresias.
In these speeches, Oedipus clearly intends his name to have another meaning that implies the second version of the origin of his name, ‘the foot knower’. He “interprets his name as οἶδα πούς, ‘I know about feet’” (Griffith 1996: 71). When he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, he must have believed that this was the correct meaning of his name. He recognizes its true origin and meaning for the first time when the Corinthian messenger tells him the story. So there is no hint of the swollenness of his feet before that scene.

Only in his recollection of the crossroads, however, did he mention the staff, and said that he had used it to beat Laius. He said nothing more about the staff. In popular representation of his legend, the staff is a common element in his confrontation with the Sphinx. A good part, if not all, of the vase paintings that depicted Oedipus in front of the Sphinx represent him with the staff (10). It is as if the staff had sneaked into the tragedy from this legendary sphere. The staff might not be ambiguous in itself, but it enhances the ambiguity of his story as a whole.

2-2 Ambiguities

The ambiguities lie not only in the evaluation of the action, but also in the action itself: How many were in Laius’ entourage? How did the action proceed and escalate into the massacre? Where did they meet and what kind of place was the crossroads? Should he have given way to Laius? Was the action of Oedipus illegal, or was it in some way justifiable? My view is that most of these questions of number, action, place, priority and justifiability are intentionally indeterminate.

The Number: Oedipus mentioned five names. 1) A herald, 2) a man riding on a carriage, 3) the guide, 4) the elderly man and 5) the one who pushed him aside, the driver. As 2) and 4) are clearly the same, we have four individuals at most and the surviving herdsman was not mentioned in his story. So if the party consisted of four men excluding the herdsman, it corresponds to the number of the entourage Jocasta mentioned, namely five. However, 1) and 3) seem most likely to be the same (11). So we have most likely three individuals excluding the herdsman. The herald and the driver were walking in front of the colts, the latter drawing them. The king was sitting alone in the carriage. The herdsman was not involved in the battle. He must have escaped before the quarrel escalated into

(10) Cf. Goldman (1911), Robert (1915: 48-58), Moret (1984: 48-61, 78-91). On the one hand, there exist several vase paintings representing Oedipus with a spear or a club but not a staff. Moreover, many figures confronting Sphinx in vase paintings are represented with a staff. It may be possible that the staff in the vase paintings depicting Sphinx is meant to be a weapon, not an aid to walking. On the other hand, σκῆπτρον in epic and tragedy almost always means either the royal scepter or the staff helping the old or the handicapped walk. Moret cites vase paintings in which Oedipus leans on his staff and O. Taplin (1993: 80) refers to a comic vase painting which seems to represent him with swollen feet.

(11) Cf. Dawe (2006: 141) on the number and identification of the Laius’ entourage. J. Bollack (1990: II. 493) suggested the interpretation that the herald and the guide are different and the guide sat on the carriage along with the king. In this case, however, there would be no way for Oedipus to recognize him as a guide, and I agree with Dawe (2006)’s argument that the article (ὁ θ’ ἡγεμὼν) strongly suggests that this guide is a person mentioned above.
murder. The party, however, consisted of four members and Oedipus seems not to have noticed the fourth, the herdsman, at all, as he claimed to have killed them all. Why, then, was Oedipus so certain that it was Laius’ entourage he had met even though Jocasta said it consisted of five members? If what she said is right, he must have killed four men, as the herdsman was the only survivor of the incident.

*The Action:* Five successive actions are mentioned in his narrative. 1) The guide and Laius tried to drive Oedipus away *violently.* 2) The driver pushed him aside and Oedipus struck the driver. 3) Laius brought a horsegoad with two sharp points directly on him when he was passing by the carriage. 4) Oedipus struck him back with his staff and Laius fell down to the ground on his back. 5) Oedipus killed them all. This simple story of escalation of the quarrel contains, however, a lot of indeterminacies.

1) Although πρὸς βίαν (violently) can mean physical violence, here it does not include physical action, because Oedipus said that not only the herald but also the elderly man (who was in the carriage) himself did this violent action. According to R. C. Jebb, “the herald rudely bade him stand aside; and Laius, from the carriage, gave a like command. (With the imperfect ἠλαυνέτην, “were for driving,” πρὸς βίαν need not mean more than a threat or gesture)” (1885: 87).

2) The driver, who walked and led the colts and was not sitting on the carriage, made the first action. How far his action was violent we cannot say, because his action was not explained in detail. “Pushing aside (ἐκτρέποντα),” however, does not seem to suggest a grave assault and Oedipus does not say he struck the driver as an act of self-defense but “in anger.” Anyway, the driver’s action was the beginning of the escalation of the physical violence.

3) We do not know what the herald was doing when Oedipus passed by the coach Laius was in. It was Laius, who “brought a horsegoad with two sharp points straight on my head”, that caused the next step in the escalation. The horsegoad might not seem to be such a lethal weapon and Oedipus’ reaction is not to be regarded as a legitimate self-defense. As J. Gregory (1995: 145) pointed out, however, “to be struck with an implement designed for animals, was to be marked as a slave(12).” It is not his biological, but social existence that was placed in jeopardy by Laius’ assault. As a free-born man, not to say as a prince, he had to defend his status.

4) Using the staff to fight back the attack of the horsegoad constituted the next move. The staff could be a lethal weapon. As Oedipus himself admits, he moved one step further in the escalation of violence. “He paid not an equal but a greater payback (810) (13).” The penalty Laius paid was greater than the outrage he had committed. We do not know whether Laius was dead when he rolled out of the carriage or if Oedipus employed additional violence against the fallen man. Anyway, there must have been a further fight whose details are not told. He only tells us that 5) he killed them all, as if the

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(12) He cites Herodotus (4.3.3-4.4.1) as evidence for his argument.

(13) “ου’ μὴν ίσην γ’ ἐπιστήν (810).” Literally, “he did not make truly equal payment.” Most commentators understand τίσιν as the noun that should go with the adjective ίσην and emphasize the adversative role of οὐ’ μὴν…γέ.
violence were completely one-sided.

The Place: Oedipus killed Laius at the junction of the three roads. “The land is called Phocis. The dividing roads lead to the same place, one from Delphi and the other from Daulia (733-734),” said Jocasta. This ascription of the place seems to be, according to J. Rusten (1996: 100-101), Sophocles’ own invention. Oedipus was traveling eastward from Delphi to Thebes and Laius was traveling the other way. It is possible, although rather implausible to assume that had Oedipus gone slightly faster, he might have turned north at this crossroads and the murder would not have occurred at all. Rusten (1996: 98) reminds us that “there are no grounds at all for supposing that the road not taken by him, the one to the tiny village of Daulia, was a real possibility.” The main importance of the place in this tragedy, then, lies in the fact it is the only major evidence that really connects Oedipus with the murder of Laius: the number both of the offenders and the victims does not really tally with Jocasta’s speech: the time of the murder is not stated precisely; she only says “it was announced to the town just a little before you came to rule this land (736-737)”: the witness they are waiting for is, after all, a slave who testified to the plurality of the culprits and should not be regarded as trustworthy, as Jocasta suggests shortly afterwards(14), although Oedipus grasps his testimony as his last chance. However, the exact identification of the place, when added to these not so exact indications, leaves no doubt that Oedipus was the murderer of Laius, whatever the herdsman might say(15).

The crossroads, however, is a place that is connected with other kinds of ambiguities: priority and justifiability. Which side should give way when they meet in a narrow road? Was Oedipus guilty according to the law? These questions are concerned with what constitute the acceptable social behavior on the road in general and especially at a crossroads.

Priority: Some scholars ascribe the priority to Laius in view of the vehicle, his age and his status shown by the carriage and followers(16). Others, fewer in number, denying the importance of age because it was only a Spartan custom to yield to a senior, argue that it is the duty of the vehicle user to show due care for the safety of the walker and ascribe the priority to Oedipus(17). They share the same presupposition that at the crossroads each claimed his priority and ignore the possibility that both of them could have passed by each other safely.

However, Oedipus’ speech does not confirm their presupposition. He says simply that the elderly man and the guide “tried to drive me away violently.” Oedipus did not ask them to wait. As a king, Laius certainly would have been justified when he claimed priority if it were necessary for either

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(14) 848-850. It was commonly supposed that slaves would tell anything the investigator wanted. Cf. for instance, Orestes 1506-1526. One could expect elicit the true information from the slaves only by the (threat of) torture, as the herdsman did in the fourth act. Classical Athens had a due legal process of torture to elicit information from slaves. Cf. [Demosthenes] 40: 15. However, in case of the yes/no questions, slaves were not, in general, thought to be reliable.
side to give way and Oedipus should concede if he recognizes the kingship of the man on a carriage. Laius, however, did not have “many attendants, proper to a ruler (751-752)” and it would have been impossible to recognize him as a king. Moreover, whether it really was necessary for one side to wait on the right was not certain. The spectators might have supposed the road in general to be narrow, but the crossroads would contain enough space for the safe passing of each party. The claim that Oedipus should have given way to the elderly and royal man spontaneously if his character was not corrupt presupposes a situation not described in this play.

Justifiability: As E. M. Harris (2010) has pointed out, it is certain that his action did not consist legal self-defense and if he were an Athenian citizen, it would have been proper to accuse him of murder of some kind. However, as he was a prince of Corinth and the murder did not occur within Athenian territory, this criticism cannot be accepted without qualifications. In this respect, the importance of the ambiguity of the crossroads (in this tragedy, the trifurcated road (τρίοδος) ) should also be emphasized. A crossroads is a place dedicated to chthonic deities, especially to Hecate(18) and a kind of No Man’s Land. “[A] crossroads was part of neither road A nor road B nor road C. … [T]he liminal point or boundary itself, because it didn’t belong to either of the two extremes it separated, was a sort of permanent chaos. Liminal points were detached from the defined units of man’s “organized” world,” S. I. Jonstone (1991: 217-218) writes. It is not easy to determine what kind of legal system should be applied to the tragic hero.

Oedipus’ words do not make it clear what course of action he should have taken at the crossroads. He might be justified not as a citizen of Athens but as a hero and Corinthian prince. He might not be. What is important is that the spectators at the Dionysus theatre could not, and we readers cannot, tell. Only one thing is certain; What Laius had done did not deserve the payback he actually paid. His murder was the final product of the escalation of the violence to which both sides had contributed.

We are neither certain about how many men Oedipus murdered, nor in what way the quarrel escalated, nor under which legal system the murder should be dealt, nor whether there was a problem of priority, nor whether his action could be justified in the heroic world of the legend. However, although these are questions that have haunted the readers, including modern critics and scholars, of this play, the spectators must, at least for the moment, have accepted these ambiguities as they are, that is, they must leave them indeterminate. Here lies one of the major differences between the experience of readers and spectators. In contrary to the readers who can access the text multiple times and have enough time to examine every detail, the spectators have only the simultaneous access to the dialogues as they are performed.

Staged narrative is one of the most important characteristics of Greek tragedy. Messengers tell the stories of what happened off stage between the acts. Heroes and Gods recollect and report the past

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events in the prologues and elsewhere. This practice might have had something to do with the fact that in its original form tragedy had only one actor, who narrated his past actions and answered the questions from the chorus, as the etymology of the word ὑποκριτής (actor) suggests, which is derived from the verb ὑποκρίνομαι, ‘to answer’.

Staged narratives, as a result, have a tendency of being particularly descriptive, especially when they focus on some scene that cannot be, for some reason or other, enacted on stage. As J. Barrett (2002: 127) has shown, “the privilege of spectatorship” is crucial to “the successful functioning” of tragic messengers “in their appointed role.” The descriptive character of staged narrative is crucial not only to the success of the messenger speeches, but to the speeches of other characters, too. Even when they tell false stories, as the Paedagogus in Sophocles’ Electra did, the concrete descriptiveness of story is essential for their success.

A narrative, however descriptive it may be, always includes a lot of indeterminacies derived from the fact that it is a purely intentional object and remains a schematized perspective, as Roman Ingarden (1960) has pointed out. It is the task of readers and critics to fill these indeterminacies or gaps. Of course, staged narratives are no exceptions. But the tendency of Oedipus’ narrative to make almost every point that concerns the justifiability of his action indeterminate should not be treated as a result of an unintentional indeterminacy of the essential quality of the narrative. It must be intentional. This intention cannot be ascribed to Oedipus, for whom blurring but not misrepresenting the malevolence of his own action to the queen is almost meaningless. He has always been sincere to the people on stage(19) and we should not doubt the integrity of his words here, too. This ambiguity, then, should be ascribed to the authorial intention and must have its own significance. What then, is its significance?

3 The significance of the ambiguity at the Crossroads

In this paper, we have attempted to establish three points.

1) No moral or intellectual flaw is shown in the character of Oedipus at the banquet and at Delphi.

2) Although the murder was not legal if it had been committed within Athenian territory by an Athenian citizen, we cannot know whether his act is justifiable in the context of this tragedy. The question whether he was guilty of the ‘tragic flaw’ in this murder was deliberately left unanswered.

3) The only thing that can be confirmed about this critical meeting at the crossroads is that the murder was an end result of an escalation.

I said that the ambiguity in the confession of the murder at the crossroads was intentional, that is, Sophocles intended not to make it clear whether and how far this murder should be justified. Here, I

want to argue that his intention is to divert the attention of the spectator away from these moral issues, because they are not what he wanted to raise. Evaluating the hero as morally good would inevitably have raised the question of the malice of the Gods, or the helplessness of the human existence before the power of fate. On the other hand, if Oedipus were to be shown to be morally corrupt in this crucial action of murder, (unconscious) regicide and patricide, whatever he might suffer afterwards would then seem to be a consequence of his corruptness and there would be no tragedy at all\(^{20}\). Neither would be appropriate to the heart of this scene.

What, then, is the heart of this scene? It is suggested by the very words of Oedipus describing the death of Laius: “he paid not an equal but a greater payback (810)”: the suffering of Laius was disproportionate to what he had done. It is the escalation of violence that lead to the death of the Theban king. B. Manuwald (1992) and E. Flaig (1998) have made a valuable contribution to the appreciation of this tragic escalation at the crossroads. They point out that the escalation of the quarrel is not motivated by personal character, whatever that may be, but by a principle implied in heroic morality itself. Flaig called it “the principle of exceeding (Überbietung),” the principle that requires retaliation to be disproportionate to what has been suffered. Regardless of whether his character is good or not, Oedipus had to react to the βία of Laius’ entourage as he did, in so far as he is a tragic hero who follows this principle of exceeding that is at the heart of heroic morality. “If Oedipus made other decisions, he would act not only against Apollo, but also against his own aristocratic ethos” (Manuwald 1992: 34).

According to Flaig (1998: 101), what is at stake in Greek tragedies is the invalidity of this heroic principle itself: “The principle of exceeding in the retaliation ethics… leads automatically to bloody conflict.” Therefore, this principle is inapplicable in real societies. It is based on the old aristocratic moral code of saving one’s honor at all costs.

The ‘old values’ … are constituent parts of the aristocratic ethos (Adelsethos) we know from Homer and the lyric poets: always try to be the best in speech and in action; never dismiss the chance to excel others; seize the slightest occasion to defend your honor – when it was unavoidable, be violent, and have no measure in your violence; seek out superiority and victory in your life, and in general, live for the sake of honor (Manuwald: 1992: 113).

Although Manuwald (1992: 20) considers that the first blow was struck by Laius’ attendant and therefore thinks Oedipus ‘guiltless (schuldlos)’ and Flaig (1998: 112) ascribes both the first blow and the responsibility of the escalation to Oedipus, the cause implied in this escalation is the same. It is this aristocratic ethos that made the escalation unavoidable. The fact they both ascribe the same logic to the escalation shows that the question of Oedipus’ guilt and character flaw is irrelevant to the tragic

\(^{20}\) At least, not in the Aristotelian sense of the word, according to which the poetic justice causes only comic effect (Poetics 1453a35-36).
outcome at the crossroads. Even if he is morally sound, he must requite wrong with greater wrong as far as he follows the heroic morality. Who it was that struck the first blow would make no difference to the result. Showing his innocence or guilt would, in this context, divert the attention of the spectator from the cause of this tragic escalation.

Following J.-P. Vernant (1970), Flaig (1998: 104) contrasts this aristocratic ethos exemplified by the protagonists with the values of the polis community (Polisgemeinschaft) represented by the tragic chorus. Aristocratic honor is always individual and shows no concern for the survival of the community, as Achilles in the earlier books of Iliad exemplifies. “The tragic poets set the protection of the honor of the individual against the survival of the community (Flaig 1998: 114).”

However, it seems to be going too far when he claims that the political education of the tragedy consists of the denunciation of the aristocratic ethos, which is unbearable to the community. One should admit that in a certain rather trivial sense, tragedy teaches that this ethos is incompatible with the democratic society of fifth century Athens. In the case of Oedipus, it is true that the murder at the crossroads was brought about by the aristocratic ethos of both sides. It would have been unbearable to the democratic community of Athens, if they really lived there at all. But it does not necessarily imply that the spectator would not have been able to appreciate the nobility and the greatness of his aristocratic character in the theatre of Dionysus and must have regarded his fall as therefore justified. Our belief system is not so simpleminded and monolithic that we cannot accept a character in the legendary world so far as he is unacceptable in the real world. It is true that classical Athens was not the pure shame-culture society which the Homeric epics had depicted. In Sophocles, “Oedipus becomes a polluted outcast, crushed under the burden of a guilt ‘which neither the earth nor the sunlight can accept’ (21).” But in the story Homer knew he continues to reign in Thebes after his guilt is discovered, and is eventually killed in battle and buried with royal honours” (Dodds 1951: 36). The ruin of Oedipus itself, according to Dodds (1951: 36) seems to go back to the “archaic sense of guilt”. Still, “many modes of behaviour characteristic of shame-cultures persisted throughout the archaic and classical periods” (Dodds 1951: 28).

For Athenians in the fifth century, the principle of exceeding, as well as the aristocratic ethos that underlies this principle was not a matter to be denied simply and straightforwardly. Homer was still thought to be the greatest educator by the citizens in classical Athens. The aristocratic ethos was still valued positively. Under the aegis of the democratic law system of Athens, a spectator did not have to undertake the revenge by himself. But this fact does not tell what he should do in a heroic world and especially in a situation in which he was not sure if he could rely on any legal authority. It is quite probable that he felt he should do what Oedipus had done at the crossroads. Oedipus was, in this sense, “like us (ὅμοιος)” and the spectator must have recognized that his fall also was a ‘not equal but

(21) Translation by Dodds.
greater’ payback paid by Oedipus and pitied him when at last he blinded himself and helplessly asked Creon, the unfavorable new tyrant, to grant him exile.

Bibliography

Comparative Theater Review

Vol. 12 No. 1 (English Issue) March 2013

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