

Oedipus' ongoing tragedy

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Much of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is taken up by a murder inquiry. Oedipus tries to find the man who has brought death and destruction to Thebes by killing its former king Laius. The truth is, of course, that this man is Oedipus himself. When he eventually realizes this, he leaves the stage in anguish and withdraws into the house. A little later a messenger gives a dramatic report of what happened inside. Jocasta, he says, as devastated as Oedipus himself, has killed herself and Oedipus has gouged out his eyes.

In some ways, this might seem a good place for the play to end. Oedipus has found out that he has killed his father and slept with his mother. The powerful and confident king has become a distraught and blind man. Events have reached their climax and one might wonder how the play should continue without creating the sense of a disappointing anticlimax. However, continue it does, for no less than three hundred lines. These lines, therefore, are worth thinking about.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle says that every tragedy has a 'complication' and a 'dénouement' or, translated more literally, a phase of 'binding' and one of 'loosening'. In these terms, our lines form the loosening phase. Apparently, to loosen the complications and tensions built up in the course of the play, it did not seem enough to let Oedipus realize the truth and to mutilate himself. So what else does Sophocles present us with?

Overwhelming disaster

Oedipus comes out of the house again and tries to come to terms with what has happened. 'O, O, unhappy man that I am, where am I being carried in my misery', he exclaims; and 'O horrible cloud of darkness that is mine ...' Laments like these continue over a number of lines, as Oedipus is still overwhelmed with the disaster that has struck him.

The chorus are no less overwhelmed. It is important to realize that Oedipus is not the only one who suffers. Already before the messenger speech the chorus sing about the pain they feel over Oedipus' fall, and when Oedipus reappears they lament him as he laments himself. 'O what terrible suffering for humans to see, most terrible thing of all that I have encountered', they begin, and add a little later 'Ah, child of Laius, I wish I had never seen you', and 'I cannot bear to look at you'. It is not clear who exactly they represent (they are certainly Thebans but this is not always stressed; sometimes they speak about humans in general). Yet what is clear is that behind the chorus there is a whole group of people who are affected by Oedipus' personal misfortunes.

Moreover, there are those who are affected without being able to voice their anguish. First there is Jocasta. She leaves the stage in silence and almost unnoticed when she realizes that she has been sleeping with her own son (later, when the Messenger

reports her suicide, she is at least very briefly lamented by the chorus: 'O unfortunate one. What was the cause?'). And then there are Oedipus' daughters. Near the end of the play Oedipus weeps for them and invokes the unhappy life that awaits them as children of a man who has slept with his mother and killed his father. 'To what gatherings of citizens will you go, to what festivals ...? And then, who will marry you? There is nobody, children; clearly, you must die childless and unmarried.'

Closely linked to such universal suffering and lament is the search for explanations. The chorus ask: 'What madness has come over you, miserable man? What deity has jumped, in the longest of jumps, upon your abject fate?', and a little later 'How could you bring yourself to do such a thing and put out your eyes? What god has stirred you up?' Oedipus responds: 'It was Apollo, friends, Apollo who made these terrible, terrible sufferings of mine happen. But it was me, nobody else, who dealt the blow with his own hand.' A deity, madness, fate, Apollo, Oedipus himself – here and elsewhere in the last three hundred lines of the play the chorus and Oedipus try to understand how it all happened. Disasters of such magnitude take time to come to terms with.

Planning for the future

However, the last three hundred lines of *Oedipus Rex* have more to offer than lament and attempts to find explanations. A man who has committed parricide and incest poses a threat to the city, since he is a source of pollution. Aware of this danger, Creon arrives and asks Oedipus to leave and to stay inside the house forever. But even now, blind and powerless as he is, Oedipus is

a man who has his own views and plans. Rather than simply obeying, he confronts Creon with a number of requests. He demands not to be shut away but to be cast out of the land altogether, asks Creon to bury Jocasta and to look after his daughters Antigone and Ismene, and finally begs to touch (if not see) his daughters once more.

The last request is granted immediately, and there follows a short sequence in which Oedipus says good-bye to his daughters and bestows his final good wishes on them. The other three requests do not meet with such a swift response. They all reach beyond the end of the play. As far as we are told, Jocasta is still unburied when the play ends; Antigone and Ismene will always be the offspring of an incestuous marriage and always be liable to suffer for it; and Oedipus, whether he is locked away inside the house or is exiled from Thebes, will continue to live, always aware of what has happened and always posing a threat to people around him.

Lament, then, has given way to at least some new events, both within and beyond the limits of the play. *Oedipus Rex* does not come to a complete halt when it does eventually stop. There still is plenty of unfinished business at the end.

Stories without endings

The story of *Oedipus Rex* stops neither with the climax nor with the end of the play. It is as though Sophocles wanted to tell his spectators that it is not easy to find the end of a story. For better or worse, life goes on – always. One of the lessons of the play is that even after disasters as terrible as those that struck Oedipus it is worth asking what happens next. What do people do to cope? What do they do next?

Something similar is true for a number of other tragedies (although it would be easy to think of tragedies which are rather different in this respect – if only because in some of them disaster never strikes). Here are two brief examples. Aeschylus' *Persians* does not end when the Messenger has reported to the queen of the Persians that the Persian army, led by king Xerxes, has been routed. Rather, the play continues for the same time again. First the chorus of Persian elders and then Xerxes lament and ponder what has happened. In between laments, the chorus invoke the ghost of Darius, the ancient king and father of Xerxes, who appears and in his own way talks about the disaster that has befallen the Persians.

In Sophocles' *Ajax*, the death of Ajax is not the end of the play but the start of a new development. The second half of the play is taken up by the efforts of Ajax's friends to secure his burial despite the resistance of some of the Greek leaders. In the course of the struggle, various characters come to lament, defend, or accuse the dead man. What is more, these scenes contain a number of allusions to the cult of Ajax. Ajax was not just a figure of the mythic past, but was worshipped as a so-called 'cult-hero', who after his death acquired superhuman powers. Not only does the play continue far beyond the death of its main character, but for ancient spectators it also reaches out into their own world. It does not just tell the story of his death but it also alludes to the object of cult that he becomes after his death.

Many tragedies do not end when disaster strikes. They often continue well into the aftermath of the disaster – people mourn,

search for explanations, there are new developments, allusions to real-life cult, and so on.

Oedipus is not the only subject

Greek tragedies are interested not in just one person. Of course there are many reasons why we should concentrate on Oedipus. He is on stage for most of the play; he is exceptionally intelligent; he is the man singled out by various oracles; he commits incest and parricide. But as should have become clear, to look only at these characters would be to miss much that is interesting. Sequences like those following the report of Oedipus' self-mutilation show that Oedipus is not the only object of interest in the play. What might have been Oedipus' merely private catastrophe clearly affects many people: Jocasta, his children, and the chorus.

Elsewhere, too, the world of tragedy is a world of people who are all linked. Friends, families, cities, and many other groups of people are prominent again and again. Greek tragedies weave a dense web of relationships. Even the most dominant of characters has an effect on, and is affected by, others, and these others, too, are worth attention. *Oedipus Rex* is only one example.

Similarly in *Persians* and *Ajax*, the defeat of the Persian army and the death of Ajax have an effect on many people, who all gain prominence: the queen and the chorus, and the friends and opponents of Ajax, respectively. In some plays, such as *Antigone* or *Hippolytus*, there are two main characters, rather than one, connected in their fortunes: not just Antigone but also Creon, not just Hippolytus but also Phaedra. In others – *Trojan Women* is a good example – it is impossible to single out two, or even three, main characters. Rather, there is a sense of almost all-comprehensive suffering.

In more than one respect, it appears, the last three hundred lines of *Oedipus Rex* are an example of something that is characteristic of much of Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy does much more than tell the story of one great man or woman who suffers an extraordinary disaster. Even where there is such a great man or woman and where there is such a disaster, there also is much else. There are other characters whose fortunes are somehow tied up with those of the main character, and there are further developments, developments that continue beyond whatever disaster there may be. This breadth of vision, this interest in how life goes on after a disaster and how it goes on for different people is one of the qualities that make Greek tragedies so attractive.

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