

## Identity Theft: The Dismemberment of Oedipus' Soterial Self-Conception

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the tragic hero Oedipus' self-conception of his identity is intimately connected to his rise and fall as ruler of Thebes. From his very first words, "O children" (ὦ τέκνα, *OT* 1), he exudes a fatherly, affectionate disposition towards his subjects, growing out of his role as savior of the city from the Sphinx, and he identifies himself as "the one called Oedipus, famous to all" (ὁ πᾶσι κλεινὸς Οἰδίπους καλούμενος, 8). On a more personal level, as Danze (2016) observes, he identifies himself completely with the sufferings of his people, claiming that "there is not one of you who ails as much as I do" (ὡς ἐγὼ / οὐκ ἔστιν ὁμῶν ὅστις ἐξ ἰσοῦ νοσεῖ, 60-61), and he proclaims himself to be the staunchest ally of the fallen Laius, ironically, "just as if he were my own father" (ὡσπερεῖ τοῦμοῦ πατρός, 264). Danze identifies this empathetic pity as the driving force for the tragedy in the *OT*, for it compels Oedipus to persevere in seeking an end to his people's suffering.

As McCoy (2013) notes, however, there is one Theban with whom Oedipus vehemently refuses to associate himself: the killer of Laius. This man he curses publicly, denying him any participation in Theban society down to the slightest conversation (*OT* 236-251). Yet, by the end of the play, he himself is revealed to be this unhappy Theban. He gauges out his eyes and proclaims himself "the father-killer and the mother--- [well...]" (τὸν πατροκτόνον / τὸν μητρός..., 1288-1289). Thus, the compassionate father figure extolled as a savior by his people sees his identity as a public hero crumble under the growing weight of his previously concealed identity (even to himself) as son to his victim and husband to his mother. In this paper, I explore Oedipus' journey to self-recognition through the lens of his self-conceived identity. I argue that his vulnerability regarding his parentage undermines his ability to withstand attacks upon his

heroic identity as father, savior, and fellow-sufferer of the Theban people, resulting in his self-recognition and the reversal of these identities into their opposites.

In the first part of the paper, I show that Oedipus conceives of himself as a father and savior of the Theban people and that the crowd of suppliants roundly affirms him in this belief. Closely tied in with this self-conceived identity is his capacity to suffer with and for his subjects, which involves an imaginative leap into their situation and difficulties. He bolsters this identity as father and fellow-sufferer by contrasting his alliance with Laius and the citizens to his utter hatred and disdain for Laius' killer and the city's source of pollution. In the second part of the paper, I examine how the series of conversations Oedipus holds over the course of the play challenge an aspect of his heroic identity in Thebes, starting with Teiresias in lines 300-462, who directly accuses him of killing Laius and polluting the city (362). Though Oedipus quickly grows angry with the prophet, he remains more or less impervious to his claims until he mentions Oedipus' parents (435-437). This reveals a long-nurtured vulnerability in Oedipus that increasingly becomes the focal point of his conversations. As his uncertain identity as a son comes to dominate his discussions, his role as father and savior is diminished as others, such as the Messenger and Herdsman, claim to have had this power over him as an infant. Finally, when his persistent questioning brings about his *anagnorisis*, or self-recognition, as son of Laius and Jocasta – and with it his *peripeteia*, or reversal of fortune – his heroic identity as savior, father, and fellow-sufferer of the city dissolve, leaving him the city's polluter, unfortunate native son, and exile.

## Works Cited

Danze, Teresa M. "The Tragedy of Pity in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*." *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 137, no. 4. 2016. 565-599.

McCoy, Marina. *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy*. Oxford U P. New York: 2013.