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### *Hamartia and Hubris in the Story of Oedipus*

by

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Exposure, salvation, murder, incest—many people today are familiar with the major details of the story surrounding Oedipus, details which invoke an odd mixture of horror and pity and often spark heated debates regarding whether or not Oedipus truly deserved his fate. Some scholars argue that he did not deserve the life laid out before him, for how can a man be held accountable for living out the fate decreed for him by the gods before his birth? Others are equally adamant in maintaining that he *did* deserve the mortifying revelations he was forced to endure, pointing out that he possessed one or more tragic flaws; therefore, even though he *may* have been a good man and ruler overall, he is still to blame for what happened to him (Dodds 17). Neither of these most common views is entirely accurate, nor is either view entirely *in*accurate; while both arguments contain some truth, neither view allows for the complexity of the causes that ultimately led to the fate faced by Oedipus.

Those who would argue that Oedipus' fate was brought about by one or several tragic flaws frequently refer to Aristotle's *Poetics*, arguably the earliest and most influential work of literary criticism. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle notes "that the best sort of tragic hero is a man highly esteemed and prosperous who falls into misfortune because of some serious [...*hamartia*]" (Dodds 18). Traditionally, *hamartia* has been identified either as being a "tragic flaw"—a serious physical, psychological, or moral flaw in an otherwise impeccable character—or as being directly caused by such a flaw. For example, Laurence Berns states, "As a result of a flaw natural to his kind, the tragic hero harms and destroys those he loves most. It is those very qualities for which he is admired and honored that cause him to wreak great evils" (77). Oedipus, then, is said to be a just and noble ruler who cares for his people as though they were his own children. Indeed, Oedipus addresses the citizens of Thebes as "children" in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus the King* (111–113), and he burns with an admirable passion to discover the truths pertaining both to his own past and to the cause(s) behind the plague besetting his city. Nevertheless, he is also regarded as having a tremendous temper and a blindness to the truth he wishes to ignore or in some way fears. A man of great passions, Oedipus is destroyed by those very passions and is to blame for his fate because he is plagued by these tragic flaws.

Defining Aristotle's *hamartia* as simply a tragic flaw of some sort or as caused by an individual's flaw, however, fails to recognize that Aristotle uses this term in other works to refer to something entirely different from a "tragic flaw"; namely, he uses it "to mean an offense committed in ignorance of some material fact and therefore free from [*poneria*] (wickedness) or [*kakia*] (vice)" [*sic*] (Dodds 19–20). For example, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states: "Thus there are three kinds of injury in transactions; those done in ignorance are *mistakes* when the person acted on, the act, the instrument, or the end is other than the agent supposed (1792). Similarly, he states in his *Rhetoric*, "Equity must be applied to forgivable

actions; and it must make us distinguish between wrongdoings on the one hand, and mistakes, or misfortunes, on the other” (2188).<sup>1</sup>

At this point, it is important to note that the phrasing Aristotle uses here demands that mistakes be categorized as forgivable actions rather than as actions that are caused by malicious intent or by an evil nature. As Aristotle uses *hamartia* thus in these two passages, it stands to reason that his intended meaning in the *Poetics* is similar. The context of the use of *hamartia* in the *Poetics* reinforces just such an interpretation: the two examples Aristotle provides of tragic heroes afflicted by *hamartia* are first Oedipus, who murdered his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta in complete ignorance of his relationship to them, and while striving to avoid that very fate; and second, Thyestes, who unwittingly ate his own children when they were vilely butchered and secretly served to him by Atreus (2325). Therefore, rather than implying some sort of tragic flaw, Aristotle is arguing that a tragic hero’s *hamartia*, from which his destruction stems, is simply his making a mistake, acting “in ignorance of some material fact.”

That *hamartia* does not necessarily stem directly from a tragic flaw is further upheld by Sophocles’ portrayal of the virtually tyrannical temper unleashed by Oedipus against both Creon and Tiresias (*Oedipus the King* 124–140).<sup>2</sup> This scene has been used by many as proof that, among other things, this violent temper is a tragic flaw afflicting Oedipus (Kitto 38). That Sophocles does not intend this interpretation is made clear from the casual manner in which Creon dismisses the outburst near the conclusion of the play when he says, “Oedipus, I’ve come not so that I might laugh at you nor taunt you with evil of the past” (171).<sup>3</sup> The actions which have led to the fulfillment of the fate of Oedipus have not *directly* stemmed from a tragic flaw within the character of Oedipus. Sophocles makes it clear that such personal characteristics as a violent temper—characteristics which, quite frankly, are neither uncommon nor found only within a tragic hero—are a source neither of misfortune nor of a character’s resulting defilement in and of themselves, for such a source could not be so casually dismissed by Creon, and thus, by implication, Sophocles himself, at the conclusion of the play (114–115).

While Aristotle’s use of *hamartia* in reference to such tragic heroes as Oedipus negates any argument that he insists on a tragic flaw being necessarily the direct cause of the horrors faced by those heroes, those who would argue that Oedipus is to blame for what befalls him are not entirely mistaken. Similarly, those that claim that Oedipus is simply a pawn in the arbitrary maneuverings of the gods are not entirely correct. An examination of the story of Oedipus reveals that, in addition to Oedipus himself, Laius and Jocasta are equally at fault. These three characters possess a tremendous *hubris*, that is, they are guilty of an overbearing pride that insists they can sidestep the fate decreed for them by the gods themselves. This pride is first made evident in Laius and Jocasta’s exposure of Oedipus when he was still an infant.

It is vital at this point that modern readers understand the cultural background surrounding the exposure of infants in ancient Greece in order to understand in what way the exposure of Oedipus pours blame for the fulfillment of their fate upon the heads of Laius and Jocasta. The exposure of newborn infants, who had not yet been recognized as members of the family, was a commonly accepted practice in ancient Greece, even though the Greeks outlawed infanticide, the killing of children who had been legally admitted into a family (Patterson 103–105). According to Fullan, although there is evidence that some physically handicapped individuals were highly regarded by the ancient Greeks, it is generally accepted that among the more routine reasons for the exposure of an infant was deformity or other physical defects (Patterson 113). That exposure was endorsed by Greek society is evidenced by such ancient injunctions as Aristotle’s statement, “As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live” (*Politics* 2119), and Plato’s comment, “[T]he offspring of the inferior, and any of those of the other sort who are born defective, [officials] will properly dispose of in secret [...]” (699).<sup>4</sup> The common acceptability of the practice of infant exposure in ancient Greek society necessarily indicates that the exposure of the infant Oedipus would not have been abhorrent to ancient minds and cannot be seen as

being an act of *hubris* in and of itself. The act of exposing the infant did not rebel against any mandates believed to have been instituted by the gods.

While Laius and Jocasta's exposing of Oedipus did not constitute *hubris*, the motivation behind that action did: the driving purpose was, quite simply, to avoid the fate that had been prophesied by the oracle given to Laius (Morford and Lenardon 298). This willful attempt by Laius and Jocasta to raise themselves above the decrees of the gods constituted the most blasphemous form of *hubris*, for no human can ignore the gods' will; the exposure of Oedipus was simply a manifestation of that most serious form of *hubris*.

In like manner, Oedipus himself was guilty of *hubris* as he also attempted to thwart the fate that had been decreed for him by the gods, thereby implicitly claiming to be above the gods themselves. When Oedipus traveled from Corinth to Delphi in order to learn his true parentage, rather than receiving the information he sought, he was instead informed that he was fated to murder his father and marry his mother. In an effort to thwart the will of the gods and evade this fate prophesied by them for him, he refused to return to the only home he had ever known and thereby hoped to avoid interaction with either of the individuals whom he believed to be his parents. Through that act of disobedience, he unwittingly set his feet on the path that would eventually lead him to fulfilling the very decree he was striving to foil.

Interestingly, it is additional *hubris*, made evident through a series of acts long after Oedipus had already murdered his true father and married his true mother, that leads him to discover the horrifying truth of what he has done. Sophocles, in his masterpiece *Oedipus the King*, vividly portrays the blindness of Oedipus, caused by his pride, as he refuses to acknowledge the truth revealed by Tiresias, the mouthpiece of the gods, taking his disbelief so far as to threaten both Tiresias and Creon, both of whom had honestly sought the will of the gods. His refusal forces the gods to explicitly reveal the truth of what he has done, thereby instigating the suicide of his mother-wife and his own self-mutilation and subsequent life-long suffering (111–176). Both of these acts become final manifestations of *hubris*, for both acts claim for mortals the authority of the gods over the continuation and quality of life.

The *hubris* of Oedipus necessitates the placement of at least some of the blame for his fate upon his own shoulders. The attribution of such blame is substantiated by Sophocles' *Antigone*, which makes it clear that "prophecy in no way compels but only predicts" (Kitto 41). Indeed, Oedipus' *hubris* can quite legitimately be recognized as a tragic flaw in his character, a flaw which indirectly results in the fulfillment of prophecy. Aristotle's understanding of *hamartia* does not deny the possibility of such a flaw; rather, he allows that a tragic flaw is not necessarily a direct cause of *hamartia*, and thus accepts that other aspects of an individual's character can constitute a tragic flaw rather than simply the one which led directly to the actions in question.

That Oedipus is in part to blame for the fulfillment of the fate decreed for him by the gods and for his resulting personal contamination before the gods, exemplified in the plague that is afflicting Thebes at the beginning of *Oedipus the King* (114–115), is clearly seen when one recognizes his *hubris*. However, Sophocles makes abundantly clear that neither Oedipus' *hubris* nor his personal contamination which results from the prophetic fulfillment is nearly so damning as those who would place *all* of the blame on the shoulders of Oedipus frequently claim. Not only is Oedipus finally absolved, he is so completely purified that the gods see fit to grant him deification, transforming him into a protector of Attica and summoning him themselves into the afterlife (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 177–187). Such an action on the part of the gods would never have occurred had Oedipus still been unredeemed.

Both a clear understanding of Aristotle's use of *hamartia* and a careful examination of the chronicle of Oedipus are necessary to achieve an accurate picture of the part Oedipus plays in the realization of the fate decreed for him before his birth. He cannot be blamed for acts committed in ignorance, but neither

can he be fully absolved of guilt when his own *hubris* is a link in that chain of events which ultimately leads to the prophetic fulfillment. The myth of Oedipus raises a question that has been considered in both philosophy and religion for centuries: do the gods cause our fates to be fulfilled, or are they simply observers who proclaim the inevitable results of our own actions? Perhaps the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes; for, while “prophecy in no way compels but only predicts,” would predicted fates be realized if humanity were not informed and did not attempt to thwart those fates?

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to E.R. Dodds for directing me to the specific passages which I have here referenced from the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to H.D.F. Kitto for directing me to this passage.

<sup>3</sup> Again, I am indebted to H.D.F. Kitto for directing me to this passage.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Michael R. Fullan for directing me to the specific passages which I have here referenced from the *Politics* and the *Republic*.

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