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Aristotelian Plot and Character in the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles and His Imitators

Thomas F. Murray
Loyola University Chicago

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Vita Auctoris

Thomas Francis Murray was born at Chicago, Illinois, April 20, 1910. He received his elementary education at Our Lady of Mercy, St. Ignatius, and Visitation Grammar Schools. He attended St. Ignatius High School and graduated therefrom in June, 1928. In October of the same year he entered the Jesuit Novitiate of the Sacred Heart, Milford, Ohio, and at this time was enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences of Xavier University. In August, 1932, he entered St. Louis University, receiving there the degree of Bachelor of Arts in June, 1933. After spending a year in graduate study at that University he entered Loyola University in August, 1934, to pursue his graduate studies.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. ARISTOTLE ON PLOT

"Tragedy then," says Aristotle, in his Poetics, "is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude: in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."¹

In this definition, Aristotle lays down first what tragedy is and what it represents; secondly, the form that tragedy employs; thirdly, the manner of communication to an audience and, lastly, the means used to fulfill its functions. Aristotle continues to say that tragedy is the imitation of an action which implies personal agents, who in turn demand distinctive qualities both in the matter of character and thought. For these two natural elements, character and thought, beget action, and on action all success or failure depends. Plot or the arrangement of incidents, is the imita-

tion of the action, and by character is meant that in virtue of which certain qualities are ascribed to certain persons. He finally divides tragedy into six parts which determine its quality, namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Song.² Of these six parts, it is my intention to treat but the first two, Plot and Character, as found in the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles, in the Oedipus of Seneca, in the Oedipe of Corneille, in the Oedipus of Dryden and Lee, and finally in the Oedipe of Voltaire.

In the thirteenth chapter of the Poetics, Aristotle gives his idea of what the ideal tragic hero should be, and gives a few more interesting points regarding Plot.

A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes, - that of a man who is not

eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous, - a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.³

B. ARISTOTLE ON CHARACTER

With respect to character Aristotle lays down four things to be obtained:

In respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good. Now any speech or action that manifests moral purpose of any kind will be expressive of character; the character will be good if the purpose is good. This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being and the slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety. There is a type of manly valour: but valor in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate. Thirdly, character must be true to life: for this is a distinct thing from goodness and propriety, as here described. The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent still he must be consistently inconsistent.⁴

CHAPTER I

REFERENCES

1

Aristotle, Poetics, Ch. VI. (The translation quoted is that of S.H. Butcher. All translations of the Poetics quoted in this thesis will be from this translation).

2

Ibid.

3

Ibid., Ch. XIII.

4

Ibid., Ch. XV.

CHAPTER II

SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS TYRANNUS

The opening scene of the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles is excellent and has been an object of admiration for all who have studied the technique of the drama. Its purpose is twofold. It first of all gives the setting; the spectators are introduced to the exact point of the legend which the poet has selected for treatment and impressed at the same time with the greatness and majesty of Oedipus. He thus opens the action in so natural and easy a way as to compel attention by its very simplicity. Oedipus expresses fatherly concern and regard for his subjects and desires to know the meaning of the embassy that would speak with him. The priest of Zeus informs him of the condition of the city: how all Thebes is laboring under a terrible plague which is fast devastating the country and beseeches him to save the city once again, as he did of old when the Sphinx was besetting the Theban citizens. We see from this speech of the priest the esteem in which Oedipus is held by his subjects. The priestly spokesman pays this tribute to the king:

.... deeming thee first of men, both in
life's common chances, and when mortals have

to do with more than man (ll. 33-4)¹

And now, Oedipus, king glorious in all eyes
(l. 40)

On, best of mortals, again uplift our
state (l. 40)!

Oedipus goes on to show himself a confident careful ruler, sublime in the strength of his manhood and tenderly concerned for the afflictions of his people. In him the people could freely place their confidence for, possessing as he does strength of will and singleness of purpose, he seems a man incapable of failure. Thus, early in the play, Sophocles begins to shape his masterful plot. In the king's natural speech that follows the seeds are sown that will ripen into the tragic frailty in the character. There is a hint of too much assurance and importance in his words to the priest:

.... well wot I, that ye suffer all; yet,
sufferers as ye are, there is not one of you
whose sufferings is as mine. Your pain comes
on each one of you for himself alone, and for
no other; but my soul mourns at once for the
city, and for my self, and for thee (ll.59 ff).²

As Oedipus is informing the Thebans that he has not idly sat by while they suffered, but that he has already sent Creon to Delphi to learn from the god Apollo what should be done, Creon is seen approaching. From the ensuing conversation we see that the plot, whatever else it should be, should fulfill, at least, Aristotle's requirement of *σπουδή*, of high

minded seriousness. The god, Apollo had made known that the Thebans should drive out, a defiling something which had hitherto, been harbored in the land, by banishing a man or by bloodshed in quittance of the blood of their former king, Laius. Oedipus learns that Laius had been slain, as it had been reported, by many robbers. All the kings suite had likewise been slain, but one alone, who had managed to escape and make the report. Cognizant now, of all that is to be known, Oedipus swears to discover the offender, and pronounces a terrible curse, in "embellished language".

Whosoever of you knows by whom Laius son of Labdacus was slain, I bid him declare all to me

But if ye keep silence - if anyone, through fear, shall seek to screen friend or self from my behest - hear ye what I then shall do. I charge you that no one of this land, whereof I hold the empire and the throne, give shelter or speak word unto that murderer, whosoever he be And for myself I pray that if, with my privity, he should become an inmate of my house, I may suffer the same things which even now I called down upon others.....

And for those who obey me not, I pray that the gods send them neither harvest of the earth nor fruit of the womb, but that they be wasted by their lot that now is, or by one yet more dire (ll. 225 ff).

Now, for Oedipus the one thing to be done is to find the murderer. He has sent for Teiresias, and anxiously awaits his coming. Teiresias, an old blind seer enters, led by a boy. Oedipus asks him to find the murderer out by whatever means he can. Teiresias, by a slip of the tongue, thinks

aloud and Oedipus immediately catches him. There follows a heated scene in which Oedipus, roused to anger, gives Teiresias an unmerciful tongue-lashing, calling him the murderer or at least an accomplice, simply because he is concealing something from the king. This, the patience of Teiresias cannot brook; in a moment of fierce anger he tells Oedipus:

Tir. thou art the accused defiler of the land.

Oe. So brazen with thy blustering taunt?
And wherein dost thou trust to escape thy due (ll. 353 ff.)?

Blinded by his rage he tells Teiresias that this is all a scheme concocted by Creon and himself to drive him, Oedipus, from the throne. Teiresias, wrought to a still higher pitch of frenzy, hints at Oedipus's real relation with Jocasta. Many have taken exception to this scene. It seems just another case of looking intently for a flaw and finding one. With this fact in mind, that Oedipus Tyrannus has been placed by the scholiasts and by most modern critics at the very summit of Greek tragic art, they have set out to peruse the play with the sole purpose of finding fault. The least little thing they pounce upon and make capital of it. To one reading the play for the first time, the difficulty would never in the least be suspected. Might not this have been the case? Could it not easily have happened that Teiresias was of a choleric nature, and the strong language of Oedipus had been too much for him? Or, if this does not suffice, add the fact that it

was only by a supreme victory over himself that Teiresias had held his tongue from the time he realized that Oedipus was the slayer and only with misgivings, salving his injured conscience by considering the nobility of Oedipus. We must remember, too, that at the moment a terrible plague was wasting the entire city, and that a fear for personal safety might have weakened the seer's resistance.

Creon, brother-in-law of Oedipus, having heard of the charges against him comes to vindicate himself. Oedipus, still in a passion, vehemently assails him. The two partake in a heated argument which is terminated by Jocasta as she comes upon the scene. Oedipus haughtily tells her that he is accused of the murder of Laius. She, in an attempt to soothe his wrought passions speaks frivolously and impiously of oracles. To substantiate her statements, she tells how the oracle had come to Laius that he should die by his son's hand, but this had not been fulfilled for Laius had met his death at the hands of foreign robbers many years after the death of his child. The child when but three days old had been thrown with its ankles pinned together, on a trackless mountain. This account of the death of Laius, intended to soothe Oedipus is so framed that it stirs up his deepest agitation.

Oedipus questions Jocasta concerning the details as they were known of Laius's death. A terrible fear comes over him as he realizes that only the statement of the servant that

robbers and not a single man had slain the king and his suite can absolve him from the crime. Lover of truth that he is, he asks that the servant be sent for, and then reveals the secret of his life to Jocasta. These double confidences of Oedipus and Jocasta are exquisite. Oedipus informs Jocasta that his father was Polybus of Corinth, and his mother Merope. One day at a banquet a man in his cups had cast it at him that he was not the true son of his father but only an adopted son. On the next day he had told this to his mother and father. Hearing of the taunt they were wroth at the man who had uttered it. This gave temporary comfort, but the rumor persisted to spread abroad. Unknown to his parents he had gone to Delphi to find out the truth from Apollo. He had not received the answer to his question but was told that he was fated to defile his mother's bed and be the slayer of his father. To avoid such dreadful deeds he decided to put Corinth far behind him. As he traveled he had come into the land of Phocis, where he met a man seated in a carriage. The right of road was disputed and he had killed the man and all who followed him. He then says:

But if this stranger had any tie of kinship with Laius, who is now more wretched than the man before thee? What mortal could prove more hated of heaven? Whom no stranger, no citizen, is allowed to receive in his house; whom it is unlawful that any one accost; whom all must repel from their homes! And this - this curse - was laid on me by no mouth but mine own! And I pollute the bed of the slain man with the hands by which he perished. Say, am I vile? Oh,

am I not utterly unclean? - seeing that I must be banished, and in banishment see not mine own people, nor set foot in mine own land, or else be joined in wedlock to my mother, and slay my sire, even Polybus, who begat and reared me.

Then would not he speak aright of Oedipus, who judged these things sent by some cruel power above man? Forbid, forbid, ye pure and awful gods, that I should see that day! No, may I be swept from among men, ere I behold myself visited with the brand of such a doom (ll. 813 ff.)!

The force of this passage is appalling. The audience knows the true state of affairs and is horrified at the words of Oedipus. It is here that the spectator realizes the masterly logic in the way incident follows naturally from incident. He realizes that "the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed."³

After this scene Jocasta and Oedipus withdraw while a choral ode is sung. When she next appears, Jocasta is on her way to visit the shrines of the gods, to pray for peace and quiet for her perturbed husband. A messenger enters desiring to see Oedipus. When told that Jocasta is his wife, he addresses her indirectly:

Then may she ever be happy in a happy home,
since she is a heaven-blest queen (l. 929).

Asked the meaning of this greeting, the messenger tells Jocasta that he possesses good tidings: the crown of

Corinth now belongs to Oedipus, for Polybus has died. Jocasta exalted over this turn of affairs, sends a handmaid to bring Oedipus. When he returns she tells him what has occurred, but he must again be told the news -- this time by the messenger. Polybus, he is assured, had died of old age. For an instant Oedipus takes Jocasta's view of oracles, but his reverent nature rebels at this and he qualifies his statement, for perhaps Polybus's death may have been due in part to longing for his return. Despite Jocasta's confident words he still fears to return to Corinth because his mother yet lives.

Throughout these scenes Sophocles makes bold strokes which must have held his audience spellbound.

Io. Nay, what should mortal fear, for whom the decrees of Fortune are supreme, and who hath clear foresight of nothing? 'Tis best to live at random, as one may. But fear not thou touching wedlock with thy mother. Many men ere now have so fared in dreams also: but he to whom these things are as nought bears his life most easily.

This conversation arouses the messenger's curiosity. On inquiry he learns Oedipus, because of the oracle, fears Merope. Wishing to be of service and free Oedipus from an unnecessary care, he manifests that Merope was not his mother. By so doing he brings about the "reversal of situation", mentioned by Aristotle.

Reversal of situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. Thus in Oedipus, the messenger comes to cheer

Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother but by revealing who he is produces the opposite effect.⁴

Oedipus learns from the messenger, that he, the messenger, had found him in Cithaeron, with his feet pinned together. Rapid fire dialogue passes between the two in a most logical manner, causing fear to run riot through the audience. The inevitable result is seen now. Jocasta knows at line 1034;

Me. I freed thee when thou hadst thy ankles
pinned together (l. 1034)

who Oedipus is and stands by horror-stricken with the horror-stricken audience. "Recognition", says Aristotle, "as the name indicates is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with reversal of situation."⁵

As the movement proceeds, the messenger narrates that he had received Oedipus from another herdsman in the service of Laius. At the suggestion of the Chorus, Oedipus asks Jocasta if the man for whom they have sent, is the herdsman in question. Jocasta in an attempt to be calm tries to throw them off the trail:

Io. Why ask of whom he spoke? Regard it
not.... waste not a thought on what he said....
- 'twere idle.

Oe. It must not be that, with such clues in
my grasp, I should fail to bring my birth to
light.

Io. For the gods sake, if thou hast any care for thine own life, forbear this search! my anguish is enough.

Oe. Be of good courage; though I be found the son of a servile mother, - aye, a slave by three descents, - thou wilt not be proved base-born.

Io. Yet hear me, I implore thee: do not thus.

Oe. I must not hear of not discovering the whole truth.

Io. Yet I wish thee well - I counsel thee for the best.

Oe. These best counsels, then, vex my patience.

Io. Ill-fated one! Mayst thou never come to know who thou art!

Oe. Go, some one, fetch me the herdsman hither, and leave yon woman to glory in her princely stock.

Io. Alas, alas, miserable! - that word alone can I say unto thee, and no other henceforth for ever. (She rushes into the palace)
(ll. 1056-1072).

With this wild transport of grief she rushes into the palace. The height of dramatic effect has been reached. Oedipus in his excitement is blind. In his blindness he thinks that Jocasta fears lest he shall be proved base-born. Little does he realize how base-born he will prove to be.

The herdsman is brought into the scene and he tries to conceal his knowledge. Oedipus raves at him as he did at Teiresias and threatens the old man with torture. Fear of torture brings from his unwilling lips the truth. We thus have a second "reversal of situation". In terrible agony

Oedipus, now seeing the whole truth, groans:

Oe. Oh, oh! All brought to pass—all true!
 Thou light, may I now look my last on thee -
 I who have been found accursed in birth, accursed
 in wedlock, accursed in the shedding of blood
 (ll. 1182-5)!

The Chorus left alone moralizes on these terrible events, which arouse in the audience deep sentiments of "pity and fear". Then the dramatic messenger arrives: Oedipus on first entering the palace sought a sword, at the same time asking for Jocasta. His intention appears to have been to expiate his unwitting crimes by killing himself before his wife-mother. Suddenly he seems to be seized with a suspicion of what had already happened (that she has anticipated him in both knowledge and attempted expiation) and he rushes at the door of the bedchamber that she has shared with him and with his father, bursts it in, and to himself and the horrified servants, reveals Jocasta's dead body hanging from the ceiling. When her body has been cut down the sight of the great brooches at her shoulders puts a new idea in to Oedipus's half frenzied mind. He seizes the brooches and with their points puts out his eyes as a punishment on them for their impious seeing and for their moral blindness. He bids the palace doors be opened. There lies dead Jocasta; and sightless Oedipus stands over her.

The remaining two hundred lines are used for purposes of contrast. Hitherto we have seen Oedipus in the pride of

monarchy and manhood, hasty, arrogant, yet withal a just and able ruler. He is now, by means of a "peripeteia" more complete than in any other Greek tragedy, revealed in the very depths of his calamity, still dignified. The children of Oedipus and Jocasta are brought in to help establish a quieting effect. Oedipus submits quietly to banishment and as he walks off, the tragedy is ended.^{5a}

THE TRAGIC HERO

Is Oedipus a true tragic hero? Is he "a man, who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity but by some error or frailty"⁶ or is he a mere puppet directed by inexorable fate? Or, the problem may be stated in other words, suggested by Mrs. Elizabeth Woodbridge Morris, when she says:

"Thus we may sum up the elements of tragic effect in three words: suffering, struggle, causality. Suffering alone is pathetic merely; struggle alone may be heroic merely; causality alone gives us the rational merely; the union of the three produces the tragic."⁷

Using these terms we would state the problem thus: is there to be found in the Oedipus Tyrannus, the union of suffering, struggle, and causality?

Sophocles did not intend, as other Greek writers did, to dwell on the horrible doctrine of destiny and fate. It was his aim to present life--life in all its marvelous mani-

festations. It was not the office of the tragedian or of any artist, for that matter, to present one phase of life to the exclusion of all others. Rather as "imitators of nature", artists should present their art as copies of life in its entirety. Sophocles, who in the words of Matthew Arnold "saw life steadily and saw it whole," was fully aware of the double term that must of necessity enter any picture of life, namely, character and fate, and he is careful not to lay undue stress on either element. Sophocles shows the workings of fate as the outcome of character. Consequently he sets about to explain the evil visitations that come upon Oedipus as the natural consequences of the physical, moral, and intellectual qualities of the characters.

Laius was told by an oracle that he should not have children, for if he did his son would slay him. He, nevertheless, begot a son and in contempt of the oracle, he ordered this son to be exposed on Mount Cithaeron. Here we already have the sins of unlicensed indulgence, contempt for the gods, and cruelty. Jocasta, too, an accomplice in the sins of Laius, is guilty of the same charges. Oedipus, when warned by the gods that he will slay his father and marry his mother, confidently turns from Corinth, determined to refute the oracle, and flies to Thebes, little knowing that instead of preventing the fulfillment of the oracle he is but placing the necessary conditions for its accomplishment.

In all three, then, there is some fault of self-confidence and intellectual pride. By giving prominence to this sin Sophocles saw the possibility of placing a balance between character and fate. Consequently he makes the unwarranted confidence and pride of Oedipus a dominant note of the play. Throughout the drama we are given glimpses of the pride of Oedipus. Toward the gods who are brought into this play to enhance the struggle and primarily because the original legend demands it, Oedipus is essentially reverent. Before the gods who rule the world he bows in humility. This shows itself in his visit to Delphi and his assent to what was there told him. On his arrival at Thebes he achieved a great intellectual success when he confounded the Sphinx with an answer to her riddle. This set him high in the eyes of the people, who ranked him second only to the gods. At the opening of the drama he is neither arrogant nor irreverent; rather he is full of tenderness for his subjects and full of reverence for the word of Apollo:

"Oe. I have sent the son of Menoeceus, Creon, mine own wife's brother, to the Pythian house of Phoebus, to learn by what deed or word I might deliver this town (ll. 69 ff.).

Then suddenly he is denounced by the prophet of Apollo, Teiresias. In a moment he is in anger; his appeal is to his intellect. What claim has any human mind to interpose between him and the gods? Was he not the only one who could silence the Sphinx? When human beings are present as opponents he is

very proud, but later, as he himself ponders the subject in silence with the gods, and no human interpreter is near, his mind sees the other side. The instinct of reverence reappears in the prayer:

Oe. Forbid, forbid, ye pure and awful gods, that
I should see that day (ll. 830 f.)!

Stung by the denunciation of Teiresias, the rage of Oedipus knows no bounds. His pride has been hurt to the quick and manifests itself in the fury with which he berates Creon. He haughtily tells Jocasta that he has been accused of the murder of Laius. Jocasta gives him the dreadful solace that oracles have no weight, adding her reason for this. Is it possible, Oedipus begins to wonder, that he himself may have slain his wife's husband? Thus he sets in motion all that will ultimately lead to the discovery of the crime.

In some manner, then, the pride and self-confidence of Oedipus are responsible for the revelation of the horrid crimes of murder and incest in which he has become enmeshed. By showing the unwarranted self-confidence of Oedipus in trying to avert the fulfillment of the god's oracles Sophocles points out the utter impotence of man when left to his own resources.

The Oedipus Tyrannus exemplifies after a fashion a tenet of the Greek religion -- that a man despite the purest intentions may fail only because he is an object of aversion

to the gods. Oedipus, however noble and good his own character may have been, bore with him an inherited sin. In the faith of the ancients, the sin of a parent imparts itself to the children and involves them in the ruin of the parents.

In this drama we find all three elements of tragedy. Obviously there is suffering. But there is not merely suffering; in other words, Oedipus is not merely a pathetic character as is an Antigone or a Cordelia. There is also struggle. If one will admit no other struggle, he must admit, at least, that Oedipus struggles against his fate. There is likewise causality, wielded by destiny. The union of the three produces the tragic; or (as Aristotle would put it): "causes to arise in us feelings of pity and terror." We pity Oedipus and Jocasta because we foresee the inevitable outcome. We fear because we realize that a like fate may be in store for us, for despite the dignity of Oedipus we see much in him that we see in ourselves. We know, too, that we have our faults, just as he has his and to think that his slight faults have been at least partly to blame for his awful sufferings causes us to fear for ourselves. Some scenes are especially excellent for bringing about this "pity and fear", as for example, the conversation between Oedipus and the Corinthian messenger and the short colloquy of Oedipus and Jocasta which immediately ensues. This will cause one to experience the purgation of pity and terror, as it will be experienced nowhere else.

Everything is centered for the moment in Jocasta. Jocasta alone, realizes the dread import of the messenger's words, and yet she is almost frozen in silence. Not a word does she utter to tell the emotions that are milling about within her soul. The mingled amazement, joy, horror, loathing, despair that grip her heart alternately are all left to the imagination of the spectator. She has recovered the child for whom she has mourned many years, but she has found him filling the husband's place. She loves him now as son, having loved him till now as husband, and the only hint of her innermost feelings is contained in the last words she speaks:

Io. Alas, alas, miserable! that word alone
can I say unto thee and no other word henceforth
forever.⁸

There are those who claim that there is no struggle in the drama and that it is merely a question of a relentless fate carrying all before it. William Archer voices this contention in the following words:

Oedipus, in fact does not struggle at all. His struggles, in so far as that word can be applied to his misguided efforts to escape from the toils of fate, are all things of the past; in the actual course of the tragedy he simply writhes under one revelation after another of bygone error and unwitting crime. It would be a mere play on words to recognize as a dramatic "struggle" the writhing of a worm on a hook.⁹

The only explanation for this criticism of Oedipus is that Mr. Archer has misread the drama. The action proper of the play is strictly in accord with the dramatic unities, and

in the usual Greek manner covers directly only that one day of revelation which transforms Oedipus from a fatherly king, much loved by his family and subjects, into an outcast and blinded beggar. But this one day is so managed that the whole of the king's life is brought under review. A fine and strong character shines forth in the suffering that Oedipus undergoes. Everything is brought tumbling about his head. At once he realizes that his struggle has failed. For naught has he deprived himself of the company of those whom he loved because he thought them his father and mother; for naught has he been most obedient to the commands of Apollo; for naught has he been most solicitous for his loving subjects. He is not a "worm writhing on a hook", but a noble soul willing with all his might to avoid doing deeds which it had been predicted he would do, doing them withal by reason of a flaw in his own character. At the opening of the play the deeds have already been done. Because he has so long willed to avoid them, he passionately resists the conviction forced upon him that he has committed the foretold crimes. A man's past is an inexorable fate, and this is the fate that bears down upon him. He is struggling in vain to escape the consequences of his own acts.¹⁰ For noble as Oedipus is, there are flaws in his character. Oedipus glories in an intellectual pride and in a sense of self-sufficiency. His impulsiveness also tends to bring on his ruin. These con-

stitute his tragic frailty. Gilbert Norwood thus describes him:

He is the best-drawn character in Sophocles. Not specially virtuous, not specially wise - though full of love and pity for his people and vigorous in his measures for their safety, he is too imperious, suspicious, and choleric. His exaggerated self-confidence, dangerous in a citizen is almost a crime in a prince. The only notable virtue in his character is the splendid moral courage with which he faces facts, nay more, with which he insists on unearthing facts which he might have left untouched, and the core of the tragedy is that this virtue of Oedipus, his insistence on knowing the truth, is the source of his downfall.¹¹

And Lewis Campbell thus speaks of him:

He is goaded to Delphi by a dim rumor and a drunken word. From Delphi he is sent flying by an only half-understood oracle, and in his sore and melancholy mood he picks the fatal quarrel by the way. He flings himself into the Sphinx adventure, and a time of brittle happiness follows. When the plague comes, and the oracle is brought from Apollo, he takes the whole burden on him with a light heart. But the two altercations, first with Teiresias and then Creon reveal the existence of hidden fires within him and he is proved to be one who being wrought can be perplexed in the extreme.¹²

JOCASTA

Jocasta is a proud, stately queen and a loving, affectionate wife. As one reads the play one can almost see and hear her, so true to life is she drawn. That she has power and is respected is readily seen at her first appearance on the stage. The heated altercation between Creon and Oedipus immediately subsides at her first request.

There are varying opinions on Jocasta. She has been charged with frivolity, lack of natural affection, and impiety. Jocasta is not frivolous. This can be proved by pointing to her whole course of action throughout the drama and to the manner in which she speaks. Jocasta does not lack natural affection. Her deep love of Oedipus shines out ever and again, and who shall say that she loved not Laius? Doubtless because she so cruelly sacrificed her child by Laius she is accused of lacking natural affection. But it must be remembered that for love of her husband she sacrificed the child. The oracle had said the child would slay the sire. To prevent the child from committing so heinous a crime and to save the husband whom she loved, she consented to expose the child. The charge of impiety is more difficult to refute, but this much is true: Jocasta is not by nature impious. In having a child by Laius she contemned the counsel of the gods! True, but her impiety in the course of the drama itself is an escape rather than an affront, and it may be doubted whether her frantic attempt to escape from the threats of the oracles must be accounted deliberate impiety.

Jocasta begs Oedipus to believe Creon for the love of the gods and because of Creon's oath unto the gods.

Io. O for the gods' love, believe it, Oedipus - first, for the awful sake of this oath unto the gods (ll. 646 ff.)....

Oedipus is deeply angered by the seer's denunciation. Jocasta seeks to comfort him with the thought that mortals cannot interpret the minds of the gods, She condemns oracles, but she is careful not to condemn the god himself.

Io. An oracle came to Laius once - I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers (ll. 711 f.)....

She does not blame the god for the loss of her Child but lays the blame to the human ministers of the god. Later when Oedipus is worried at the thought that he may be the slayer of Laius, she casts off her former restraint and says:

Io. never, king, can he show that the murder of Laius, at least, is truly square to prophecy; of whom Loxias plainly said that he must die by the hand of my child. Howbeit that poor innocent never slew him, but perished first itself. So henceforth, for what touched divination, I would not look to my right hand or my left (ll. 852 ff.).

Now she has actually uttered impious words, but she does so only from a desire to free Oedipus from anxiety.

For the verification of the fact that she is by nature more pious than impious, witness her action when she can no longer assist Oedipus by her speech. She betakes herself to prayer. Immediately before the entrance of the Corinthian messenger Jocasta appears in the garb of a suppliant on her way to visit the shrines of the gods. The great joy aroused in her soul by the message from Corinth, the news which it seems certain will set her husband at peace once again, the apparent refutation of another oracle, all conspire to draw

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from her gladdened soul her last triumphant fling at oracles:

Io. O ye oracles of the gods, where stand
ye now (ll. 946 f.)!

These are the only speeches of Jocasta in which she refers to the gods. From these the inference may be drawn that when she speaks disparagingly of the oracles that pertain to herself, it is because of the memory of the anguish with which she sacrificed her child to no good purpose, and when she speaks disparagingly of the oracles that pertain to Oedipus, she does so either to soothe his despondency or to share the joy of his supposed deliverance.

The character of Jocasta is most consistent. Her love is as great if not greater for Oedipus at the end than at the beginning. She begs him to give up his search that she may save him terrible sorrow and pain. She bears herself magnificently under great strain and cruel anguish of spirit, and at the end when she sees she cannot save Oedipus she rushes to death.

CHAPTER II

REFERENCES

1

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4

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5

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5a

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6

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CHAPTER III

THE IMITATORS

A. THE OEDIPUS OF SENECA

The Oedipus of Seneca is much shorter than any of the other Oedipus plays and, it may be added, much inferior. The drama opens with the hero, alone on the stage, rambling on in an oratorical effort to introduce himself to the audience. The stiffness of this opening is best realized when it is compared with the easy and natural opening employed by Sophocles. Little need be said about the first three acts of the tragedy. We note that Seneca departs from the Sophoclean plot in a few minor details. Tiresias¹ does not intuitively know that Oedipus is the slayer of Laius; the ghost of Laius must be summoned from the dead. Tiresias does not make known to Oedipus what has happened in the grove where the ghost of Laius has proclaimed Oedipus his murderer and the defiler of Jocasta. This office is delegated to Creon upon whom Oedipus rather weakly vents his wrath. In the first three acts there are 763 lines. Of these, 80 are devoted to Oedipus's opening oratorical flourish; 354, to long and rambling pieces by the chorus; and 129 to Creon's uninterrupted

discourse narrating to Oedipus the scene in the grove. Add to this the fact that there are portents which rival Livy's and erudite treatment of Roman augural lore which almost equals in detail the sixth book of the Aeneid, and what is the result? A slow moving, uninteresting action in which we almost forget who the leading characters are, or even that there are any such. At the end of the third Act, Oedipus appears as a proud and somewhat quick-tempered king; Jocasta as the king's wife. That is all.

Seneca's only claim to improvement on Sophocles is one short bit of irony. Oedipus in his curse says:

Oe. may he, too, slay his own father
with his own hand and do - can aught heavier
be entreated? - whatever I have fled from
(ll. 261-4)! ²

In all likelihood the reason for the main departures is merely the fact that Seneca, being a Roman, wrote as the Romans. In the last two Acts, Seneca follows Sophocles rather closely. There are, however, a few divergences. One companion falls with Oedipus, not four. This change Seneca introduced for the sake of plausibility. He thought it hard to believe that one man should slay five. As in Sophocles, the messenger arrives with the news of Polybus's death and of Corinth's awaiting the succession of Oedipus to the throne. The messenger, however, does not first meet Jocasta but comes in upon Jocasta and Oedipus together, thereby losing a bit of

dramatic effect.

In the recognition scene that follows Jocasta says nothing at all, nor are we told that she rushes from the scene. Seneca again loses a point by his departure. In the final act, in order to have a scene between the blinded Oedipus and Jocasta, the latter does not kill herself until after Oedipus has put out his eyes. Instead of hanging herself she takes her life with the sword of Oedipus, saying as she does so:

Come lend thy hand against thy mother,
if thou art a parricide; this lacks to crown
thy work.

Nay, let me seize his sword: by this
blade lies slain my husband - nay, why not
call him by his true name? - my husband's
father. Shall I pierce my breast with this,
or thrust it deep into my bared throat? Thou
knowest not to choose a place? Strike here, my
hand, through this capacious womb, which bore
my husband and my sons (ll. 1032 ff.)!

Cursing Apollo, Oedipus now makes his departure, feeling his way in darkness. Obviously, the quieting effect at the end of the Sophoclean play is not desired by Seneca.

The characters are very poorly drawn. Oedipus is proud, arrogant, and boastful throughout the play. One is tempted to think of him as of one who talks much and does nothing. To Jocasta, until after the blinding of Oedipus, are given exactly eleven lines. In six of these she merely asks Oedipus what good it does to make woe heavier by lamentation; the other five are her answers to Oedipus's questioning. Naturally

the dramatic effect which is brought about by her mere presence in Sophocles is entirely lost.

Oedipus is thus no different than the other Senecan tragedies. It is unnatural both in the development of plot and character and revolting in the violation of propriety. One is tempted to surmise that the play was not meant for the stage but rather for the rhetorical schools.³

Schlegel aptly says of the attempted imitations of Greek plays to which Seneca turned his hand:

.... With the old tragedies, those sublime creations of the poetical genius of the Greeks, these have nothing in common but the name, the outward form, and the mythological materials; and yet they seem to have been composed with the obvious purpose of surpassing them: in which attempt they succeeded as much as a hollow hyperbole would in competition with a most fervent truth.⁴

There are, nevertheless, a manliness and a high standard of morals in the drama which evidence a robust sense of moral sentiment. It is on this account that Seneca far outstrips Dryden in the treatment of Merope, queen of Corinth, whom Oedipus supposed to be his mother. It is but necessary to read the parallel passages to recognize the superiority of treatment by Seneca. This is the way Dryden treats the subject.

Aegeon. Your royal mother Merope, as if
She had no soul since you forsook the land,
Waives all the neighb'ing princes that adore her.

Oed. Waives all princes! poor heart! for what?
O speak.

Aegeon. She, though in the full-blown flower
of glorious beauty
Grows cold, even in the summer of her age.

And for your sake has sworn to die unmarried.

Oed. How! for my sake, die and not marry!
Oh my fit returns.

Aegeon. This diamond, with a thousand kisses
Blest, with thousand sighs and wishes for your safety.
She charged me give you, with the general homage
Of our loving lords.

Oed. There's magic in it, take it from my sight;
There's not a beam it darts, but carries hell
Hot flashing lust, and necromantic incest:
Take it from these sick eyes, O hide it from me!
(Act IV, Sc.1)⁵

The same is thus treated by Seneca:

Old Man. All fears thy father's kingdom will dispel.

Oedipus. I would seek thy father's kingdom, but from
my mother do I shrink.

Old Man. Dost fear thy mother, who in anxious suspense
longs for thy coming?

Oedipus. 'Tis love itself bids me flee.

Old Man. Wilt leave her widowed?

Oedipus. There dost thou touch on the very thing I fear!

Old Man. Speak out what hidden fear weighs on thy soul?

'Tis my wont to offer king's a loyal silence.

Oedipus. Warned by the Delphic oracle, I dread my
mother's bed.

Old Man. Then cease thy empty fears, thy horrible
forebodings; Merope was not in truth thy
mother (ll. 793-802).

CHAPTER III

B. THE OEDIPE OF CORNEILLE

"Time spares not that on which time has been spared", warns the old French adage, but Corneille did not dream that this could apply to him. The fate of his Oedipe, however, shows how aptly it applies even to Corneille. As he tells us in the "Au Lecteur", he wrote Oedipe in less than two months and even hints that he considered it a good play because there were many who did not understand it for its complications.

....mais, en récompense, j'ai eu le bonheur de faire avouer à la plupart de mes auditeurs que je n'ai fait aucune pièce de théâtre où il se trouve tant d'art qu'en celle-ci, bien que ce ne soit qu'un ouvrage de deux mois....⁶

The play was produced at Paris in 1659. Despite its great popularity it was a very poor play. Brunetiere says it was his poorest and most popular play. For our purposes, however, the play proves interesting enough. Corneille was the first to diverge widely from Sophocles; his greatest departure is his introduction of the sub-plot.

"The severely simple theme of Sophocles, with its natural elements of pity and terror, is found too meagre by the modern dramatist."⁷ For a further source of variety and tragic relief he feels that he must have something more than

the bare tragic incidents of the famous Greek dramatist. To supply this need he introduces his sub-plot in the way of a happy episode of the loves of Theseus, the king of Athens, a very noble character, and Dirce the daughter of the slain king Laius. This sub-plot runs away with the author. The fortunes of Dirce and Theseus are always of interest to us to the detriment of those of Oedipus and Jocasta. Lack of impressiveness throughout the play is conspicuous. The introduction of this sub-plot leads to many differences. Oedipus plays a very peculiar rôle. Too often he fails to be the tragic hero; yet in the latter part of the play there appears a nobility which is at variance with the character portrayed in the first part. For some time in the play he is nothing but a selfish man, eager to hold his throne at any cost. Here, he is too proud and pompous, but heroic traits of character are in evidence during the later Acts. But even in these later Acts an artificial stoicism in the king destroys tragic pathos.

Corneille's development of the sub-plot is somewhat unique. Dirce, daughter of Laius, feels that Oedipus is usurping her rights. She thinks that it is her throne which he is occupying.

Oed. Je suis roi, je puis tout
 Dir. Je puis fort peu de chose;
 Mais enfin de mon coeur moi seule je
 dispose,
 Et jamais sur ce coeur on n'avancera
 rien

Qu'en me donnant un sceptre, ou me
 rendant le mien.
 (Act II. Sc.1.)

Theseus, prince of Athens, and Dirce are in love but Oedipus, because he fears Theseus desires that Dirce marry Haemon. She is determined to marry none but Theseus and strife between the step-father and step-daughter results. The attitude on the part of Dirce is that of defiance, whereas Oedipus merely tries to strengthen his hold upon the throne by forcing Dirce into marriage with Haemon. There is no doubt that the sub-plot is bound up intimately with the play. At times, in fact, it seems to be the central theme. The fortunes of Dirce and Theseus have some connection with every scene.

Teiresias is not brought on the stage; we are told by one of the minor characters, Nerine, that his usual methods of finding out hidden truths have not proved successful. He has been forced to raise the ghost of Laius from the dead, who has thus spoken:

"Un grand crime impuni cause votre misère;
 Par le sang de ma race il se doit effacer;
 Mais à moins que de le verser,
 Le ciel ne se peut satisfaire;
 Et la fin de vos maux ne se fera point voir
 Que mon sang n'ait fait son devoir."
 (Act II. Sc.3)

Though she knows she is innocent of all crime, Dirce, the only one of Laius's blood, wishes to be sacrificed for the sake of the Thebans who are so swiftly wasting away under the plague. Theseus, however, further complicates matters with the

startling announcement that he has just discovered that he is the son of Laius. Phaedime, a man dying of the plague, has disclosed the fact to him. This fictitious story stands to await the ratification of the sole survivor of King Laius's suite when Laius met his death. This man, the herdsman of the Sophoclean plot, Corneille (following Seneca) names Phorbas. Phorbas, after his return to Thebes, spent a year in recovering from an injury received in the fight at the cross-roads. When he recovered and saw for the first time the new ruler of Thebes, in fear and silence he went off to lead a hidden life. He is now brought back to Thebes to indict or free Theseus. Oedipus recognizes him as one of the men against whom he fought at the cross-roads and in so doing proves that he it is who killed Laius.

There is a difference in the latter part of the play. Phorbas, is introduced before the messenger from Corinth, whom Corneille calls Iphicrates. As a result, Oedipus knows for certain before Iphicrates comes on the scene that he has slain Laius. Corneille's purpose in making this alteration was no doubt to heighten the dramatic effect by introducing another scene of recognition.

By still further deviation from Sophocles Corneille attempts to improve his play but in the event only weakens it. Iphicrates informs Oedipus that Polybus on his death-bed made it known that Oedipus was not his own son but an adopted child.

So the crown falls to the rightful heir. By this change Corneille has erred in many respects. First of all, why should Iphicrates have come all the way from Corinth? Was it only because he had so great a love for Oedipus whom he had cared for while Oedipus was but a child? But Iphicrates is now an old man, and old men are not usually induced to undertake long journeys on foot to carry news to friends. How much more plausibly is the incident handled by Sophocles! The messenger seeks out Oedipus to tell him much good news, though mingled with the sad, and that not only out of love for Oedipus but for his own benefit as well. The kingship at Corinth awaits Oedipus and he, as the first to tell Oedipus should have great reward as his due. This is after the manner of the Greeks, which Corneille in this instance either ignored or could not sense.

Jocasta does not appear even once in the course of the fifth Act. It is difficult to see Corneille's reason for this unless it be to prevent Oedipus and Jocasta from eclipsing the sub-plot. By her absence much of the power and strength of the latter part of the drama is lost. Oedipus alone hears from the lips of Phorbas and Iphicrates what fate has done to him. Phorbas pours out his tale to Jocasta as he kneels before her, begs her pardon, and stabs himself. This is not enacted on the stage but recounted by Nerine. The queen likewise, we are told by the same character, on hearing the full truth plunges the

same sword into her side, saying as she dies:

Allez dire à Dirce qu'elle vive en repos,
 Que de ces lieux maudits en hâte elle s'exile;
 Athènes a pour elle un glorieux asile,
 Si toutefois Thésée est assez généreux
 Pour n'avoir point d'horreur d'un sang si
 malheureux. (Act V. Sc. 8.)

Dumas narrates how Oedipus blinded himself and how in this tragic instant the gods were appeased and the plague was stopped. The account is much milder than that of Seneca because, as Corneille himself points out, he had to take into consideration the weaker sex who were in the audience.

We are given to suppose that Theseus and Dirce marry and live in happiness. The character portrayal, due no doubt to Corneille's haste in composing, is poor. The third requirement of Aristotle, namely, consistency of character, is repeatedly lacking throughout the play. Instances in point are Oedipus and, less notably, Jocasta, Dirce, and Theseus.

CHAPTER III

C. THE OEDIPUS OF DRYDEN

And now we come to the consideration of Oedipus as written by Dryden in collaboration with Lee. Before taking up this study, it may be profitable to note Saintsbury's estimate of the play.

.... During the time of its (Limberham's) production the author collaborated with Lee in writing the tragedy of Oedipus, in which both the friends are to be seen almost at their best. On Dryden's part, the lyric incantation scenes are perhaps most noticeable, and Lee mingles throughout his usual bombast with his usual splendid poetry. If anyone thinks this expression hyperbolic, I shall only ask him to read Oedipus instead of taking the traditional witticisms about Lee for gospel. There is of course plenty of

"Let gods meet gods and jostle
in the dark",

and the other fantastic follies, into which "metaphysical" poetry and "heroic" plays had seduced men of talent, and sometimes of genius; but these can be excused when they lead to such a passage as that where Oedipus cries,

"Thou coward! yet
Art living? Canst not, wilt thou find
the road
To the great palace of magnificent death,
Through thousand ways lead to his
thousand doors,
Which day and night are still unbarred
for all."8

Dryden has a different starting point. The hero is held

back; he enters only after the scene has been well laid. The conspiracy which is only hinted at in Sophocles and which in that play exists only in the mind of Oedipus, is drawn out in the opening scenes. Creon, a hideous monster, is desirous of the kingdom of which he feels he has been deprived, because of Jocasta's passion for the young and handsome Oedipus. This strikes a very regrettable note which is to be held throughout the play, namely, the peculiar love of Oedipus and Jocasta.

Oedipus at the opening of the play is absent from Thebes and the Thebans are alienated from their king. Creon takes advantage of this situation and starts a revolution intending to establish himself as king. At the same time, infatuated with one who detests him, Creon nevertheless pushes suit to Eurydice, the daughter of Laius. The people, willing to revolt, are shouting for Creon when the blind seer, Tiresias, brings them back to their right minds by pointing out all that Oedipus has done for them.

Oedipus returns to the applause of the fickle crowd. With him as a prisoner of war comes Adrastus, King of Argos. Out of magnanimity Oedipus releases Adrastus to woo Eurydice, the step-daughter of Oedipus. This is the beginning of the sub-plot which runs through the play.

In his preface, Dryden thus refers to Corneille's work:

In our own age, Corneille has attempted it, and it appears by his preface, with great success; but a judicious reader will easily ob-

serve how much the copy is inferior to the original. He tells you himself that he owes a great part of his success to the happy episode of Theseus and Dirce, which is the same thing as if we should say that we were indebted for our good fortune to the underplot of Adrastus and Eurydice and Creon.⁹

Though he seems to find fault with Corneille for allowing the sub-plot to interfere with the main plot, he himself fails in this respect. Adrastus is a magnanimous hero from the moment of his first appearance until the end of the play. Eurydice, who plays a rôle difficult to describe or account for, nevertheless wins our attention to such an extent that she almost "steals the show". We continually wonder throughout, whether she and Adrastus will in the end find peace and happiness. Her purity is contrasted with the lustfulness of Creon, while Adrastus's manliness and valor are set off against Creon's effeminacy and cowardice. Eurydice, by reason of her purity may be said to overshadow Jocasta, whose passionate nature is overemphasized. Adrastus for the same reason possibly overshadows or at least equals Oedipus.

As in Seneca, the blind seer, Tiresias, whom Dryden also employs, is forced to call the ghost of Laius from the dead. Dryden, however, brings the ghost on the stage whereas Seneca and Corneille introduced a minor character to relate how the interview had taken place. The scene produced is a ghastly one, but one that seemed to please the audience of Dryden. That the dramatist sought this effect designedly, is apparent

from the final four lines of his Epilogue:

Their treat is what your palates relish most
 Charm! Song! and Show! a Murder and a Ghost!
 We know not what more you can desire or hope
 To please you more, but burning of a Pope.¹⁰

Dryden also borrows from Seneca in his use of portents.

Dreadful shapes of Oedipus and Jocasta carefully labeled in glittering letters appear in the clouds after a thunder-storm. This, however, it must be said in his favor, he does with much more reserve than Seneca. His use of portents does not become tiresome. Shakespeare is laid under tribute when Dryden has the ghost of Laius calling from behind the scenes; this device brings to mind the ghost of Hamlet's father. Likewise, when Oedipus walks and talks in his sleep, the reader of Shakespeare readily recalls the famous sleep-walking scene of Lady Macbeth.

The complication now reaches a new stage. Creon accuses Eurydice as the slayer of Laius. This accusation fits in with the facts and seems to be quite in place. Tiresias had spoken thus:

Tir. The wretch, who shed the blood of old Laodacides
 Lives and is great;
 But cruel greatness ne'er was long;
 The first of Laius' blood his life did seize.
 (Act II. Sc. 1.)

Thus Creon had accused her who was the first of Laius's blood so far as he and the rest of the Thebans knew. This but gives occasion to enhance the character of Eurydice.

The play closes in an orgy of bloodshed. Eurydice is stabbed by Creon; Creon dies by Adrastus's poniard; Adrastus is murdered by the soldiers; Jocasta slays her children by Oedipus before taking her own life, and Oedipus having blinded himself leaps to his death from an open window.

The very regrettable note of unnatural love dominates the action of the play. Even after the discovery of their true relationship, Oedipus and Jocasta countenance the continuance of their conjugality.

Joc. In spite of all those crimes the cruel gods
Can charge me with, I know my innocence,
Know yours, 'Tis fate above that makes us
wretched,

For you are still my husband.

Oed. Swear I am,
And I'll believe thee; steal into my arms,
Renew endearments, think them no pollutions,
But chaste as spirits' joys. Gently, I'll come,
Thus weeping blind, like dewy night upon thee
And fold thee softly in my arms to slumber.
(The Ghost of Laius ascends by degrees,
pointing at Jocasta)

Joc. Begone, my lord! Alas, what are we doing?
Fly from my arms! Whirlwinds, seas, continents,
And worlds, divide us! O thrice happy thou,
Who hast no use of eyes; for here's a sight
Would turn the melting force of mercy's self
To a wild fury. (Act V. Sc.1.)

Dryden also makes use of much more irony than Sophocles.

Where this is used to advantage, it is an improvement on Sophocles, but the main part of it is reprehensible. Either Dryden or Lee decided to make capital of a feature which was merely mentioned in the Oedipus of Sophocles, the likeness of Oedipus and Laius. "This resemblance between the former king

and the present one, which is remarked by many at Thebes assumed instinctive maternal and filial feelings of Jocasta and Oedipus toward each other which are utilized to their fullest extent throughout the play - in fact beyond all decency." ^{ll}

The note of lust is dominant or at least present almost everywhere in the play - in one form or another. No doubt the audience for which Dryden was writing influenced him in this but he has carried the matter to excess.

In some respects, however, the Dryden tragedy has been improved by his use of irony. The following passages are instances in point:

Tir. 'Tis Oedipus indeed: your king more lawful
Than yet your dream. For something still there
lies
In Heav'n's dark Volume, which I read through
Mists
'Tis great, prodigious; 'tis a dreadful birth,
Of wondrous Fate; and now, just now disclosing
I see, I see! how terrible it dawns:
And my soul sickens with it.

1.Cit. How the God shakes him!

Tir. He comes! he comes! Victory! Conquest!
Triumph!
But oh! Guiltless and Guilty: Murder! Parricide!
Incest! Discovery! Punishment! ----'tis ended,
And all your sufferings over. (Act I. Sc.1.)

Oedipus has just finished making the public condemnation of the murderer, who ever he be, when Jocasta enters as the priests ask that Heaven confirm the charge.

Joc. At your devotions, Heaven succeed your wishes;
And bring th'Effect of these your pious prayers
On you and me, and all.

Pr. Avert this Omen, Heaven.

Oed. O fatal sound, Unfortunate Jocasta.
What hast thou said! an ill hour hast thou chosen

- For these foreboding words. Why we were cursing!
- Joc. Then may that Curse fall only where you laid it.
- Oed. Speak no more!
- For all thou say'st is ominous: We were cursing,
And that dire imprecation hast thou fastened
On Thebes, and thee and me and all of us.
- Joc. Are then My blessings turned into a curse?
O unkind Oedipus! My former Lord
Taught me his blessing. Be thou like my Laius.
- Oed. What yet again? The third time thou hast curst me:
This imprecation was for Laius's death,
And thou hast wished me like him.
- Joc. Horror seizes me!
- Oed. Why dost thou gaze upon me? pr'ythee Love
Take off thy Eye; it burdens me too much.
- Joc. The more I look, the more I find of Laius:
His speech, his garb, his action; nay his Frown;
For I have seen it; but ne'er bent on me.
- Oed. Are we so alike?
- Joc. In all things but his Love.
- Oed. I love thee more; so well I love Words cannot
speak how well,
No pious son ever lov'd his mother more
Than I my dear Jocasta.
- Joc. I love you too
The self-same way: and when you chid, me thought
A Mother's Love start up in Your defence,
And bade me be not angry: be not you;
For I love Laius still, as Wives should love:
But you more tenderly; as part of me:
And when I have you in my Arms, me thinks
I lull my Child asleep. (Act I. Sc.1.)

We have classed Dryden as an imitator of Sophocles but

Sophocles was not the model for anything morbid in the play.

There is no foundation in Sophocles for as much as a hint of
morbidly. Livingstone makes the statement that there is

no morbid pathology in Greek drama,

and then goes on to say, in effect, that although the legend of
Oedipus Rex is morbid yet the play is not so. According to the
story, Oedipus in ignorance kills his father and marries his
mother which cannot be called "ordinary, central, broadly

human" and might rather rank with or below Salome. But the real interest of the play is not in the relations into which Oedipus is brought; it resides partly in the plot and in the intricate net of circumstances by which Oedipus is taken in his guilt, and mostly in the appeal to our moral sympathies. ¹³

CHAPTER III

D. THE OEDIPE OF VOLTAIRE

Voltaire, as he himself admits in a letter to Father Porée, S.J., wished to follow the master, Sophocles, as closely as he possibly could. He saw the superiority of the original author over all his imitators. Seneca's, Dryden's, and especially Corneille's weaknesses were all known to him. He saw the failure of the sub-plot which Corneille had introduced and wished to do away with it. This he was unable to do entirely, because of the contemporary actors and actresses who thought a play without love scenes an absurdity. The following extract from his letter will point out the difficulty which confronted him:

I consulted Mr. Dacier, who was of the country: he advised me to put a chorus into every scene after the manner of the Greeks; he might as well have advised me to walk about the streets of Paris with Plato's gown on. I had much ado only to persuade the players to perform the choruses which appear three or four times in the piece; and greater still was the difficulty to make them act a tragedy almost without any love in it: the actresses laughed at me when they found there was never a tender scene for them, the reciprocal confidences of Oedipus and Jocasta taken partly from Sophocles was thought quite insipid; in a word the actors, who at that time were all grand signiors and petits-mâîtres absolutely refused to represent it.¹⁴

Voltaire admits: "I spoiled my piece, to please them

(the actors and actresses) by inserting several uninteresting scenes of tenderness in a subject entirely foreign to them." ¹⁵

This somewhat reconciled the players, but they refused to allow Voltaire to bring in the grand scene between Oedipus and Jocasta. Sophocles and his imitators were treated with equal contempt. An actor named Quinault, who played in the drama, determined to teach Voltaire a lesson by seeing to it that the play was acted exactly as it was written with the "vile fourth act taken from the Greek". This, he considered, would be sufficient punishment for Voltaire's obstinacy.

Of the four imitators Voltaire follows the original most closely. Realizing its great strength, he made only a few changes as he was forced to make. The underplot, the necessary condition for the acting of the play, is present but unlike his predecessors he has not allowed it to overshadow the main action. The objectionable addition is reduced by merely recalling the love of Jocasta for Philoctetes, prince of Euboea, and former companion of Alcides. This love had been blighted by Jocasta's marriage to Laius.

Philoctetes revisits Thebes after a long absence to learn from his friend, Dymas, the sorry state of the city. Jocasta and Oedipus have been married only four years, not sixteen as in Sophocles. This is almost necessary to make the sub-plot plausible. Jocasta would hardly be expected to be in love with Philoctetes after sixteen years of married life with

Oedipus. The latter, it must be remembered, was her son. This makes it necessary to suppose that some thirty-four years had elapsed since her love affair with Philoctetes.

The high-priest supplants Teiresias of Sophocles, Seneca, Corneille, and Dryden. He relates that when he had called forth the shade of Laius, the ghost spoke thus:

The death of Laius is still unrevenged
 The murth'rer lives in Thebes and dost infect
 The wholesome air with his malignant breath
 He must be known, he must be punished
 And on his fate depends the people's safety.
 (Act I. Sc.3.) 16

Phorbas, as Voltaire also names the faithful servant and herdsman of the Sophoclean plot, seems to give the French dramatist unending reason for worry. He says:

Mais ce qui est encore plus étonnant, ou plutôt ce qui ne l'est point après de telles fautes contre la vraisemblance, c'est qu'Oedipe, lorsqu'il apprend que Phorbas vit, ne songe pas seulement à le faire chercher; il s'amuse à faire des imprécations et à consulter les oracles, sans donner ordre qu'on amène devant lui le seul homme qui pouvait lui fournir des lumières. Le cœur lui-même, qui est si intéressé à voir finir les malheurs de Thèbes, et qui donne toujours des conseils à Oedipe, ne lui donne pas celui d'interroger ce témoin de la mort du feu roi; il le prie, seulement d'envoyer chercher Tirésie.

Enfin Phorbas arrive au quatrième acte. Ceux qui ne connaissent point Sophocle s'imaginent sans doute qu'Oedipe, impatient de connaître le meurtrier de Laius et de rendre la vie aux Thébains, va l'interroger avec impressement sur la mort du feu roi. Rien de tout cela. Sophocle oublie que la vengeance de la mort de Laius est le sujet de sa pièce: on ne dit pas un mot à Phorbas de cette aventure; et la tragédie finit sans que Phorbas ait dit seulement ouvert la bouche sur la mort du roi, son maître. 17

In this great difficulty Voltaire seems to forget that the circumstances of the Greek tragedy are not those of his French imitation. He is so much imbued with his own ideas that when he is criticizing the Sophoclean play he speaks of the herdsman as Phorbas. Sophocles at no place designated this character other than the Herdsman. In Sophocles, well over fifteen years have elapsed since the death of Laius, and not four as in Voltaire's play. Eleven years make a great difference where memory is concerned.

"...lorsqu'il apprend que Phorbas vit" says Voltaire, but he has no evidence for such a statement. Line 118 of the Sophoclean play reads thus:

All perished save one who fled in fear and could not tell for certain but one thing of all he saw.

In the Greek the indefinite pronoun τὶς is used. What Oedipus desires to know is the circumstances of Laius's death. Whether these circumstances come first or second-hand makes little difference. It might even be taken for granted that one who had protected the king some sixteen years before was by this time dead.

Voltaire likewise finds fault with Sophocles for not having Oedipus immediately inquire about the murder. When one reads the play of Sophocles one sees that what is uppermost in Oedipus's mind at the arrival of the herdsman is the fact of his birth. It is necessary to read but the last part of

Sophocles and the last part of Voltaire to see which of the two dramatists attains the greater effect.

Voltaire's treatment of the herdsman differs from all the preceding imitators. He is mentioned in the very first act. Sometime after his return to Thebes, when he bore the news of the king's death, he was placed in confinement. Jocasta speaks of it:

Oed. Where is that faithful servant? lives he
still?

Joc. Alas! for his zeal and service ill
repaid

Too powerful to be loved, the jealous
state

His secret foe, nobles and people joined
To punish him for past felicity.

The multitude accused him, even demanded
Of me his death: sore pressed on every
side

I knew not how to pardon or condemn,
But to a neighboring castle I conveyed him,
And hid the guiltless victim from their
rage.

There four long winters hath the poor old
man

To future favorites a sad example,
Without a murmur or complaint remained,
And hopes from innocence alone release.

(Act I. Sc.3)

This is well done. Phorbias, having been shut off from men, knows nothing of the king of Thebes. On sight he accuses Oedipus. The accusation is made much earlier in this play, and the spontaneity of the accusation is very plausible in the light of the antecedents thus exposed by this speech of Jocasta.

Because of the words spoken to the high-priest by the

shade of Laius, the people, vexed by the pestilence, are looking for the murderer in their midst. Philoctetes was known as an open foe of Laius, jealous of the king because he had obtained the hand of Jocasta, to whom he had once been betrothed. In the circumstances, he is thought guilty, seized by the mob, and accused of murder. Jocasta, who is put in a different setting in this play, now lets her love of Philoctetes show itself. She never really loved her first husband, but had been forced to marry him. Neither did she love Oedipus, in spite of the admission;

I felt some tenderness
 For Oedipus; but O! 'twas far from love-
 'Twas not Egina, that tumultuous passion
 The impetuous offspring of my ravished senses
 Not the fierce flame that burned for
 Philoctetes. (Act II. Sc.2.)

Thebes when beset by the cruel Sphinx had promised its deliverer the hand of the queen. Thus it was that when Oedipus had answered the riddle, he took both throne and queen. She had for some unknown reason felt a horror in taking Oedipus for her husband. This detail points to Dryden's influence on the author. Jocasta now is anxious that Philoctetes fly from Thebes to save his life, but he is determined not to break his word of honor, preferring to stand trial. If it came to the worst, he was prepared to die, an innocent man.

The high-priest in a scene which closely resembles the questioning of Teiresias, is forced by the importunings of Oedipus to name him as the slayer of Laius. Jocasta in a

speech not out of keeping with her character thus far portrayed takes the part of Oedipus and proclaims the oracle false. Philoctetes, likewise takes Oedipus's part despite the fact that Oedipus did not do as much for him when he was suspected. Oedipus bursts into a rage and after venting it on the high-priest strikes the keynote for the terrible things to come:

High Priest: Thou callest me hypocrite and
base impostor; thy father
thought not so
Oedipus: Who? Polybus?
My father saidst thou?
High Priest: Thou wilt know too soon
Thy wretched fate: today shall
give thee birth;
Today shall give thee death;
(Act III. Sc.4.)

In the new scene Oedipus is sobered. He now fears that, after all, the priest may not have erred. What, if he spoke as a true seer? The third act closes as Philoctetes again protests his faith in Oedipus, and Oedipus refuses to permit Jocasta to sacrifice herself.

The fourth act follows closely the corresponding part of the plot in Sophocles. There are a few characteristic differences. In Sophocles the first doubt of Oedipus concerning his parentage, springs from a taunt uttered at a feast. Voltaire wishes to be more realistic and substitutes a prodigy. As Oedipus prepared to pour his first libation to the gods he was halted at the sight of human blood dropping before his eyes amid the accusing tones of an unearthly

voice.

Stain not the holy threshold, with thy feet
 The gods have from the living cut thee off
 Indignant, nor will e'er accept thy gifts;
 Go, take thy offerings to the furies, seek
 The serpents that stand near ready to devour
 thee;

These are thy gods, begone and worship them.
 (Act IV. Sc.1.)

"This", says Jebb, "is powerful in its way. But where Voltaire has introduced a prodigy - the supernatural voice heard amid lightnings - Sophocles was content to draw from common life, and to mark how a random word could sink into the mind with an effect as terrible as that of any portent."¹⁸

In Voltaire, Icarus is the name given to the messenger of the Sophoclean plot. Voltaire, following Corneille, has Phorbas enter before Icarus. Phorbas, as we have seen, recognizes Oedipus immediately as the slayer of Laius and so accuses him. When Icarus comes, Oedipus is already on his way to exile. At this stage Icarus can offer Oedipus nothing but a land of refuge. The tragedy is complete. Oedipus is told of Polybus's death and assumes that he is now king of Corinth. But Icarus informs Oedipus that his brother-in-law is reigning and that it would mean death for him to return to Corinth. Enraged, Oedipus is determined to go to Corinth and snatch the crown he considers rightfully his. The hero, in this version, has completely forgotten the oracle. But how much more skillfully are both plot and character worked out in Sophocles

where Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth for fear of the oracle, and by so doing smoothly and logically brings about the great reversal of situation.

Voltaire manages the final situation on Corneille's plan but with a much improved effect. The high-priest announces that Oedipus has blinded himself thereby appeasing the gods, and the play closes with the death of Jocasta.

Again the insertion of the sub-plot seems to weaken the characterization. Because of the sub-plot there are introduced Philoctetes, Dymas, Egina, and Araspes. Philoctetes is a magnanimous hero, poorly drawn. He shows greatness of soul during the accusations brought against him as well as in befriending Oedipus after the high-priest has accused him.

Voltaire himself realized that he was laboring under difficulties in introducing this character.

Voici un défaut plus considérable qui n'est pas du sujet, et dont je suis seul responsable: c'est le personnage de Philoctète. Il semble qu'il ne soit venu à Thèbes que pour y être accusé; encore est-il soupçonné peut-être un peu légèrement. Il arrive au premier acte, et s'en retourne au troisième; on ne parle de lui que dans les trois premiers actes, et on n'en dit pas un seul mot dans les deux derniers. Il contribue un peu au noeud de la pièce, et le dénouement se fait absolument sans lui. Ainsi il paraît que ce sont deux tragédies, dont l'une roule sur Philoctète et l'autre sur Oedipe.¹⁹

Dymas, a former friend of Philoctetes who welcomes him to back to Thebes, Egina as confidante of Jocasta, and Araspes as an intimate of Oedipus carry very minor rôles. The high-priest

is not drawn half so well as the Teiresias of Sophocles. Creon, whom Voltaire considered a very cold and lifeless character, does not enter the play.

Voltaire labored much on the character of Phorbas with the result that the herdsman is well-depicted. He is a faithful, humble servant who loves and reveres his queen. He is quick to accuse Oedipus but regrets he has done so when he realizes the full import of his accusation. When confronted with Icarus, he strives to keep hidden the horrible news from Oedipus, doubtless out of love for Jocasta. Phorbas speaks the truth much more freely than the herdsman in Sophocles, a circumstance that weakens Voltaire's dramatic effect. Voltaire is more successful in his portrayal of Oedipus than either Seneca, Corneille, or Dryden. Nevertheless, he lacks the masterful touch we admire in Sophocles' Oedipus. This is due in great part to the introduction of Philoctetes. He draws from Oedipus; for once he leaves Oedipus seems to come more into his own, namely, in the last acts of the play. The words of the different members of the chorus praising Oedipus seem to fall very flat at times, and we are not given the impression that the people implicitly trust him.

Jocasta has a very strange part to play. The only man she ever loved returns to her city at a time of great stress and strain, only to find that she is the wife of another man. She wants to be loyal to her husband, yet she desires to

protect her former lover. The Jocasta of the original play is motivated by a deep and ardent love for both her first and second husbands. Though Voltaire blamed the players for his not having the mutual confidence scenes between Oedipus and Jocasta, yet, under the circumstances, it may be doubted whether these would have fitted in.

Father Mahaffy claims that Voltaire degraded the play into an attack on the justice of the gods.

Voltaire degraded it into a formal attack on the justice and wisdom of the gods - in fact, a vehicle for the scepticism which he preached.²⁰

This stricture, though too severe, and difficult to prove, may perhaps be partially excused in view of the following speeches of Oedipus and Jocasta:

Oed. At length the dire prediction is fulfill'd,
 And Oedipus is now, tho' innocent,
 A base incestuous parricide: O virtue!
 Thou fatal empty name; thou who didst guide
 My hapless days, thou hadst not pow'r to stop
 The current of my fate: Alas! I fell
 Into the snare by trying to avoid it:
 Heav'n led me on to guilt, and sunk a pit
 Beneath my sliding feet: I was the slave
 Of some unknown, some unrelenting pow'r,
 That us'd me for its instrument of vengeance:
 These are my crimes, remorseless cruel gods!
 Yours was the guilt, and ye have punished me.
 (Act V. Sc.4.)

Joc. Weep only for my son who still survives.
 Priests and you Thebans, who were once my
subjects,
 Honour my ashes, and remember ever,
 That midst the horrors which oppressed me,
still
 I cou'd reproach the gods; for Heav'n alone
 Was guilty of the crime, and not Jocasta.
 (Act.V. Sc.6.)

CHAPTER III

E. OTHER IMITATIONS

There have been other attempts to better the play of Sophocles, but all have failed. Jean Cocteau has his Oedipe Roi, which is scarcely more than a translation into the French except for the fact that the speeches and choruses are shortened. The plot works itself out exactly as in Sophocles. Cocteau lacks the power of character portrayal through dialogue, in which Sophocles is pre-eminent.

Marie Joseph Chenier likewise wrote an Oedipe Roi.

Eleanor Jourdain writes of this play:

The Oedipe Roi of Marie Joseph Chenier is interesting as a contrast to Voltaire. The language has the rhythmical flow and choice of words that we associate with Chenier's writing. But the play is not only a practical rendering into French of Sophocles' drama, it is also a document. Chenier felt the spirit of the revolution and he used this play, like Charles IX and others to recall the king of France to his duty as a patriot-king. The threats used by the high priest to Oedipe are changed in view of this context.

Soyez encore Oedipe, et sauvez vos sujets;
Pour nous avec les dieux que la terre
conspire;

Que bientôt, roi de nom, vous n'aurez plus
d'empire....

(Act I. Sc.1.)

The people are recalled to their allegiance by the king, and there is a constant appeal beyond

both human law and practice to equity.

'Ecoutrez, retenez, rappelez-vous sans
cesse

Les ordres, les serments, les vœux de
votre roi'

(Act I. Sc.2.)

In the dialogue between Oedipe and Creon, who is represented as self-sacrificing and self-controlled, Oedipe says:

'Vous désobéissez aux volontés d'un roi!' and Creon answers:

'Oui; son pouvoir n'est rien séparé de
la loi.'

Finally Oedipe calls on the Thebans, and Creon acquiesces:

'C'est moi qui les appelle;
Nos libertés, nos jours, ne sont pas votre
bien,

Vous êtes roi de Thèbes, et j'en suis
citoyen.'

(Act III. Sc.2.)²¹

Hugo Von Hoffmannstahl also wrote an Oedipus. He regards the story from an ethical point of view and devotes the entire play to this aspect. La Croix translated the Oedipus Tyrannus into French and published it in 1858. We know of other Oedipus Tyrannus plays, the text of which no longer survives.

CHAPTER III

REFERENCES

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Tiresias. Note the change in spelling of this word. Different authors spell it differently. The spelling of the author under consideration, when the word is mentioned will be followed.

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CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF SPECIAL DRAMATIC ASPECTS

A. VARIATIONS IN THE TREATMENT OF THE "IMPROBABLE"

To note the manner in which the different dramatists treat the "improbable", the τὸ ἀλόγον mentioned by Aristotle, makes an interesting study. The improbabilities brought up are, first and foremost, the fact that Oedipus is ignorant of the details of the murder of Laius. How account for the fact that after sixteen years of married life Oedipus still knows little or nothing about the death of his wife's former husband? Another difficulty is this: Why did Jocasta marry a man much younger than herself without making any inquiry into his identity although she knew of the oracle which had warned her against the guilt of incest with her son? Why, too, once she had married him did she fail to notice the marks on his feet? First, as to the improbability of Jocasta's entering the marriage state with a man much younger than herself. Jocasta not only loved Oedipus deeply, as the play clearly shows, but lacked all choice in the matter of marriage. In its desperate plight, Thebes had promised the throne to him who would answer the riddle and save the city from utter destruction. Oedipus

solved the riddle and so was entitled to both throne and queen. Furthermore, as has been pointed out elsewhere, Jocasta had good enough reasons to satisfy herself that the oracle in her case had been conclusively refuted. The oracle had said the son should slay the sire and be guilty of incest with the mother. The son had been destroyed and the sire had been slain by wayfarers. She had lost the two dearest to her, having slain the one to save the other. As for her not adverting to the marks on Oedipus's feet, no special reason is apparent that she should have done so. It must be kept in mind that it was many years before that her son had been exposed on Mount Cithaeron and that she had had cause to take his death for granted. Should she have broached the subject to Oedipus he would have told her the story he had been told by Polybus and Merope, which no doubt would have been plausible since they had done all in their power to make Oedipus believe that he was their child. Schlegel regards this ignorance on Jocasta's part as another feature of a levity of mind.¹ There is no reason for this; if the explanation already given is not satisfactory, a more conclusive argument will be proposed when the first improbability (that Oedipus remained ignorant of the details of Laius's death) is treated.

Some attempt the explanation that the affairs of state immediately consequent on the death of Laius absorbed the attention of Oedipus to the exclusion of other interests. This

explanation is scarcely satisfactory but there is an explanation which does satisfy. The Oedipus legend was something which Sophocles had to take ready-made. It constituted part of the national folk-lore, which was well known to the populace. He was not at liberty to change the tale at will. He had no choice but to take the legend as he found it and so to present it in dramatic form. The play, given as part of religious ceremonies of which the legend was commemorative, was to be preserved in its integrity. Furthermore, as Aristotle says, if the "improbable" must enter, let it be placed in the antecedents and not in the play itself.

It was an interesting discovery of Francisque Sarcey's that an audience is never unduly exacting about the assumption on which a play is founded. It will listen to the exposition of a most unlikely state of affairs; it will give its attention to the author while he sets forth the existence of two pairs of twins so alike that their own wives cannot tell them apart (as in the Comedy of Errors); or while he explains that a wandering Englishman is the very image of the sovereign on the throne (as in the Prisoner of Zenda). It will sit ^{by} calmly and wait to see what will happen next, giving the author all the rope he asks for, but whether to hang himself or to pull himself on deck is as the event turns out. If the play which the author builds on an arbitrary supposition of this sort catches the interest of the spectators and holds them enthralled as the story unrolls itself, then they forget all about its artificial basis and they have no leisure to cavil. If, on the other hand, the play is dull and fatiguing to witness, their attention strays away from it and they have time to go back to its arbitrary foundation. And then they rise up in

their wrath and denounce the foolishness of the author who dared to suppose that they could ever be interested in anything built upon an absurdity so flagrant.³

The only debatable statement here made by Brander

Matthews is that this was Sarcey's "discovery", Sarcey merely amplified a simple statement of Aristotle. The fact is, then, that unless you say the Oedipus Tyrannus is "dull and fatiguing to witness" (and how could anyone say this?) you should be willing to grant the antecedents of the play. This is a telling blow against those who would find fault with Sophocles' assumption at the beginning of the play. Let him postulate there what he pleases, as long as in the play he carries on logically. The Oedipus Tyrannus from its opening line to its closing is a masterpiece of fine logic. It would be beside the point, if not unfair, to make one's judgment of the play contingent on its antecedents, however frail or flimsy these might happen to be.

Seneca does not undertake to improve on Sophocles.

Corneille is the first of the imitators to attempt a change. His Oedipus knows that Laius was said to have been killed by robbers; likewise he knows the time and place. The hero remembers that at about the same time and at the same place he himself had attacked three wayfarers with whom he had disputed the right of way. He is represented as believing that he has avenged the murder of Laius because he has killed two of the

three who he suspects killed Laius. By attempting to avoid one improbability he falls into another.

Oed. Ah! je te reconnois, ou je suis fort
trompé:
C'est un de mes brigands à la mort
échappé,
Madame, et vous pouvez lui choisir des
supplices;
S'il n'a tué Laius, il fut un des
complices.

Joc. C'est un de vos brigands! Ah! que me
dites-vous!
(Act IV. Sc.4.)

Dryden explains away the element of the "improbable" in a more simple manner. Oedipus had heard but a confused report of the affair when he took the throne, but it immediately passed out of his mind at the beck of many important matters.

Tell me Thebans,
How Laius fell; for a confus'd report
Pass'd through my ears, when first I took the crown;
But full of hurry, like a morning dream,
It vanished in the business of the day.

As Jebb says: "This only serves to show us that the dramatist
4
has an uneasy conscience".

Oedipus, according to Voltaire, has refrained out of delicacy for the feelings of Jocasta from inquiring into the death of Laius. This subterfuge did not satisfy him, as he himself admitted in his Lettres Sur Oedipe.

CHAPTER IV

B. VARIATIONS IN THE USE OF THE CHORUS

The Chorus in the plays of Sophocles is the result of an established tradition. It was a religious survival of the early stage and as such could not be done away with, but Sophocles minimized the part it had to play. Before his time the Chorus had taken the part of an actor and as such was very much concerned in the outcome of the play. In the Sophoclean drama, however, its rôle in this respect is a very insignificant one. Its office when thus sharing in the dialogue is to represent the generality of human beings as opposed to the heroic figures taking part in the drama. It becomes an impartial mediator, holding the balance between the various contending forces. The Chorus of Sophocles does not as it did in Aeschylus feel that its own fortunes are at stake; there are consequently no frantic outbursts of terror, nor ejaculations of extreme despair or ruthless revenge, but rather its utterances are characterized by cool and sober reflection. In its character there is nothing ideal; it exhibits both the good points and the weaknesses of an average group of citizens. It is very human and capable of being deceived like any ordinary mortal; it is, at times, even irresolute and wavering in its

views, easily led away by the latest speaker.

But when the actors have retired and the Chorus is left alone, it takes on a new character. No longer does it grope in the dark, but now with clear eyes looks beyond the present surroundings and judges things in the light of the eternal laws of justice and religion. The moral of the play is thus revealed.

"In a Sophoclean tragedy", says Jebb, "every occurrence, every speech contributes to the dramatic progress; at every step the tragedy interests rise toward the climax. The Chorus directly assists this progress; not indeed as a rule by sharing in the action, but by attuning the thoughts of the spectators to successive moods in sympathy with the action of the play." This certainly holds for the Choruses in Oedipus Tyrannus, but the imitators fail to make good use of the Chorus. Seneca, it seems, considered the Chorus as something entirely extrinsic to the drama. Often enough his Choruses have absolutely nothing to do with the development of the plot. Corneille does not use the Chorus, and by dropping it shows both originality and good judgment. He realized that he would be unable to compete with Sophocles in this type of writing and decided to sacrifice a dramatic device to which he felt unequal. Dryden's Choruses contain anything but the beautiful poetry found in those of Sophocles. His idea of a Chorus seems to have been an occasion for having a number of men about, expressing their individual

opinions of things in general. Voltaire, as we have already seen, had to reduce the Chorus scenes to the barest minimum.

CHAPTER IV

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4

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5

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The tragedy of the Athenians still exercises its power over the creative poet of the present; not only the perishable beauty of its contents, but its poetic form influences our poetic work; the tragedy of antiquity has essentially contributed to separate our drama from the stage productions of the middle ages and give it a more artistic structure and more profound meaning.¹

Had the modern imitators of the great Athenian dramatist followed their exemplar more closely, they would have been more successful, but they undertook to improve upon the simplicity of his plot technique. Corneille was the first to include a sub-plot and by so doing spoiled his play. Dryden found fault with Corneille for allowing the sub-plot to run riot, only to lapse into the same dramatic error himself. Voltaire admits that he "spoiled his play to please his players" when he introduced the sub-plot. But that he himself considered a sub-plot necessary may be learned from what he says in his Lettres sur Oedipe. In his own words:

Monsieur me voilà enfin parvenu à la partie de ma dissertation la plus aisée c'est-à-dire à la critique de mon ouvrage; et pour ne point perdre de temps, je commencerai par le premier défaut, qui est celui de sujet. Régulièrement, la pièce d'Oedipe devrait finir

au premier acte. Il n'est pas naturel qu'Oedipe ignore comment son prédécesseur est mort. Sophocle ne s'est point mis du tout en peine de corriger cette faute; Corneille en voulant la sauver, a fait encore plus mal que Sophocle et je n'ai pas mi mieux réussi qu'eux.

.....
 A l'égard de ce souvenir d'amour entre Jocaste et Philoctète j'ose encore dire que c'est un défaut nécessaire. Le sujet ne me fournissait rien par lui-même pour remplir le trois premiers actes; à peine même avais-je de la matière pour les deux derniers. Ceux qui connaissent le théâtre, c'est-à-dire ceux qui sentent les difficultés de la composition aussi bien que les fautes, conviendront de ce que je dis. Il faut toujours donner des passions aux principaux personnages. Eh! quel rôle insipide aurait joué Jocaste, si elle n'avait eu du moins le souvenir d'un amour légitime, et si elle n'avait craint pour les jours d'un homme qu'elle avait autrefois aimé?²

When we consider how important the imitators considered this sub-plot we are confronted by the question: how could Sophocles without the use of any subordinated plot produce an incomparably better drama? Besides using masterly art and plot development, Sophocles knew how to make his story an ideal study of character and passion. Corneille, Dryden, and Voltaire were more concerned for their audiences than they were about their plays. Fearing that the ghastly story of Oedipus might prove repulsive or monotonous, they inserted scenes of love and of intrigue.³

Dryden in his preface to Oedipus correctly estimates the Oedipus plays of Seneca and Corneille:

In our own age, Corneille has attempted it and it appears by his preface, with great success:

but a judicious reader will easily observe how much inferior the copy is to the original. He tells you himself that he owes a great part of his success to the happy episode of Theseus and Dirce.... The truth is, he miserably fails in the character of the hero: if he desired that Oedipus should be pitied he should have made him a better man. He forgot that Sophocles had taken care to show him in his first entrance, a just, a merciful, a successful, a religious prince, and in short a father to his country. Instead of these he draws him suspicious, designing, more anxious of keeping the Theban crown than solicitous for the safety of the Theban people, hectoring by Theseus, contemned by Dirce and scarce maintaining a second part in his own tragedy. This was an error in the first concoction; and therefore never to be mended in the second or third. He introduced a greater hero than Oedipus himself for when Theseus was once there, he must yield to none. Seneca on the other side, as if there were no such thing as nature in the play is always running after pompous expression, pointed sentences and philosophical notions, more proper for study than the stage: the Frenchman followed the wrong scent and the Roman was at cold hunting.⁴

It might be added that Corneille's play is insipid, unreal, and declamatory. The gripping power of real drama is painfully lacking. Pettiness, rather than loftiness of character seems to dominate in the play. Oedipe is certainly not a tragic hero, indeed, he falls far short of heroic grandeur. Jocasta is too unimportant to be considered a heroine and Dirce is at times petty and spiteful. Theseus is scarcely more than an added character in the cast. The sub-plot dominates what should be the main action. Seneca, though he has seemingly followed closely in the footsteps of the Athenian, in a sense is

further from the original than those who made use of the sub-plot. His bombast and his continual striving for pomposity, which are so patent, negative many good points in his play.

Dryden's Oedipus is not representative of Dryden's best dramatic work. He is far inferior to Sophocles in various respects. His Oedipus can in no sense compare with the sublime portrayal of that same character by Sophocles. Jocasta is not the well-depicted, clear-cut Jocasta of the Sophoclean drama. Dryden's morbidity is peculiarly opposed to the wholesomeness of the great Athenian dramatist.

Voltaire's work is the best of the imitations. He followed Sophocles closely and relegated the sub-plot to as minor a rôle possible. There are limitations and deficiencies, but on the whole the play is a notable composition. Oedipus in the hands of Voltaire assumes the proportions of a true tragic hero. Jocasta comes somewhat into her own despite the fact that she is placed in different circumstances. Philoctetes is a weak point in the play, but Voltaire himself seemed to realize this, for he dropped him completely after the third Act of the play.

The more one studies these plays the more does one become impressed by the work of the master, Sophocles. Corneille, Dryden, and Voltaire, each a leading dramatist of his day, failed to equal, not to say surpass, the great Athenian dramatist in the creation of powerful dramatic effect. It may, in-

deed, be questioned whether the effect produced by Sophocles will ever be equaled in the treatment of the Oedipus theme. Judged by this play, Sophocles proves himself *κατ' ἔξοχὴν* the master of simple plot and heroic character. This study may fittingly conclude with Symonds' tribute to the great Athenian dramatist:

.... the vigorous logic wherewith the conclusions are wrought out by Sophocles leaves nothing to be desired on the score of truth to nature. There is, indeed, no work of tragic art which can be compared with the Oedipus Tyrannus for closeness and consistency of plot. To use the critical terms of the Poetics it would rank first among tragedies for its *μῦθος* (plot), and for the *σύνταξις πραγμάτων* (construction) even were its *ἦθη* (characters) far less firmly traced. The triumph of Sophocles has been, however, so to connect the *ἦθη* of his persons with the *πράγματα* characters with plot, as to make the latter depend upon the former; and in this kind of ethical causality lies the chief force of his tragic art.⁵

CHAPTER V

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The thesis, "Aristotelian Plot and Characters in the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles and His Imitators," written by Thomas F. Murray, S.J., has been accepted by the Graduate School of Loyola University with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Rev. W.I. Bundschuh, S.J.

June, 1935

Rev. F.N. Reilly, S.J.

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