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The Many Functions of Tiresias in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex

The minor role of Tiresias fulfills several chief purposes in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, all of which are necessary in guiding the play through to its tragic ending and the completion of the prophecies. Tiresias primarily functions as the catalyst ultimately responsible for the provocation of Oedipus' venomous jealousy, a vital factor in the play's progression. The calm and confident Tiresias also acts as a foil for Oedipus through his dramatic difference in character, which allows the reader to see Oedipus for who he really is and realize that it was he who brought about his own downfall. Lastly, the wise prophet who functions as an authoritative father figure to the authority-threatened king (Lesser 147-148) helps make the motif of fathers, all of whom Oedipus sees as threats, evident.

This motif of father figures is strongly supported by Tiresias, unveiling one of the prophet's main functions in the play. The motif of father figures in the play is significant due to the fact that Oedipus is known primarily for killing his father and marrying his mother (after which the "Oedipus complex" is named) as both of the prophecies foretold; it only makes sense that Oedipus would in some way rebel against all of the father figures in the play. The wise and respected prophet represents one of the most threatening of these father figures to Oedipus (Lesser 147). Tiresias always acts calmly, confidently and with authority, specific qualities of the archetypal father, and according to Lesser "... both Creon and Tiresias had attributes which would have led Oedipus to look upon them as fathers" (Lesser 147). While the king may not see Tiresias as a literal father, there is evidence that he sees many of the prophet's qualities with jealous contempt, thus stirring his intrinsic hostility (Lesser 148). Oedipus consciously feels threatened by both Tiresias and Creon; they both are highly respected and in addition possess qualities that Oedipus does not, qualities that frustrate the unprivileged king:

The way Oedipus speaks to Tiresias and Creon suggests another source of his tendency to regard them as fathers and then feel envious and hostile toward them. Both men have personal qualities which are not native to Oedipus and which he cannot assume for long. (Lesser 148)

Many of Oedipus' characteristics identify him as being a "son figure" who corresponds to his many father figures (Lesser 148). There is evidence of Oedipus being selfish, envious, and pugnacious, all of which describe children to some degree. Because of Tiresias' seemingly father-like and authoritative

conversation with the childlike and antagonistic king, “[Oedipus] very quickly ceases to speak to Tiresias as king to subject – to command him or beseech him to serve the common good. Instead he talks to him as a feared and hated rival...” (Lesser 148). These tendencies provide ground to the idea that he indeed represents a rebellious “son” to his “fathers” (as described by the Oedipus Complex) – Tiresias included. Tiresias’ role is significant in the support it gives to the father motif, which is understood to be important because of Oedipus’ hatred toward all father figures (this is symbolized when he murders his father unknowingly). Tiresias’ significance to the motif is clearly illustrated by the manner in which he conducts himself in addition to the response that he, as a father figure, is able to evoke from Oedipus.

The noticeable differences between Tiresias and Oedipus suggest that the prophet’s role is significant for another reason – it was also designed as a foil for the king; the contrast between the two highlights each of their personality traits to the reader allowing us to see Oedipus for who he really is: a contentious, and envy-driven tyrant. It is imperative that the readers clearly see these traits within the king and recognize that these unfortunate characteristics of Oedipus’ aid in fulfilling the prophecy resulting in Oedipus’ ultimate downfall. This realization by the readers is cleverly achieved by including a wise and respected prophet, whom the reader can compare with Oedipus, who, in contrast, is hotheadedly immature and spontaneous by nature. An example would be when Tiresias first comes to Thebes. He knows the truth about Laius’ murder and, at first, seems concerned for all involved in the situation. Feeling that it would be best for everyone, he decides not to share any information he knows. In the following quote, the prophet attempts to persuade Oedipus not to pursue this issue any further, clearly revealing Tiresias’ concern for the common good, “O, send me home. Take up your load and I’ll take mine. Believe me, it is better so...I’d rather keep you and me from pain. Don’t press me uselessly, my lips are sealed” (Sophocles 35). Tiresias is mature in his decision to keep the truth concealed; he wants what is best for everyone and uses common sense toward his goal whereas Oedipus continues to be shrouded in the misconception that the knowledge of Laius’ murderer will somehow lift the plague from Thebes. Oedipus vents his intense anger several times at Tiresias’ for his unwillingness to share what he knows, here going as far as to accuse him of Laius’ murder, “...I vent it all on you. You, you planned this thing; and I suspect you of the very murder even- all but the actual stroke; and if you had your eyes I’d say you played that chief part too” (Sophocles 36). Oedipus’ reactions to situations that do not turn out the way he wants are always aggressive, as if he were on the defensive. Oedipus’ last words to Tiresias were, “You

are nothing but a nuisance here, and obstacle. Your riddance is a blessing" (Sophocles 41). Tiresias is the archetypal wise, old man who uses his wisdom for the good of others while Oedipus is the archetypal selfish and violent tyrant who insists on always being right and always getting his way. Tiresias mainly functions as the foil for Oedipus, a device specifically designed to magnify Oedipus' character traits by the presence of the sharp contrasts between the two. The significance of this lies in the easy distinction of Oedipus' faulty personality traits. Because of Tiresias' presence, the reader is able to see that Oedipus is everything that Tiresias is not: spontaneous, immature, hostile, envious, violent, and jealous among others. It is important to realize that it is these traits of Oedipus' that cause him to bring about his own downfall thus fulfilling the prophecy. The absence of Tiresias would result in the reader not fully visualizing this key concept.

Tiresias finally functions as the catalyst ultimately responsible for the second half of the play's progression by directly causing the surge of anger in Oedipus first by refusing to talk and then, when he finally is compelled to do so, by giving the king the answer he did not want to hear. Oedipus was first frustrated by the prophet's silence, made evident by Oedipus saying, "What, nothing? You miserable old man!" (Sophocles 36). This insult is a sign of his increasing anger. Oedipus intended to elicit the truth from this prophet and it infuriated him that he could not. As the king's frustration grew, he insulted Tiresias repeatedly, even accused him of Laius' murder (Sophocles 36). Tiresias' response to this was not what Oedipus wanted to hear at all – Oedipus is Laius' killer, "...The rotting canker in the state is you...I say, you murdered the man whose murderer you require." This intensely incites Oedipus' anger, which causes the second half of the play to begin. Oedipus, bent on disproving Tiresias' words, sets out even more intently to learn the truth about both the murder of Laius, and later about his own heritage, all in response to the conversation he has had with the prophet. The role of Tiresias thusly functions as the catalyst responsible for thrusting the second half of the play into motion by driving Oedipus on his quest to discover the truth about Laius' demise, which, in turn, finally leads to Oedipus' thirst for the truth about his own past.

The inventive, multifaceted role of Tiresias is essential to the play's thematic scheme, clarity, and plot. Tiresias is used as a building block that helps support the motif of father figures throughout the play. He is used as a foil to assist the reader in clearly recognizing and distinguishing Oedipus' significant character traits, and finally, Tiresias is used to advance the plot as the primary catalyst responsible for the events

leading to the tragic ending. The author's ingenious use of this role was both clever and extremely effective.