CONCEPTUALISING VIRTUE IN SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

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Abstract

*This essay focuses on **Oedipus Tyrannus**, a Classical archetypal tragedy. Its spatial and temporal settings and characterisation situate this tragedy as an archetype for appraising the tragic hero. Given this canonical status among tragedies, scholars, since the Classical era, have attempted to appraise the underlying causes of Oedipus' tragic fall from various perspectives. The question of free will and moral responsibility in the face of predestination as represented by Oedipus' and his parents' lives, is the crux in some of those studies. This paper, therefore, takes a trajectory different from this generic approach, shedding light on the admirable qualities of virtue which Oedipus possesses, as typified by the tough choices and decisions he gallantly makes in order to resolve the internal and external conflicts of identity and regicide-cum-parricide that plague him and the Thebans. The analysis carried out from the hermeneutics perspective evaluates Oedipus' rather familiar 'vices' as having the inherent properties of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance, which make up the Aristotelian conceptualisation of virtue. It finds that justice in Sophocles' tragedy is a bifurcated fusion of divine will and retribution that often plays out on an innocent life as it happened in the case of Oedipus, who, along with his parents, consistently sacrifices any position of gain by birth and circumstance; and proactively bears the weight of his father's misdeed even when that means paying the ultimate price in order to avert or revert the ill-*

fated curse placed on him before his conception. The study concludes that Oedipus' actions are virtuous and worthy of emulation—not castigation—and that he should be regarded as a national hero and selfless leader, a model for the contemporary leaders and individuals.

"I learnt that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not one who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

Nelson Mandela

Introduction

Oedipus Tyrannus written over two thousand years ago by Sophocles of Colonus, Greece, has been adapted time and time again to fit modern audiences or different perspectives. Undoubtedly, *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles is one of the most popular classical dramas, and generally acknowledged as one of the greatest tragedies ever written in the world of literature. Aristotle, the famous ancient Greek philosopher, in his work, titled *Poetics,* considers *Oedipus Tyrannus* as one of the best plays ever written and praises its 'exemplary well-constructed plot'. It is a fate-ridden tragedy. The tragedy has been appraised and criticised by scholars, both ancient and modern. The theme of fate or predestination has been a subject of debate since the production of the Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It is obvious that fate is the driving force in *Oedipus* and the entire plot of the tragedy centres around whether or not the main characters of the play, starting with King Laius and his wife, Jocasta, and Oedipus, can control or avert fate. Despite all efforts put forward, the life course could not be altered. However, there are other literary themes that can be gleaned from this tragedy. These include ambition, courage, justice, duty, loyalty, suffering, loneliness, and truth. The theme of courage is prevalent in the play. It is courage that enables Oedipus to carry out his promise to exile the killer of Laius even after he discovers that he is the culprit. Oedipus suffers greatly for the sins committed ignorantly. The tragedy provides important moral values that individuals should not only be well aware of, but also be ready to apply. Employing a philosophical analytical approach, this paper discusses the themes of courage and justice, as presented in the play.

A synopsis of Oedipus' Character

The play, *Oedipus,* takes as its title the name of the protagonist and tragic hero of the play. He is a charismatic leader and king who possesses not only ideal qualities of a ruler, but also the ideal features of a tragic hero. As such, he can be seen as an epitome of the tragic character. Oedipus is also the victim of a hereditary curse which leads him to kill his father and beget children by his own mother. Oedipus was shown compassion by the shepherd sent to dispose of him in the mountain of Cithaeron. Hence, instead of being killed, he was given to the shepherd who, in turn, gave him to a childless king of Corinth and his queen, Polybus and Merope.

The name, Oedipus, meaning 'swell foot' in Greek, comes from his swollen feet which resulted from his parents using skewer to pin his feet together before casting him away. The skewer gave him the terrible, tragic mark which eventually also stuck to him as name. Oedipus grew up in Corinth far away from his biological parents because he was destined to murder his father and later marry his mother. Oedipus was not aware of his destiny until "a drunken man" accused him of being a bastard. Rattled by the accusation, he asked his supposed parents for clarification but because the story had spread around widely, he decided to inquire from an oracle at Pytho. However, the oracle did not answer his question directly; instead, the oracle told him of the horrors that would befall him. Oedipus decided to run away from Corinth. On his way, he ignorantly killed his father and married his mother when he got to Thebes. All this he did without knowing that he had run into the doom he believed he was escaping from.

In terms of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy, Oedipus is a tragic hero less from his imperfections, than his tragic flaws. Aristotle points out that Oedipus' tragic flaw is excessive pride, which the Greeks referred to as *hubris* and self-righteousness. Aristotle also mentions certain characteristics that determine a tragic hero, using Oedipus as an ideal model. He further explains that a tragic hero must be an important or influential man who commits an error in judgment, and must then suffer the consequences of his actions (Aristotle, *Poetics* xiii, 2-4).

The Virtues of Courage and Justice in *Oedipus Tyrannus*

The details of the story of Oedipus have generated heated argument among scholars as to whether or not he really deserved his fate. Some scholars have argued that he did not deserve the kind of life laid out for him since he was only acting out the 'script' written by the gods before his birth. Other scholars are of the opinion that he quite deserved what happened to him, noting that Oedipus possessed certain tragic flaws that

could not be overlooked. Dodds (1966) is of the opinion that though Oedipus was a good man and ruler, he deserved to be blamed for what happened to him. Referring to Aristotle's analysis of the tragedy, Dodds (1966:37) asserts that "the best sort of tragic hero is a man highly esteemed and prosperous who falls into misfortune because of some serious […*hamartia*]".

The word *hamartia*, as used by Aristotle, refers to a serious physical, psychological, or moral flaw possessed by an otherwise impeccable character (*Poetics*, 1453a16). In agreeing with Aristotle's conception of tragic flaw, Berns (1964:77) states that "as a result of a flaw natural to his kind, the tragic hero harms and destroys those he loves most. It is those very qualities for which he is admired and honoured that cause him to wreak great evils". Drawing by inference, it is obvious that Oedipus possesses certain qualities of virtue for which he is honoured and admired. Those virtuous and admirable qualities become the focus of this essay.

The term 'virtue' derives from the Latin word '*virtus*' which personifies the Roman god, Virtus, and connotes manliness, honour, and worthiness of reverential respect. Somewhat similarly, *arête*, the Greek word for virtue means moral excellence. According to Guthrie (1960) virtue is:

> A state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to ourselves, determined by a rational principle and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it (Guthrie, 1960:154).

Kirk (1982) provides deeper insight into its connotation when he opines:

> Virtue, then, meant in the beginning some extraordinary power. The word was applied to the sort of person we might call now "the charismatic leader." By extension, "virtue" came to imply the qualities of full humanities... Virtue came to signify, as well, moral goodness; the practice of moral duties and conformity of life to moral law; uprightness; rectitude (Kirk, 1982:343).

Walton (1987) shares a view akin to Guthrie's, stating that virtue is:

> the different kinds of practical wisdom that enables a person to carry out ethical goals, principles and values in an imperfect world in which the right thing to do is too

> often obscure and hard to carry out with judgment and wisdom (p. 589).

The above definitions align with the ancient Greek philosophers' descriptions of virtue. From Aristotle's viewpoint, virtue can be referred to as a habit, a tendency of character to act in accordance with practical reason toward worthy ends, a state between extremes, a state between two vices, one of excess and the other of deficiency. He then identifies four principal virtues namely: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance. These virtues are tagged the cardinal virtues, which, in Aristotle's opinion, are those habits of character which primarily guide the individual toward the 'golden mean' in particular situations (Aristotle, NE, I, 8 & III, 9). These cardinal virtues are interrelated and serve as practical guiding principles in everyday life. To Russell (1982:343) the four cardinal virtues are a guide to the practice of moral duties in conformity to the practical law, uprightness, and rectitude.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to shed insight to this central question: what is the nature of virtuous acts in Sophocles' tragedy, if any? Two of the four principal or cardinal virtues are selected to appraise the question. These are the virtues of *courage* and *justice*. As expounded by Onayemi and Adebowale (2015:63) the word 'courage' is taken from the Latin expression *fortitudo* (fortitude) which can be described as "the ability to confront uncertainty and intimidation." Aristotle often uses the words, courage and fortitude, interchangeably. To Aristotle, a courageous man is able to maintain a balance between cowardice and rashness. Hence, he states:

> For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean (*NE*, 1103b, 15 – 20).

Aristotle believes that a courageous man is able to maintain the mean position between his feelings of confidence and fear. The courageous man

does not fear evil things, such as disgrace or punishment under the law. He maintains "confidence and fear concerning the most fearful thing, death, and especially the most potentially beautiful form of death, death in the battle" (*NE*, 1115a). At the same time, Aristotle maintains that sometimes not everyone feels the need to fear, even fear of terror, but endures fears and feels confidence in a rational way for the sake of what is beautiful ((*NE*, 1115b -1117a).

Justice, which is the other cardinal virtue to be analysed in this paper, is from the Greek word *dikaiosyne* which means 'righteousness' while its Latin origin '*iustitia'* means fairness. Justice as a virtue deals with human rights and obligations towards not just oneself but also to other people. The concept of justice denotes giving to others their due respect and fulfilling the obligation owed them. Justice refers to the ability and willingness to mete out exact justice to everyone, even oneself, in every relation of life, in thought, word and action (Adebowale & Onayemi, 2016:38).

Aristotle explains his concept of justice in two related senses: general justice and particular justice. Aristotle describes general justice as virtue expressed in relation to other people. In explaining Aristotelian virtue of justice, Adebowale and Onayemi (2016:38) state:

> Aristotle believes that a just man deals properly and fairly with others; he will not lie, cheat or take undue advantage of others but will rather give what is owed to them. In the case of particular justice, Aristotle defines this as a justice that has to do with people getting what is proportional to their worth or merit. In other words, particular justice is giving to people what they deserve according to the circumstance. Aristotelian concept of justice has it that an educated judge is needed in order to apply just decisions in relation to a particular case. Justice is considered by Aristotle as the only virtue thought to be "another's good," because it is related to one's neighbour and does what is advantageous to another.

Aristotle's justice as fairness then can be explained in two aspects. First, justice is the distribution of what is good or bad. Two, justice is rectification. It rectifies by setting right or correcting some injustices that have been committed in the past. Thus, for justice, the focus is on the injustice, and not the people involved.

Oedipus, unlike his biological parents, King Laius and Queen Jocasta, is neither egoistic nor self-centred nor a coward. His parents display the vices of cowardice and rashness while trying to avert the fates of being murdered and being married by their son. As Aristotle describes it, they fear the worst—death. Not even death in a battle, but death in the hands of a son they could have shown love and affection. They never consider exploring any other alternative that might have been open to them before absolutely condemning an innocent soul to death without giving him a chance. In other words, they lack even the bravery to carry out the killing assignment; delegating it to the palace messenger/shepherd whom they consider brave.

In contrast to the cowardly disposition exhibited by his parents, Oedipus, right from the beginning of his appearance in the play as an adult, proves to be just and courageous in his dealings with other people. He sympathises with their situation and looks for means to give them comfort. Ordinarily, as a king, he could have sent someone to see to the plights of the people; but he does not send a messenger, he courageously goes out to meet his people and address them thus:

> Children, young sons and daughters of old Cadmus
> Why do you sit here with your suppliant crowns?
> The town is heavy with mingled burden,
> of sounds and smells, of groans and hymns and incense.
> I did not think it fit that I should hear
> of this from messengers but came myself
> I, Oedipus, whom all men call the Great (O.T. lines 1-5).

Oedipus' display of courage here is based on his personal commitment, intention, and judgment rather than on a strict moral rule. His next address reveals the depth of his commitment:

> I pity you, children. You have come full of longing,
> but I have known the story before you told it
> only too well. I know you are all sick,
> yet there is not one of you, sick though you are,
> that is as sick as myself.
> Your several sorrows each have single scope
> and touch but one of you. My spirit groans
> for city and myself and you at once.
> You have not roused me like a man from sleep;

know that I have given many tears to this,
gone many ways wandering in thoughts,
but as I thought I found only one remedy
and that I took. I sent Menoeceus' son
Creon, Jocasta's brother, to Apollo,
to his Pythian temple,
that he might learn there by what act or word
I could save this city. As I count the days,
it vexes me what ails him; he is gone
far longer than he needed for the journey.
But when he comes, than may I prove a villain,
if I shall not do all the God commands (O.T. lines 66-86).

In his search for solution to the pestilence afflicting his people, the Thebans, the oracle declares that the land harbours the killer of the former king, Laius, and unless he is found and banished from the land, the pestilence will continue. Oedipus becomes resolute to find the killer not just out of moral obligation to the Thebans, but also because he considers it as a duty he owes the late king to avenge his murder. He states further:

Since I am now the holder of his office,
and have his bed and wife,
that once was his,
and had his line not been unfortunate
we would have common children – (fortune leaped upon his head)
because of all these things,
I fight in his defence as for my father.... (O.T. lines 255-265).

How ironical that what Oedipus understands as a rhetorical expression, is literally true. For one, Oedipus says he fights as for his father, and indeed, he fights for his father since Laius was his father. For another, Laius did not die without children; he had a son who is assumed to have been killed as a child. And then, the kingship he feels he holds through institutional selection is really his by natural succession. Oedipus' decision to search for the killer of King Laius requires commitment and courage; he does not know what the outcome would be. In this case, Walton (1987:598) describes such an act of courage as showing "merit beyond the requirements of expected duties and norms of conduct but based on personal commitment."

Oedipus' thirst for justice burns with an admirable obsession to discover the truth about the causes behind the plague that beset his beloved city. To some critics, Oedipus is destroyed by this very obsession since his obsession to find out the truth not only about the killer but also about his own origin/identity constitutes his tragic flaw (*hamartia*)**.** He is condemned for having a tremendous temper and for being blind to the truth he wishes to ignore or, in some way, fears. At this point, we submit that considering Oedipus' obsession in seeking the murderer of the former king of Thebes, reducing it to a tragic flaw alone would be a misjudgement and misinterpretation of his character. The search was not based on an ulterior motive. Every good ruler seeks what is good for the well-being of his subjects and seeks justice, not just for the purpose of punishment, but to avert any adversity that may be threatening to befall the subjects. From this perspective, we posit that Oedipus' action is one full of compassion rather than obsession.

His innermost disposition to justice reveals that Oedipus is not partial in his judgement; he is ready to face whatever the consequences of his quest would be. He promises that the person who knows and tells the truth about the killer would be rewarded and the murderer would also receive his punishment. He even declares that, if the killer is a family member, the relation would receive the same fate as others even though that means exile which he pronounces for the murderer. Oedipus states:

> ... now I proclaim to all the men of Thebes:
> who so among you know the murderer
> by whose hand Laius, son of Labdacus,
> died –I command him to tell everything
> to me, - yes, though he fears himself to take the blame
> on his own head; for bitter punishment
> he shall have none, but leave this land unharmed.
> Or if he knows the murderer, another,
> a foreigner, still let him speak the truth.
> For I will pay him and be grateful too.
> ...If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth
> I pray that I myself may feel my curse (O.T. lines 224-250).

As the search for the culprit advances, fingers begin to point at Oedipus. At first, he holds on to the false report that the late king was killed not by one man but by a group of robbers at a crossroads. With this report, he could exonerate himself from guilt. All that changed when the blind priest, Teiresias, points the accusing finger at him declaring him a

murderer and bed-sharer. Desiring to prove his innocence, Oedipus, more than ever, becomes determined to find the truth about the murderer and about his own identity. He sends for the only survivor of the tragedy that claimed the life of King Laius. The messenger reveals to Oedipus that it was indeed only one man who killed the late king. With this revelation, it becomes more obvious that Oedipus was likely responsible for the death of the former king.

The arrival of a messenger from Corinth, his erroneous birthplace, who informs Oedipus about the death of King Polybus and the request of the people that Oedipus is made king in his stead, compounds the issue further. Both Jocasta and Oedipus become excited, thinking their fears had been unfounded, after all. Yet, Oedipus is worried, feeling that though his father did not die by his own hands as predicted by the oracle, he may have killed his father figuratively, because the possibility existed that his father (Polybus) could have died of grief arising from his absence. He becomes worried about the second part of the prophecy that he would marry his own mother and have children by her. Oedipus reveals his fears to the messenger who assures him that he has nothing to fear because he was adopted by the king. At this point, Oedipus becomes increasingly determined to know the truth about himself. However, it is becoming clear to those around Oedipus, that Oedipus is the killer of the King Laius. Even the once sceptical Jocasta (his mother and wife) is not left out this time. They try to dissuade him from looking for the shepherd he is asking about. Out of desperation, Jocasta pleads thus:

> I beg you – do not hunt this out – I beg you,
> if you have any care for your life,
> What I am suffering is enough...
> O be persuaded by me, I entreat you:
> do not do this (O.T. lines 1060-1063).

Oedipus is adamant; he will not be deterred. Courageously, he declares:

> I will not be persuaded to let be
> the chance of finding out the whole thing clearly
> (O.T. lines 1064-65).

With this obsession of knowing the truth, Oedipus sends for the shepherd whose recognition of the messenger from Corinth exposes the

truth to Oedipus. The revelation comes with a strong force that Oedipus breaks down and weeps:

> O, O, O, they will all come,
> all come out clearly! Light of the sun, let me
> look upon you no more after today!
> I who first saw the light bred of a match
> accursed, and accursed in my living
> with them I lived with, cursed in my killing
> (O.T. lines1181-1185).

With this revelation, Oedipus could have abandoned his quest for the truth. After all, the people of Thebes were not aware of the truth and would neither be able to identify him as the murderer of King Laius, nor as the abandoned son of King Laius and Jocasta. He could have allowed fear and cowardice to overpower him, but Oedipus does not only accept responsibility for his action, he also accepts the punishment he has earlier pronounced. Truly, the consequences of the situation are tragic. Oedipus' heightened sense of justice moves him to accept the situation. He chooses to blind himself and go to exile as declared during his search for the killer of the late king.

Oedipus is not a perfect man; he possesses flaws that cause him to wreak great evils. However flawed Oedipus is, he displays great courage and his courage is greater than his pride. This pride is not to be confused with the Greek term ὕβρις which Aristotle has accused Oedipus of. By using the word hubris, Aristotle believes that Oedipus was driven by excessive pride which according to him means:

> Doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything other than what is done, but simply to get pleasure from it. For those who act in return for something do not commit hubris; they avenge themselves. The cause of the pleasure for those committing hubris is that by harming people, they think themselves superior; that is why the young and the rich are hubristic, as they think themselves superior when they commit hubris (*Rhetoric*: 1378b 23-30).

The word hubris, is the anglicised form for the Greek expression *ὕβρις* which, according to Liddell and Scott (1968:723), is "wanton violence arising from the pride of strength, passion, riotousness, insolence, licentiousness." The common use of the word in English connotes pride, over-confidence, or any behaviour which may offend the gods or supernatural beings. MacDowell (1976:17) explains that a person shows hubris (arrogance) by intentionally engaging in activities that are bad, immoral or, at best, useless, "because it is what he wants to do, having no regard for the lives or rights of other people." To Cairns (1996:1), among other things, hubris is: "essentially a disposition of overconfidence or presumption as a result of which one fails to realise or recognise one's limitations and precariousness of one's human condition." Cairns asserts that the word hubris, for Plato, is:

> a failure to control disruptive forces within the personality, a refusal to accept one's place within a rational system, and an exaltation of the merely human (or less than human) at the expense of the divine (Cairns, 1996:31).

Cohen (1991:172) believes that the word, hubris, as used in ancient Greece, refers in a general sense to some unspecified kind of wrongful, insulting, insolent, or excessive behaviour.

While Oedipus could have been guilty of displaying excessive pride or arrogance – hubris – at one time or the other as the events of his life unfold, he displays a virtuous pride. Pride as a virtue is a rational assessment of self-worth. When a drunkard refers to him as a bastard, Oedipus could have just allowed the matter to rest, but being courageous and resolute, he wants to find his identity and origin. Discussing the courage of Oedipus, Kitto (1954:143–144) points out as follows:

> A man of poor spirit would have swallowed the insult and remained in Corinth, but Oedipus was resolute; not content with Polybus' assurance he went to Delphi and asked the gods about it, and when the gods, not answering his question, repeated the warning given originally to Laius, Oedipus, being a man of determination, never went back to Corinth.... [Oedipus and Laius] met at the crossroad, and father and son were of similar temper, the disaster occurred. ...What

> happens is the natural result of weaknesses and the virtues of his character.

Analysing the character of Oedipus, Dodds (2007:27) states:

> To me personally, Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles—even the last riddle, to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion. I do not know how far Sophocles intended that. But certainly in the last lines of the play (which I firmly believe to be genuine) he does generalise the case, does appear to suggest that in some sense Oedipus is every man and every man is potentially Oedipus.

While the argument can be put forward that it is the crimes Oedipus commits that eventually lead to his downfall, it must be emphasised that all these actions are done in ignorance. His killing his father and marrying his mother cannot at all be regarded as his fault; but that of the gods, who decide to punish him for the sin of his father, in the first instance, and later deliberately conceal the truth of his origin from him, leading him to commit unforgiveable crimes which, in turn, torture him for the rest of his life. Be that as it may, Oedipus courageously pays the ultimate price for his curiosity.

Summary and Conclusion

The sense of justice in Sophocles' tragedy is in two folds: it is a combination of divine will and the law of retribution. King Laius, the father of Oedipus, offends the gods by kidnapping and raping Pelops' son, Chrysippus, as a visitor in the palace of King Pelops. King Laius' action violates the Greeks' rule of hospitality and brings down a curse on the Theban house, namely that Laius will be killed by his own son and that the son will marry his own mother and have children through his mother. In order to prevent this, Laius orders a servant to expose his new born son on a mountainside. The baby, Oedipus, is rescued and adopted by the King of Corinth. Thus, divine justice means that neither Oedipus nor Laius could have escaped the punishment that was decreed by the gods. Thus when Oedipus leaves Corinth to avoid killing the man whom he erroneously believes is his father, he encounters his real father at the crossroad and kills him. Despite his being fated by the gods, parricide

violates one of the deepest divine edicts against spilling the blood of kin, and creates ritual pollution that contaminates not only Oedipus but the entire city of Thebes which remains culpable until retribution is paid. For the law of retribution to be fulfilled, Oedipus puts a curse on the killer—banishment. And eventually when he realises he is the culprit, he knows that only by leaving Thebes, would he save his people from the curse put upon the city. The people would prosper and be happy. As a good king, he has always wanted the best for his people and he knows that the right thing to do is leave. This is exactly what he does. Even though he does not anticipate the tragic events that occurred, he shows that he has moral courage and a sense of justice that borders on the sublime. The result being that he saves many lives just as a hero, not a villain, does. Oedipus courageously pays the ultimate price for being born to King Laius. From the textual appraisal of this tragedy, the life lesson learnt from the character of Oedipus is that it might be hard; it might not be to one's benefit, but the right thing has to be done. Cultivating and displaying moral courage is not beyond our reach. It is best for everyone and can be done. Moral courage is always the best choice, no matter what the consequences are.

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