

Freud vs. Sophocles

Sun-Tzu said in his Art of War: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." Every decision and action made is the result of unseen battles between the unconscious and consciousness; man battles against himself as his unconscious tries to make itself the conscious. How much self-knowledge is required to ensure victory when the enemy is one's own unconscious? Or is it wiser to seek knowledge of neither the enemy nor self, but succumb to the battle? The duty of unraveling the struggle between the two psychical forces is fulfilled by Sigmund Freud in his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. By examining the dreams of his patients, Freud identified a comprehensive system that describes the entering of the unconscious into the conscious through the stages of censorship, distortion, displacement, and the preconscious. Sophocles applies Freud's theory to life by adopting the myth of "Oedipus the King", an exaggerated model that illustrates the workings of the unconscious on everyday life. When information in a man's unconscious threatens his conscious well-being, he will battle then submit to his unconscious due to the inaccessibility of knowledge of his enemy and self.

It is crucial to first identify the symbolic representations of Freudian elements and ideas in "Oedipus the King". One of the reasons why Freud analyzes dreams instead of other psychical activities is that dreams are unaffected by the "much-abused privilege of conscious activity, wherever it plays a part, [that conceals] every other activity from our eyes" (652). For Sophocles, the dream case-study in "Oedipus the King" is the plague. Just as Freud follows the thought processes within each dream, the people of Thebes try to interpret the dream-thoughts through the dream-content. The plague represents the dream-content, and the gods correspond to the unconscious, to which the Thebans reach out: "Great welcome voice of Zeus, what do you bring? ... Thebes like a great army dying...send rescue radiant as the kindness in your eyes!" (ll.169, 194, 216-17) Because the gods are omniscient and determine the fate of the characters, in the Theban world they function as the unconscious—a "specific psychical act, distinct from and independent of the process of the formation of a presentation or idea" (178). The parts are assigned, therefore, and Sophocles has created a model that demonstrates the struggle and manifestation of the unconscious.

The first defense set up by consciousness against the unconscious is censorship, determined by a factor of unpleasantness—consciousness only admits messages that it finds favorable. In the Theban world, prophets and oracles stand like screens between the people and the gods because humans cannot understand divine language. For example, Oedipus responds to his people's lamentation by promising "after a painful search I found one cure: I sent Creon ... to Delphi—Apollo the Prophet's oracle—to learn what I might do or say to save our city" (ll.80-84). The only way to interpret the will of the gods is seeking foresight. Oracles are the medium through which the divine and mortal communicate, much like how the unconscious meets consciousness. However, there exists a screen which "nothing...can reach consciousness from [the unconscious] without passing" (177). This screen is an independent system whose sole purpose is to greet and censor the information from the unconscious and to prevent it from disturbing the equilibrium in consciousness. The seer Tiresias finds the message from the gods—that Oedipus killed his father and coupled with his mother—distressing, therefore functions as the censorship and blocks this idea from entering consciousness: "I will never reveal my dreadful secrets...I'd rather not cause pain for you or me" (ll.374, 378). Knowing that the revelation of Oedipus' curse would cause turmoil, Tiresias the seer acts as the screen and attempts to stop Oedipus' quest into the past. Assuming that knowledge of his self would be an advantage in battling the unknown, Oedipus ignores Tiresias' warnings and continues his pursue. Jocasta enacts a similar defense mechanism as Tiresias does when the shepherd and messenger's stories confirm her premonition: "Not a man on earth can see a day ahead...better to live at random...many a man before you, in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed...Live, Oedipus, as if there's no tomorrow!" (ll.1070, 71, 74, 75, 77, 78) Her desire to censor the truth overpowers her reason, and even leads her to accept and justify the incestuous possibility that she has indeed slept with her son. However, no matter how severely the censorship curtails the unconscious, traces of it escape into the consciousness: Tiresias is coerced into revealing the curse, and Jocasta unknowingly speaks the truth. Despite Tiresias and Jocasta's efforts at fending off the unconscious, they cannot stop Oedipus from seeking self-knowledge. The unraveling of the secrets, instead of giving Oedipus a clearer vision, marks his downfall by providing a gateway through which the unconscious slips. Because he fails to recognize the enemy as his own unconscious, Oedipus' acquisition of knowledge only quickens his self-destruction.

Sometimes men would employ a different mechanism from censorship against the unconscious—distortion. Freud describes this process as a defense against a "wish [which] was unable to express itself except in a distorted shape" because there exists a "disagreeable story at the back of it which [one wants] to avoid becoming aware of" (175, 171). For Oedipus, the disagreeable story which he wants to avoid is his curse. Distortion takes place when Oedipus learns of his curse, and abandons Corinth "by the stars, running, always running toward some place where [he] would never see the shame of all those oracles come true" (ll.878-880). The gods give Oedipus a disagreeable oracle, and the censorship agency stops it from entering his consciousness. Oedipus does show initial acceptance of the curse, however, for it is due to

fear of the prophecy's fulfillment that he leaves Corinth. Yet his consciousness does not allow dwelling of this dangerous information which can jeopardize his well-being. Thus it is distorted into the notion that by running away from Corinth, where Oedipus believes to be his native land, he would escape his unfavorable fate. Because of his refusal of his fate upon first notification, Oedipus is denied from full access to his unconscious; this inaccessibility eventually leads to his downfall.

When distortion fails to block the entrance of an unfavorable, unconscious thought, the censorship agency resorts to yet another method which Freud names displacement. For the purpose of dissimulation, the agency "strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity...and creates from elements of low psychical value new values...it is as a result of these that the difference between the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about" (342-343). Displacement occurs when the message from the unconscious is too overwhelming for censorship. Instead of barring or twisting the information, the defense mechanism creates a pseudo-message based on the original. In order to distort the unconscious thought into an unrecognizable form, the agency redistributes a new set of values during screening. The purpose of displacement is to infect the original message with so much transference of energy so that it is no longer unfavorable, but acceptable to the conscious. When the messenger from Corinth announces Polybus' natural death, Oedipus' defense agency processes the information by displacing its values: "Why look to the Prophet's hearth...well look, [Polybus is] dead and buried...all those prophecies I feared—they're nothing, worthless" (ll. 1054, 1058). Oedipus focuses only on the fact that Polybus died not at his hand, but does not consider the possibility that Polybus could not be his father. He places so much importance on the naturalness of Polybus' death that even Jocosta joins him in rejoicing; "But your father's death, that, at least, is a great blessing, joy to the eyes!" (ll. 1082-1083) Oedipus and Jocosta would rather celebrate their father's natural death to strip themselves of the responsibility for committing patricide and incest. The lack of information on his family background weakens Oedipus' position as he counteracts his unconscious. If he has had knowledge of his true birth, then the effects of his unconscious becoming conscious might have been less severe. Yet because he distorts his first acknowledgement of the curse, he continues to deny and reject his fate. For example, Oedipus again experiences displacement when he finds a breach between his and Jocosta's account of the incident: "You said thieves—he told you a whole band of them murdered Laius...I cannot be the killer. One can't equal many" (ll. 931, 932, 934). Like a drowning man clinging to a piece of straw, Oedipus takes refuge in any petty detail, regardless of its relevance, and protects himself against unconscious truth. His rejection of the unconscious knowledge shows the censorship agency's displacement at work. The importance of the evidence is reduced, while trifles, such as the death of Polybus and slip of words, are endowed with great attention. Psychical intensities have been misplaced, and the unconscious thought is temporarily hampered from entering consciousness.

The last bulwark protecting consciousness is a limbo named preconscious, where an unconscious thought dwells before full manifestation. Freud calls preconscious memory, a system that "stands like a screen between the system unconscious and consciousness...[that] not merely bars access to consciousness, [but] also controls access to the power of voluntary movement" (653). When Oedipus learns of his curse as a youth, the information is displaced and stored in system preconscious, where it stays dormant, or is deliberately forgotten. In system preconscious, memories can be either brought into the consciousness or cast back into the unconscious, depending on perceptual stimuli. According to Freud, the two sources of stimuli for unconscious thoughts entering consciousness are the "perceptual system, whose excitation [is] determined by qualities...and the interior of the apparatus itself" (654). Sophocles gives Oedipus the plague for a perceptual excitation, and lets Oedipus delve into his own preconscious to recall elements from within his memories. When excitation materials flow into consciousness from both ends of the apparatus, an unconscious thought enters consciousness. Confronted with the plague at hand and troubled by his mysterious past, Oedipus seeks prohibited answers and suffers disastrous consequences.

When a man tries to enter the forbidden and inaccessible unconscious, the results can be hazardous. The disaster is multiplied if he tries to access information that jeopardizes his welfare. Oedipus falsely assumes that knowing the enemy and self would bring him victory; yet he fails to realize that his enemy and self are one. Whether it is the screening of censorship, the distortion of displacement, or the limbo preconscious, the unconscious fights through layers of protections and finds expression in consciousness. Oedipus' quest into the unconscious and prohibited knowledge cost him his fatal end.