

Who deserved his fate more- Hippolytus or Oedipus?

The satisfaction the reader gains from the two characters is based on a number of factors, including the traditional definitions of a tragic hero, as set down by Aristotle, and the sympathy one feels towards the characters themselves.

Aristotle's definition of the ultimate aim of tragedy was to bring about "catharsis"; to arouse the spectators' sensations of pity and fear for the characters in the play so that, by the end of it, they were left with a heightened understanding of the superiority of the Gods and the role of Fate in people's lives.

"Character determines men's qualities, but it is their action that makes them happy or wretched.."

Aristotle also believed that the incidents of tragedy are often beyond the protagonist's control or not closely related to his/her personality. Since the aim of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear through the "peripeteia" of the central figure, the character must be a figure with whom the audience can easily identify with and whose fate can trigger these emotions.

Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, as illustrated in the cases of Oedipus and Hippolytus. Aristotle defines the ideal protagonist as "a man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgement or frailty; a personage like Oedipus..."

In my opinion, both Hippolytus and Oedipus conform to these definitions. Both characters have difficulties with their families - it is due to a family curse that Oedipus leaves his home to go to Thebes, and the fact that his father has brought his wife to stay with Hippolytus is the cause of his tragic events. Both characters are self-assured and egotistical - Oedipus thinks that he can run the city on his own as he is the king, and Hippolytus thinks that he is superior to the goddess

Aphrodite. Oedipus is a victim of fate, whereas Hippolytus is disrespectful towards Aphrodite, therefore bringing about his own demise. 'I have no liking for a Goddess worshipped at night'.

Oedipus had little choice about the action he took when he found out the truth about his life, whereas if Hippolytus had acted more sympathetically to Phaedra, he could have avoided the outcome of the play. Therefore, perhaps it is fair to say that both characters are, to some extent, victims of the Gods and the fates.

Hippolytus is a less sympathetic character as he is more obnoxious and acts in a cruel manner towards his stepmother. He is so conceited that he prides his chastity above the gods. Since gods may choose whom they will honour, so may men.' Oedipus has no control over events and it is only through 'Hamartia', which is no fault of his own; thus increasing the pity we feel towards his character.

As a modern reader, I feel more sympathy for Oedipus. It is clearly shown to us by Sophocles that this man was just a subject of an unlucky prophecy. Although he is hot-tempered and impatient- bad characteristic traits in my belief; I still think Oedipus is a good ruler of the city, and has served his people well, obviously identifying with them. Oedipus' peripeteia is brought about through no direct fault of his own, but a combination of unlucky coincidences that overpowered his wish to escape his destiny whereas Hippolytus' downfall is brought about by his own conceit.

Aristotle said that the most tragic of plays is witnessing a good man come to a bad end through a peripeteia, and Oedipus is clearly a better man than Hippolytus, making his fate all the more tragic. The fate of Oedipus shows that no matter how far you have come in life you can never escape your destiny, tragic just because it could happen to anyone.