

OEDIPUS: AN OVERVIEW

Welcome to “Stories of Oedipus”. Over the course of the next two presentation evenings my colleagues and I will be musing with you on the play, Oedipus Rex, written by the great tragedian of the ancient Greeks, Sophocles.

But first, some background to set the stage. I would like to tell you about how tragedy was born and about the religious, political and cultural environment in which the play is embedded. I will also tell you about the life of the playwright, Sophocles.

The origins of Greek tragedy are shrouded in mystery. Scholars have several interpretations but these are largely founded on speculation. We do know that the word “tragedy” means “goat-song”; “Tragos” = goat; “Oide” = song. We also know that it was performed at “The Great Dionysia”, the spring festival which heralded the beginning of the year in ancient times. The festival was held in honour of the god Dionysus, the twice-born god of death and rebirth.

Like the god himself, the origins of Dionysus are mysterious. Various myths assign his parentage to Zeus or to Hades. Likewise, his mother is said to have been Persephone or a mortal woman, Semele. Perhaps the answer lies in the claim that Hades is actually another name for Zeus in his aspect as ruler of the underworld. Legend has it that when Dionysus was born, Hera, the wife of Zeus, ordered him torn to pieces. Zeus saved his heart, gave it to Semele to eat and

she became pregnant, giving birth to Dionysus a second time. Thus, Dionysus was known as “the twice-born” and was worshipped as the god of the mystery of birth, death and resurrection. Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, is the goddess of the spring, the seed that lies beneath the earth and returns to life when the sun once more warms the earth. After she picked a strange death flower in the meadow that her uncle Hades, lord of the dead, had planted to attract her, the god carried her off to his kingdom in the under-world. On behalf of Demeter, Hermes bargained with Hades for the return of Persephone to earth, but Hades asked her to eat a pomegranate, fruit of the underworld and symbol of fertility because of its many seeds. Having eaten, she was compelled to remain in the underworld for one-third of the year. A symbol of barrenness and fertility, death and life, she returned to the world each spring, bringing new life in the form of the seed. Her son, Dionysus belonged to both the realm of the dead and the realm of the living. During the winter months he lived in the underworld. His return to the land of the living in the spring heralded the beginning of the ancient New Year and the return of green and growing things. To the ancient Greeks, he was the vital force of life itself, dying each winter and resurrecting each spring. Without the favour of Dionysus, nothing could be reborn from the death of winter. Dionysus, or Bacchus as he was also called, was the nectar of life, ruler of all life-giving fluids. His gifts were fruitfulness and growth. His animal was the goat, associated with the harvest and with the abundance of the fruits of the harvest.

It is thought that all of the types of drama developed by the Greeks evolved from the worship of Dionysus, who was the patron of theatre. Dedicated to Dionysus, tragedy – “goat-song” – is rooted in the primeval rites of sacrifice, the mysteries of life, death and rebirth. For centuries

before the time of Sophocles, an animal would be offered up in sacred ritual to supplicate the favour of the god. Domestic animals were precious, since they provided food and clothing. Only the finest and most unblemished animals were an acceptable offering. Since meat was rarely eaten, a sacrificial ceremony was also a time of feasting and celebration. At the spring festival held in honour of Dionysus, a goat would be sacrificed as an appeasement to the god. It was a very valuable and important animal to the Greeks, providing them with meat, milk, cheese and clothing.

The very nature of the festival gives us an inkling as to the original significance of tragedy. Greek tragedies are linked with the ancestors and with the semi-divine legendary figures of the heroic age. Only the noblest, the great heroes of legend, figures who were regarded as equals to the gods, were suitable subjects for the great religious occasion and the heightened language for which it called.

Perhaps tragedy (goat song) derives its name from these stories of men of the highest character who, innocent of any intentional wrongdoing give their lives, like the goat, to propitiate the gods and ensure the well-being of society.

After the sacrificial offering, performances of choral dance and song would ensue. Prizes would be given for the best performance. Tragedy as a sophisticated art form began around 534 BC, when a man named Thespis, of whom little is known, introduced a new element to the choral song and dance arrangement. It is said that at the Great Dionysia in Icaria, a village northeast of

Athens, Thespis leapt up on a table and answered the chorus with speeches. He won the prize that day for his performance, which was, by the way, a goat.

In this act of spontaneous creativity, Thespis changed the form of the performance from choral song to drama, and took the first step towards the development of dramatic dialogue. He introduced an actor, or “hypocrites” - an answerer - who introduced the play and delivered set speeches. The root of the word “Hypocrites” also informs us of the spirit in which tragedy was composed and of the sense of mystery and reverence with which the audience received it, for it is derived from “hypokrinesthai”, which in its earliest usage is connected with the spirit world and means to interpret dreams and other signs from beyond. Thus, actor and chorus were the mouthpieces and interpreters of the spirit world and the gods.

Later, Aeschylus, an older contemporary of Sophocles, who was already established as a distinguished playwright of tragedy by the time Sophocles began to write, added a second actor to the play. Sophocles developed the art form even further by introducing a third actor. This allowed for a more dynamic interchange between the players and provided a wider scope for character development. The three actors shared all of the speaking parts, so that there could be (and were) more than three characters in the play. Therefore, there were never more than three speaking characters before the audience at any one time.

In its form, Greek tragedy was closer to opera and ballet than to modern plays. We don't know what the music and choreography was like, since nothing of the original notations for the plays

has survived. It was a union of two kinds of poetry. The actors spoke verse and the chorus sang verse. The subject matter was heroic legend and the main characters were the kings and queens and nobles of the past. Sometimes contemporary history was taken as the theme. It dealt with major issues – religious, ethical and political. There was little room for original plots or characters. The audience already knew the outline of the contents.

The legend of Oedipus was old and had been used as the dramatic subject by many playwrights when Sophocles wrote his play. It was a favourite subject amongst the Athenians. The audience didn't come to see how the story would turn out. They had learned the legends in childhood. They came to learn how the heroes came to do what they did. What the meaning of it might be. The lives and deeds of the gods and heroes were viewed as fit subjects for the edification of man on the issues and problems of human life.

Antiphones, a comic dramatist wrote:

“Lucky in every way, the tragic poet!

The first, the plot. The audience already know it.

Before a line's declaimed. Just a reminding

That's all. Say “Oedipus” and they know the lot

Dad, mum and the kids, the killing and the blinding.

“Alcmaeon” and the schoolboys on the spot

Recite, “Killed his mother. Crazy in the brain.

Adrastus will be in, and off again”

Chorus and actor together interpreted the play. The chorus set the stage and a tragic legend of the past was presented. One who is innocent – indeed of noble character - encounters a tragic fate and suffers terribly. The fate is connected with the ancestors and their fates. A wrong must be expiated, or nothing will flourish or be in balance with nature.

Athens at the time of Sophocles

Sophocles was born to a well-to-do family at Colonus (now within Athens) in 496 B.C. In the century before his birth the world had been dominated by Asia. Persia was the super power of the time and the Greeks were just emerging from the dark ages. They were a group of warrior societies, or city states, often at war with each other but who banded together and fought as one when threatened from without by a common enemy. Democracy had only just been established a mere twelve years or so before the birth of Sophocles. Around 508 B.C. an aristocrat named Cleisthenes reformed the constitution and set it on a democratic footing. Before this, the city states had been ruled by kings and tyrants. The word tyrant did not carry the pejorative meaning it has today. Then it simply meant a person who ruled not by right of birth but who had taken or been given the power to rule.

Demos= people; Cracos= power. The Athenians created an experiment in direct popular rule.

Each month a common group was selected by lot to rule the city. Another group met weekly to

prepare the agenda to take to the assembly of the city. In a manner very much like the reality show “Survivor”, a system of ostracism was also employed. People could be and were “voted off the island” if they were perceived as a threat to the democratic system. Often it was a person who was perceived as having grown too powerful and influential and who might be tempted to seize power as a tyrant, or “tyrannos” who was exiled in this way, usually for a period of ten years.

The democratic system of the Greeks was not quite like the democracy of modern times. The armies were made up men who had been granted the citizenship and who had the right to vote. This did not include everyone. One-third of the population of Athens were slaves – mainly prisoners of war – to whom the Greeks referred as “man-footed things”. As well, it was a fiercely patriarchal society. Women were cloaked and veiled and not allowed to vote. Then there were children and foreign residents, or “metics” who also could not vote. In all almost 90% of the populace was excluded from the vote. Only adult male citizens who had completed their military training as adolescents had this right.

This system of democracy may not have survived if it weren’t for a windfall that made Athens rich. The discovery of several rich veins of silver nearby provided the city with the means to govern and to build a powerful fleet of ships in anticipation of an invasion by Persia.

In 480 BC, when Sophocles was sixteen years old, there was a huge battle between the Persians and Athens. The Persians set fire to Athens, but the Athenians won the war by leading the

Persian fleet into a trap, killing them off and sinking their ships. It was a great victory for Athens and is known in history as the battle of Salamis. It is the opinion of some scholars that had the Greeks not won this battle the entire history of western civilization would have turned out quite differently. It is considered to be one of the most significant conflicts in history. After this victory by the Greeks, a schism grew between the east and the west and the era of Athenian pre-eminence began. The Greek island states formed a confederacy with Athens and thus safeguarded the Aegean Sea. However, for all their talk of democracy, the Athenians abrogated the wealth from this confederacy, requiring other states to give tribute money and established an empire.

Athens grew by taking over foreign territories and distributing the plots democratically among the Athenians. Tribute money was paid by tribute countries. The Parthenon was built as a symbol of its imperial power.

Sophocles was honoured by being asked to lead the performance of the chorus celebrating the victory of Salamis, which indicates he came from a good family of wealth, since only the youths from families of prominence were invited to take part. His father is said to have been the owner of an armaments factory. Athenaeus describes him as handsome in youth, proficient in dancing and music while still young. He was educated in music by Lampros, a rival of Timotheus who influenced Euripides' music.

In the time of Sophocles, Athens was at the pinnacle of its powers. It was a war-like city and its

citizens admired men of courage and decisive action – men like Oedipus. Equality and fair play were important to the Athenians. They ruled and were ruled in turn. They championed freedom of speech, but were not at all tolerant of criticism from within. Unorthodox opinions and views from citizens were perceived as a threat. The great philosopher Socrates fell victim to this attitude. In 399 BC he was tried and convicted of corrupting the youth of Athens and of worshipping strange gods. He was made to take poison for speaking his mind freely.

Political life was at the heart of daily life in Athens. People who didn't vote were known as "idiotes", from which we derive the term "idiot". Grain was the oil of the time. It is speculated that the miasma over the city of Thebes in Sophocles' play Oedipus Rex may have been due to drought and a lack of grain supply. Incidentally, Athens was suffering from a plague at the time the play was performed.

Sophocles' lifetime was also a period of intellectual revolution. Rationalism and relativism were on the rise. Nothing was immune to discussion or accepted without question. Athens was at the centre of the new thought. With the building of the Parthenon, which was completed in 438 BC, architects, artists and philosophers flooded into the city. Experimentation flourished among the new intelligentsia. Athens at the time of Sophocles was undergoing a change from a culture dominated by a polarized attitude of black and white, right and wrong, for or against to a culture with a greater capacity for introspection and introversion and a disposition to wrestle with moral problems.

In 6th century BC, the Acropolis was a fortress as well as the place where people came to make sacrifices to the gods. In Sophocles' time it became the site of congregation of the people to discuss and vote on public affairs. The Theatre of Dionysus was on the southern slope beneath the Acropolis in Athens. This is where the spring festival was held and where Sophocles presented Oedipus Rex.

The spring festival was the greatest of Athens' four annual festivals in honour of Dionysus. At this festival three tragic poets were chosen to compete with their plays over a period of three days. Each playwright presented a trilogy followed by a "satyr" play – a lighter, more humorous treatment of the subject matter of the tragedies.

Drama was part of the life of the entire citizen body, a product of Athenian democracy. The performance was a religious ceremony rather than mere entertainment. Religion was supreme and religious life to the Greeks, like politics, was a daily affair that consisted of offerings to and worship of the gods and goddesses. Separation of church and state was unimaginable, since the welfare of the city depended on the good will of the gods. To glorify the gods was to glorify the city. Piety and patriotism were one. The Delphic oracle of Apollo, where questions were put to the priestess and her enigmatic answers were translated by the priests, came closer than any other institution at the time to being accepted as a central religious authority.

Moral debates were played out in the theatre and the dramas dealt with the dreadful potential of men. Pursuit of power was a popular theme. The playwrights were chosen and funded by the

State in a democratic process. Debates were dramatized and philosophical ideas were explored.

The plays never gave easy answers and the poets were allowed to express ideas that would not normally be spoken or shared in daily life. The presentation of a legend about a tyrant had contemporary political significance in a city state that ruled with imperial power and was viewed more and more by other city-states as tyrannical in nature. Greek tragedy was an important part of culture and politics and debate. The plays were performed in the full light of day.

Ironically, Sophocles was said to have lived a very fortunate life, untouched himself by tragedy. The comic poet Phrynichus says of him: “Blessed Sophocles who died after a long life. A man fortunate and successful, who made many fine tragedies. And finely did he die, having had no evil to endure.” His lifespan coincided with the Golden Age of Athenian intellectual, artistic and political glory.

In maturity his circle of acquaintanceship included great thinkers and artists. Herodotus, the Greek historian, was an intimate friend. The great statesman, Pericles, was an associate. Ion of Chios, the originator of the biography, was also a companion. Sophocles enjoyed the respect and affection of his peers. In his play, Frogs, Aristophanes says of him “he was amiable on earth and he is amiable here”.

Reputed to be a pious man, Sophocles held many offices and priesthoods in his time, including the high office of senior general, and is said to have been elected to office in 441 BC because of the political impact of Antigone. He retained his intellectual and physical vigour to the end of his

long life and died at age 90. His last play, Oedipus at Colonus, was written when he was close to 90 years old.

In his day he was considered to be the greatest master of tragedy. Ancient critics agreed with Aristotle that Oedipus Rex was his best play. His plays maintained the highest level of the heroic character. Departing from the tragic style of Aeschylus, Sophocles dealt with tragedy of character rather than of situation. His heroes were men who suffered and wrestled with moral and ethical dilemmas. He said that Euripides showed men as they are, while he portrayed men as they should be.

Sophocles composed approximately 123 plays and won first prize for 96 of them, outdoing both Aeschylus, his older contemporary and Euripides, his younger contemporary. He never sank below second place. Only 7 of his plays have survived intact. Of the others there are snippets, either in quotations by later Greek authors or on scraps of papyrus recovered in Egypt. No play remains in existence from his earlier period. The first surviving play is Ajax. He was close to 50 when he wrote it and was close to 70 when he wrote Oedipus Rex.

He died in 406 BC, two years before the Peloponnesian war, which marks the end of the Golden Age of Athens. When Sparta, a totalitarian state, marched on Athens to liberate Greece from its tyranny, Athens fell to the Spartans and a new chapter in history began.