

Are We Blind? Oedipus

Sophocles' *Oedipus* is often the first point of contact that many high school students have with Oedipus, and Greek Drama as a genre. This is due to Aristotle claiming that Sophocles' *Oedipus* is the perfect example of Greek Tragedy in his *Poetics*. Aristotle's focus on *hamartia*, this 'tragic flaw', has led to the pursuit of these faults as the source of the misfortunes for protagonists of these plays (Scodel, 2010). The Aristotelean archetype, that became the authority on tragedy during the 16th century and was further promoted because it fit the style of Shakespearean tragedies (Edmunds 2006), has effectively caused the character of Oedipus to be pigeon-holed solely as a tragic hero whose flaw of excessive pride and self-righteousness caused his downfall. Based on various ancient authors, including Sophocles himself, we know that Oedipus is a complicated figure and we ought to represent him as such, rather than simplify his stories. As educators, we do a disservice to our students by narrowing their perception of the interpretation of Oedipus based solely on one method of analysis (Dodds 1966). As such, we must provide students with the proper context and information behind the man and introduce the different versions of Oedipus found in literature in antiquity and connect it back to what we see in Tragedy.

To do so, we need to turn back time to the 8th century BC and start with Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. Within these two works we are exposed to the first mentions of Oedipus, in which his life and fate are briefly described. In Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, the mother of Oedipus, Epikaste, tells Odysseus how she married her son in ignorance, but that the gods made this known soon afterwards. According to the spirit of Epikaste, and Homer through her, Oedipus continued to rule Thebes; Oedipus' cameo in Book 23 of the *Iliad* confirms the version of the story found in the *Odyssey*. In his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias relates to us how Cinaethon, a Spartan poet,

confirms Homer's version of the story in his *Oedipodea* and informs us that Oedipus' children were born from a different union (9.26). Just from these two sources, we already see a huge difference between the earlier versions of the Oedipus myth and the Sophoclean play. In his work, Pausanias also references several cultic sites that are dedicated to Oedipus, which are referenced in other literary works (Edmunds 1981), such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Colonus*. Acknowledging Oedipus' role in cult provides the students with new avenues of approach when analyzing the character of Oedipus within tragedy (Nagy 2013).

By tracking the changing variations of Oedipus' character within myth, literature, and cult and using textual analysis we are able to provide other interpretations to the events within the plays outside the lens of stereotypical Aristotelian tropes. In doing so, we are able to not only able to change the students' perception of Oedipus, but also their perception of Greek tragedy as a genre. They will be able to view the genre in its entirety, and not limited by Aristotle's limited ideal.

Bibliography

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Sophocles, *Oedipus Colonus*