

Heroism in The Lord of the Rings, or what Oedipus and Frodo have in common?

by S.L. Ager

Several years ago, I wrote an article for *Labyrinth* on the subject of Aragorn, one of the chief characters in Tolkien's fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. The relevance of such a character to a journal devoted to Classical Studies was found in Aragorn's emulation of the classic hero pattern. Like Perseus, Herakles, Theseus, and other heroic figures of Greek mythology, Aragorn presents a common set of characteristics: royal ancestry, danger and dislocation at the time of his birth, a youth spent away from his people (in Rivendell), quests and adventures upon attaining manhood, and, finally, the prize of the throne (Gondor) and the hand of the noble maiden. Incidentally, the maiden often turns out to be related to the hero more or less closely (in Oedipus's case, a little too closely), so it's interesting to note that the lovely Arwen is Aragorn's first cousin, although, since she is 2,690 years older than he is, the cousin relationship is rather attenuated.

The release of Peter Jackson's film trilogy based on *The Lord of the Rings* (two down and one to go) has prompted me to return to the subject of the classic and mythic roots of Tolkien's epic. Although the specifics of his work were often inspired by Nordic rather than Greco-Roman mythologies, the hero pattern is a universal one, and so I'd like to take a look at another extremely important character: Frodo Baggins, the Ringbearer. While Frodo's life and deeds have certain features analogous to the heroes mentioned above, there is another Greek hero who offers what I think is a more interesting comparison: Oedipus.

Oedipus is of course infamous for one thing (or rather, two things): killing his own father and marrying his own mother. Even those who have never encountered any other scrap of Greek mythology know the name of Oedipus, made so notorious by Freud. At first glance, therefore, he might not seem the best choice for a comparison with the undoubtedly noble Frodo. Yet Oedipus too is a hero. As far as the hero pattern goes, in fact, Oedipus is one of the better examples. Abandoned at birth by his royal parents, Laios and Jocasta, he grows up far away, in ignorance of his true identity. Upon reaching manhood, he sets out on the journey that will ultimately take him to Thebes, his "once and future" kingdom. Encountering his true father along the way, Oedipus, still ignorant of his identity, kills Laios in a quarrel; answering the riddle of the Sphinx, he frees the people of Thebes from the depredations of the monster. His reward - the throne and hand of the royal lady - is the classic heroic dream come true; it's just too bad that this all happens to be taking place in his home town. Many years (and the birth of four children) later, the truth comes out. Jocasta kills herself, Oedipus blinds himself and goes into exile, leaving his ancestral home forever. After much weary and anguished wandering, Oedipus finally comes to the territory of Athens, where he reveals to its ruler Theseus that his bones will sanctify whatever land grants him his final resting place. In the midst of an earthquake - a sign from the gods - Oedipus mysteriously disappears, and the Athenians establish a cult to honour him.

Frodo too fulfills some of the aspects of the classic hero pattern, though not so many as Aragorn. He too is orphaned and grows up away from the land of his birth.

Frodo's father Drogo, though originally from Hobbiton, marries a hobbit (hobbiteess?) from Buckland, and that is where Frodo is born. When his parents die in a boating accident, Frodo returns to the land of his father's birth, and finds a foster father in Bilbo, who adopts Frodo as his heir. Frodo sets out upon a quest, of course, though he himself describes it as a "negative" one, in that he goes to lose a treasure (the Ring) rather than to find one. Nevertheless, this does not run counter to the hero pattern - after all, relatively few Greek heroes are actually seeking a talisman of any kind. Most of their quests involve dragon-slaying rather than treasure-finding, and surely the Ring is a "dragon" of the worst kind. Along the way, Frodo receives help from many quarters; just as the Greek gods help Greek heroes, so Frodo is helped by various non-mortal powers, such as Gandalf and Galadriel. Upon fulfillment of the quest, with the destruction of the Ring and the downfall of Sauron, Frodo returns to the Shire, his ancestral home. At this point, the Shire is in the grip of a "monster" (Saruman), who must be defeated before the hobbits can feel that the quest is truly complete. With Saruman gone, the Shire can prosper, and enter into a new golden age. Unlike his younger friends, however, Frodo is unable to enter into the optimism and happiness of this new age, and ultimately he must leave his homeland forever. Together with Gandalf, Galadriel, Elrond, and Bilbo, he takes ship at the Grey Havens and leaves Middle-earth for good. Frodo's departure from the world - a departure barred to ordinary humans and hobbits - is one more aspect of his life that accords with the classic hero pattern.

But heroism - in ancient Greek myth and in Tolkien alike - is about far more than a slavish and meaningless adherence to a stereotypical pattern. I think it is possible to find still deeper connections between Frodo and Oedipus.

The losses suffered by each of them while young serve to isolate and alienate these two heroes, to set them apart and make them "other". These losses are those of kin and of home. Oedipus's parents reject him (in fact, try to bring about his death), and their actions ensure that he grows up distanced from his homeland not only in space but also in awareness. Frodo's parents unintentionally abandon him through death, and his father's actions in coming to Buckland from Hobbiton to find a wife in the first place have ensured that Frodo is not wholly connected to either Buckland or Hobbiton. The "otherness" of Frodo is underscored in the first chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, where the older residents of Hobbiton are gathered at the inn, drinking beer and speculating on the oddness of Frodo's maternal ancestors, and the possible oddness of Frodo himself. Similarly, in *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles's unparalleled literary treatment of the Oedipus myth, Oedipus reports that a drunken stranger at a banquet had once cast aspersions on his (Oedipus's) ancestry, a confrontation which had the effect of beginning the hero on his journey to self-discovery.

The isolation of these two heroes means that while they love the community, and do all they can to promote its well-being, they ultimately cannot be a part of it. Oedipus not only rids Thebes of the monstrous Sphinx, he also rules his homeland well and justly for many years before disaster strikes. Frodo not only guarantees the well-being of all of Middle-earth through the destruction of the Ring, he also participates in ridding the Shire of the monstrous Saruman. Yet neither of them is able to settle in his homeland for good. Furthermore, it is not so much the actions of others that expel Oedipus and Frodo from their homes, as it is the internal forces driving each of the two. Oedipus himself craves exile once he understands what he has done, while Frodo reluctantly comes to the

conclusion that he cannot remain in the Shire. Though each has done what he could to save his community from peril, neither can benefit personally from his success - neither Frodo nor Oedipus can find inner peace in his homeland.

Both Oedipus and Frodo, then, are set apart from others, despite being intimately connected to others through ties of kin and emotion. Each is marked by a fate that cannot be shared or fully understood by anyone else; each has been to a place that no one else would ever wish to go. Though each inspires pity and respect for his suffering, as Frodo does in Sam or Oedipus in Theseus, each must stand alone, unique in his destiny. Frodo's solitude is all the more poignant when we realize that in spite of Sam's devotion to his master and the vital role he plays in enabling Frodo to fulfill his quest, it is not the faithful Sam, but rather the treacherous, yet pitiful, Gollum who is able to reach Frodo's mind. The isolation of Oedipus and Frodo, the way in which each has been marked by fate for a singular destiny, is symbolized physically by minor wounding, a wounding that establishes the unique identity of each. In Oedipus's case, the wounding comes long before he has committed the central acts of his life (but not before he has been destined to do so): his heels are pegged together when he is abandoned as an infant, and the adult Oedipus still bears the scars (and perhaps the disability) of that injury. In Frodo's case, the wounding is simultaneous with the fulfillment of his crucial act: struggling with Frodo at the very brink of Mount Doom, Gollum is able to seize the Ring only by severing the finger on which Frodo bears it. "Nine-fingered Frodo", as the bard identifies him during the subsequent celebrations at the Field of Cormallen, and "Swollen-foot" (a popular etymology for the name "Oedi-pus") are appellations that transfer the destiny of these heroes into their very identities. Frodo's injury marks him as separate and different from others, though in one respect it provides him with a new and troubling kinship, more disquieting even than the one he shared with Gollum. Just as Gollum had understood his mind, so Frodo is now marked forever as in some way akin to another who had lost a finger to the Ring: Sauron.

Spiritual anguish is central to the stories of both these heroes. If the tales of Perseus and Herakles are largely about the vanquishing of monsters that threaten the physical well-being of humankind, the tales of Oedipus and Frodo are primarily about the heroism needed to vanquish the monsters of the mind and heart ("monsters from the id", as a classic science fiction film once labeled them). Frodo's true test and quest is not so much the journey to Mordor as it is the struggle for the freedom of his own soul; Oedipus's most heroic task is not in facing the Sphinx but in facing who he is and what he has done. Neither Frodo nor Oedipus is primarily a hero of physical might, appropriately enough, perhaps, given that both ultimately are physically disabled (however slightly). It is fitting that both overcome an enemy - in Oedipus's case, the Sphinx, in Frodo's, Saruman - through the force of their intellect and will, without raising a hand.

Heroism is an internal process, not simply a matter of one's deeds. Arguably the most heroic moments in both Frodo's and Oedipus's lives are passive ones, related not to what they do, but to what they are. Oedipus may have been a curse for Thebes, but he brings blessings to Athens at the end of his life, simply by being who he is - a man who has endured great anguish and has been touched by the gods. As for Frodo, he vanquishes Saruman in their final confrontation at the very door of Bag End not by force but by the simple revelation of what he has become, of the strength and wisdom that have

come to him through his great suffering. Frodo and Oedipus are both heroes of spirit and will, of heart and intellect, rather than of brawn and sinew. As such, and in spite of their “otherness”, they are perhaps far more in touch with true human experience than the folktale heroics of a Perseus or a Herakles.