EIGHT

Why Is Oedipus Called Tyrannos?

This is not the same question as that asked by one of the ancient hypotheses—"Why is it entitled *tyrannos?*"—for the title by which the tragedy is known is clearly post-Aristotelian.[1] But the title owes its origin, as Jebb points out,[2] to the frequent occurrence of the word *tyrannos* in the play.

It is of course true that this word *tyrannos* (partly perhaps because of its greater adaptability to iambic meter) is sometimes used in tragedy (especially in Euripides)[3] as a neutral substitute for *basileus*, king. But in the Sophoclean play it is used in at least one passage with the full import of its historical and political meaning—an unconstitutional ruler, who generally abuses the power he has seized. Jebb, who translates the word *tyrannos* and its cognates as "king," "prince," "royalty," "empire," "crown," and "throne" elsewhere in the play, comments on vs. 873 (*hubris phuteuei tyrannon*—Violence and pride engender the *tyrannos*) as follows: "Here not a prince, nor even, in the normal Greek sense, an unconstitutionally absolute ruler (good or bad), but in our sense a 'tyrant.'" Other passages, too, insist on the historical figure of the *tyrannos*, a despot who has won power through "friends ... masses and money" as Oedipus himself says (541–42). The word cannot then be considered neutral in any of its appearances in the play; it is colored by the reflections of these emphatic references to the traditional Athenian estimate of the *tyrannos*.

In what sense is Oedipus a *tyrannos?* There is one aspect of his power in Thebes which fully justifies the term; he is not (as far as is known at the beginning of the action) the hereditary successor to the throne of Thebes, but an outsider, a *xenos*, as he says himself,[4] who, not belonging to the royal line, for that matter not even a native Theban, has come to supreme power. This is one of the fundamental differences between the historical *tyrannos* and the king, *basileus*. Thucydides, for example, makes this distinction in his reconstruction of

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early Greek history. "Tyrannies were established in the cities as the revenue increased ... previously there was kingship with fixed prerogatives handed down from father to son."[5]

This sense of the word *tyrannos* is exact and appropriate for Oedipus (as far as he understands his own situation at the beginning of the play); he is an intruder, one whose title to power is individual achievement, not heredity. But, though exact, it is a double-edged word, and Creon, whose sophistic defense later marks him as the subtle politician of the play, seems to be aware of its implications; for in the opening scene he refers to Laius, who was king, not *tyrannos*, in terms which avoid pointing the contrast between Oedipus' title to power and the hereditary title of his predecessor. "We once, my lord, had a ... leader (*hegemon*) called Laius" is his formula to avoid what might have been an odious comparison (103).

Oedipus, in reply, carries on this diplomatic misnomer of Laius: he refers to the power of his predecessor by a word which equates it with his own—*tyrannis* (128). Later in the play, he twice calls Laius himself *tyrannos* (799, 1043): and the reason why he calls him *tyrannos* instead of *basileus* in these lines is all too clear—by this time he suspects that Laius may have been the man he killed many years before where the three roads meet, and it is only natural that in these circumstances he should avoid the use of a word which would invest his violent action with a darker guilt. The psychological nuance of his use of the word *tyrannos* here emerges clearly from the comparison of this situation with that in which, for the only time in the play, he gives Laius his proper title. "It was not right" he tells the chorus "that you should leave this matter unpurified, the death of a good man—and a king" (*Basileos t' ololotos*, 256–57). The context explains his choice of terms. For in these lines, which follow the pronouncement of the curse on the unknown murderer, Oedipus is dwelling, with terrible unconscious irony, on the close connection between himself and Laius. "Since now it is I that am in authority, holding the powers which he formerly held,— ... married to his wife ... and if his line had not met with disaster we would have been connected by children born in common to us both ... for all these reasons I shall fight on his behalf or as if he were my father ... seeking the murderer ... on behalf of the son of Labdacus, whose father was Polydorus son of Cadmus before him, whose father in ancient time was Agenor" (258–68).

The involved irony of these lines has aroused much admiring comment: their motivation also deserves attention. The resounding, half-envious recital of Laius' royal lineage emphasizes Oedipus' feeling of inadequacy in this matter of birth: though he claims the royal line of Corinth as his own, he cannot in his inmost heart be sure of his parentage.[6] And he tries in these lines to insert himself into the honored line of Theban kings. "Having his powers"—his successor then, "married to his wife"—Oedipus feels himself almost legitimized by this fact[7] and his children completely so: "we would have been connected by children." The presence of an heir of Laius would have drawn attention to the royal blood in the veins of his own children, born of the same mother. Then, inconsistently (the typical inconsistency of deep unconscious desires forcing themselves violently and disturbingly up into the surface of rational speech): "as if he were my father." In this context, where Oedipus' buried misgivings about his birth express themselves as a fantasy that he is, in one sense or another, of the line of Laius, Labdacus, Polydorus, Cadmus, and Agenor, it is only natural that he should give Laius his proper title, king, *basileus*: it is what he would dearly like to be himself.

The terrible fact is that he *is* king: no man more legitimately. He is the son of Laius, direct descendant of Cadmus and Agenor. But it is only when he and all Thebes know the truth that he is finally addressed by this title. "You rose up like a fortified wall against death for my city," sings the chorus in the tremendous ode which follows the recognition, "since then you are called my king, *basileus emos kalei*" (1202).[8] Once he was called Oedipus, famous among all men, and now "you are called my king." But this transformation from *tyrannos* to king is his reversal; the revelation that he is king is the overthrow of the *tyrannos*. The proof of his legitimacy is at the same time the exposure of his unspeakable pollution.

The title *tyrannos* has then a magnificent ironic function, but if it makes a great contribution to the complexity of the play's texture, it raises some problems as well. For the word meant more to the fifth-century audience than a usurper who replaced the hereditary king: the *tyrannos* was an adventurer who, however brilliant and prosperous his regime, had gained power by violence and maintained it by violence. The connection of the *tyrannos* with violence is forced on the spectator when the chorus sings, "Violence and pride (*hybris*) engender the *tyrannos*." The succeeding sentences of this choral ode are an estimate of the origin, nature, and end of the *tyrannos* in terms of the current moral and political tradition of the late fifth century.

What is the reason for the chorus's attack on Oedipus? And why does it take this particular form? According to Jebb,[9] "the strain of warning rebuke" is suggested by "the tone of Oedipus towards Creon," but this does not seem an adequate explanation. The chorus's last word on the subject of Creon was a declaration of complete loyalty to Oedipus. "I should be clearly insane, incapable of intelligence, if I turned my back on you" (690–91). The change from this to "Violence

and pride engender the *tyrannos*" is clearly a decisive change: it must be due to something that has happened since the quarrel with Creon.

Not much has happened, but much has been revealed. Oedipus came to Thebes with blood on his hands, and one of the men he had just killed was a person of some importance, for he rode in a carriage and was accompanied by a herald. True, Oedipus struck in self-defense, but none the less the chorus has come to know an Oedipus they had not suspected, a man of violence, who can say, with almost a touch of pride, "I killed the whole lot of them" (*Kteino de tous xumpantas*, 813). *Hubris phuteuei tyrannon*. The elevation of Oedipus to the throne of Thebes was preceded by the bloody slaughter on the highway.

But this is not all. Oedipus has good reason to suspect that the man in the carriage was Laius, the hereditary king of Thebes, and the chorus is afraid that he is right.[10] If he is, then Oedipus won his power by killing the hereditary king and taking his place both on his throne and in his marriage bed—like Gyges of Lydia, one of the classic types of the *tyrannos*; Gyges is in fact the first man to whom the title is applied in extant Greek literature.[11] *Hubris phuteuei tyrannon*—violence engenders him, for it is the instrument of his accession to power.

These aspects of Oedipus' present title to power and his past actions, together with the choral ode on the *tyrannos*, clearly raise the whole issue of *tyrannis* in terms of the current political tradition. Why? The play cannot be an attack on *tyrannis* as an institution, for not only was *tyrannis* universally detested, it was also, at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, a dead issue;[12] though he was to be a typical phenomenon of the next century, in the last half of the fifth century the *tyrannos* was a bitter memory of the past rather than a fear of the future. And in any case, Oedipus is not a figure which conforms to the pattern of the *tyrannos*. He does not defy ancestral laws, outrage women, put men to death without trial,[13] plunder his subjects,[14] distrust the good and delight in the bad,[15] nor does he live in fear.[16] He is not equipped with the armed bodyguard, which is the salient characteristic of the *tyrannos* in real life[17] and of Aegisthus, for example, on the tragic stage.[18] Oedipus comes directly to his people—"not through messengers," as he says himself (6); he is loved, not feared. And the political actions which he carries out in the play are decidedly untyrannic. He rejects Creon's strong hint that the oracular response should be discussed in private,[19] calls an assembly of the people of Thebes,[20] and on a matter which he considers vital, the condemnation of Creon, he gives way to Jocasta and to the chorus which represents the people he has summoned in the opening scene. Thebes under Oedipus may be a *tyrannis*, but it works surprisingly like a democracy, led by its most gifted and outstanding citizen. What are we to make of this combination of democracy and *tyrannis*?

It was no puzzle to members of the Athenian audience, who were themselves citizens of exactly such a state. "We are called a democracy," says Pericles,[21] but he also tells the Athenians, "you hold your empire (*arche*, Oedipus' word!) as a *tyrannis*."[22] Cleon calls the Athenian empire a *tyrannis*, too,[23] and it is the word used not only by Athenians, but by the enemies of Athens: the Corinthians at Sparta twice characterize Athens as the city "which has been established as *tyrannos* in Hellas."[24] It is clear that in the late fifth century the idea of Athens as *tyrannos* was a commonplace both at Athens and abroad. Oedipus talks about his power (*arche*) in terms that vividly recall the fifth-century estimates, both hostile and admiring, of Athenian power. "O wealth and *tyrannis*," he exclaims, "and skill surpassing skill in the competition of life, how much envy and hatred (*phthonos*) are stored up in you . . . " (380–83). Wealth was the Athenian boast, and the terror of her enemies:[25] skill, especially technical and naval skill, was the guarantee of Athenian commercial and naval supremacy,[26] and the Athenians knew how they were envied and hated. "Do we deserve," say the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, "the excessive hatred and envy (*phthonos*) the Greeks feel for us?"[27] "The possession of power," says Pericles, "has always brought envy: when the power involved is great, the envy must be accepted."[28]

The Athenian *arche*, like that of Oedipus, is not an inherited power, but something new in the Greek world, gained by self-exertion. Pericles proudly refers to the fathers of the Athenians whom he is addressing, "who by their own efforts and not by inheriting it, gained this power and maintained it."[29] And, like the power of Oedipus, it was originally offered, not sought. "This power," says Oedipus, "which the city put into my hands, as a free gift, not something I asked for" (303–4). "We did not take power by force," the Athenian ambassadors remind the Spartans, "the allies themselves came to us and asked us to be their leaders . . . an empire was offered to us, and we accepted it."[30]

These resemblances between the Athenian supremacy in Greece and Oedipus' peculiar power in Thebes are enough to suggest that the word *tyrannos*, applied to Oedipus, is part of a larger pattern of image and emphasis which compares Oedipus with Athens itself. They are strengthened by the fact that the character of Oedipus is the character of the Athenian people. Oedipus in his typical reactions and capacities, his virtues and defects, is a microcosm of the people of Periclean Athens, the audience which watched the play. That such a generalized conception, the Athenian character, was current in the late fifth century is clear from the speeches in Thucydides alone (especially the brilliant contrast of Athenian and Spartan character made by the Corinthians in Book I): and for an example of a national type portrayed on the tragic stage we have only to look at Euripides' *Andromache*, where Menelaus

is clearly a hostile portrait, verging on caricature, of the worst aspects of the Spartan character as seen by the Athenians in war time. The character of Oedipus, one of the most complicated and fully developed in Greek tragedy, bears a striking resemblance to the Athenian character as we find it portrayed in the historians, dramatists, and orators of the late fifth century.

Oedipus' magnificent vigor and his faith in action are markedly Athenian characteristics. "Athens," says Pericles, "will be the envy of the man who has a will to action,"[31] and the boast is supported by Thucydides' breath-taking summary of the action of the "fifty years." The enemies of Athens have a different view of Athenian vigor. "Their nature," say the Corinthians, "not only forbids them to remain inactive, but denies the possibility of inaction to the rest of mankind."[32] This is an apt description of Oedipus in the tragedy: his will to action never falters and forces Tiresias, Jocasta, and the shepherd, in spite of their reluctance, to play their part in the dynamic progress towards the discovery of the truth and his own fall.

The priest appeals to Oedipus as "experienced," the state which results from constant action, and this too is a source of Athenian pride and of caution for her enemies.[33] And like Oedipus, Athens is magnificently courageous:[34] Athenian courage, in fact, rises to its greatest heights when circumstances seem most adverse,[35] and this again is a characteristic of Oedipus.

Oedipus' action is swift (he has already sent to Delphi when the priest hints that he should, he has already sent for Tiresias when the chorus advises him to); he prefers to forestall rather than react (as he says when condemning Creon) (618–21). This speed in decision and action is the Athenian characteristic which the Corinthians fear above all others. "They are the only people who simultaneously hope for and have what they plan, because of their quick fulfillment of decision."[36]

But Oedipus' swift action is not rash, it is based in reflection. Even his most impulsive act, his self-blinding, is shown to be based on a careful deliberation.[37] And this too is typically Athenian. "We are unique," says Pericles, "in our combination of the most courageous action and rational discussion of our projects."[38] Oedipus' reflection is the working of a great intelligence, and this is his greatest pride, *gnomei kuresas*. "I found the answer by intelligence" (398), he says of his solution of the Sphinx's riddle. So Pericles claims that the Athenians defeated the Persians "by intelligence rather than chance" (*gnomei te pleoni e tuchei*).[39]

All these qualities and the record of success which they have produced generate in Oedipus an enormous self-confidence (a mood that informs all the Periclean speeches in Thucydides, even the last

one)[40] and also unlimited hopes. Athenian hopes are highest in the face of danger and even impending disaster. "In terrible circumstances they are full of good hope" say the Corinthians;[41] this reads like a comment on Oedipus' hopeful outburst which follows Jocasta's last words.

Oedipus, speaking of the riddle of the Sphinx, boasts that he was the amateur (*ho meden eidos Oidipous*, 397) who put the professional (Tiresias) to shame. This is of course the proud boast of the Funeral Speech; the Athenians are amateurs in war but are confident of their ability to beat the Spartan professionals.[42] And Oedipus' adaptability—he was a homeless exile and became the loved and admired ruler of a foreign city—is another Athenian characteristic. "The individual Athenian," says Pericles, "addresses himself to the most varied types of action with the utmost versatility and charm."[43]

Oedipus' devotion to the city, the mainspring of his dedicated action in the first half of the play, is the great Athenian virtue which Pericles preaches[44] and Athens' enemies fear. "In the city's service"—the Corinthians again—"they use their bodies as if they did not belong to them."[45]

Oedipus' quick suspicion and keen nose for a plot is of course one of the outstanding traits of the Athenian *demos*.[46] And so is his terrible anger, which at its height seems uncontrollable by force and reason alike. This rage of Oedipus is the rage of Athens which even Pericles feared,[47] which condemned the people of Mitylene and the generals at Arginusae.[48] But like the Athenian anger, it does not last: Creon gets a reprieve, as Mitylene did.[49]

Oedipus *tyrannos*, then, is more than an individual tragic hero. He represents, by the basis of his power, his character, and his title, the city which aimed to become (and was already on the road to becoming) the *tyrannos* of Greece, the splendid autocrat of the whole Hellenic world. Sophocles' use of the word *tyrannos* and the relationships it points up, add an extra dimension to the heroic figure of Oedipus, and also to the meaning of his fall.

Notes

1. Aristotle calls it simply "The Oedipus," cf. *Po.* 1452ᵃ24, 1453ᵇ7, etc.
2. p. 4, n. 2.
3. Euripides goes so far as to make a chorus of Athenian citizens refer to Demophon, son of Theseus, an Attic King and pattern of Athenian bravery and piety, as *tyrannos* (*Heracl.* 111).
4. cf. 219–20 and 222.
5. Th. 1.13 *patrikai basileiai*; cf. also *Pol.* 1285ᵃ3.
6. He left Corinth to settle his doubts once and for all by consulting the Delphic oracle, but was sent away unanswered—*atimon* (789) is his word, which in the context

simply means "with my request disregarded" (cf. 340 *atimazeis*) but also implies "without honor," i.e., the doubt about his birth still unresolved.

7. cf. the situation on Ithaca in the *Odyssey*, where the hand of Penelope is evidently regarded as a stepping stone to royal power.

8. *ex hou . . . basileus kalei emos kai ta megist' etimathes. Kalei* is ambiguous, for it refers in such a construction to both past and present (cf. Goodwin, sec. 26), but the present reference is emphasized by the change in tense of the next verb *etimathes*, which permits no ambiguity at all (naturally, for the statement cannot refer to the present, only to the past). Normal construction, however, would demand that this verb, too, be in the present tense. The effect is to stress the present reference of *kalei*, which might not have been emphatic without the sudden change of tense.

9. at vs. 873.

10. cf. 834.

11. Archil., *Fr.* 25 (Bergk[4]) and cf. the second hypothesis of the *O.T.*

12. True, the meetings of the Assembly were preceded by the recital of prayers which included curses on those who aimed to restore the *tyrannos*, but the frequent Aristophanic parodies of this prayer indicate that it was an antiquarian survival (cf. *Av.* 1074, *Th.* 334–40), and a celebrated passage in *V.* 488–502 suggests that, although demagogues and unscrupulous persecutors made free with the accusation of tyranny, it was not to be taken seriously.

13. For these three characteristic actions, see Hdt. 3.80 and E., *Supp.* 447–49.

14. cf. Hdt. 3.39 (Polycrates); 5.92, sec. 2 (Cypselus); Arist., *Pol.* 1311[a]; E., *Fr.* 605 (N[2]); Pl., *Phd.* 82a; E., *Supp.* 450–51.

15. Hdt., 3.80; E., *Ion* 627–8; Pl., *R.* 8.567.

16. E., *Ion.* 621–28. Cf. also *Fr.* 605 (N[2]). X., *Hier.* 2.8–10.

17. Pl., *R.* 8.567d.; Arist., *Pol.* 1285[a], 1311[a]; Th. 1.130.

18. A., *A.* 1650, *Ch.* 768–69; S., *El.* 1369–71; E., *El.* 798, 845.

19. 93 *es pantas auda*.

20. 144 *allos de Kadmou laon hod' athroizeto.*

21. Thuc. 2.37. From here on, all references are to Thucydides if not otherwise indicated.

22. 2.63.

23. 3.37; cf. also 6.85 (Euphemus, Athenian ambassador in Sicily).

24. 1.122, 124.

25. 1.80, 2.13, 64, 6.31.

26. 1.102, 142, 1.71, 2.87, 1.121.

27. 1.75. *Ar' axtoi esmen . . . kai prothumias heneka tes tote kai gnomes xuneseos arches ge hes echomen tois Hellesi me houtos agan epiphthonos diakeisthai*? The parallels to the Oedipean phrases are striking: 48. *tes paros prothumias*, 398 *gnomei kuresas*, 381 *hosos phthonos*, 382 *tesde g' arches hounek'*.

28. 2.64; cf. also (Lysias) *Epitaphios* 48.

29. 2.62.

30. 1.75, 76.

31. 2.64.4; cf. also 6.

32. 1.70.9; cf. also 8.

33. 7.61; 2.84, 85, 89; 1.142. Hdt. 9.46.

34. Hdt. 9.27; Th. 1.9, 102, 2.88, 2.41, 7.28.

35. 1.74 (Lysias) *Epitaphios* 58.

36. 1.70. For parallels to Oedipus' "forestalling" cf. 1.57, 3.3.

37. cf. 1371ff.—Oedipus' defense of his self-blinding: note the past tenses (1372, 1375, 1385) and the correspondence of the argument with the words of Oedipus before the action, as reported by the messenger (1271–74).

38. 2.40.

39. 1.144; cf. also 1.75, 2.40 *philosophoumen*, 2.62 *xunesis* and *gnome*.

40. 2.62.

41. 1.70 *en tois deinois euelpides*; cf. Euelpides, the Athenian of Aristophanes' *Aves*. Cf. also Th. 7.77.

42. 2.39 *rathumiai mallon e ponon meletei* and 1.133. (Themistocles) *hon d' apeiros eie, krinai hikanos.*

43. 1.41 *ton auton andra . . . epi pleist' an eide . . . malist' an eutrapelos* . . . and also 1.138 (Themistocles at Sardis).

44. 2.43; cf. 2.60 *philopolis*.

45. 1.70.

46. cf. e.g., 6.28, 53; 2.13; 3.43; Ar., *V.* 343–45 (with which cf. *O.T.* 124–5).

47. 2.60 and Ar., *Pax* 606–7.

48. For Athenian *orge* cf. 6.60, 8.1; Ar. *Eq.* 41–42 *despotes agroikos orgen . . . Demos . . . duskolon gerontion*, Ibid. 537, *V.* 243, Antiphon *Herodes* 69, 71.

49. 3.36 *metanoia*; cf. 1.65 and X., *HG.* 1.7.35.

By the same author

THE HEROIC TEMPER
OEDIPUS THE KING (translation)
OEDIPUS AT THEBES

WORD AND ACTION

Essays on the Ancient Theater

Bernard Knox

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