

5-2019

The Delphic plague : a study in Athenian oracular rejection as evident in the Oedipus Tyrannus.

Devin A Stephens
University of Louisville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors>



Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stephens, Devin A, "The Delphic plague : a study in Athenian oracular rejection as evident in the Oedipus Tyrannus." (2019). *College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses*. Paper 196.

Retrieved from <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors/196>

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. This title appears here courtesy of the author, who has retained all other copyrights. For more information, please contact thinkir@louisville.edu.

**The Delphic plague:
a study in Athenian oracular rejection as evident in the
*Oedipus Tyrannus***

By
Devin Stephens

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Graduation *magna cum laude*

University of Louisville

Louisville, KY

May 2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| I.THE CAUSE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE FONS ET ORIGO MALI..... | 3 |
| THE CHARACTER OF SOPHOCLES..... | 3 |
| THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND..... | 5 |
| THE ENIGMA OF OEDIPUS' GUILT..... | 6 |
| II.THE SICKNESS: A DIAGNOSIS OF THE RELIGIOUS MALADY | 11 |
| THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND..... | 11 |
| THE REFLECTIVE NATURE..... | 13 |
| THE MATTER OF DELPHIC APOLOGISM..... | 19 |
| LUCIDITY..... | 21 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 22 |
| REFERENCES..... | 23 |

INTRODUCTION

Since its creation, *The Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles' has become one of the most lauded pieces of literature in the western canon. The high pedestal upon which the play rests has led to a subsequent avalanche of writings about the work, both scholarly and literary, since ancient times. One would think that due to the sheer magnitude of such scholarship on the matter there is certainly nothing more to be said on the subject, that everything that could have been written has indeed already been written. This is most certainly not the case, and there is still much to be said. Whereas most research done previously on the work focuses on the *hamartia*, or tragic flaw, as being a fulfillment of the oracle or else focuses on the theme of fate versus free will in the dealings of humans, there is little research that seeks to examine the work in its historical context, and even less still is there research that seeks to reconcile the work's literary themes with its historical context. The literature closest to completing this reconciliation is perhaps Bernard Knox's insightful *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time*, but even then, there are some loose ends in the analysis.

The *Oedipus Tyrannus* was written by the Athenian tragedian Sophocles' sometime between 430-426 BCE¹. These years were a tumultuous time for the city that reared the author. Athens had found itself in the midst of a war to defend its right as a major superpower in the Mediterranean against its rival Sparta, plague had begun to ravage the city's population, and one of its greatest statesmen, Pericles, contracted this plague and died. The Plague of Athens broke out during the second year of the Peloponnesian War²

¹ Sophocles, *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

² Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 118.

and consisted of two epidemics. An initial outbreak started in 430 BCE and lasted two years until 428 BCE, and after a short rest a second outbreak occurred in 427 BCE which lasted until 426 BCE³. This plague bookended an already decaying belief in the religious institution of oracles, primarily handed down from Delphi. Oracular decay is the dissolution of the belief system in oracles and prophecies imparted from a divine intelligence. This dissolution became present due to undesirable decisions and oracles handed to the Athenians by Delphi, the agents of the divine will, that defied Athenian political interests. This political discrepancy between the two, coupled with a plague ravaging Attica in the midst of a major war with the Spartans, led to a dissolution of religious customs and mores within the city of Athens.

The purpose of this work is to determine the effects of the Plague of Athens on the socio-cultural and religious climate of Athens as revealed through Sophocles' *magnum opus* the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The focus is the problem of oracular rejection as viewed by Sophocles due to the political discrepancies between Athens and Delphi of which the plague was the final catalyst. Sophocles in this work is then explored as a writer with sentiments of Delphic Apologism in the wake of the plague which acted as a catalyst for a near complete dissolution of religious customs and furthermore a negation of past acceptance of oracular wisdom. In short, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* presents a portrait of Sophocles as an author trying to reconcile his religion with his politics.

³ Jacques Jouanna, *Sophocles: A Study of His Theater in Its Political and Social Context* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 29.

I.THE CAUSE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE FONS ET ORIGO MALI

In order to further examine the dual nature of the plague in question, one must first examine the *fons et origo mali*, or the “fount and origin of the malady”. From this deduction one can depart and examine the sickness diagnosed by Sophocles and the subsequent remedy one may infer he prescribes. In order to examine and reach a conclusion on the form of the cause, one must develop the world in context within which the cause finds its existence, meaning in order to define the nature of the transgression one must develop a sketch of the world it transgresses. The world in which Oedipus, and through him Athens, transgresses against the divine is a product of the author as a reflection of a larger Greek worldview. Therefore, one must proceed to provide an analysis of what one can gather about Sophocles and the natural order in which he believed himself to exist.

The Character of Sophocles

Sophocles was by all accounts a politically involved individual who held positions important in the Athenian polis. His strong involvement indicates an affinity for the nation in which he was born, and an inclination to support its political interests. Sophocles of the deme of Colonus held his first political position sometime in his fifties, and according to inscriptional evidence was appointed *Hellonotamias*, or “Hellenic treasurer”, sometime between 443-442 BCE⁴. The office of *Hellonotamias* was created between 478-477 BCE⁵ after the Battle of Salamis, when a coalition of Greek cities banded together with the intention of preserving the strength afforded to them by this

⁴ Jouanna, *Sophocles*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*

newfound unity. They met on the island of Delos at the sanctuary of Apollo and allowed Athens to assume hegemony over this coalition which they named the Delian League⁶. For a time, they collected their levy and deposited it into the sanctuary at Delos, but eventually, as all of the treasurers were Athenian, they started depositing the levy directly into the temple of Athena in Athens instead of the previous temple of Apollo. Due to the success and fame of his *Antigone*, Sophocles received his second political office as *Strategos* between 441-440 BCE and accompanied Pericles in the Athenian expedition against Samos, which had recently revolted against the newfound hegemony of Athens⁷. In this, Sophocles served Athens' political interests directly and helped to affirm its hegemony.

Sophocles was a man of deep religious sentiments, who was closely associated with the healer-god Asclepius, son of Apollo, as Plutarch attests:

Again, there is a story, still well attested, that Sophocles, during his life, was blessed with the friendship of Aesculapius, and that when he died, another deity procured him fitting burial.⁸

Sophocles was the first Athenian to welcome the god from his sanctuary at Epidaurus and was chosen to accept the statue of Asclepius into his home, thereby establishing the cult of Asclepius in Athens. According to Plutarch, the arrival of the god's image in Athens gave both the Athenians and Sophocles an epiphany of great joy⁹. Sophocles was chosen for this honor on account of the fact that he was himself a priest of the healer-hero Halon, and thus was deemed worthy of hosting an image of the healing god¹⁰. Upon his death,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jouanna, *Sophocles*, 19.

⁸ Jouanna, *Sophocles*, 63.

⁹ Jouanna, *Sophocles*, 65.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Sophocles was bestowed with the religious honor of heroization for his connection to Asclepius was renamed *Dexion*, “the welcomer”, as recorded in a Byzantine dictionary:

Dexion: that is what Sophocles was called by the Athenians after his death. It is said that at the death of Sophocles the Athenians, wanting to pay him homage, established for him a heroic sanctuary and called it Dexion, because of his reception (*dexeos*) of Asclepius. He had in fact received the god in his house and had constructed an altar. It is for that reason he was called Dexion.¹¹

In this way Sophocles was not only heroized but was accepted into the cult of Athens and was given offerings of worship as a lesser divinity. These things, his priesthood, his establishment of the cult of Asclepius, his heroization, and his worship in the cult of Athens are all indicators that Sophocles was a faithful adherent to the Greek religion and that his beliefs, both political and religious, are likely to have carried into his work.

The Religious Background

At the core of Greek religion and of the Greek natural order laid the anthropomorphized goddesses of fate the *Moirai*. The *Moirai* consisted of the three goddesses Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos who spun the thread of men’s lives and decided their *moira*, or “share”.¹² These were primarily personalized deities that represented order and justice in the Greek natural order and in fact to the Greeks dictated the natural order and everything in it¹³. In some traditions, Zeus even found himself at the whims of these three goddesses, an idea that even finds itself with a precedent in tragedy through Sophocles’ predecessor Aeschylus:

PROMETHEUS: Fate (*Moirai*) fulfils all in time; but it is not ordained that these events shall yet reach such an end... Cunning is feebleness besides Necessity.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² B.C. Dietrich, *Death, Fate, and the Gods* (University of London Athlone Press, 1967), 59.

¹³ Ibid.

CHORUS: And whose hand on the helm controls Necessity?

PROMETHEUS: The three Fates (*Moirai*); and the Erinys, who forget nothing.

CHORUS: Has Zeus less power than they?

PROMETHEUS: He cannot fly from Fate (*Moirai*).¹⁴

Considering this, one must elaborate on the nature of these goddesses and the oracles handed down to the Greeks. The oracle, in light of this, is not a prescription given by a physician, but is like the shining of a light to elucidate what is already there, i.e. what is already fated to happen as dictated by the *Moirai*. Apollo, then, is like the hand that guides what the object the light should elucidate, having been given knowledge of all objects without the power to change them.

The Enigma of Oedipus's Guilt

The Greek word *hamartia* translates literally as a missing of the mark and is the fatal flaw of the tragic hero that causes his downfall. The nature of the *hamartia* is not that it is a vice or depravity on the part of the tragic hero, but it is merely an error of judgement¹⁵. The error of judgement of Oedipus is his failure to adhere to the oracle and thus his rejection of the workings of the natural order of the Greek cosmos. In Athenian society, of which the play is a reflection of, the divine took priority over all else¹⁶. Meetings of the *ecclesia*¹⁷ always began with the purificatory sacrifice of a pig and prayers led by the herald, and before any official meeting or gathering the sacred matters had to be dealt with before one could move on to the profane things¹⁸. It is this priority

¹⁴ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 35.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1467.

¹⁶ Jon D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 13.

¹⁷ The Athenian Assembly

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

Oedipus circumvents in order to preserve his innocence, and it is this which constitutes the error in judgement on his part.

The normal bringers of retribution on the guilty the chthonic goddesses, the Erinyes and the goddess Nemesis, are eerily absent in the actions of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Their role is supplanted by the god Apollo, and one may conclude that this is the result of a direct affront against him. If Oedipus were to be punished for the crime of killing his father, or else if he were suffering a curse on his bloodline through the actions of his father Laius in the rape of Chrysippus, then it would not be Apollo handing down his punishment but rather the normal dispensers of justice the Erinyes. They at least have a precedent in tragedy through their attempted punishment of Orestes in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*¹⁹, but rather one finds a parallel to the *Oedipus Tyrannus* in Homer's *Iliad*²⁰. When Agamemnon takes the maiden Chryseis from her father and priest of Apollo, Briseis, the crime is an affront not only to Briseis, but to Apollo as well. Apollo afflicts the Achaean camp with a plague, his method of punishment, until Agamemnon returns the girl to her father. Thebes is afflicted by its own plague, as the Achaeans are by theirs, and this is because the crime of Oedipus was a crime against Apollo. If the crime transgressed a human-human boundary, then perhaps one would find the Erinyes taking the place of Apollo as accuser, but this is not the case and one must infer that Sophocles as the playwright placed some significance in this role replacement. Apollo was directly affronted by the actions Oedipus took to defy the oracle given to him, and thus takes direct action against the Theban tyrant and his people. It is Apollo who moves the play

¹⁹ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia* (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

²⁰ Homer, *The Iliad* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

forward from its beginning. It is his agents, the Pythia at Delphi and the plague upon the Thebans that catalyzes the chain of events that lead to Oedipus' awareness of the oracle's fulfillment.

In a literary work, the question of innocence and of guilt in relation to the moral character of the individual is irrelevant. What is relevant is what portrayal we are meant to receive from the author. The author and his intentions are what we must discern here, and how his character Oedipus is intended to be portrayed to his audience in mind, that being his fellow 5th Century BCE Athenians²¹.

In order to understand the concept of Oedipus's guilt as judged by his opposition to the Greek natural order, one must adopt certain modes of parameter. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard provides a useful set of dialectical terms in his work *Fear and Trembling*²² for understanding the relation of an individual's act to the ethical in which one becomes a synthesis between two concepts. The first of these concepts is the ethical. The ethical is the universal, operating on the assumption that what is ethical for one is ethical for another. In the world Sophocles creates through his play the ethical is a universal principle, objective in nature. The individual acting within the bounds of this world is a singular entity and is the particular within the universal. The tragic hero then, is themselves the *particular* operating within the *universal*, which is the ethical in accordance with the Greek natural order. In the case of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus is the particular and the moralistic code that

²¹ E.R. Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex" *Greece and Rome* 13, no. 1 (1966): 37-49

²² Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death* (Massachusetts: Princeton University Press, 2013), 107.

operates within his world is the universal. Within these parameters the tragic hero is one who suspends the ethical in favor of the ethical and places his *telos*, or intended purpose, beyond the universal in order to gain a harmony with the universal. Oedipus's *telos* lies both within and beyond the universal. He suspends part of the ethical in order to preserve another part of it. He suspends the part of the universal that concerns the dealings with the divine in order to preserve the part that constitutes his filial love for his parents. As a result of this, Oedipus is at once both innocent and guilty, and one must conclude that the man is a living paradox. His act to avoid his fate goes against the intentions of a divine will and therefore marks him guilty, though if he were to allow his oracle to come to pass, he would find himself performing an abominable act which would affirm his guilt as well. In spite of this twofold guilt Oedipus finds himself innocent by attempting to avoid an unclean act against whom he believes are his parents, but his intention to escape the confines of a universe governed by the *Moirai* is unacceptable. It is here that Oedipus commits an affront against the divine, and by the laws of the Greek natural order this is unacceptable, for where his oracle would have him commit a human-human transgression his evasion would commit a human-divine transgression. The latter is a far loftier crime. It is the causal factor of his punishment and the punishment of Thebes for harboring him. Oedipus' natural inclination to act in accordance with the universal places him beyond the realm of the universal through his defiance of the oracle.

Another point that is often misconstrued in studies of the tragedy are the means and form of the punishment, which is not the fulfillment of the oracle but

rather it is his realization of its fulfillment. Oedipus had committed the crime in ignorance long ago and then enjoyed the fruits of the act for many years before the events of the tragedy unfold. His fulfillment is not the punishment, he is not punished for being punished. If one were to look at the matter in such a way then his fulfillment of the oracle, his killing of his father and the marriage to his mother, would be the punishment and one is left without an act to punish. Oedipus is not punished for this but is rather punished for defying the oracle, and it is instead the realization that he has fulfilled the very thing which he strove to defy that comprises his punishment. The form of the punishment laid upon the Thebans is more readily apparent, they are afflicted by a dire plague.

The *hamartia* of Oedipus is not his rashness or anger in his treatment of Creon or Tiresias, but rather it is his rejection of a core principle of Greek religion: fate. For almost the entirety of his adult life, Oedipus defied his preordained fate. Once given his oracle, he left his home and declared that he would not kill his father, that he would not share his mother's bed. This rebellion, this *hubris* against the divine's priority is what comprises his *hamartia*. But why should he be punished for this? Surely any virtuous person would do everything in their power to avoid such unnatural and unclean acts. In his determination to divorce himself from his oracle, he counteracts the possibility of two unnatural acts with the certainty of one natural act. It is unnatural to act against a nature of which fate lies at the center. Whereas the first unnatural acts would be detrimental to himself and others, the second goes further and offends the gods. Apollo says he will do one thing, Oedipus tries to do another, thus his act of self-preservation and virtue becomes in itself unvirtuous and

filled with sacrilege. In light of this, Sophocles presents Oedipus as a man guiltless among humanity, but who nonetheless stands before an accusing Apollo guilty of a transgression against the divine.

II. THE SICKNESS: A DIAGNOSIS OF THE RELIGIOUS MALADY

Now that the cause of the punishment and the form of the transgression has been deduced, one may move to diagnose the nature of the sickness itself in the context of Sophocles. The plague holds a preeminent role in the play, and this is because the plague lies at the core of Sophocles' diagnosis of contemporary events. Although the religious background and definition of Greek natural order are required to answer whether Sophocles' finds Oedipus acting outside of the ethical, it is paramount that one provides a social and historical background of which the play is a reflection. One must elaborate on the nature of the plague to Sophocles both literary and historically, and from there we may endeavor to speculate on his intentions in the instruction of the Athenians or else deduce what the message of the play is in its context.

The Historical and Social Background

The *Oedipus Tyrannus* was performed for the first time in the midst of two major events for the city of Athens which had a profound effect on the work, the Peloponnesian War and the Plague of Athens. The influence of these two on the play is based off of their effect on the religion of the Athenians. The Peloponnesian War caused a rift to form between Athens and Delphi as a result of an oracle given to the Spartans regarding their conflict with the Athenians:

The oracle also which had been given to the Spartans was now remembered by those who knew of it. When the god (Apollo) was asked whether they should go

to war, he answered that if they put their might into it, victory would be theirs, and that he would himself be with them. With this oracle events were supposed to tally. For the plague broke out so soon as the Peloponnesians invaded Attica, and never entering the Peloponnesus (not at least to an extent worth noticing) committed its worst ravages at Athens, and next to Athens, at the most populous of the other cities. Such was the history of the plague.²³

In this way the god Apollo became an enemy of the Athenians by taking a public stance against their hegemony, and thus the plague that erupted in Athens seemed indicative of this in their newfound enemy Apollo god of plagues. It would make sense then that the Athenians would reject a practice that involved a god who had allied himself with their enemies, but in Athens the belief in oracles and prophecies had begun to decay long before the Spartans received support from Delphi. Writers such as Thucydides and Euripides were themselves very cynical in their treatment of prophecy and reflected a more widespread disbelief prevalent among the Athenian prophecy²⁴. It is this prevalent disbelief that Sophocles addresses in the play through the chorus:

No longer shall I go in reverence to the inviolate navel of the earth (Delphi)²⁵, nor to the temple at Albae, nor to that of Olympia, if these oracles do not accord with truth, so that all mortals may point to them. But O ruler, if you are rightly thus called, Zeus, lord of all, may this not escape you and your ever-deathless power! For already the oracles of Laius are fading and are being expunged, and nowhere is Apollo manifest in honor; but the power of the gods is perishing.²⁶

To Sophocles, the dissolution of prophecy meant the dissolution of Greek religion in its entirety, for if the gods have no knowledge of the beyond then they only have knowledge of mortal things and are no better than mortals themselves. Prophecy marks the divide between the divine and mortal intelligence and therefore between man and the gods. If

²³ Thucydides, *Histories*, 121.

²⁴ Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 46.

²⁵ Delphi was believed to be the *omphalos*, the "center" or "navel" of the earth.

²⁶ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 415.

prophecy is false, then the gods are no better than mortals and mortals should have no more reason to bear them reverence.

The Reflective Nature

Sophocles' work is a product of its time, and one finds its devices and context to be contemporary to the time it was written in. The driving themes of the plot are the driving themes of Sophocles' Athens. From these one may deduce Sophocles' views of his time and apply the historical method to his literature.

Oedipus/Athens

Noted classicist Bernard Knox, in his work *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time*, makes the argument that Oedipus in Sophocles' work is a personification of Athens itself, and that he carries with him all the traits and virtues which Athenian society prided itself on having. He writes,

Sophocles' Oedipus is more than an individual tragic hero. It is characteristic of the Greek attitude towards man to see him not only as an individual but also as an individual in society, a political being as well as a private person.²⁷

In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus is at once both a political being acting in accordance with a society and thereby personifying the society's beliefs as well as acting as an autonomous individual within the society. Oedipus, though acting for himself, acts within a society similar to Athens and as a political being acts on behalf of Athens. The relationship between Thebes and Oedipus does not function as it should, that being the relationship between a tyranny and its tyrant. Thebes in the play seems oddly democratic, and one finds Oedipus yielding to the wishes of the both the chorus and Jocasta in his

²⁷ Knox, *Oedipus*, 53.

dealings with Creon²⁸. Oedipus at first proposes that Creon should be put to death for conspiring to steal his crown, yet at the behest of the chorus and Jocasta he relents even though he still suspects Creon of treason. A tyrant, in the sense of a ruler without legal claim to the throne, would not subjugate himself to the whims of those he rules, and yet Oedipus is conscientiously transparent to the chorus of Theban citizens. At the beginning of the play, when Creon returns from Delphi, he suggests to Oedipus that they should discuss the Pythia's words in private, but Oedipus readily refuses and urges Creon to announce the oracle's words to the Thebans before him. These democratic tendencies along with his title of *tyrannos*, of which Athens had become over its subordinate allies²⁹, indicate that Oedipus is a metaphor for the city of Athens.

The Plague of Thebes/The Plague of Athens

In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* we find the literary plague to be a reflection of the historical plague contemporary to the work. Consisting of two outbreaks lasting from 430-426 BCE, the Plague of Athens is well recorded by the Athenian historian Thucydides, as someone who both lived contemporary to the events and survived contracting the plague himself, as having a severe detrimental effect on the moral fabric of Athenian society:

“The bodies of dying men lay upon one another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round the fountains in their longing for water. The sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane...Fear of gods or law of man there was

²⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 393.

²⁹ Knox, *Oedipus*, 55.

none to restrain them. As for the first, they judged it to be just the same whether they worshipped them or not, as they saw all alike perishing...³⁰

Though certain religious institutions, such as oracles, had fallen out of favor to a certain degree the plague caused the populace to throw out a number of others, including proper burial rites for the newly deceased. Interestingly enough, the religious institution of tragedy itself did not suffer from the plague as the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was performed in the midst of it, and many allusions to contemporary events are present in the work. In the opening scene of the play, the priest addresses Oedipus and describes the plague afflicting Thebes:

For the city, as you see yourself, is grievously tossed by storms, and still cannot lift its head from beneath the depths of the killing angry sea. A blight is on the flocks of grazing cattle and on the women giving birth, killing their offspring; the fire bearing god, hateful Pestilence, has swooped upon the city and harries it, emptying the house of Cadmus...if you are to continue ruling, as you govern now, better rule a land that has men than one that is empty, since a wall or a ship is nothing without men who live inside of it. ll.24-57³¹

In this one finds a comparison that sets the reflective tone of the plague for the rest of the play, and that is the metaphor of the city of Thebes as a ship “tossed by storms”. This is a clear allusion to the Athenian audience that the priest is actually commenting on the state of their own city. At this time, Athens was a major naval superpower and throughout many works and speeches the city was commonly compared to a ship itself³². It is likely that Sophocles included this metaphor so early on in the work, and especially when discussing the ravages of a plague to a plague-ravaged people, so as to create a clear reflection of the audience’s reality within the fictional reality of the play. Other allusions

³⁰ Thucydides, *History*, 120-121.

³¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 329.

³² Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*.

that strengthen this claim are found in the lengthy choral ode starting at line 151 of the text:

“On you first I call, daughter of Zeus, immortal Athena, and I implore your sister who protects the land, Artemis, seated on her round throne, far-famed in the marketplace, and Phoebus the far-darter; appear to me, all three, to ward off doom!...And may savage Ares, who now without the bronze of shields is scorching me as he attacks with shouts, turn his back and hasten from our land...Him, father Zeus, you who wield the power of the lightning flashes, destroy with your thunderbolt!” ll.151-202³³

Again, we find a direct link between the audience and the work by the nature of the gods invoked to ward off the plague from their city. The first invoked before all others is the goddess Athena, patron deity of Athens, with no other precedent of a connection to Thebes in the literary tradition. Third called is Apollo, which seems appropriate on account of his role as a plague god and the fact that the plague they are afflicted with is his own doing. What is especially interesting though is the last god invoked with a rebuke instead of a call for help. For Ares, god of war, to even be named in a choral ode pleading for the plague to be lifted from Thebes seems out of place, and even more peculiar for the chorus to call for violence against him. Thebes is not at war at the time of the play’s events, but the audience viewing the play most certainly was. By the time the plague had reached Athens, the Athenian Empire had already entered into the second year of the Peloponnesian War, and citizens outside of the city walls were forced to evacuate their lands and move into the city walls. This caused several problems with overcrowding for the Athenian people and most certainly inflamed the spread of the plague. Which is why one may interpret the line “...savage Ares, who now without the bronze of shields is scorching me...”³⁴ as alluding to the effects of the Peloponnesian War on the Athenians

³³ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 341.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

while not condemning the war itself, only those things that result from "...without the bronze of shields..."³⁵.

Tiresias/Delphi

One may take Sophocles' Tiresias to be a representation of Delphi, and one may find their most evident link through their connection to the god Apollo as the interpreters of his divine will. Though Delphi is directly represented to some degree in the beginning of the play through their message to Creon, Sophocles substitutes them later on with a more believable representative of Apollo which is the Theban priest Tiresias. His connection to Apollo is emphasized by the chorus who tell Oedipus "...that he whose sight is closest to that of the lord Phoebus is the lord Tiresias..."³⁶. Though the scene which provides the best evidence of a reflective nature inherent in the play regarding Delphi is that in which Oedipus cross-examines Tiresias. The exchange mostly involves a back and forth stichomythia or distichomythia where Tiresias refuses to divulge any information while professing he has the knowledge Oedipus is seeking. Oedipus becomes mistrustful of the prophet and begins to suspect that he and Creon are conspiring for his crown, which leads him to unload a diatribe upon the prophet:

"O riches and kingship and skill surpassing skill in a life much-envied, how great is this hatred you store up, if it is for the sake of this royal power, which the city placed in my hands as a gift, though I had not asked it, Creon the trusty, my friend from the first, has crept up to me and longs to throw me out, setting upon me this wizard hatcher of plots, this crafty beggar, who has sight only when it comes to profit, but in his art is blind! Why, come, tell me, how can you be a true prophet? Why when the versifying hound was here did not you speak some word that could release the citizens? Indeed, her riddle was not one for the first comer to explain! It required prophetic skill, and you were exposed as having no knowledge from the birds or from the god. No, it was I that came, Oedipus who

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 351.

knew nothing, and put a stop to her; I hit the mark by native wit, not by what I learned from birds.” ll.380-398³⁷

Now, if one operates off of Knox’s analysis one can draw two distinct conclusions from this polemic that all relate to the main thesis that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is in part a reflection of contemporary events. One can make the claim that Sophocles is accusing Delphi of siding with Sparta on the mere premise of feeling slighted about the transfer of the Delian League’s base of operations from the sanctuary of Apollo on Delos to the temple of Athena in Athens. Although Delphi was not the site of the Delian league’s base both were closely connected in that they were both the major religious sites of Apollo.

One can also gather that Sophocles admonishes Delphi for its mediating and unhelpful prophecies regarding the Persians during the Persian War, and its inability to take a substantial side³⁸. The Persians are alluded to through the “versifying hound” which is the Sphinx that terrorized Thebes until Oedipus came and solved her riddle. With Oedipus acting as a metaphor for Athens one might take this outburst as a rebuke of Delphi for not providing any oracle of victory or advice from Apollo in the Persian War. In fact, in 480 BCE³⁹ the first oracle given to the Athenians at news of Xerxes’ arrival was one of despair and hopelessness:

Now your statues are standing and pouring sweat. They shiver with dread. The black blood drips from the highest rooftops. They have seen the necessity of evil. Get out, get out of my sanctum and drown your spirits in woe.⁴⁰

³⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 363.

³⁸ Fairbanks, *Herodotus*.

³⁹ Joseph Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle, Its Responses and Operations, With a Catalogue of Responses* (University of California Press, 1981).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Unsatisfied with this oracle and finding no useful information in it they decided to consult Delphi a second time:

Await not in the quiet the coming of the horses, the marching feet, the armed host upon the land. Slip away. Turn your back. You will meet in battle anyway. O holy Salamis, you will be the death of many a woman's son between the seedtime and the harvest of the grain.⁴¹

Eventually the Athenians were evacuated from their city where they fled to Samos and defeated the Persians in a decisive and crushing naval victory. Though, this was achieved at the cost of great damage to the city of Athens itself, which suffered substantial damage from the invasion of the Persians in the absence of the Athenian military to guard it.

Here Oedipus is accusing Tiresias of the same crimes which a patriotic Athenian could accuse Delphi, of offering no help from a divine intelligence in the form of oracles and leaving the city to the ravages of a foreign enemy. It was Athens' "native wit" that stopped the Persians in their tracks at Samos, and not Delphi's "knowledge from the birds or the god"⁴².

The Matter of Delphic Apologism

The concept of Delphic Apologism comes from Arthur Fairbanks' essay, "Herodotus and the Oracle at Delphi", in which Fairbanks supposes that the Delphic Oracle had fallen into disrepute in the 5th Century BCE due to temporizing policies towards Persia and that possibly the historian Herodotus had felt the need to defend the institution by giving his histories a "Delphic coloring"⁴³. In this article, Fairbanks mentions that a handful of other authors contemporary to Herodotus could have had

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

⁴³ Fairbanks, *Herodotus*.

similar sentiments. He gives an example of Sophocles, whose *Oedipus Tyrannus* he says could be considered a "...miracle play in honor of the Delphic Apollo."⁴⁴ Fairbanks fails to elaborate much further on his theory of Delphic Apologism in regards to Sophocles, only going on to say that "...Sophocles was influenced by one with whom he must have been somewhat closely associated with for a time in the group of artists and authors gathered around Pericles."⁴⁵ The idea that Sophocles had found a kindred spirit in the circle of Pericles who convinced him to defend the Delphic Oracle seems dubious at best, and one may wonder why Fairbanks didn't suppose that Sophocles held these beliefs simply because he adhered to the religion of his day. The idea that Athenian authors of a religious persuasion felt the need to defend Delphi, or else the religious significance held by Delphi, in the wake of its anti-Athenian sentiments seems entirely plausible. Delphic Apologism is clearly evident in the play, as the entire work seems to be an apology for the oracular institution as a whole. Yet, Sophocles also felt the need to rebuke Tiresias, the priest of Apollo, for not taking action against the sphinx. In this one may conclude that although Sophocles held strong religious sentiments, and as a result of this proposed that the divine and the agents of the divine be given priority, he also deemed Athens to be politically favorable and justified in its inclination to defend its interests. In short, Sophocles seems to propose to Athens the priority of the spiritual divorced from the institutional, and the god to be revered even if Athens finds the agents of the god politically unfavorable.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Lucidity

Dialectically speaking, the state of lucidity in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a synthesis between punishment and remedy. Initially, Oedipus is struck with a feeling of maddening despair at the awareness of his fulfillment of the oracle, but herein lies also the cure to the disconnect between man and divine in Sophocles' work. One becomes aware of the disconnect with the divine in order to move forward with clarity on how to remedy this disconnect. When Oedipus first becomes aware of his self-fulfillment, he mutilates and deprives himself of sight, here awareness functions as punishment, but by the end of the play he yields to the divine and imposes upon himself the exile which the divine had decreed and thereby lifts the plague from his people, here awareness functions as remedy. Thus, the awareness of his circumstances functions as a synthesis to Oedipus, it inflicts punishment upon him while also becoming his salvation and the salvation of his people.

If we take the personification of Athens through Oedipus as our point of departure, we must discern the remedy with which Sophocles prescribes to Athens and conclude that it is the same as that which he prescribed for Oedipus: lucidity and an awareness of a disconnect between man and the divine. Specifically, of a disconnect between Athens and Apollo qua Delphi. Though one must unravel the nature of this disconnect, its causes and contributors, before one can remedy it. When putting this disconnect in a contextual sense it is clear that two main parts that constitute it are a political discomfort of Delphi acting against the interests of Athens and the oracular rejection which has become prevalent in Athens. It is this disconnect, which is itself a synthesis of these two parts, that is brought to light by the plague. The plague, as brought about by Oedipus' rejection of the divine institution, is a reflection of the deteriorating religious and social customs of

Athens and is therefore a reflection of the disconnect itself. Sophocles, as remedy to the sickness, proposes that Athens must divorce the spiritual nature of its beliefs in oracles from the institutional beliefs that have become warped by politics. Delphi may act on Apollo's behalf, but it is not Apollo himself and therefore is not infallible. One must accept the prophecies of the god, even though one may find political discomfort with the institution that hands them down.

CONCLUSION

Sophocles' work presents a multilayered diagnosis of the religious decay he believed prevalent in his society. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a product of its contemporary social, historical, and religious context that seeks to remedy a crisis that Sophocles saw as a product of disbelief in prophecy due to political tensions between Athens and Delphi. He presents his character Oedipus, and through him Athens, as justified in his intentions to preserve his own interests while condemning his rejection of the oracular institution put forth by Apollo. Sophocles' proposes that Athens, just as Oedipus was, becomes lucid of its impiety and moves to remedy it by divorcing the spiritual from the institutional and giving reverence to the god and his agents even if they are justified in finding a political discomfort in doing so. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the tragedy of Oedipus is the tragedy of Athens itself, and it is through this reflection that Sophocles presents his commentary on the world in which he lived.

REFERENCES

- Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Translated by Robert Fagles. London: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*. Translated by Philip Vellacott. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Translated by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.
- Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Dietrich, B. C. *Death, Fate, and the Gods*. University of London: Athlone Press, 1965.
- Dodds, E. R. "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex." *Greece and Rome* 13, no. 01 (1966): 37-49. doi:10.1017/s0017383500016144.
- Fairbanks, Arthur. *Herodotus and the Oracle at Delphi*. University of Chicago Press, 1906.
- Fontenrose, Joseph. *The Delphic Oracle, Its Responses and Operations, With a Catalogue of Responses*. University of California Press, 1981.
- Griffith, R. *The Theatre of Apollo: Divine Justice and Sophocles Oedipus the King*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Jouanna, Jacques. *Sophocles: A Study of His Theater in Its Social and Political Context*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Princeton, Massachusetts: Princeton University Press, 2018.

- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling, and The Sickness Unto Death*.
Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Knox, Bernard MacGregor Walker. *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero
and His Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998
- Mikalson, Jon D. *Athenian Popular Religion*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North
Carolina Press, 1989.
- Mitchell-Boyask, Robin. *Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History
and the Cult of Asclepius*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011.
- Sophocles. *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus*. Translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Thucydides. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the
Peloponnesian War*. Edited by Robert B. Strassler. New York: Free Press,
2008.