

Oedipus the Monster in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Towards the end of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*, after Oedipus has learned the truth that he has married his mother and has killed his father, he emerges, blinded, from the *skene*. At this sudden sight, the chorus exclaims, "I cannot even bear to look on you, though I wish to ask you many questions and to learn many answers and perceive many things; such is the horror (*phrike*) you inspire in me!" (1303-6). Cairns (2015) has persuasively argued that *phrike* is a complex emotion, involving shivering, shuddering, and goosebumps, that serves as an automatic response to various auditory and visual stimuli. In effect, we can think of *phrike* as the horror emotion, the same one we experience when watching horror movies or reading horror fiction.

Yet why would the chorus feel this horror response at this point in the play? It cannot be simply due to the violence of the scene, since there are plenty of other examples of violence in Greek tragedy where the other characters do not experience *phrike*. However, if this truly is a moment of horror within the play, then perhaps we can gain perspective by examining contemporary theories of horror. The predominant theory of horror is that of Noel Carroll (1990), who proposes that horror requires the presence of an impure, revolting monster that causes onlookers to shrink back and avoid looking at or touching it. In this paper, I argue that Oedipus can productively be compared to a monster (after all, he produces these reactions in the chorus), and, more tentatively, that Oedipus may actually develop into a monster over the course of the play.

For Carroll, horror monsters are impure beings that are categorically interstitial – they blend and transcend categorical definitions. Furthermore, they are beings that lie outside the bounds of contemporary science. While this is obviously the case for zombies, werewolves, and the like, Oedipus satisfies this definition as well, though a bit less evidently. In terms of

categories, Oedipus is both a son and husband to Jocasta; thus, he is categorically interstitial.

And while being a son and a husband to someone is not a scientific impossibility (since Oedipus himself provides an example), it does lie at the margins of acceptable biological behavior.

If this is true, then Oedipus has been impure and categorically interstitial for the duration of the play, and the play's focus now shifts to Oedipus's slow and steady recognition that he is a monster. Utterly resistant to this realization, Oedipus rejects information from Tiresias, the Corinthian, the Herdsman, and Jocasta. In the *anagnorisis*, however, when Oedipus fully realizes his monstrous nature, he responds by transforming his physical body to reflect his character's impurities – he blinds himself. It is at this point that the chorus experiences *phrike*, when Oedipus's monstrous nature becomes physicalized. Yet it is clear that if Oedipus is a monster, then he is an extraordinarily pitiable one, because his monstrousness was due to the accidents of fate. Thus, we can expand upon Cairns's understanding of *phrike* as a tragic emotion, because in this play, *phrike* was caused not just by a revolting sight, but by a revolting, horrifying monster.

Bibliography

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