



---

Oedipus Rex as the Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle

Author(s): Marjorie Barstow

Source: *The Classical Weekly*, Oct. 5, 1912, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Oct. 5, 1912), pp. 2-4

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4386601>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Classical Weekly*

JSTOR

service on behalf of the Association. We have now over 500 members, and over 500 subscribers; before April 30 next we ought to have 750 members, and 750 subscribers. In this connection I venture to urge upon the present members prompt payment of dues for the current year, which began on May 1 last, and prompt notice to the Secretary of change of address. The management of the business of the Association and of *THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY* requires much labor and much money; the labor can be greatly reduced and the possession of the needed funds guaranteed if the members will give fair heed to the suggestion in the preceding sentence.

The members of the Association are reminded that the special rates for *The Classical Journal* and *Classical Philology*, allowed by the University of Chicago Press to them if they subscribe through the Secretary-Treasurer of the Association, are available again for the new volume of *The Classical Journal*, which will begin in October, and for the volume of *Classical Philology* which will begin in January next. Members desiring to take advantage of these offers should communicate at once with the Secretary-Treasurer, making remittance (\$1.00 for *The Classical Journal*, \$1.67 for *Classical Philology*). Last year some members who delayed sending in their subscriptions found it impossible to secure copies of the early numbers of the volumes.

C. K.

### OEDIPUS REX AS THE IDEAL TRAGIC HERO OF ARISTOTLE<sup>1</sup>

If we give ourselves up to a full sympathy with the hero, there is no question that the Oedipus Rex fulfils the function of a tragedy, and arouses fear and pity in the highest degree. But the modern reader, coming to the classic drama not entirely for the purpose of enjoyment, will not always surrender himself to the emotional effect. He is apt to worry about Greek 'fatalism' and the justice of the downfall of Oedipus, and, finding no satisfactory solution for these intellectual difficulties, loses half the pleasure that the drama was intended to produce. Perhaps we trouble ourselves too much concerning the Greek notions of fate in human life. We are inclined to regard them with a lively anti-

quarian interest, as if they were something remote and peculiar; yet in reality the essential difference between these notions and the more familiar ideas of a later time is so slight that it need not concern the naïve and sympathetic reader. After all, the fundamental aim of the poet is not to teach us about these matters, but to construct a tragedy which shall completely fulfil its proper function. Nevertheless, for the student of literature who feels bound to solve the two-fold problem, 'How is the tragedy of Oedipus to be reconciled with a rational conception of life?' and 'How does Oedipus himself comply with the Aristotelian requirements for a tragic hero?', there is a simple answer in the ethical teaching of the great philosopher in whose eyes the Oedipus Rex appears to have been well-nigh a perfect tragedy. In other words, let us compare the ideal of the Ethics with the ideal of the Poetics.

Aristotle finds the end of human endeavor to be happiness, that is, an unhampered activity of the soul in accordance with true reason, throughout a complete lifetime. This happiness, as Aristotle discovered by careful observation during the length of his thoughtful life, does not result principally from the gifts of fortune, but rather from a steady and comprehensive intellectual vision which views life steadily and distinguishes in every action the result to be attained. By the light of this vision the wise man preserves a just balance among his natural impulses, and firmly and consistently directs his will and emotions toward the supreme end which reason approves. He has, therefore, an inward happiness which cannot be shaken save by great and numerous outward calamities, and, moreover, he attains an adequate external prosperity, since, other things being equal, the most sensible people are the most successful, and misfortune is due, in large measure, to lack of knowledge or lack of prudence. Even if he is crushed beneath an overwhelming catastrophe from without, the ideal character of the Ethics is not an object of fear and pity, for 'the truly good and sensible man bears all the chances of life with decorum, and always does what is noblest in the circumstances, as a good general uses the forces at his command to the best advantage in war'.

Such is the ideal character, the man who is best fitted to attain happiness in the world of men. On the other hand, the tragic hero is a man who fails to attain happiness, and fails in such a way that his career excites, not blame, but fear and pity in the highest degree. In the Poetics, he is described as not eminently good and just, not completely under the guidance of true reason, but as falling through some great error or flaw of character, rather than through vice or depravity. Moreover, in order that his downfall may be as striking as possible, he must be, as was Oedipus, of an illustrious family, highly renowned, and prosperous.

<sup>1</sup> This paper Miss Barstow prepared when she was a Sophomore at Cornell University (1909-1910). In *Harvard Studies*, Volume 23 (1912), 71-127, Dr. Chandler Rathfon Post, under the title *The Dramatic Art of Sophocles*, discusses "the distinctive quality of Sophocles as a dramatist . . . his stress upon delineation of character". On page 77 Dr. Post says, "But with Sophocles it was a foregone conclusion that the interest should be centered upon psychological analysis". On pages 81 ff. Dr. Post argues that "First and foremost, in his delineation of the protagonist, he [Sophocles] lays emphasis upon the strength of the human will. From the very beginning the principal character is marked by an iron will centered upon a definite object; and the drama, according to Sophocles, consists to a certain extent of a series of tests, arranged in climactic order, to which the will is subjected, and over all of which it rises triumphant". On page 83 he illustrates this dictum by a brief discussion of the Oedipus Rex. The whole paper is well worthy of careful study.

C. K.

When we analyze the character of Oedipus, we discover that, in spite of much natural greatness of soul, he is, in one vital respect, the exact antithesis of Aristotle's ideal man. He has no clear vision which enables him to examine every side of a matter with unclouded eyes, and to see all things in due perspective; nor has he a calm wisdom which is always master of his passions. Oedipus can see but one side of a matter—too often he sees that wrongly—and it is his fashion immediately to act upon such half-knowledge, at the dictates, not of his reason at all, but of the first feeling which happens to come uppermost. His is no deliberate vice, no choice of a wrong purpose. His purposes are good. His emotions, his thoughts, even his errors, have an ardent generosity which stirs our deepest sympathy. But his nature is plainly imperfect, as Aristotle says the nature of a tragic hero should be, and from the beginning he was not likely to attain perfect happiness.

When the drama opens, the thoughtless energy of Oedipus has already harnessed him to the 'yoke of Fate unbending'. Once at a feast in Corinth, a man heated with wine had taunted him with not being the true son of Polybus. These idle words of a man in his cups so affected the excitable nature of Oedipus that he, characteristically, could think of nothing else. Day and night the saying rankled in his heart. At last, too energetic to remain in the ignorance which might have been his safety, he eagerly hastened to the sacred oracle at Delphi to learn the truth. The only response he heard was the prophecy that he should kill his father and marry his mother. Absorbed in this new suggestion, he failed to consider its bearing upon his question, and, wholly forgetting his former suspicion, he determined never to return to Corinth where his supposed father and mother dwelt, and hurried off in the direction of Thebes. Thus his disposition to act without thinking started him headlong on the way to ruin. At a place where three roads met, all unawares he encountered his real father, Laius, King of Thebes. When the old man insolently accosted him, Oedipus, with his usual misguided promptness, knocked him from the chariot, and slew all but one of his attendants. Thus, by an unreasonable act of passion, Oedipus fulfilled the first part of his prophetic destiny.

But in the crisis in which he found the city of Thebes, his energy and directness served him well. By the flashing quickness of thought and imagination which, when blinded by some egoistic passion, so often hurried him to wrong conclusions, he guessed the riddle of the Sphinx. Then he married the widowed queen, seized the reins of government, and generously did his best to bring peace and prosperity back to the troubled land. In this way he was raised, by the very qualities that ultimately wrought his ruin, to the height from which he fell.

And yet, admirable as these performances were, he displayed in them none of the wisdom with which Aristotle endows his happy man. A thoughtful person, one who acted in accordance with true reason, and not merely with generous impulse, might have put two and two together. Adding the fact that he had killed a man to the Delphic prophecy and the old suspicion concerning his birth, he might have arrived at the truth which would have guided the rest of his life aright. But it never was the habit of Oedipus to do more thinking than seemed necessary to the particular action upon which all the power of his impetuous nature was concentrated. His lack of the 'intellectual virtues' of Aristotle is only paralleled by his inability to keep the 'mean' in the 'moral virtues'.

Between his accession to the throne of Thebes and the opening of the drama there intervened a long period of time in which Oedipus had prospered, and, as it seemed to the Chorus, had been quite happy. The play of Sophocles is concerned with the complication of the rash hero's mistakes; this complication, which is suddenly untangled by the words of the old Herdsman, forms the last chapter in the tragic career of Oedipus. In the first scene the land is blasted by a great death. Old men, young men, and children have come as suppliants to the king, seeking deliverance from this great evil. Oedipus appears, generous, high-minded, and prompt to act, as ever. When Creon brings the message of Apollo, that the slayer of Laius must be cast out of the land, he immediately invokes a mighty curse upon the murderer, and we thrill with pity and fear as we see the noble king calling down upon his own head a doom so terrible. His unthinking haste furnishes the first thread in the complication which the dramatist so closely weaves. Teiresias enters. When Oedipus has forced from his unwilling lips the dreadful words, 'Thou art the accursed defiler of the land', he forgets everything else in his anger at what he deems a taunt of the old prophet, and entangles a second thread of misunderstanding with the first. Still a third is added a moment later, when he indignantly accuses Creon of bribing Teiresias to speak those words. In his conversation with Jocasta the tendency of Oedipus to jump at conclusions does for one moment show him half the truth. He is possessed with the fear that it was he who killed Laius, but here again he can think of only one thing at a time, and, again absorbed in a new thought, he forgets his wife's mention of a child of Laius, forgets the old story concerning his birth, and misses the truth.

Then comes the message from Corinth. After his first joy in learning that his supposed father did not die by his hand, Oedipus loses all remembrance of the oracle concerning his birth, and all fear concerning the death of Laius, in a new interest and a new fear—the fear that he may be base-born. Eagerly

following up the latest train of thought, he at last comes upon the truth in a form which even he can grasp at once, and, in his agony at that vision, to which for the first time in his life he has now attained, he cries out: 'Oh, Oh! All brought to pass—all true! Thou light, may I now look my last upon thee—I who have been found accursed in birth, accursed in wedlock, accursed in the shedding of blood'. In a final act of mad energy, he puts out the eyes which could not see, and demands the execution upon himself of the doom which he alone had decreed. In the representation of Sophocles, this is the end of a great-souled man, endowed with all the gifts of nature, but heedless of the true reason in accordance with which the magnanimous man of Aristotle finds his way to perfect virtue or happiness.

Perhaps we are not entirely reconciled to the fate of Oedipus. Perhaps the downfall of a tragic hero never wholly satisfies the individual reader's sense of justice, for the poet, by the necessity of his art, is bound to make the particular embodiment of a universal truth as terrible and as pitiful as he can. Surely this result is attained in the *Oedipus Rex*. Every sympathetic reader will agree with Aristotle that, 'even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place'. Whatever 'fatalism' there may be in the drama—in the oracles, for instance, and in the performance of the prophesied crimes by Oedipus in ignorance of circumstances—directly increases the tragic effect. Aristotle himself mentions crimes committed in ignorance of particulars as deeds which especially arouse pity. The oracles, such a source of trouble to those who muddle their heads with Greek 'fatalism', have a threefold function. They have a large share in the dramatic irony for which *Oedipus Rex* is so famous, and which is a powerful instrument for arousing tragic fear. They serve as a stimulus to set the hero's own nature in motion without determining whether the direction of the motion shall be right or wrong. And lastly, they point out in clear and impressive language the course of the story. Shakespeare in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* introduces less simple and probable forms of the supernatural, for similar purposes. The oracles of Sophocles, like the ghosts and witches of Shakespeare, are but necessary means for attaining an end. The representation of their effect upon the action of the characters is not the end of the drama, and must not be so regarded. They embody the final teaching of the poet as little as the words of particular dramatic characters, in particular circumstances, express the poet's own unbiased thought and feeling.

The central conception of the *Oedipus Rex* is plainly no more fatalistic than the philosophy of Aristotle. If any reader finds the doctrine hard, he may remember that Sophocles himself completed

it somewhat as the Christian Church completed Aristotle, and, in the representation of the death of Oedipus at Colonus, crowned the law with grace. Nevertheless, for the understanding not only of Sophocles, but of the great 'master of those who know' the laws of life and art, it seems important to recognize the relation between these two ideal conceptions—the magnanimous man of the *Ethics*, ideal for life, the tragic hero of the *Poetics*, ideal for death. According to Aristotle, the man who attains perfect happiness in the world is the wise man who sees in all their aspects the facts or the forces with which he is dealing, and can balance and direct his own impulses in accordance with reason. In the *Oedipus Rex* Sophocles had already shown the reverse. The man who sees but one side of a matter, and straightway, driven on by his uncontrolled emotions, acts in accordance with that imperfect vision, meets a fate most pitiful and terrible, in accordance with the great laws which the gods have made.

This philosophy of Aristotle and Sophocles is clearly expressed in the drama itself. 'May destiny still find me', sings the Chorus, 'winning the praise of reverent purity in all words and deeds sanctioned by those laws of range sublime, called into life throughout the high, clear heaven, whose father is Olympus alone; their parent was no race of mortal men, no, nor shall oblivion ever lay them to sleep: the god is mighty in them and grows not old'.

MARJORIE BARSTOW.

#### REVIEWS

Horace, *The Epistles*. Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by Edward P. Morris. New York: American Book Company (1911). Pp. 239. Price (with *Satires*) \$1.25.

In 1909 Professor Morris published an edition of Horace's *Satires* (reviewed in *THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY* 3.229); he now edits the *Epistles*, and the two are issued in a single volume. In conformity with the plan adopted for other books in the same series the notes accompany the text—one can hardly say that they are at the foot of the page, for almost always they occupy at least half of the available space. By this I do not mean to imply that they are too full; on the contrary it is obvious that the editor has endeavored to be succinct and to present only that which is of direct value to the student. The recent edition of Kiessling, revised by Heinze (1908), shows how much more voluminous a commentary on the *Epistles* may be and still avoid, for the most part, the seductive by-paths of irrelevant pedantry.

The text of these poems does not present many difficulties; originality on the part of the editor is here hardly possible. Perhaps we can detect in Professor Morris a tendency to adopt even more of