

The Guilt of Oedipus • 207

P. H. VELLACOTT

The Guilt of Oedipus†

In this paper I propose to deal with some difficulties in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, of which some have been noticed before, others I think have not. I am going to propose an unorthodox explanation, not through any love of unorthodoxy, but in the spirit of Oedipus himself, who when faced with a puzzle could not resist following a fact to its logical conclusion. The Sphinx's riddle was not, after all, a very hard one; and Oedipus doubtless grew tired of being praised for ingenuity. My thesis too disclaims that dubious quality. Ingenuity is what many of us have been using all our lives to explain difficulties in this play which may after all be insoluble.

The story, as it existed in Sophocles' time, before he wrote his play, seems to have been as follows: Laios king of Thebes was told by the Delphic oracle that if he married Iocasta his son would kill him. He ignored the oracle and married Iocasta. When the child was born Laios pierced and bound his ankles and exposed him on Kithairon, where he was found by a shepherd who took him to Corinth; there he was brought up as the son of King Polybos. The Delphic oracle later told Oedipus that he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother. He set out towards Thebes, and on the way killed Laios, not knowing who he was. Arrived at Thebes, he vanquished the Sphinx by guessing her riddle, and for reward became king of Thebes and married Iocasta. Sixteen or more years later, when Thebes was visited by plague, Oedipus investigated the murder of Laios and discovered his own double guilt; whereupon Iocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself.

Now this story, in its elaboration of detail and in the vividness of its characters, compares with the greatest of the Greek legend-cycles—with those of Herakles, Theseus, the war at Troy; in particular, because of the way it shows a family curse descending through three generations, it invites comparison with the myth of the House of Atreus. It has the same splendour of setting, the same extremes of emotion, the same concern with both sexual relationship and dynastic power, the same close link with the supernatural

† P. H. Vellacott, "The Guilt of Oedipus," *Greece and Rome*, Vol. XI (October 1964), 137-148. Reprinted by permission of the author and The Clarendon Press, Oxford.

[This article was written five years ago and contains some emphases which I have since modified, particularly the

emphasis on the moral aspect of the myth; this, I feel, in part justified the comment it drew from Professor E. R. Dodds. My general thesis remains, and will shortly be published in the form of a book called *Sophocles and Oedipus*.—*Author's Note*]

208 · P. H. Vellacott

as evidenced in the Delphic oracle and the utterances of prophets, the same sense of inescapable Fate. Yet there is one point of difference between the two myths; and it is a central point.

The story of the House of Atreus shows from beginning to end the actions of men and women as being carried out under the eye of gods in a universe where cause and effect have a moral significance. The central figure, Agamemnon, is shown faced with a desperate dilemma, but there is no doubt that the decision he made was the wrong one, and that his sin incurred the retribution which followed. The central figure of the Theban legend, Oedipus, is by contrast apparently innocent. The worst he is usually accused of by students of Sophocles' play is hasty temper—and this itself is Sophocles' own invention rather than part of the basic myth. As a result the whole sequence of events is barren of any significant moral or religious content. There is an inherited curse, but no real sin to justify it; so that the only lesson to be drawn is one of total pessimism, and the only attitude encouraged is that of uncomprehending resignation. What is more disturbing, the story appears to show two crimes of the most heinous and polluting kind actually brought about by divine guidance—a circumstance which can only be regarded as a direct blow at the concept of a coherent world in which Zeus upholds a moral standard.

Let us try to picture Sophocles, with the example of the *Oresteia* to challenge his consciousness of his own poetic power, contemplating the Oedipus-myth as dramatic material. When a dramatist begins to write a play about characters whose story is already fixed in outline, before he can compose any dialogue, he must collect all the material he intends either to use or to assume as part of the story, and in imagination live it all through, dramatizing in his own mind many scenes which will never find a place in his play, but which will clarify for him a character's state of mind at a given moment, or fill in decorative or poetic background. There is a great deal of this in *Agamemnon*, where Aeschylus pictures for us such inessential details as the distress of the forsaken Menelaus, the scene in Troy on Helen's arrival; besides the essential details given in the long sequence about Iphigenia in the first great Ode. In Sophocles' *Oedipus*, however, the unfolding of the plot depends closely on a long string of events stretching back thirty-five years, all narrated at various points in the dialogue, and beginning the story at the time when Laios consulted Apollo as to whether he should marry Iocasta, and was told that, if he did, his son would kill him. The birth of Oedipus, the maiming of his feet, the exposure, the deception, the childhood in Corinth, the visit to Delphi, the encounter by the road-junction, the Sphinx and her riddle, the

The Guilt of Oedipus • 209

deliverance of Thebes from the first plague—all these events Sophocles pieces together, every one of them necessary to his story. Yet in none of these do we find what we are looking for—what Sophocles must surely have looked for—some sin, some fault in Oedipus' character which would justify to men the seemingly cruel and immoral ways of Zeus or of Apollo or of Fate. There is no question here of an individual god being arraigned, as Euripides arraigns Aphrodite or Apollo, while the concept of justice itself remains secure in the hand of Zeus. The terrible destiny of Oedipus is shown as one put upon him by supernatural powers in general, by that comprehensive Fate which governs every man's life.

We do, however, glean from these narratives which Sophocles gives us one detail which makes moral as well as dramatic sense. Laios, after receiving divine warning that if he married Iocasta his son would kill him, clearly committed two sins: he ignored the warning and married Iocasta; and then, having begotten a son, he was morally guilty of that son's death; though the formula of exposure on the mountain, being designed to give the infant a one per cent chance of survival, cleared Laios from ritual pollution. Here, then, is a sin in the previous generation; but when we look for its repetition in Oedipus (as Agamemnon repcated his father's guilt) we find nothing. How can there be a true tragedy without a sin? Where is the dignity, the awe, of *nemesis* without *hybris*? True, in line 873 the Chorus seem to rebuke Oedipus for *hybris*, alluding apparently to his extraordinary and groundless accusations against Teiresias and Kreon; but this bad behaviour of Oedipus, besides being inexplicable in view of the character established for him in the opening scene, does not belong to the main stream of the story at all. Usually the best that can be said for it is that Sophocles inserted it to provide Oedipus with a sin to justify his downfall; and to some this explanation will seem unworthy of Sophocles.

I have given above a list of the past events in the story which Sophocles has included as narrative in his dialogue in order to provide us with the essential background of his drama—the birth of Oedipus, the journey to Delphi, and so on. Perhaps you observed that I omitted from my list one detail; one which is more significant than any other. The details I mentioned are all essential to the usual version of the story; but Sophocles added one detail which is *not* essential to the usual version: the incident of the man who got drunk at a banquet and told Oedipus he was not the son of Polybos. Sophocles could have invented a dozen reasons why Oedipus should visit Delphi; but he used this one. Now see how Oedipus continues his story to Iocasta: 'At Delphi I was not given the knowledge which I came to seek, but was told that I was fated

210 · P. H. Vellacott

to marry my mother and kill my father. When I heard this, I turned my back on Corinth, to go towards any place where I might never see the fulfilment of this shameful oracle.'

That statement would make sense, if Oedipus had gone to Delphi on some state mission for King Polybos. But Oedipus went to Delphi, says Sophocles, because he had been led to doubt that Polybos was his father. It has generally been assumed that the horror of the new prophecy drove clean out of Oedipus' mind the question about his parentage which he had come to ask. That might have been so, had the question and the prophecy been unconnected. In fact they were so obviously and frighteningly connected that I do not believe Sophocles could imagine that Oedipus would fail to connect them. The doubt about his parentage doubled the menace of the prophecy. He would have been thankful indeed, could he have believed that by turning his back on Corinth he could face the rest of the world without apprehension. That was now impossible: he knew that he might meet his true father or his true mother anywhere in Greece; no place was safe.

We must leave for the moment the question why Oedipus apparently expected Iocasta to accept this curious *non sequitur*; and turn instead to ask, what did Sophocles intend us to picture as Oedipus' state of mind when he left the Delphic oracle? He had come there convinced that there was a mystery connected with his birth; the oracle plainly confirmed this. So now, if he was to avoid heinous pollution, he must make for himself two unbreakable rules: never to kill an older man; and never to marry an older woman. The incident at the banquet makes it clear that these two rules, and not the resolve to keep away from Corinth, would be the probable preoccupation of Oedipus' thoughts as he left Delphi. Then, twenty-four hours later, in the midst of an angry scuffle, his head ringing from a vicious blow, he looks up and sees before his eyes a furious middle-aged face with greying hair. For a fraction of a second comes the thought of the oracle's warning—this is the man I must not strike. But his blood is boiling; the man has struck him first. The grey hair lies in the dust, near four other bodies. Oedipus has, at the first opportunity, ignored a divine warning. That this man could be his father would be a coincidence so incredible as to be impossible; but this was the risk he ought not to have taken. He is guilty. Sophocles, by inventing and introducing the incident at the banquet, has entirely changed the moral situation of Oedipus in the story. He is no longer the innocent victim of malevolent powers. *Dike*, justice, daughter of Zeus, a goddess forgotten in the version of the myth which had been current for centuries, reappears, resuscitated by a single subtle creation of the poet.

We shall soon need to look again at the long central scene where Oedipus tells his story to Iocasta. But this scene can only be under-

The Guilt of Oedipus · 211

stood if first we are clearly aware of what happened in the previous scene, where Oedipus confronts Teiresias. Here is a summary of the information which Teiresias gives Oedipus (1) line 337, a hint: 'You have not seen that your own kinswoman is living with you.' (2) line 353, a plain statement: 'You are the defiler of the land.' (3) this is repeated in line 362: 'You killed Laios.' (4) line 366: 'You are living in shameful union with your nearest kin, and do not know it.' (5) line 373: 'You call me blind, deaf, and dull-witted—soon everyone will hurl those reproaches at you.' (6) line 414: 'You do not see what a terrible situation you are in, or whom you are living with.' (7) line 415: 'Do you know whose son you are? And you are an enemy to your own kin both dead and living.' (8) line 420: 'You will shriek aloud when you learn the truth about your marriage—a truth which shall make you level with yourself and with your children.' (9) lines 437-9: 'The mystery of your birth shall be revealed today.' (10) lines 450 ff.: 'The killer of Laios is here, passing as a foreigner, but in truth a Theban; brother and father of his children, son and husband of his mother.'

Now look at the man to whom all this is said. First, he is a famous solver of riddles. Second, he had been told at Delphi that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Third, even before that he had doubted if he was the son of Polybos. Fourth, he remembered only too well killing a man—an older man—on the road from Thebes to Delphi, at a time and place corresponding with the murder of Laios, as Kreon has just reminded him. Fifth, Kreon has also told him that only one man escaped—another point which Oedipus can hardly have forgotten. Sixth, if Oedipus had misgivings about having killed an older man, he must certainly have had more misgivings about having married an older woman. Now, how could a man bearing all that in his memory listen to the repeated and repeated words of Teiresias and not recognize the truth? *

One more point before we move on to the central scene. Let us look at our hero's name. He announces it himself in line 8: ὁ πᾶσι κλεινὸς Οἰδίπους καλούμενος. 'Called by all men Oedipus.' 'Oedipus' means 'swollen-footed'. Let us look into a later scene, that with the Messenger from Corinth, lines 1031 ff.

OED. What pain had I when you took me in your arms?

Mess. Your ankles could bear witness to that.

OED. *Oimoi*, why do you mention that ancient injury?

Mess. Your feet were pierced, and I'm the man who freed you.

OED. That terrible disgrace (*δεινὸν ὄνειδος*) I bore from the cradle.

Nothing could show more clearly that Sophocles thought of the maimed feet as something of which Oedipus was bitterly and constantly conscious.

212 · P. H. Vellacott

Now we are ready for the central scene, where everything becomes even more astonishing. Here is Oedipus, remembering the oracle, remembering his encounter by the cross-roads; and a few minutes ago he was told by Teiresias again and again, 'You killed Laios; Laios was your father; Iocasta is your mother.' To him Iocasta now says, 'Laios was once told by an oracle of Apollo that his son and mine would kill him. So as soon as the child was born Laios pinned its ankles together and exposed it on a mountain. Subsequently Laios was killed by robbers near a road-junction.'

Each of these statements connects at once with a thought seething on the surface of Oedipus' mind. The oracle given to Laios corresponds with the oracle given to Oedipus. Iocasta's mention of the road-junction reminds Oedipus of his encounter at that spot. But the third is by far the most significant: the maimed ankles, added to everything that has been said already, *must* identify Oedipus, to his own perception, as Iocasta's son. Yet Oedipus in his reply passes over the unique clue of the maimed ankles, and takes up the commonplace clue of the road-junction—though Iocasta has not even said that it was the road to Delphi. What was Sophocles' purpose in making Iocasta mention the maimed ankles at this point? It was quite unnecessary. Are we to say he didn't know what he was doing? We must also remember another point. The close connexion of so many strands of evidence might well be missed by a modern English theatre-audience; but Sophocles wrote this play for an audience whose minds were trained by constant practice in law-courts to follow arguments and weave evidence together. What then was he trying to do in this play?

So far I have drawn your attention to certain facts of the text. When we come to draw inferences, perhaps the only indisputable one is, that Sophocles' intention in this play is something beyond what we have hitherto understood. A second inference, which may be called probable rather than certain, is that Sophocles intended, by the incident at the banquet, to present Oedipus to us as consciously guilty. This idea is strengthened by the fact that it makes the sin of Oedipus the same as that of Laios, and so gives poetic as well as moral meaning to the hereditary curse. The next step in our inquiry, then, is to follow up the implications of this idea.

Let us assume that Sophocles, steeping his imagination in the story, and pondering its characters and their experiences as a dramatist inevitably does, finds himself examining the possibility that Oedipus really was guilty. He has killed this man—an older man; he had been warned that he was fated to kill his father; and he is far from certain that his father is Polybos. That this dead man should be his father would be an incredible coincidence; nevertheless Oedipus, conscious that he had acted rashly, can hardly fail to look at

The Guilt of Oedipus • 213

the dead man's face to see if it bears any resemblance to his own. Also, knowing that one servant escaped back to Thebes, Oedipus, on entering Thebes himself, can hardly fail to keep his ears open for any talk of a man lately murdered on the Delphi road. Indeed he could not fail, even if he had been innocent, to be told by every Theban he met that the king had been murdered, with the time, the place, and details of the carriage, horses, and servants. Greeks talk all the time about everything. If we are speaking factually about the myth, rather than critically about the play, it is certain that within an hour of entering Thebes Oedipus knew that he had killed Laios. Then he volunteered to interview the Sphinx, knowing that the prize was Laios' widow. Therefore—again speaking factually—it is certain that Oedipus said to himself: 'If the man I killed was my father, and if I overcome the Sphinx and marry the queen, the oracle will be exactly fulfilled, and I shall have only myself to blame.' A horrible thought. What could he do to reassure himself? He could try to clear his mind of the suspicion of a likeness between himself and the dead man. He could inquire how old the queen was, and if she had had a son eighteen years ago. Suppose he was told she had? Then the risk was too appalling, and he must give up all idea of becoming king of Thebes. And yet, *why* was he now forced into this frustrating position? Because a drunkard had shouted 'Bastard' at him. The thing was ridiculous; but for that one drunken word, his course and his conscience would have been clear. Was a drunkard's shout to rob him of a throne? Finally, is it surprising that Iocasta, whose adolescent beauty had inspired the cautious Laios to defy Apollo, should in her maturity, at thirty-five, prove irresistible to Laios' son?

If Sophocles, in order to add moral and religious content to this marvellous story which so curiously lacked it, ever conceived and explored the possibility that Oedipus was in fact guilty, he could hardly fail to reason as I have reasoned, and so to see just how it came about that a good man like Oedipus could, in extraordinary circumstances, make this fatal decision to run a ninety-nine per cent risk, and stake his life on a one per cent possibility that he was after all the son of Polybos. He still had two more bridges to cross: first, the moment when he would meet the queen and scan her face to tell how old she was, and to discern any possible likeness to his own; second—and here we come to the central feature of the whole story, embodied in the name—the moment when his wife would see the scars on his feet. It was clear that if Iocasta was in fact a mother who eighteen years ago had lost a son with scarred feet, she would not be likely to forget his eighteenth birthday. The news that her husband had been killed by an unknown assailant would certainly suggest to her that the Delphic oracle nineteen

214 · P. H. Vellacott

years ago had told Laios the truth, and that her son was perhaps not far off; so that now, meeting a wandering foreigner aged eighteen she would look in his face for a likeness to her late husband, and at his feet for the scars.

The final stage of this course of reasoning presents us with the picture of Oedipus and Iocasta living together in mutual love, each having chosen to believe as truth the one per cent possibility that their marriage was lawful; building up for themselves a version of past events which was satisfactory and painless, even if it involved some dangerous corners; and pushing the terrible probability further and further into the recesses of forgetfulness—which in busy lives can be very deep; while his guilt retains for Oedipus just enough reality to act as a constant spur to make amends for the frightful wrong he may have inflicted on Iocasta and on Thebes, by devoting himself tirelessly to the tasks of a loving father of his family and of his people. This is the character so emphatically established for him in the opening scene of the play. Then at last, after sixteen or seventeen years, came the return of the plague; and Oedipus knew that the gods, who neither forget nor forgive, were at work, his respite was at an end and his ordeal before him. If Sophocles once set foot on the path of reasoning which supposes the gods to be just and Oedipus to be guilty, I see no point at which he could have turned aside before reaching the situation I have just described.

Take the words of the Priest of Zeus in lines 31 ff. 'We regard you, Oedipus, as the first of men, both in the ordinary chances of life and in dealings with the gods. Now help us, either by some utterance you have heard from a god, or perhaps a word from some man has given you knowledge. For with men of experience I observe this, that the results of their decisions live. You brought us good fortune before: now be the same as you were then.' 'Be the same' . . . Oedipus, resolute to be now utterly different from the man he was then, replies: 'There is not one of you whose sickness is as grievous as mine. I assure you, I have shed many tears, and paced many paths in the wanderings of anxious thought.'

The outcome of those pacing thoughts was now clear in his mind. There were three points. First, he must submit himself to public exposure of the two facts that he killed his father Laios and that Iocasta is his mother. Second: after the exposure, the choice would appear to be suicide or banishment—but suicide would admit defeat at the hands of Fate, and Oedipus would not admit defeat. He had sinned, and he would pay; but he had a right, even though guilty, to live. Third: there was one thing which was his own private concern, which Thebes—which even his children—need never know; and that was, the fact that his guilt had been

The Guilt of Oedipus • 215

knowingly incurred, that he had been aware of his own pollution from the beginning. That was between himself and Iocasta, and the gods. The city could be delivered, and that ultimate truth could remain his secret and hers, to carry silent to the grave.

Now, supposing Sophocles to have perceived—and I believe he did perceive it—that the story was capable of being developed along these lines, what did he in fact do with this potential material? To begin with, it was obvious that the story, so developed, acquired a moral and religious seriousness which it did not have before. On the other hand, to present such a story on the Attic stage involved insuperable difficulties. The whole drama now took place within one man's consciousness; Oedipus could speak no unveiled word to Iocasta, nor she to him, nor either to anyone else; so how could the true situation be conveyed to an audience? In fact, my own guess would be that the story as I have outlined it was something like what actually happened to Oedipus, but that the central truth of the matter dropped out after one generation of popular telling, and never reappeared until the dramatic imagination of Sophocles looked below the surface of the folk-tale and found it. But having found it he saw that such a conception was impossible to express in the conventional forms of tragedy, and even if the attempt were made it would be missed or rejected by most of the audience. Yet this conception was so exciting as drama, and morally and theologically so moving, that to abandon it entirely in favour of the popular, and morally nihilistic, version seemed like an abdication from the poet's prophetic task. Then this possibility is to be considered: that Sophocles in the end decided to write his play on the basis of the popular concept of an innocent Oedipus lured by Fate into a disastrous trap; but that, in order to record for ever his own deeper perception, he embodied in the play certain features, notably the incident at the banquet, which, if rationally examined, would suggest what the real story of Oedipus was. The play, of course, on a prima-facie interpretation makes good enough sense—almost good enough, though there are anomalies and contradictions which may prove disturbing even in a good performance. The dramatic power of a gradual revelation conceals the moral poverty of the theme. But all the serious difficulties of the plot vanish once they are seen as subtle contributions towards this other view of the character and situation of Oedipus.

First, the statement that he had believed that in avoiding Corinth he was avoiding parricide and incest now appears as an essential element in the make-believe world which Oedipus had to construct to protect his own sanity, and in which he lived safely for sixteen years. (This statement appears again in lines 990-7.) Secondly, his ignoring of Iocasta's reference to the maimed ankles

216 · P. H. Vellacott

is also explained: the disclosure must be carried out one stage at a time, and the killer of Laios revealed before the son of Iocasta was identified. The third point, which I have already mentioned briefly, is more important. It is the behaviour of Oedipus to Teiresias and Kreon, which evinces a lack of stability and common sense excusable perhaps in an adolescent, but entirely destructive of the god-like character given to Oedipus in the first scene. But Oedipus' wild and angry accusations make sense if Sophocles had in mind the situation I have suggested. On this view Oedipus, being willing himself to give his life for Thebes ('The king must die' was a familiar formula), and hoping for the help of the omniscient Teiresias in his desperately difficult task, is met with a blank refusal. As his own anger swells, he realizes that anger is the one thing which will make Teiresias speak. So he goads Teiresias with extravagant charges, whereupon Teiresias utters the whole truth. Even then the Chorus appear hardly to have heard it—the truth is not only incredible but inaudible to respectable old men. Then if they will not listen to Teiresias, perhaps Kreon will help—he may well have guessed who Oedipus is, he knew Laios, and is likely to have seen the scars. So Oedipus attacks him too. But Kreon gives nothing away. His scene, however, serves to give another dimension to Iocasta, as well as to prepare the audience for his important role in the last scene.

The play *Oedipus Tyrannus*, then, was written to tell the simple story which is familiar to us and was familiar to the contemporaries of Sophocles; that was the only story which he could expect to be understood and accepted. But I believe, on the evidence I have put before you, that as he wrote it the poet had also in mind another story, which may even have been the true story of Oedipus; and that his consciousness of this story and of its importance made him include certain elements which cannot be properly accounted for on the basis of the popular version; and made him, moreover, at numerous points in the dialogue use a double irony whose significance only appears when the possibility is considered that Oedipus at the beginning of the action has known for sixteen years in what a terrible position he is, and is now engaged in an act of voluntary atonement which will save his city at the price of destroying his own life.

This view makes the final scene, if possible, even more poignant. Iocasta, who has suppressed knowledge of the truth more completely than Oedipus, sees the end coming as early as line 765, where Oedipus asks for the old slave to be sent for; Iocasta knows, though Oedipus does not yet know, that this is the same man who took her infant son to the mountain and did not kill him. From that point on, Oedipus knows that both he and Iocasta know where they are going; but he must lead, and she must follow, with-

The Guilt of Oedipus · 217

out a word. When she has finally rushed out in despair, Oedipus, aware that he has sent her to her death, finds the only refuge from his anguish in taunting Iocasta with pride of birth. He cannot afford to weaken yet with tears, for he has still the last lap to run—the interview with the Theban shepherd. When that is over, he will no longer need to hold back anything.

From the old shepherd Oedipus forces the last drop of truth. Only then does he stand at the point where he had so often imagined himself standing—but imagination was feeble and useless and had given him barely a faint taste of the agony and horror into which his instinctive honour and courage had now led him. He suddenly sees the utmost depth. 'I should never have been born. What I am is now brought to light; and this light shall be my last.' He goes in, finds Iocasta as he knew he would find her; and reaches his own terrible fulfilment.

Much has been written about the pessimism of the ancient Greeks; and this play is usually included in the evidence—a play which shows a man guilty of hasty temper and a woman guilty of disparaging remarks about prophecy (both very common faults) but otherwise innocent—shows them both subjected to the most dreadful agony and humiliation by blind Chance or cruel Fate. There were, of course, many Greeks who would have called that a fair picture of human life. But such a picture implies a universe in which there is no place for *Dike*, Justice, as a divinity. I believe that Sophocles saw the myth of Oedipus as containing a deeper message, as illustrating a universe where *Dike* is the daughter of Zeus. He suggests that the sin of Oedipus was not a mere matter of hasty temper, but an obstinate neglect of divine warning in the pursuit of his passions and his ambitions; the taking of a risk he had no right to take, one which put a whole city in peril. Therefore his punishment is not a blind cruelty of Fate, but one more assurance that the world is ruled by *Dike*, that cause produces effect, that Nature pays every debt. Furthermore, the central figure of this drama now appears potentially in a different light, as being no longer a pitiful, helpless plaything of circumstance, a broken man acknowledging transcendent Powers whose purpose is at best mysterious, at worst gratuitously malevolent. He is a man capable both of evil and of good, a man conscious of *Dike* as a force in the universe which he honours, and which, in its operation against himself, he will obey with dedicated courage, acknowledging his own debt. That is a picture which defies pessimism, and gives both to man and to the gods an honourable part in the development even of the most painful and terrible events.

The question which I have raised in this paper may well have other aspects; but it is the dramatic aspect which opens the inquiry;

218 · E. R. Dodds

and I think it likely, having stuck my spade into the well-raked flower-bed of Sophoclean Tragedy, that it will be found I am not so much sowing a seed of uneasiness and doubt, as watering a well-rooted plant which conscientious gardeners have for many years guiltily regarded as a weed.

E. R. DODDS

On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*[†]

On the last occasion when I had the misfortune to examine in Honour Moderations at Oxford I set a question on the *Oedipus Rex*, which was among the books prescribed for general reading. My question was 'In what sense, if in any, does the *Oedipus Rex* attempt to justify the ways of God to man?' It was an optional question; there were plenty of alternatives. But the candidates evidently considered it a gift: nearly all of them attempted it. When I came to sort out the answers I found that they fell into three groups.

The first and biggest group held that the play justifies the gods by showing—or, as many of them said, 'proving'—that we get what we deserve. The arguments of this group turned upon the character of Oedipus. Some considered that Oedipus was a bad man: look how he treated Creon—naturally the gods punished him. Others said 'No, not altogether bad, even in some ways rather noble; but he had one of those fatal *ἀμαρτίαι* that all tragic heroes have, as we know from Aristotle. And since he had a *ἀμαρτία* he could of course expect no mercy: the gods had read the *Poetics*.' Well over half the candidates held views of this general type.

A second substantial group held that the *Oedipus Rex* is 'a tragedy of destiny'. What the play 'proves', they said, is that man has no free will but is a puppet in the hands of the gods who pull the strings that make him dance. Whether Sophocles thought the gods justified in treating their puppet as they did was not always clear from their answers. Most of those who took this view evidently disliked the play; some of them were honest enough to say so.

The third group was much smaller, but included some of the more thoughtful candidates. In their opinion Sophocles was 'a pure artist' and was therefore not interested in justifying the gods. He took the story of Oedipus as he found it, and used it to make an exciting play. The gods are simply part of the machinery of the plot.

[†] E. R. Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*," *Greece and Rome*, Vol. XIII (1966), 37-49. Reprinted

by permission of The Clarendon Press, Oxford.