

Theater 125: Notes on Oedipus the King (or Oedipus Rex)

[These notes are based on the 1986 BBC-TV film version directed by Don Taylor and starring Michael Pennington and Claire Bloom.]

Aristotle's Poetics were based on such plays as this tragedy by Sophocles. Thought and spectacle are interwoven with diction. Character drives this plot vehicle at breakneck speed. The unities of time, place, and action are held together by the following:

1. Time: the events happen within the passing of one day. The Chorus of Theban Elders breaks up the action with their odes and commentaries, providing a lyrical way to compress real time.
2. Place: the events happen in the front courtyard of the palace of Thebes.
3. Action: all of the events relate to Oedipus and his search for the cause of the plague on the city, for the murderer of the old king, and ultimately for his true identity.

Directorial Concept = Spine + Central Image

*The spine of Oedipus is that he wants to know the truth at all costs to his life and well-being.

*The central image is the EYES of Oedipus.

*Several themes (thoughts) develop from this emphasis on EYES:

--Seeing versus knowing

--Sight versus blindness

--ignorance versus knowledge

Other themes:

--humanity's relationship to the gods. For the Greeks, this was interpreted as FATE ("a predetermined course of events...based on the belief that there is a fixed natural order to the cosmos." Wikipedia). For modern audiences, especially those familiar with Judeo-Christian traditions, this is known as THEODICY (the attempt to reconcile the problem of evil with the belief in God's Providence and justice. Based on Wikipedia's definition plus the New World Encyclopedia.)

--IDENTITY. Who is Oedipus really?

--FORTUNE. Very close to FATE, but more fickle. The Wheel of Fortune was a Greek notion way before Vanna White took a spin.

--HAMARTIA (fatal flaw): for Oedipus and Jocasta, it is HUBRIS (pride) in their ability to OUTWIT the gods. Or so they think, until the whole truth is revealed.

Other images based on dialogue:

--the ship of state

--plagues/corruption/death of unborn babes, livestock, crops/contagion

The Greek gods central to this story:

Apollo, god of light, knowledge (the sun god), who spoke through the Oracle at the city of Delphi

Zeus, the high king of the Greek gods, ruling from Mt. Olympus

Major dramatic devices:

Dramatic irony: we know what's going on before Oedipus does

Foreshadowing: clues, both verbal and physical, are planted all along the plot's course

Exposition: the citizens drag themselves into the courtyard to implore Oedipus to help rid the city of a plague

Point of Attack: Creon returns from the Oracle at Delphi with the message that the source of the plague is the murder of the old king, Laius

Rising Action: each bit of news or confrontation with the messenger

- a. Oedipus pronounces an edict that whoever is found guilty of the murder of the old king will be exiled. Oedipus goes further, uttering a curse upon the murderer. (more irony, as both edict and curse will fall upon Oedipus later)
- b. Tiresias, the blind prophet, tells Oedipus the truth about the murderer of old king Laius, but Oedipus can't understand it. Tiresias leaves Oedipus with a riddle to solve, which sends Oedipus on a quest to find his true identity.

- c. We see Oedipus' hot temper in this scene with Tiresias, and we'll see more of it when Creon returns to protest his innocence of the murder and of bribery. Creon swears an oath protesting his innocence (a very serious thing to do back then).
- d. Jocaste arrives to break up the argument between Creon and Oedipus. She presents her proof that the gods don't always know the future, that they are not reliable: her baby died, and did not grow up to kill his father and marry her. Laius was killed by "a band of robbers, not by one man."
- e. Oedipus begins to remember how he killed a man before he came to Thebes. He tells the story of his childhood and his flight from Corinth. He fears that part of the Oracle may have come true. He appeals to Zeus for help.
- f. Jocaste leads him into the palace. She returns to make an offering to Apollo to give them knowledge and wisdom in this time of trouble. She has changed into a pale gown with golden brooches on her shoulders (brooches Oedipus will use later to blind himself).
- g. A messenger from Corinth arrives unexpectedly with "good news." He tells Jocaste that Oedipus's father, Polybos, the king of Corinth, has died, and that Corinth wants to crown Oedipus the new king. Oedipus comes back out from the palace. He and Jocaste celebrate this victory over the gods' prophecy. But when the messenger reveals more of his "good news," Jocaste begins to understand that the prophecy has indeed come true. She begs Oedipus to stop asking questions. He rebuffs her; he won't give up his quest for the truth. Jocaste goes into the palace.

CLIMAX

- h. An old shepherd arrives. Like Tiresias, he doesn't want to reveal the truth, but Oedipus forces him to. When he finishes, he tells Oedipus, "You were marked for suffering." As Oedipus puts together all of the truth, he experiences the CLIMAX of the play, and so do we. He says, "Let the night come. Daylight has no mercy; it shows too much." He goes into the palace.
- i. The chorus moans about the reversal of fortune Oedipus has felt. They cover their heads with their cloaks.

Falling Action:

- a. A messenger from the palace comes out to tell the chorus about the death of Jocaste and how Oedipus has blinded himself.
- b. Oedipus returns from the palace, with blood running down his face. The Chorus expresses varied emotions, all proper responses to tragedy.
- c. Oedipus begins his lament.

Resolution:

Creon arrives to restore order, to take charge of the kingdom, and to take Oedipus inside the palace. Creon says Oedipus has suffered in public long enough, and it's time to mourn in private.

Oedipus says there is a larger purpose for his suffering. He thinks the gods must have some mysterious purpose for invoking such a harsh fate on him and his household.

Oedipus makes several requests of Creon:

- a. A decent burial for Jocasta
- b. A last visit with his daughters Ismene and Antigone, to touch them and hold them once more
- c. Creon's promise to take care of the girls
- d. Creon's promise to banish Oedipus, according to his own edict and curse

Creon's response is to comply with all but the last request; Creon says "Only the gods can decide that." Creon also says, "You once gave orders; now you must learn to obey."

It is visually and thematically clear that the Wheel of Fortune has turned on Oedipus. Instead of a King, he is now a beggar. No longer rich, but poor. No longer a strong, healthy man in his prime, but a weak, blind man dependant on others to lead him.

The Chorus has the last word, confirming the omnipotence of the gods: "Call no man fortunate or safe until he lies safe in his grave and the earth covers his head."

The Tragic Effect

Does Oedipus's pursuit of knowledge and subsequent suffering disturb you? It should; examine how this play makes you feel, as well as what it makes you think. Why is this character's journey so different from our journeys? Ponder the earlier discussion of Fate, Theodicy, and Providence. How do Americans view the "sins" of civic and government leaders? How do Christians view the idea of atonement for sins? Remember that for the Greek audience, this play was part of a larger religious ritual and festival. The way they FELT when the play was over was supposed to be similar to the way Christians feel when they have attended church.