

“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 (index). Oedipus blinds himself upon the discovery of himself as the murderer of his father and of Iocaste’s death. He transforms from the great helmsmen of Thebes to a blinded, vulnerable man in exile. Yet, in midst of intense pain he is able to compose himself, and delivers one of the most beautiful and 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 (see index). The themes, subtle motifs, vivid imagery, careful diction and effective structure of the speech are ingenious touches that complete Oedipus’ 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” (commentary).

This is the first lengthy speech Oedipus has given since the revelation of his birth. Sophocles uses this opportunity to establish Oedipus’ place as a great tragic hero. The chorus’ 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 (line). 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. 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 in Hades and the children nor can he stand the sight of the gods and the great city (lines). There is a very cruel peripeteia in this statement from Scene III when he thought it was “sweet to see [his] parents again” (line). Oedipus also grieves at the irony of his contradictory value as the “the noblest of all the line of Kadmos” (line) and one that is cancerous with evil (line). 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 (lines). 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" (line) punishment more painful than death, fulfilling his declaration to severely punish the murderer of Laïos in Scene I, and subsequently sustaining his moral clarity (pg. 14). Phrases from line 1-2, "this punishment that I have laid upon myself is just" and line 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 from. 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 role often reserved for the gods. (73 of the meaning of Masculine)

With the loss of sight, Oedipus gains insight to this 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" with "evil" and "cancerous", and the realization that he is not the child of Polybos mark Oedipus's disillusionment of his past. Finally, Oedipus addresses the crossroads where the fateful murder of Laïos took place. "Where three roads met" is symbolic of the turning point in Oedipus life where he obviously makes the fateful decision. 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 (line). Oedipus imputes each crossroads with human quality. 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 alludes to the misfortune brought upon him at the three crossroads.

Oedipus depicts fate as a monstrous thing because it has been unkind to Oedipus. Having lost faith in the divinity, Oedipus makes little mention of the gods in this speech. Instead, he focuses on his family and the blood bonds. “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 (line). In section three Oedipus calls out, “O, marriage, marriage!” (line). He reviews the making of his family and stops in an abrupt caesura in line 44, “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 speak how evil” (Lines). Oedipus’s marriage with his mother Iocaste proves to be a fatal sin. The “the net of incest” creates a vivid image illustrative of the entangled, complicated blood relations (line). 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”. 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 and solitude 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 (line) contrasts with his violent desires to stifle his hearing so to make his body “a tight cell of misery, blank to light and sound” (line). 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.

By making his body “a tight cell of misery”, Oedipus also isolates the evil that is causing trouble in Thebes. 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. 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, as Oedipus calmly says, “Of all men, I alone can bear this guilt” (line). Oedipus once again demonstrates heroism in his willingness to readily accept his role as the source of pollution, and arguably the scapegoat.