

The Words of a Tragic Hero:  
Commentary on a Speech by Oedipus from *Oedipus Rex*

“For I, [. . .] Oedipus, noblest of all the line / of Kadmos, have condemned myself to enjoy / these things no more,” laments Oedipus in utter despair at the end of the play *Oedipus Rex*, the first of the trilogy by Sophocles (13-16. Appendix). Oedipus blinds himself upon the discovery of himself as the murderer of his father and of Iocaste’s death. Yet, in midst of intense pain he is able to compose himself, and delivers one of the most moving speeches in the play. In a fifty-four-line speech in Éxodos, Oedipus reflects on the fateful events in his life leading to the catastrophe and justifies his action of self-blinding. The themes, subtle motifs, vivid imagery, careful diction and effective structure of the speech are ingenious touches that complete Oedipus’s portrayal as a tragic hero. Although the chosen passage is a translation from Greek to English, the translators “found the best English equivalent in a literalness which extended to the texture and rhythm of the Greek phrasing [. . .] to render precisely—the emotional and sensible meaning of every speech in the play” (Fitts and Fitzgerald, “Commentary” p.239).

This is the first lengthy speech Oedipus has given in Éxodos. Sophocles uses this opportunity to establish Oedipus’s place as a tragic hero. The chorus’s comment that Oedipus would be happier if he committed suicide impels Oedipus to give this speech as a strong and powerful defense of his resolve to remain alive. “Do not counsel me anymore” snaps Oedipus to the chorus assuming an authoritative tone in revelation of the assertiveness of his decision (1). His speech changes from the brief lyrical outcries during the *kommos* with the chorus to mostly Alexandrine and occasionally iambic pentameter to express a calmer and more logical self. However, the speech is in continuous and longer sections than Oedipus’s normal speech to show his sorrow and overwhelming emotions. Oedipus makes no mention of his physical pain, but rather is concerned with the psychological torment the truth brings. In lamentation, Oedipus sighs that he cannot bear to see his parents, children, the images of the gods and Thebes (5-11). There is a very cruel peripeteia in these statements from Scene III when he thought it would sweet to see his parents again. Oedipus also grieves at the irony of his contradictory value as the “the noblest of all the line / of Kadmos” (14-15) and one that is

cancerous with evil (33-34). All the things that were once the joy of his life now become the source of his pain. Twice in the speech, Oedipus begs to be hidden away from men's eyes forever revealing the incredible burden of guilt he carries (20, 52). Consequently, he struck his eyes out so to alleviate the pain. More importantly, Oedipus chooses self-blinding over death because he sees it as a "just" punishment more painful than death, fulfilling his declaration to severely punish the murderer of Laïos in Scene I, and subsequently sustaining his moral clarity (2). Phrases from lines 1-2, "this punishment / that I have laid upon myself is just" and lines 13-15, "I [...] have condemned myself" reveal that Oedipus is very clear in making the distinction that the punishment was self-chosen unlike the sufferings brought by Apollo. These actions make Oedipus all the more tragic and heroic because he makes a conscious decision to resist misfortune and endure life. His active role in judging and punishing himself also elevates his character because it is a privilege reserved for the gods.

With the loss of sight, Oedipus gains insight into his identity. Oedipus searches for self-understanding through retrospect of his life in the first, second and third sections of the speech. The subsequent naming of the crucial places of his past in these three sections thus marks Oedipus's symbolic journey of reliving his life, this time with awareness. Oedipus addresses to each place in second person and personifies them. In these sections, Oedipus reaches his point of emotional climax in the speech, therefore rhetorical questions and exclamations are frequent. Beginning with Kithairon, the place his parents abandoned him, Oedipus asks a series of rhetorical questions bitterly emphasized by the anaphora in lines 28 and 29. With excruciatingly painful tone, he moves on to address Corinth. The juxtaposition of "fair" (32) with "evil" (33) and "cancerous" (34), and the realization that he is not the child of Polybos mark Oedipus's disillusionment of his past. Finally, Oedipus addresses the symbolic crossroads where the fateful murder of Laïos took place. Oedipus directly confronts the crossroads, "can you remember / the unspeakable things I did there, and the things / I went on from there to do?" and in turn, confronts himself (39-41). The beastly and graphic personification of the roads drinking his father's blood places the crossroads in an active position in the killing of Laïos. The crossroads in such context no longer stand for the freedom of

choice but the power of fate and prophecy. Crying out “thrice miserable!” Oedipus once again alludes to the misfortune brought upon him at the three crossroads (14).

Oedipus depicts fate as a monstrous thing because it has been unkind to him. He makes little mention of the gods in this speech. Instead, he focuses on his family. “My own blood spilled by my own hand,” Oedipus emphasizes the dear cost of his father’s life due to his hubris and ignorance by calling Laios’s blood his own (39). In section three Oedipus calls out, “O, marriage, marriage!” (42). He reviews the making of his family and stops in an abrupt caesura in line 44, “act performed by the son in the same bed—” because it is too painful to think of. Incest, as Oedipus declares, is “the last evil / that can be known by men: no tongue can say / how evil” (48-49). Oedipus’s marriage with his mother Iocaste proves to be a fatal sin. “The net of incest” creates a vivid image illustrative of the entangled, complicated blood relations (45-46). The list of relations that sprang from incest, “mingling fathers, brothers, sons, / with brides, wives, mothers,” follows immediately to complement the image of “the net of incest” (45-46). It further exemplifies the utter disgust that wells up in Oedipus upon the thought of marriage. At the height of his emotional outcry, Oedipus sways between ambivalent feelings of staying alive and begging for death because of the immense shame.

Ironically with the revelation of his identity, Oedipus seeks to conceal himself from the external world. Sophocles uses the references to senses and Oedipus’s loss of the privilege to enjoy the sensory stimuli to conjure a solitary figure of Oedipus. The exposure of his guilt (19) contrasts with his violent desires to stifle his hearing so to make his body “a tight cell of misery, blank to light and sound” (24-25). The speech also contains numerous references to the motif of sight and eyes. Eyes are an archetype for knowledge and insight. The half rhyme of “eyes” and “sight in lines 3-4 and lines 10, 20 ending with “eyes” place emphasis on the loss of sight and the joys associated with it. The apparent failure in the sensory apparatuses symbolizes Oedipus’s isolation from the outside, carrying the pain and guilt inward. The striking oxymoron of “safe in a dark agony / beyond all recollection” represents Oedipus’s alleviation from emotional turmoil by instilling physical pain (25-26).

By making his body “a tight cell of misery,” Oedipus also isolates the evil that is causing trouble in Thebes (24). The metaphor of Oedipus’s fate and his crime as cancer

evokes an image of cancer cells replicating endless, ruining his life on a daily basis. In identifying himself tainted since birth, “for I am [. . .] sick in my origin,” Oedipus grabs the source of evil by the root (36). Fate is compared to a lethal illness lurking inside him. Oedipus thus takes up the play’s pervasive imagery of disease, laden with the pollution and impurity of the community. His expulsion then, is the act of purification. The last sentence is heartbreaking and a powerful tool for the exhibition of pathos on the part of Oedipus, as he calmly says, “Of all men, I alone can bear this guilt” (54). Oedipus once again demonstrates heroism in his willingness to readily accept his role as the source of pollution, and arguably the scapegoat.

In his first formal speech since the revelation of his identity, Oedipus postures himself as a typical Greek tragic hero who mercilessly judges and punishes himself. He reviews his eventful life vividly with bitter emotions. Sophocles’s careful use of symbols, diction and form of the speech complement each other successfully in portraying a fallen hero that evokes deep sympathy and admiration from the reader. In recognition of his contradictory values as both a great king and a sinful murderer of his own father, Oedipus exhibits ambivalent and overwhelming emotions. By showing Oedipus in a vulnerable, yet still stately light in *Éxodos*, Sophocles brings the depth of Oedipus’s character to the surface.

**Word Count: 1468**

**Works Cited:**

Fitts, Dudley and Robert Fitzgerald. "Commentary." *The Oedipus Cycle: An English Version*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1976

Sophocles. *The Oedipus Cycle: An English Version*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1976.

**APPENDIX:**

OEDIPUS:

Do not counsel me anymore. This punishment	1
That I have laid upon myself is just.	
If I had eyes,	
I do not know how I could bear the sight	
Of my father, when I came to the house of Death,	5
Or my mother, for I have sinned against them both	
So vilely that I could not make my peace	
By strangling my own life.	
Or do you think my children,	
Born as they were born, would be sweet to my eyes?	10
Ah never, never! Nor this town with its high walls,	
Nor the holy images of the gods.	
For I,	
Thrice miserable!—Oedipus, noblest of all the line	
Of Kadmos, have condemned myself to enjoy	15
These things no more, by my own malediction	
Expelling that man whom the gods declared	
To be a defilement in the house of Laïos.	
After exposing the rankness of my own guilt,	
How could I look men frankly in the eyes?	20
No, I swear it,	
If I could have stifled my hearing at its source,	
I would have done it and made all this body	
A tight cell of misery, blank of light and sound:	
So I should have been safe in a dark agony	25
Beyond all recollection.	
Ah Kithairon!	
Why did you shelter me? When I was cast upon you,	
Why did I not die? Then I should never	
Have shown the world my execrable birth.	30
Ah Polybos! Corinth, city that I believed	
The ancient seat of my ancestors: how fair	
I seemed, your child! And all the while this evil	
Was cancerous within me!	
For I am sick	35
In my daily life, sick in my origin.	
O three roads, dark ravine, woodland and way	
Where three roads met: you, drinking my father's blood,	
My own blood spilled by my own hand: can you remember	

The unspeakable things I did there, and the things  
I went on from there to do? 40

O marriage, marriage!  
The act that engendered me, and again the act  
Performed by the son in the same bed—

Ah, the net 45  
Of incest, mingling fathers, brothers, sons,  
With brides, wives, mothers: the last evil  
That can be known by men: no tongue can say  
How evil!

No. For the love of God, conceal me 50  
Somewhere far from Thebes; or kill me; or hurl me  
Into the sea, away from men's eyes for ever.

Come, lead me. You need not fear to touch me.  
Of all men, I alone can bear this guilt. 54