

Great literature tends to be suggestive rather than dogmatic, and it would be foolish to claim that one knows in any exact sense the "message" of Hamlet or Faust. Such works suggest different things to different readers, and often to the same reader at different times. So with Sophocles' masterpiece: thoughtful readers have had a variety of reactions to Oedipus the King.

Perhaps a majority of students who read the play for the first time end with a feeling of pessimism. It seems that everything is rigidly fixed, and Oedipus is caught in a trap from which there can be no escape. The great facts of his life were fixed even before he was born: he will kill his father and marry his mother. Not only does the audience know his fate, but Oedipus himself was informed of it by Apollo's oracle in his youth. He then made every effort to avoid such horrors, leaving his home, his princely position, and the parents he loved - but his efforts were in vain. It would seem that no story could more clearly emphasize the rigidity of fate and the absence of any real freedom of choice. Oedipus, apparently, has no choice at all, and if we may take him to be in some sense representative of humanity, men seem to be ultimately not responsible for their actions.

The relationship between fate or divine foreknowledge and man's free will has long vexed thinkers, and Sophocles was surely troubled by it. We cannot know his mind fully, but all his works suggest a deep-seated belief in divine foreknowledge. Did he then feel that Oedipus, like all of us, lacked free will and therefore was not responsible for his actions?

The Sophoclean version of this myth does not suggest that the gods forced Oedipus to do what he did. There is no necessary connection between prediction and compulsion. Even as a far from omniscient parent, I am quite able to predict the actions of my children in a variety of circumstances, including actions that I deplore and have warned them against. B.M.N. Knox, in his study of Oedipus, suggests that a famous New Testament story is relevant here, even though not in every way comparable to Oedipus' situation. Peter was told by Jesus that he would deny him thrice. He did just that, and wept bitterly when he realized what he had done. As Knox puts it, "No one, so far as I know, has ever suggested that Peter's will was not free, that he was 'fated' to deny his Master" (Oedipus at Thebes, p.40).

Sophocles, as all agree, was wholly familiar with Homeric language and thought. Again and again in Homer we find that there seems to be no incompatibility between divine causation and human responsibility; we might then suppose that Sophocles would not find it hard to believe that in some sense the gods were responsible for the actions in this myth, and also that at the same time Oedipus himself was responsible. For Homeric thought on this matter the classic study is the first chapter of E.R. Dodds' The Greeks and the Irrational. Whether or not we today are willing to accept this kind of "over-determination" is ultimately irrelevant: the Greeks of the classic age were quite able to accept it.

Then too, it is easy to forget that Sophocles wrote not about the myth of Oedipus as a whole, but about his discovery of his situation. For that discovery he himself was fully responsible: as Knox puts it, "Apollo predicted neither the discovery of the truth, the suicide of Jocasta, nor the self-blinding of Oedipus. In the actions of Oedipus in the play [emphasis mine]

"fate" plays no part at all" (p.6). Yet in the version of the play read by virtually all students today this statement seems to be contradicted. Tiresias says to Oedipus: "It is not destiny that you should fall at my hands, since Apollo is enough for that, and it is his affair." If indeed the fall of Oedipus was Apollo's work, it would seem that Oedipus himself was not ultimately responsible for his own fate. That conclusion is often drawn, but the basis for it is unsound.

We cannot, of course, question Sophocles about what he meant, or be absolutely certain what he wrote: here as always we are dependent on the words of the manuscript tradition. In this case that tradition is clear, and it does not give us the reading quoted above. The statement about Apollo's responsibility is an emendation of the text by an 18th century editor who was convinced that Oedipus the King was a tragedy demonstrating the inevitability of fate: he changed the manuscript reading to fit his own interpretation, and his emendation has been widely accepted. Despite this acceptance it would seem very hazardous to base an argument on words which have no ancient support whatsoever, and which indeed are the exact opposite of the manuscript reading.

It may be, however, that the concentration on questions of fate and divine causation has distracted attention from what could well be the most important element in the play. A central term in Aristotle's Poetics is anagnorisis, usually translated as recognition or discovery. What is it that Oedipus recognizes or discovers in this play? Not, I think, his fated actions: he had been told of these before the action of the play began. What he discovers is himself, and even more specifically his own ignorance. He has not known who he was or what he was doing: even he, endowed with unusual clarity of mind, as indicated by his ability to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, has been moving in utter ignorance.

The sense of human ignorance of the most important matters is recurrent in Sophocles' writings, and an awareness of man's limitations is not unique to him in the Athens of his day. The most obvious example would be Socrates, whose whole career was based on the judgment of Apollo that he was the wisest of men. This could only be true, Socrates felt, if wisdom was taken to mean a realization of one's own ignorance, and indeed of all-pervasive human ignorance. We can be reasonably confident that in the small society of Periclean Athens Sophocles and Socrates knew each other. It is an interesting question whether perhaps poet and philosopher had at times talked together about their shared judgment about ignorance, and the real knowledge possessed only by the gods.