

Œdipe and Louis XIV

The Renaissance saw a great abundance of adaptations of the works of the Greco-Roman authors. One of such authors was Pierre Corneille, a French dramatist of the 17th century. His tragedy *Œdipe* is a good representation of how writers alter the story in order to mirror the views or the political atmosphere of their times. It was performed in January of 1659, a period still reeling from the rebellion of the aristocrats, La Fronde, an event that greatly troubled the monarchy and influenced Louis XIV, a child at the time, to be more authoritative in his rule. In this paper I will examine how Corneille's prominent changes and additions to Sophocles' tragedy give an insight into the consciousness of the French monarchy.

One notable difference is the lack of Tiresias. Although he is mentioned by name and his words are paraphrased, he only receives four lines which are quoted by someone else (1031-1034). I feel that this omission is the defining feature of Corneille's *Œdipe*. With Sophocles the scene between Oedipus and Tiresias represents a powerful moment which foreshadows all that is to come (*OT* 316-462). However, Corneille chooses not to put him on stage in order to lessen the importance of prophecies. Nevertheless, the plot is still guided by the message of Laius' who will not be appeased until "le sang de [sa] race," the blood of his family, is spilled (606). This is where the addition of Dircé, the daughter of Jocasta and Laius, plays an important part. She is a headstrong and independent woman who is quiet unhappy with the fact that her rightful place at the throne of Thebes had been given to a stranger. However, when she learns that the only way to save Thebes is with the death of Laius' kin, she bravely accepts her responsibilities.

On the other hand, Corneille's Oedipus seems to be more concerned about being overthrown. First, he fears that if Dircé marries her lover and the king of Athens, Theseus, she will have enough power to take the city by force. Then, he fears that the apparently alive son of

Laius will assassinate him without realizing that he is talking about himself. Furthermore, in *Oedipus Rex* the two revelations concerning the killer of Laius and the question of Oedipus' birth seem to be closely intertwined. However, Corneille seems to address them separately, placing more emphasis on the regicide than on the incest. Even after Jocasta's death and his self-blinding, Corneille states that Oedipus has accomplished "son devoir," his duty, to the city.

All in all, Corneille's adaptation is rather politically-centered. He underlines the importance of having a legitimate ruler who would bring harmony to the state. Oedipus, although he is the son of Laius and therefore the legitimate heir, brings only death and unrest when he receives the throne through murder. I would agree that Dircé is "the voice of orthodox absolutism" and the embodiment of Louis XIV (Bilis, 2010). She echoes Louis XIV's own worries and the desire to protect his rightful place at the throne. Pierre Corneille's tragedy is not about fate or free will, or the truthfulness of the oracles, it is about who has the right to rule, who is the legitimate ruler and what qualities make a good king. Thus, by examining the differences in the plot and the portrayal of the characters between Sophocles' and Corneille's tragedies, we can better understand the attitudes and the thoughts of Corneille and his contemporary audience, mainly Louis XIV himself.

Bibliography

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