Oedipus Rex: metaphysics and the fundamental human struggle

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OEDIPUS REX:
METAPHYSICS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN STRUGGLE

by
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A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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ABSTRACT

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2005/2006
Phillip A. Graneto, MFA, Graduate Program Advisor
Master of Arts in Theatre and Dance

The fundamental human struggle is a spiritual struggle demonstrated by a metaphysical analysis of the drama *Oedipus Rex*. Drama presents a mimesis of human action and dramatic plots are comprised of these physical actions. This fundamental dramatic action consists of the embodied action of the human being (i.e., substance), comprised of body and soul (i.e., matter and form). Through these embodied actions Aristotelian metaphysical *first principles* become tangible for the audience. This metaphysical reality is both fundamental to the human being and universal to the human experience. Therefore the fundamental human struggle is a spiritual struggle, viz., the exercise of virtue and rejection of vice.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ...................................... 2

CHAPTER ONE: PURPOSE, METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE .......... 1

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE .................................. 1

METHODOLOGY ........................................... 2

SURVEY OF LITERATURE .................................. 3

General Background Literature .............................. 3

Literature referenced for this study ....................... 5

Synopsis of *Oedipus Rex* ................................. 8

The Myth of *Oedipus Rex* ................................ 8

Import of *Oedipus Rex* .................................. 9

CHAPTER TWO: *Oedipus Rex*, Victim of Fate? ................. 11

Determinism ............................................. 11

Fate or Manifest Destiny .................................. 17

Divine Providence ........................................ 20

CHAPTER THREE: Oedipus’ Choices .......................... 24
PROLOGUE ................................................................. 25

Oedipus sends Creon to the oracle ................................. 25

Oedipus reveals the oracle to the populace ...................... 26

Oedipus reopens the investigation of Laius' death ......... 27

EPISODE 1 ................................................................. 28

Oedipus curses the murderer ....................................... 28

Oedipus ridicules Tiresias .......................................... 29

EPISODE 2 ................................................................. 30

Oedipus accuses Creon of treason and conspiracy .......... 30

Oedipus unburdens himself to Jocasta ......................... 30

Oedipus and Jocasta send for the shepherd .................... 31

EPISODE 3 ................................................................. 31

Messenger from Corinth arrives in Thebes .................... 31

Oedipus' perseverance sends Jocasta into suicidal hysteria 32

EPISODE 4 ................................................................. 33

Oedipus questions, threatens, then tortures the shepherd . 33

EXODOS ................................................................. 34

Jocasta commits suicide then Oedipus blinds himself ....... 34

CHAPTER FOUR: METAPHYSICS AND CHOICE .................. 37

METAPHYSICAL REALITY ........................................... 37

METAPHYSICS: A DEFINITION ........................................ 37
CHAPTER FIVE: VIRTUES AND VICES ................................................................. 51
HAPPINESS FOUND IN VIRTUE ................................................................. 51
ARISTOTELIAN DIFFERENTIATION OF VIRTUES ...................................... 52
INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES ........................................................................... 52
MORAL VIRTUES ....................................................................................... 55
VIRTUE OF COURAGE .............................................................................. 58
VIRTUE OF TEMPERANCE ....................................................................... 61
VIRTUE OF PROPER PRIDE ..................................................................... 64
VIRTUE OF GOOD-TEMPER .................................................................... 66
PASSIÓN OF SHAME ................................................................................. 67

CHAPTER SIX: VIRTUE OF JUSTICE ............................................................ 70
JUSTICE: THE MOST COMPLETE VIRTUE ............................................... 70
RULER AS EXEMPLAR FOR THE POLITY ............................................... 72
NECESSITY OF VIRTUE FOR THE POLITY ............................................ 75

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING WITH CHARACTER ............................... 78
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 MORAL VIRTUES AND VICES ......................... 57

Table 2 PASSIONS OF SHAME AND PAINS/PLEASURES AT OTHERS’ MISFORTUNE ................................. 58
CHAPTER ONE: PURPOSE, METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the metaphysical realities made tangible through mimesis of human actions in drama. The physical representation of human actions, as dramatized in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, presents the quiddities (i.e., the substance and qualities) of Oedipus’ rashness, intemperance and injustice. This dramatic reenactment reveals the fundamental, intangible *first principles* which, although spiritual, constitute the human struggle. These same fundamental, intangible *first principles* give human actions their meaning.

*Oedipus Rex* is an allegory about maintaining the stability of civilization. King Laius, his wife Jocasta and their son Oedipus are archetypes of civilization. Laius is an archetype of government. His choices result in its downfall. Jocasta is an archetype of family. Her choices result in its destruction. Oedipus is an archetype of civilization itself. He is the cause and effect of what civilization has wrought through his parents’ choices, viz., blindness to his faults.

Metaphysical reality is both fundamental to the human being and universal to the human experience. Therefore the fundamental human struggle is a spiritual struggle, viz., the exercise of virtue and rejection of vice. This thesis will develop this concept using a fundamental play of Western drama, viz., Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. 
METHODOLOGY

— Chapter One covers the Statement of Purpose, the Methodology, a brief synopsis of the play and the importance of *Oedipus Rex*.

— Chapter Two discusses the issue of fate or freewill and whether Oedipus is in fact a victim. This chapter reviews the arguments of determinism, divine providence and freewill.

— Chapter Three examines Oedipus’ choices using Aristotelian principles, and reviews Oedipus’ actions as presented in the play thereby determining if there is another, ethereal level behind the actions observed.

— Chapter Four discusses this ethereal reality, specifically treating the metaphysical reality of being in *Oedipus Rex* and the metaphysical process by which he chooses.

— Chapter Five is a detailed explanation of the metaphysical truths behind human actions, particularly identifying Oedipus’ actions with virtues and vices.

— Chapter Six treats the virtue of Justice. It explains how Oedipus’ violation of this most complete virtue resulted in the tragic events of the play.

— Chapter Seven follows from the previous chapter because it discusses character. Character is a consequence of the sum total of choices made throughout life. Character is why Oedipus’ was not virtuous. This thesis concludes that the play *Oedipus Rex* demonstrates the fundamental human struggle is a spiritual struggle.
SURVEY OF LITERATURE

GENERAL BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The literature on ancient Greek drama covers a broad spectrum of topics. Many sources were consulted for this thesis. While some provided useful context for study of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, not every reference provided useful material for citation in this study.

Erika Simon’s book *The Ancient Theatre* uses archaeology to trace the history of ancient Greek drama. Her book looks at all aspects of Greek dramatic production. She covers the origin of the dances of the Dionysian cult (c. 8000-1000 B.C.) and the evolution of Greek theatre from the dithyrambs. She describes the significance of the physical layout of the orchestra, skene and the costumes. However, her book does not speak directly to the metaphysics embodied in the action of *Oedipus Rex*.

A book covering the same subject but with greater detail is *The Context of Ancient Drama* co-authored by Eric Csapo and William J. Slater. It is an excellent reference covering aspects of production, the hierarchy of audience seating, and growth in the prestige of actors. It also presents an excellent description of the Dionysian competition, yet does not speak to the subject of metaphysics in drama.

Benjamin Hunningher’s *The Origin of Theatre: An Essay* begins with a discussion of the relationship between theatre and religion. The author follows the evolution of theatre from primitive religious practices. His book also covers Christianity’s role in modern theatre’s development from the tropes of *matins* in the Divine Office Liturgy of Easter.
Howard Bloom discusses the evolution of Thales thought and his discernment of the human soul in "Greece, Miletus and Thales - the Birth of the Boundary Breakers - 3000 B.C. to 550 B.C.: A History of the Global Brain XIII" as found in the online magazine Telepolis: Magazin der Netzkultur. In order to focus specifically on metaphysics and *Oedipus Rex* this article was not included.

Another text on ancient Greek philosophy is Plato’s *Trial and Death of Socrates*. Since it concerns the Athenian Senate’s sentence of death it is not particularly useful. Plato’s *Protagoras* gives some insight regarding Socrates’ approach to philosophy as a lived experience rather than an intellectual exercise. While it covers many points of Socratic thought it does not speak directly to the subject of this study.

Mary Whitlock Blundell’s interesting book on ancient Greek morality, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies*, explains ancient Greek moral principles. She discounts speaking about morality in terms of religion. Blundell relates that the ancient poets were the first philosophers and it was only later that philosophy became a separate tradition. While her perspective may be valid, her criteria for identifying human behaviors are not specific enough. This study reveals a deeper, more complex view to human choice and its consequent behavior.

Thomas Hurka’s book *Virtue, Vice and Values* explains consequentialist moral theories. These theories examine morality without reference to virtue; using a base-clause/recursion clause approach. The base-clause concerns a specific good; the recursion clause concerns loving for itself what is good. But this approach provides
no parameters, such as virtue or vice and, consequently, there is ambiguity over what constitutes a good.

**LITERATURE REFERENCED FOR THIS STUDY**

The following works were directly useful as source material for this thesis.

John Crossett's essay "The Oedipus Rex" was consulted for its view on determinism. Crossett considers *Oedipus Rex* a search for meaning. This search occurs in the context of *kairos*, something that happens in its own time, rather than *kronos*, or chronological time. Crossett highlights Sophocles' use of the *kairos* because the patricide and incest have already occurred in his play. It is in this context that Oedipus' story unfolds.

Charles Segal's essay "On the Greatness of Oedipus Rex" sees the play as a futile existential dilemma. *Oedipus Rex* concerns the fear of living a meaningless life.

John Jones' essay, "Actions and Actors," asserts that the issue is Oedipus vis à vis divine providence. He contends that Oedipus' final acceptance of the oracles signifies the gods prevailed.

No study of *Oedipus Rex* would be complete without Freud's analysis. His estimation of the play in his work "Die Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams)," provides a notorious deterministic perspective.

Richmond Y. Hathorn's essay "Existentialism in Oedipus the King" is a direct rebuttal to Freud's position. He sees Oedipus as a highly moral individual, a victim of freewill rather than fate. Oedipus' self-recognition, says Hathorn, is a moral act.
Harold Bloom also refutes Freud in his Introduction to Sophocles’ Plays: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus & Antigone. He finds Freud’s Oedipal complex would be more appropriate for a character in one of Shakespeare’s tragic plays.

Carl. R. Mueller in his Introduction to Sophokles: the Complete Plays presents a different perspective addressing the issue of Oedipus’ hubris. Mueller believes it is a gross misrepresentation to label Oedipus hubristic. The definition of the word includes deriving pleasure from harming others which he asserts is contradicted by Oedipus’ actions in the play.

Addressing the issue of fate, Levi Robert (L.R.) Lind asserts that fate is a fallacy. In his book Ten Greek Plays in Contemporary Translations, Lind contends the notion of deterministic fate is a consequence of a modern perspective imposed on ancient Greek thought.

E.R. Dodds, in his essay "On Misunderstanding Oedipus Rex." asserts that the ancient Greeks did not hold for determinism.

Bernard Knox, in his essay "Sophocles’ Oedipus," considers Oedipus a paradigmatic figure. He explains how Oedipus, through his ascension to the throne of Thebes, personified the ancient Greek ideal of control over one’s destiny.

Returning to the issue of divine providence and the Delphic oracles, G. Devettere rejects Freud’s dismissal. His essay "Incest and Self-Blinding in Oedipus Rex," argues that the oracle is merely foreknowledge of actions, rather than a pre-ordained compulsion to act.
Augustine of Hippo in his book On Free Choice of the Will clarifies the difference between divine foreknowledge and preordained compulsion. He contends that the foresight of divine providence does not preclude the exercise of freewill. Foreknowledge does not mean foreordained. Such knowledge does not make an action inevitable.

Aristotle, was an obvious choice for the topics of ethics, metaphysics, the soul and their relation to drama. Aristotle's "Metaphysics," discusses the existence of an ethereal reality that transcends physical, observable reality. Metaphysics explains the reasons behind the actions we observe on stage. William A. Wallace's book The Elements of Philosophy: A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians helps to understand this process. Metaphysics also explains for us the compound/complex that is the human being and the origin of human choice.

Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics" discusses human behavior in terms of vice and virtue. The "Nic. Ethics" outlines Oedipus' transgressions in terms of virtue and vice. It explains how through the violation of the virtue of justice, Oedipus' behavior is vicious (vice) in an absolute sense.

Using the "Nicomachean Ethics" this study concludes with a discussion of character. It shows how Oedipus' character, viz., the cumulative consequence of his choices, led to his downfall. His character signifies he is not a virtuous man. His struggle is a spiritual struggle that is both fundamental to humanity and universal to human existence.
The translation used for this study is Robert Fagles’ 1982 Penguin Classics edition entitled *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. A detailed outline of the dramatic action of *Oedipus Rex* appears in the Appendix. A brief synopsis of the drama follows here.

**SYNOPSIS OF OEDIPUS REX**

Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* presents a confident ruler attempting to solve the murder of his predecessor. In his pursuit, the ruler’s demeanor veers from benevolent compassion to violent rage. His perseverance reveals truths to the audience which the ruler cannot see, all the while wreaking havoc in the city. In the end his perseverance reveals terrible truths about himself. The play highlights the import of the virtue of justice to maintain the stability of both the people and their government. *Oedipus Rex* is a play about family, polity and the virtue of justice.

**THE MYTH OF OEDIPUS REX**

The myth of *Oedipus Rex* predates the play by approximately three or four centuries. The first written reference comes from Homer’s *The Odyssey* written *circa* 800 B.C. This passage is from Book 11:

I saw the mother of Oidipous, Epikastē,  
whose great unwitting deed it was  
to marry her own son. He took that prize  
from a slain father; presently the gods  
brought all to light that made the famous story.  
But by fearsome wills he kept his throne
in dearest Thebes, all through his evil days,
while she descended to the place of Death,
god of the locked and iron door. Steep down
from a high rafter, throttled in her noose,
she swung, carried away by pain, and left him
endless agony from a mother’s Furies

(Homer, *Odyssey* Book 11, lines 269-80).

**IMPORT OF **_Oedipus Rex_

Sophocles’ version of this play was produced during the fifth century B.C. The translator, Robert Fagles, in his Introduction writes:

The play is universally recognized as the dramatic masterpiece of the Greek theater. Aristotle cites it as the most brilliant example of theatrical plot, the model to follow, and all the generations since who have seen it staged—no matter how inadequate the production or how poor the translation—have agreed with this assessment as they found themselves moved to pity and fear by the swift development of its ferociously logical plot (Fagles 131).

_Oedipus Rex_ is a work that has been continuously produced for 2500 years. Why has this play survived while other plays from later centuries have come and gone and never been seen again? It is because this play speaks to the fundamental human
struggle. This struggle is a spiritual struggle that is both specific to each human being and universal to the human experience.

As noted previously, *Oedipus Rex* is an allegory about maintaining the stability of civilization. King Laius, his wife Jocasta and their son Oedipus are archetypes of civilization. Laius is an archetype of government. His choices result in its downfall. Jocasta is an archetype of family. Her choices result in its destruction. Oedipus is an archetype of civilization itself. He is the cause and effect of what civilization has wrought through his parents’ choices, viz., blindness to his faults.

Therefore, *Oedipus Rex* continues to be produced because it speaks to successive civilizations about maintaining stability both in the family and, consequently, in the polity. The play highlights the terrible price paid for the failure to choose virtue and reject vice.
CHAPTER TWO: OEDIPUS REX, VICTIM OF FATE?

The general view of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex holds that the protagonist is a victim of fate. In Oedipus Rex, portentous oracles indicate a deterministic fate and prophesy patricide and incest. Is there a fundamental human struggle born of the exercise of freewill? If the fundamental human struggle is a spiritual struggle requiring choice, why do many believe in determinism? Scholars argue a great deal over whether we possess freewill or are victims of fate. Is Oedipus’ dogged pursuit of the murder investigation a consequence of predetermination or an exercise of freewill? Does determinism render the fundamental human struggle futile?

DETERMINISM

There are two ways to look at time. First is the kronos which refers to the chronological passage of time and the sequence of events that follow one upon the other. Then there is the kairos which refers to things that happen in their own time irrespective of the kronos but with no less impact on events. John Crossett, in his essay "The Oedipus Rex," compliments Sophocles’ artistry in using both the kronos and the kairos. The acts foreseen by the oracle, viz., the patricide and the incest, have already occurred before the chronology of events of the play begins:

The two most important kairoi [i.e., critical moments] of Oedipus’ life have passed; the slaying at the crossroads and the marriage with Jocasta. Nothing that happens in
the play can alter or undo these. By starting his play after these events Sophocles is doing something entirely new.... Sophocles takes up the life of his hero after the oracles have been fulfilled, and the vanity he is dramatizing becomes at once more severely simple and more agonizingly terrible (Crossett 141).

Since the key aspects have already occurred it is presumed that fate is the determinant for what happens. In this view *Oedipus Rex* is a play about search for meaning or the lack thereof. In his essay "On the Greatness of *Oedipus Rex*," Charles Segal sees a futile, existential dilemma:

For the general reader today, Oedipus’ situation touched another area of anxiety existential rather than sexual or psychological: the fear of meaninglessness. Oedipus confronts the mystery of being alive in a world that does not correspond to a pattern of order or justice satisfactory to the human mind. He places us in a tragic universe where we have to ask whether the horrible suffering we witness is all due to design or to chance, whether our lives are random or entirely determined (Segal 74).

Another deterministic perspective focuses upon Oedipus and divine providence. In his essay "Action and Actors," John Jones asserts that the premise of *Oedipus Rex*
is "the god’s word shall prevail" (Jones 32). As proof he points to Oedipus’ final acceptance of the oracles as his destiny.

The most noted determinist is Sigmund Freud. In "Die Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams)" Freud contends that our dreams are indicative of our inner desires, even as children. In Chapter III entitled "The Dream as Wish-Fulfillment" he writes: "[Children’s dreams] present no problem to be solved, but they are invaluable as affording proof that the dream, in its inmost essence, is the fulfillment of a wish" (Freud 191).

Therefore, in Chapter IV entitled "Distortion in Dreams," he concludes: "I now declare that wish-fulfillment is the meaning of every dream, so that there cannot be any dream other than wish-dreams..." (Freud 193-194).

In Chapter V, section B, "Infantile Experiences as the Source of Dreams," he writes that investigating dreams leads to our earliest childhood experiences. These experiences become the lifelong source of all our dreams. Our desire (i.e., wish-fulfillment) stem from these nascent life experiences. Freud takes these conclusions and applies them to Oedipus Rex.

In Chapter V, Section D, subsection (b) "Dreams of the Death of Beloved Persons," Freud writes that, from infancy, parents play a significant role in the neuroses of their children. This results in a love/hate relationship with parents:

Falling in love with one parent and hating the other
forms part of the permanent stock of the psychic impulses which arise in early childhood and are of such
importance as the material of subsequent neurosis...in
their amorous or hostile attitude toward their parents,
psychoneurotics do no more than reveal to us, by
magnification, something that occurs less markedly and
intensively in the minds of the majority of children (Freud 246).

Freud feels that a child’s love/hate relationship with parents is also found in
literature like *Oedipus Rex*. He considers this play the first principle of determinism.
His thematic summary concludes the play is about the inevitability of fate, using the
step-by-step process of psychoanalysis. "[R]esignation to the divine will, and the
perception of one’s own impotence is the lesson which the deeply moved spectator is
supposed to learn from the tragedy" (Freud 246).

Freud explains that *Oedipus Rex* moves us because something within us assents
to the inevitability of fate. Without using the word *catharsis*, he writes that we are
moved because Oedipus’ plight could be our own. However, Freud identifies this
sense of destiny exclusively in terms of a psychosexual dynamic:

It may be that we were all destined to direct our first
sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first
impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers; our
dreams convince us that we were. King Oedipus, who
slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is
nothing more or less than a wish-fulfillment—the
fulfillment of the wish of our childhood (Freud 247).
However, Oedipus’ may not be a victim of determined fate but of exercise of freewill. In his essay, "Existentialism in Oedipus the King," Richmond Y. Hathorn sees *Oedipus Rex* as a highly moral play about a moral man. Hathorn explains: "Even the recognition of an unpleasant truth is a moral act.... *Oedipus Rex* is not a crime-and-punishment play; it is a moral drama of self-recognition" (Hathorn 41).

Because of Oedipus’ moral act of self-recognition, Hathorn rejects the notion that the play is deterministic. Hathorn explains that determinism seeks to deflect responsibility for behaviors by, "explaining them away, away from us at all costs" (Hathorn 41). For Hathorn, determinism paints human beings as victims of fate rather than persons with freewill. So, in opposition to Charles Segal’s assertion of random determinism Hathorn counters: "The willingness to accept guilt is an indispensable step toward the goal of self-knowledge...an adult who falls into deterministic excuses for his behavior shuts that door on the possibility of self-development" (Hathorn 41).

Harold Bloom also rejects Freud’s determinism in his Introduction to *Sophocles' Oedipus Plays: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus & Antigone*. Bloom suggests that Freud’s analysis should have been drawn from the work of Shakespeare rather than Sophocles:

Because of Freud’s unfortunate formulation of "the Oedipus complex" we find it difficult to interpret the Oedipus plays of Sophocles without indulging in rather irrelevant Freudian considerations. Freud should have named it "the hamlet complex," since that is what he
suffered from, an accurate sense that, "the poets"
(meaning Shakespeare) had been there before him. In this
case Sophocles had not been there before him, since
Oedipus in fact had no desire whatsoever, conscious or
"unconscious," to kill his father and marry his
mother (Bloom 5).

John Jones in "Action and Actors." discusses the argument of determinism in conjunction with Oedipus’ hubris. The first problem he sees begins with the definition of the word and whether it actually applies. There is a definition that fits the description of Oedipus’ passionate behavior. In his book, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy*, Samuel Enoch Stumpf writes that hubris involved interference by the gods in human affairs. "In particular, the Homeric gods would punish men for their lack of moderation and especially for their pride or insubordination, which the Greeks called *hubris*" (Stumpf 4).

Now this aspect of *hubris* and the interference of the gods in human affairs must be combined with another. An online dictionary defines the Greek perspective on *hubris* as "excessive pride, wanton violence" (*Dictionary.com*). Other scholars point to the operative phrase, *wanton violence*, as a reason to reject the application of *hubris* to *Oedipus Rex*. In his Introduction to *Sophokles: The Complete Plays*, Carl R. Mueller points to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. It refers to the Aristotelian definition of *hubris* as pleasure derived from harming other people. Mueller concludes: "To see the compassionate and people-directed Oedipus of the play’s
opening as hubristic is, therefore, seriously to misread and misinterpret the motives of a man who is justly honored as a man, not as a god by his grateful people” (Mueller 25).

So, if fate and *hubris* are not the determining factors in Oedipus’ hapless plight what is? Could there be freewill at work in this play?

FATE OR MANIFEST DESTINY

In his Introduction to the compilation *Ten Greek Plays in Contemporary Translations*, Levi Robert (L.R.) Lind holds there is a fallacy of so-called fate in Greek drama. Lind writes:

So narrow a concept as mere fatalism in the modern sense would make puppets of the dramatic heroes. Such a theory corresponds to nothing in modern thought more faithfully than to that desolate sense of frustration so common in our society and the psychological isolation which it produces (Lind xi).

E.R. Dodds agrees in his essay "On Misunderstanding *Oedipus Rex.*" Dodds questions whether Oedipus is in fact, "a mere puppet...a ‘tragedy of destiny’ which denies human freedom?" (Dodds 40). He maintains we suffer a duality of thinking on this question. This duality stems from whether we accept the Christian understanding of freewill or we believe in determinism. Dodds explains that ancient Greek poets did not accept determinism; despite their mythic heroes' destinies and predetermined date of death. Rather, "it never occurs to the poet or his audience that this prevents them
from being free agents" (Dodds 40). Addressing the issue of divine providence, Dodds points to a speech by the Messenger at the end of the play. While acknowledging some fate is implied, it is proof of Oedipus' ability to exercise freewill:

Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine foreknowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are predetermined. If explicit confirmation of this is required, we have only to turn to lines 1230ff [sic, cf. lines 1402ff], where the Messenger emphatically distinguishes Oedipus' [sic] self-blinding as "voluntary" and "self-chosen" from the "involuntary" parricide and incest. Certain of Oedipus' [sic] past actions were fate-bound; but everything he does on stage from first to last he does as a free agent (Dodds 40-41).

Therefore the actions embodied on stage are freewill actions. The dramatic action demonstrates the many wrong choices Oedipus makes, and the audience clearly sees them made.

Indeed, Bernard Knox, in his essay "Sophocles' Oedipus", calls him a symbol of human yearning and also a paradigm of the human struggle. Knox considers Oedipus,

...the classic representative figure of his age: he is also one of the long series of tragic protagonists who stands
as symbols of human aspiration and despair before the
characteristic dilemma of Western civilization—the
problem of man's true stature, his proper place in the
universe (Knox 5).

Knox explains that, as a paradigm, *Oedipus Rex* encouraged the ancient Greeks
to believe they could seize control of their fundamental human struggle and manifest
their own destiny. He writes in the same essay:

> But the word tyrannos has a larger significance. Oedipus,
to quote the same choral ode, is a...paradigm, an
example to all men; and the fact that he is tyrannos, self-
made ruler, the proverbial Greek example of worldly
success won by individual intelligence and exertion,
makes him an appropriate symbol of civilized man, who
was beginning to believe, in the fifth century B.C., that
he could seize control of his environment and make his
own destiny, become, in fact, equated to the gods (Knox 6).

Manifesting one's own destiny is a constant theme in human history. However,
the play presents the audience with oracles that Oedipus will kill his father and couple
with his mother. Because this does in fact happen, is it a consequence of fate?
Chapter 6 of the "Poetics" explains that the actions of the characters cause their
happiness or tragedy. Their actions are the determinant. Therefore the *fate* Oedipus
suffers in the play is a consequence of his actions. The ancient Greek idea of fate
leaves room for human action as a determinant. Returning again to L. R. Lind, and the Greek perspective on fate, he writes:

Moira, the Greek word for fate, means many things but chiefly "that which is one's due, lot, or portion of good fortune or ill." "that which is meet, proper, and right," or, in plural personification, the Fates. The Greek fate is not exclusively what must happen to one because it is foreordained but that which actually happens to one as his lot, partly due to his own actions, partly due to heredity and circumstances (Lind ix).

Another issue concerning fate is its relationship to divine providence and the dictates of the gods. Does divine providence render the human struggle futile? Is divine providence a determinant that overwhelms human behavior and the exercise of freewill?

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

E.R. Dodds' penultimate point concerning Oedipus' "involuntary" fate vis à vis the patricide and incest, leads to a consideration of the role of divine providence and freewill. Is there a contradiction? Are human beings really free to act in the face of divine providence? Is human destiny predetermined by either supernatural or temporal forces? Is our fate at the mercy of inevitability and determinism, or a consequence of the exercise of freewill?
There is compelling evidence in *Oedipus Rex* that Sophocles believed in determinacy. Laius did everything he could to contravene the Oracle’s prediction that his son would murder him. Jocasta dismissed oracles as nonsense yet handed her son over for abandonment and certain death. Oedipus fled Corinth, and the people he thought were his parents, to avoid fulfilling the prophecy. Despite all efforts to thwart the oracles, the play suggests divine providence determined their fulfillment. Yet, what if the oracle only predicted the behavior of Laius, Jocasta and Oedipus rather than ordained it?

In his essay, "Incest and Self-Blinding in *Oedipus the King*," G. Devereux rejects Freud’s dismissal of divine providence. Devereux finds Oedipus’ behavior an act of freewill foreseen, but not foreordained, by the Delphic Oracle. Devereux explains that the Oracle, although aware of the incest and parricide, "spoke only of the slaying or exile of the regicide" (Devereux 50).

Does divine providence interfere with freewill or merely predict human behavior? If a person, using reason, exercises freewill, can divine providence impede that exercise? In his book *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine of Hippo says no. He explains that in exercising our will we act, and these actions are in our control. Therefore, he says, divine foresight does not hinder human choice in the exercise of freewill. He writes in Book III, Chapter 3:

> For you could not maintain anything is in our power except actions that are subject to our own will.

> Therefore, nothing is so completely in our power as the
will itself, for it is ready at hand to act immediately, as soon as we will (Augustine 92; bk. 3, ch. 3, sec. 27).

Foreknowledge by divine providence does not impede human freewill. According to Augustine, the proof is found when we make wrong choices:

Because unless I am mistaken, your [i.e., God’s] foreknowledge that a man will sin does not of itself necessitate the sin. Your foreknowledge did not force him to sin even though he was, without doubt, going to sin; otherwise you would not foreknow that which was to be. Thus, these two things are not contradictories. As, you know, by your foreknowledge, know what someone else is going to do of his own will, so God, forces no one to sin; yet he foreknows those who will sin by their own will (Augustine 94-95; bk. 3, ch. 4, sec. 39).

Predicting future behavior is not unknown to the modern mind. One adage of Psychology holds, *the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior*. However, while actions may be predictable they are not enforced by determinacy. Therefore, Oedipus’ freewill actions, and all that follows, are not a consequence of determinism. The drama *Oedipus Rex* demonstrates the consequences for the exercise of freewill. This is a particularly pertinent point regarding Oedipus’ decision to pursue the investigation of Laius’ murder. It means that the Oracle’s foreknowledge is not the cause of wrongdoing, it is simply foreknowledge of it. Augustine explains:
...God foreknows all things of which He Himself is the Cause, and yet He is not the Cause of all that he foreknows. He is not the evil cause of these acts, though He justly avenges them. You may understand from this, therefore, how justly God punishes sins; for he does not do the things which He knows will happen. On the contrary, let us acknowledge both that it is proper to His foreknowledge that nothing should escape his notice and that it is proper to His justice that a sin, since it is committed voluntarily, should not go unpunished by his judgment, just as it was not forced to be committed by His foreknowledge (Augustine 95; bk. 3, ch. 4, sec. 39).

So, divine foreknowledge of human action is not an impediment to the exercise of freewill. Providence merely foresees the choices individuals will make and allows this chosen behavior to lead to its natural result because it is a freewill choice. When Oedipus blinds himself, providence allows his volatile, freewill behavior to proceed to its natural end. His downfall is not the result of predetermined fate. Rather, Oedipus’ fate is a consequence of his cumulative choices and actions. This fate stems from Oedipus’ failure to exercise reason and freewill; which follows from his choices and not vice versa.
CHAPTER THREE: OEDIPUS' CHOICES

Our actions reveal our choices. These choices result from our use of reason and freewill. Drama displays the actions of the characters. *Ethos*, or human character, is the sum of a person's choices or ethics. Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics" will help to clarify Oedipus' actions in the play.

The "Nicomachean Ethics" posits that human actions are always aimed at some good which makes that person happy. In Book III: Chapter 4 of the "Nic. Ethics" Aristotle writes:

That wish is for the end has already been stated; some think it is for the good, others for the apparent good....

Now different things appear good to different people, and, if it so happens, even contrary things

("Nic. Ethics" 356-57; 1113a 15, 22).

So the good is relative to an individual's perception of what is real, true and good. Therefore, this good varies from person to person. In Book II Chapter 3 of the "Nic. Ethics" Aristotle writes there are several types of choice:

There being three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, the pleasant, and their contraries, the base, the injurious, the painful, about all of these the good man tends to go right and the
bad man to go wrong ("Nic. Ethics" 335; 1104b 30-33).

If human actions always aim at some good then people act with the expectation of attaining happiness. Aristotle explains that the pursuit of happiness is the primary driving force for human beings and for governments. In Book I Chapter 4 of the "Nic. Ethics" Aristotle explains:

Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy ("Nic. Ethics" 311; 1095a 14-19).

As ruler of Thebes, Oedipus should have aimed for the highest of all goods for himself and his people, viz., the exercise of virtue through good and noble acts. Instead, Oedipus freely chose for himself and thereby brought torment to his people? An examination of the key points of the play will identify the suffering caused by Oedipus’ freewill actions.

PROLOGUE

OEDIPUS SENDS CREON TO THE ORACLE

Oedipus reveals that he has already sent Creon to the Oracle at Delphi to obtain a cure for the plague ravaging Thebes:
After a painful search I found one cure:
I acted at once. I sent Creon…
— to learn
what I might do or say to save our city
(Prologue, lines 80-81, 83b-84).

Oedipus’ freewill choice is a preemptive one to end the city’s affliction. Sending Creon to the oracle appears to be a noble choice, an exercise of prudent leadership. However, it is more likely a choice to maintain political power and ensure security against rising panic in the city. Yet, this freewill choice is an ironic one since it is the first step toward his destruction. Thus it is actually a contrary, viz., an injurious choice to be avoided.

OEDIPUS REVEALS THE ORACLE TO THE POPULACE

Creon returns and recommends they retire to the Palace to discuss the Oracle. However, Oedipus freely insists Creon publicly reveal its contents:

Speak out,
speak to us all. I grieve for these, my people,
far more than I fear for my own life
(Prologue, lines 104b-106).

Oedipus’ second freewill choice will force him to act boldly to save face. By insisting that Creon reveal the oracle publicly Oedipus appears to make the noble choice; however, it is another injurious choice to be avoided.
Oedipus Reopens the Investigation of Laius’ Death

At this point Creon utters Apollo’s command to drive out the murderer of Laius, the late king. Creon also tells Oedipus that, despite one surviving witness to the murder, the city dropped the investigation because of the Sphinx.

Oedipus then freely chooses to reopen and pursue the matter. He vows to rid the city of this corruption saying:

No,

I’ll start again—I’ll bring it all to light myself!

Apollo is right, and so are you, Creon,
to turn our attention back to the murdered man.

Now you have me to fight for you, you’ll see:

I am the land’s avenger by all rights

(Prologue 149b-154).

Oedipus chooses to "bring all to light," and be "the land’s avenger." Indeed Oedipus’ choice to bring all to light and expel the corruption seems to be noble. But this choice will bring vengeance upon him as he uncovers regicide and incest. Thus his choice is, yet again, an injurious one.

So, in the Prologue, Oedipus freely chooses to send Creon to the Oracle, have that Oracle announced to the populace and then reopen the investigation of the murder. And through a series of injurious choices, he will reveal his base deeds. With these freewill actions Oedipus has set his demise in motion.
EPISODE 1

OEDIPUS CURSES THE MURDERER

Oedipus begins his investigation by canvassing the people for information. When he doesn't get a response he gets angry. He threatens them, but gets no answers. In a rage he adjures the populace to shun the murderer. Then, as his composure disintegrates he curses the murderer:

Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,
a lone man unknown in his crime
or one among many, let that man drag out
his life in agony, step by painful step—

(Episode 1, lines 280-283).

After this rash tirade Oedipus then utters a dire imprecation:

I curse myself as well...if by any chance
he proves to be an intimate of our house,
here at my hearth, with my full knowledge,
may the curse I just called down on him strike me!

(Episode 1, lines 284-287).

In this episode Oedipus begins questioning in a way that appears noble and pleasant. When he gets no response from the people his behavior moves quickly from anger to raging curses. This of course means Oedipus' choices fall into the category of actions to be avoided. Anger and rage are injurious and painful, and cursing is base and ultimately injurious.
Now the Leader, anxious over Oedipus’ curses, suggests that the prophet Tiresias may have the answer. Oedipus replies that he sent for Tiresias.

Oedipus’ call for Tiresias seems an advantageous choice although it will shortly prove both painful and injurious.

OEDIPUS RIDICULES TIRESIAS

Tiresias enters and, despite Oedipus’ cordial welcome, avoids answering any questions about Laius’ murder.

The prophet has answers and Oedipus becomes angry when he won’t reveal them. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of conspiracy. At this point Tiresias adjures Oedipus to obey his recently uttered curse and speak to no one because he is the corruption. Oedipus rebukes Tiresias and asks him why he would say such a thing? Tiresias replies: "...you forced me, twisted it out of me" (Episode 1, line 407).

Then, upon further pressure from Oedipus, Tiresias reveals that Oedipus is the source of the corruption plaguing the city. Tiresias declares: "I say you are the murderer you hunt" (Episode 1, line 413).

Oedipus’ pursuit of the murder investigation is a noble choice, but his loss of temper results in a base choice to ridicule a blind man. This choice to ridicule also proves injurious. Oedipus’ choice to pressure Tiresias leads to a base revelation, viz., that Oedipus is the murderer.

In sum during this episode Oedipus makes quick decisions to find the murderer. In a rage he curses the murderer and unwittingly himself. Then, while...
interrogating Tiresias, he exerts such pressure that Tiresias reveals Oedipus as the murderer. These events are the consequence of freewill actions.

EPISODE 2

OEDIPUS ACCUSES CREON OF TREASON AND CONSPIRACY

Oedipus, still enraged, argues with Creon. Creon denies conspiring with Tiresias. Oedipus tries to discover if Tiresias ever accused him of Laius’ murder. Creon indirectly warns Oedipus about the virtue of silence when not in possession of all the facts:

OEDIPUS. But the great seer never accused me then—why not?

CREON. I don’t know. And when I don’t, I keep quiet

(Episode 2, lines 634-635).

Now, because of his freewill choice to confront Creon, Oedipus exacerbates his situation. Oedipus’ choice to accuse Creon of treason, is a painful choice to be avoided. This action also proves injurious since it exposes Oedipus’ imprudence. However, Oedipus thinks his actions are advantageous, because he is exposing an assassination plot.

OEDIPUS UNBURDENS HIMSELF TO JOCASTA

Eventually Jocasta enters to break up the conflict. Oedipus unburdens himself to her about Tiresias’ prophecy and accusation. This results in Jocasta telling the story of Laius’ death and challenging the reliability of prophecy (cf. Episode 2, lines 778b-800). Oedipus’ choice to confide in Jocasta in expectation of spousal comfort, unfortunately leads to painful and injurious consequences. Rather than comfort,
Jocasta’s tale brings Oedipus greater anxiety. After he clarifies some specifics about Laius’ murder, viz., the time, place, and his general appearance, Oedipus bemoans his own actions:

Oh, no no,
I think I’ve just called down a dreadful curse
upon myself—I simply didn’t know
(Episode 2, lines 819b-821).

Here Creon’s poignant remark about keeping quiet when one doesn’t know the facts becomes painfully clear to Oedipus. His choice to unburden himself to Jocasta leads to an increase in his anxiety. Their exchange has resulted in painful and injurious revelations that point to murder.

OEDIPUS AND JOCASTA SEND FOR THE SHEPHERD

During their exchange Oedipus and Jocasta move to have the lone surviving member of Laius’ traveling party brought before them. Oedipus hopes that this choice will exonerate him of culpability in the murder of Laius. Both Oedipus and Jocasta suppose this an advantageous action, but it will prove injurious.

EPISODE 3
MESSENGER FROM CORINTH ARRIVES IN THEBES

Without warning a Messenger arrives from Corinth with the news of Polybus' death. This news leaves Oedipus and Jocasta exultant that Oedipus is not guilty of murdering Polybus as the prophecy foretold. But the Messenger reveals that Polybus and Merope were not Oedipus’ parents. Oedipus’ persistent questioning leads to the
revelation that he was a foundling left to die on a mountain. Persevering for answers, Oedipus learns the Messenger received the child from one of Laius’ men, a Shepherd.

Oedipus’ investigation into the murder of a king now becomes an investigation into his family tree. The discovery that Polybus and Merope are not his parents comes like a lightning bolt out of the blue, but this revelation is still the result of Oedipus’ persistent questioning. Searching for family history could be considered an advantageous or pleasant choice, however, the results will shortly prove both injurious and base.

**Oedipus’ Perseverance Sends Jocasta into Suicidal Hysteria**

Oedipus asks if anyone knows the whereabouts of the Shepherd who gave the infant to the Messenger from Corinth? The Leader tells Oedipus this is the very man already sent for. Oedipus turns to Jocasta and asks her to confirm this. Meanwhile, this inquiry causes Jocasta to become anxious and dissembling as Oedipus becomes more determined. When Oedipus asks if the Shepherd is the same man she replies:

**Jocasta.** That man...

why ask? Old shepherd, talk, empty nonsense,
don’t give it another thought, don’t even think—

**Oedipus.** What—give up now, with a clue like this?

Fail to solve the mystery of my birth?

Not for all the world!

**Jocasta.** Stop—in the name of god,

if you love your own life, call off this search!
My suffering is enough (Episode 3, lines 1157b-1164a).

Oedipus presumes class snobbery moves Jocasta to call off the search, and his resolve to carry on increases her distress:

JOCASTA. You're doomed—

may you never fathom who you are!

OEDIPUS. To a servant.

Hurry, fetch me the herdsman, now!

Leave her to glory in her royal birth.

JOCASTA. Aieeeeeee—

man of agony—

that is the only name I have for you,

that, no other—ever, ever, ever (Episode 3, lines 1172b-1178).

Because of Oedipus' persistence Jocasta flees into the palace.

Oedipus' determination to switch from investigating the murder to investigating his family history has unintended consequences. Jocasta sees his true family lineage because of this choice. Oedipus' choice to know his parentage throws Jocasta into turmoil. What Oedipus presumed was an advantageous pursuit is actually both injurious and base.

EPISODE 4

OEDIPUS QUESTIONS, THREATENS, THEN TORTURES THE SHEPHERD
When the Shepherd arrives, Oedipus interrogates him but the Shepherd claims a faulty memory. When the Messenger recounts their past relationship, the Shepherd rebukes him.

Oedipus chooses to ratchet up the pressure and begins to torture the Shepherd for answers. Slowly, and under duress, the Shepherd reveals that Oedipus was given to him by Jocasta at Laius’ directive. In order to contravene the prophecies, he was commanded to leave the child to die on the mountain.

At this point Oedipus understands the truth of his birth and his relationship to both Laius and Jocasta:

I stand revealed at last—
cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands

(Episode 4, lines 1308-1310).

Oedipus finally realizes what he has done. He has murdered his father; married and sired children with his mother. He is, in fact, the source of the corruption and plague ravaging the city.

EXODOS

JOCASTA COMMITS SUICIDE THEN OEDIPUS BLINDS HIMSELF

A Messenger from the palace comes to report Jocasta’s suicide. He tells how she mourned for Laius, her marriage to Oedipus and their offspring, and eventually hanged herself. She was not under immediate threat from Oedipus. Jocasta decided to die of her own freewill.
Then the same Messenger recounts how Oedipus, in a rage, entered the palace intent on killing Jocasta. However, when he discovered Jocasta’s body, Oedipus’ demeanor changed. He removed her brooches, and with the long gold pins, gouged out his eyes:

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins
holding her robes—and lifting them high,
looking straight up into the points,

he digs them down the sockets of his eyes crying, "You,
you’ll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!"

(Exodos, lines 1402-1406).

There was no outside force to coerce this violence but Oedipus’ freewill action.

Now Oedipus enters and when the Chorus asks him why he mutilated himself, he admits,

...the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
mine alone—no one else—

I did it myself!

What good were eyes to me?

Nothing I could see could bring me joy

(Exodos, lines 1467-1473).

The actions of both Jocasta and Oedipus can only be characterized as base. They are also the consequence for Oedipus’ freewill choices. Choices he presumed were noble for his station, advantageous to his reign, and leading to a pleasant state
of honor; such as he enjoyed after solving the riddle of the Sphinx. Instead Oedipus' choices led to the revelation that he committed base acts of patricide and incest. These same acts were also injurious to his reign; as well as painful to his subjects. All these truths were discovered as a direct consequence of his freewill choices.
CHAPTER FOUR: METAPHYSICS AND CHOICE

METAPHYSICAL REALITY

Choice is an intangible thing. Can anyone experience the concepts of noble or base, advantageous or injurious, pleasant or painful without the five senses? If behind every action something intangible is revealed, then, in *Oedipus Rex*, intangible truths are behind all the actions of the play. This reality beyond the physical is called the metaphysical. Metaphysical choices expand beyond the noble or base, advantageous or injurious, pleasant or painful to the metaphysical realities of virtue and vice.

In *Oedipus Rex* the lead character makes choices and takes actions he presumes will make him happy, yet they do not. In fact these choices prove to be either painful, injurious or even base. These distinctions, painful, injurious or base, are not tangible, physical realities, rather they are the intangible truths behind Oedipus' actions.

The reenactment of this story, the mimesis of the play, makes these metaphysical principles visible, because there is an ethereal reality beyond these observed physical actions. It is the truth beyond the actions.

METAPHYSICS: A DEFINITION

A popular idea of metaphysics connotes a plane where objects exist above nature and in a state of perfection. For instance, the Platonic notion of metaphysics posits a perfectly shaped parallelogram existing somewhere in the cosmos.
In fact, metaphysics was a term first used by the followers of Aristotle to explain his abstract, theoretical musings. The prefix meta can refer to something which comes later or behind, e.g., after physics. But another meaning for meta is transceding. The transcendence Aristotle talks about concerns wisdom, specifically the universal abstract principles that guide human existence. In Book A (I): Chapter 1 of his "Metaphysics" Aristotle writes:

... all men suppose what is called Wisdom to deal with the first causes and the principles of things; so that, as has been said before, the man of experience is thought to be wiser than the possessors of any sense-perception whatever, the artist wiser than the men of experience, the master-worker than the mechanic, and the theoretical kinds of knowledge to be more of the nature of Wisdom than the productive. Clearly then Wisdom is knowledge about certain principles and causes ("Metaphysics" 245-46; 981b 27-982a 2).

Aristotle calls the science of metaphysics the first philosophy because it deals with first principles of Wisdom.

Samuel Enoch Stumpf, in his book Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy, declares Aristotle’s first philosophy the pinnacle of the sciences:

Metaphysics deals with knowledge at the highest level of abstraction. This knowledge is abstract because it is
about what is universal instead of what is particular....
Wisdom has to do, then, with the abstract levels of
knowledge and not with the levels of visible things....
True wisdom, first philosophy, or metaphysics is the
most abstract and also the most exact of all the sciences
because it tries to discover the truly first principles from
which even the first principles of the various sciences are
derived (Stumpf 89-90).

Aristotle thereby redefines the *arche or first principles* from the tangible earth, wind, fire and water to the intangible, metaphysical reality of Wisdom.

**METAPHYSICS AND \*OEDIPUS REX\***

Why is metaphysics necessary for the study of *Oedipus Rex*? According to Levi Robert (L.R.) Lind, ancient Greek drama centers on the highest of ethical problems which demand a solution for the sake of a stable society. Lind gives sound reasons to apply metaphysics to *Oedipus Rex* because:

...Greek drama explores the possibilities for spiritual self-knowledge which human beings can reach by long intense thought about the contest of man against man, man against nature, and man against the gods (Lind ix-x).

This exploration of spiritual self-knowledge is a thoughtful, if intangible process. This spiritual self-knowledge is the immaterial essence behind the observable. When one can know and identify an immaterial thing one confronts metaphysical reality.
When it is said any immaterial thing that can exist does exist one speaks of ontology, the study of being.

Ontology

Rev. William A. Wallace, O.P., in his book The Elements of Philosophy: A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians, explains that metaphysics brings us to ontology:

Because the Greek word for being is on this discipline is also called ontology...i.e., the study of the meaning, structure, and principles of whatever is and inasmuch as it is or exists. In its material object, or the number of things it studies, metaphysics is all-inclusive, extending to everything and every aspect of whatever is or can exist, whether of a sensible, material, physical nature or of a higher, non-material nature—from which extension to the most perfect and divine it is called first philosophy and even theology.... Its formal object is being precisely as being (ens qua ens), i.e., according to the relation that any thing or aspect of things has to existence, rather than to one of the particular aspects treated in the other branches of philosophy. The unity of this point of view, centered on what is most fundamental to all reality, enables metaphysics to investigate the way in which the
many are interrelated to the one in the deepest ontological sense. Further, since things are reflected in knowledge, it enables metaphysics to order and evaluate the various types of speculative and practical knowledge, on which account it is also called wisdom (Wallace 85; pt. 1, ch. 5, §30, par. 1).

Wallace explains that metaphysics/ontology covers anything that could exist including the ethereal. It identifies the interrelationship of all aspects of knowledge which Aristotle calls Wisdom as noted above. Therefore, as Wallace states, one can grasp the existence of the immaterial because one can make a judgment about something, even though there is no tangible evidence to positively affirm the truth of its existence. This is called a negative judgment of separation:

The subject of metaphysics is best clarified after one has established in natural philosophy and in psychology the existence of non-material realities such as the first unmoved mover...and the human soul.... Knowing of such immaterial reality, the mind is enabled to make the negative judgment of separation that the real is not necessarily the material. On this account the perfection of metaphysics as a distinct science requires (1) that its subject, whose real definition is the middle term in its demonstrations, be drawn from material things, the
quiddity of which is the proper object of man's intellect... and (2) that the separation of a meaning for being distinct from that of material being be validated by the witness of actually existing non-material beings. When enabled by such witness to make its judgment of separation the mind can remove a restriction on its understanding of things. Whereas previously, having attained knowledge of all things through the senses, it spoke of reality precisely as sensible, it is now enabled to speak of these distinctively according to that by which they exist as real...the mind leaves aside all the limitations of matter and cognizes an object that is intelligible without reference to matter (Wallace 85-86; pt. 1, ch. 5, §30, par. 2, 3).

In sum, Wallace explains that through negative judgment of separation, "the real is not necessarily the material" (Wallace 86; pt. 1, ch. 5, par. 2).

Since immaterial reality cannot be touched, metaphysics allows one to intellectually make a negative judgment of separation. Wallace explains this process as follows:

Just as the sensible is the object of the senses, so the

intelligible...is the object of the intellect.... The proper material object of man's intellect comprises every object

42
that can be perceived by the senses—other men, animals, plants, artifacts, all the things he can know naturally and easily. Whereas the senses grasp such objects as sensible, however, the intellect recognizes them for their meaning, for what they are. On this account the "whatness" or quiddity...of material objects is the proper formal object of the human intellect.... Accordingly, while the adequate material object of the intellect is being, its adequate formal object is truth or intelligibility

(Wallace 73; pt. 1, ch. 4, §25, par. 4).

So, meaning can be discerned beyond what is observable. And, in its search for meaning the mind can acknowledge the existence of immaterial reality. Therefore, on the immaterial plane, the formal object of the intellect is intelligibility, i.e., meaning.

In *Oedipus Rex* the realm of metaphysical intangibility becomes tangible through actions embodied in the drama. This occurs through the mimesis of human behavior in the play. The audience sees Oedipus’ violent rage and persistent behavior as actions common to the human experience. The quiddities, (viz., the substance and qualities) of these actions become intelligible to the audience. Thus we discern that Oedipus’ actions, which he thought were noble, advantageous or even pleasant; were actually base, injurious and even painful.
METAPHYSICS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

It is necessary to understand metaphysics because it reveals a fundamental truth of the human experience, viz., the reasons for human actions. These reasons behind human actions, the metaphysics of choice, are also the first principles of human existence which makes them universal to the human experience. The application of metaphysics to *Oedipus Rex* reveals truths behind the actions in the play. In Book Α (XII), Chapter 5 of the "Metaphysics" Aristotle explains how aspects of human behavior beyond the observable do exist:

> Some things can exist apart and some cannot, and it is the former that are substances. And therefore all things have the same causes [the causes of substance are the cause of all things], because, without substances, modifications and movements do not exist. Further, these causes will probably be soul and body, or reason and desire and body ("Metaphysics" 279; 1070b 36-1071a 4).

Thus, through metaphysics, we know that the soul (where reason and desire reside) and the body are the sources of choice for a human being. This makes metaphysics fundamental to the universal human experience.

METAPHYSICS: HUMAN CHOICES AND THE SOUL

In Book I Chapter 3 of, "On the Soul (De Anima)" Aristotle posits two senses in which something can be moved; either indirectly by something other than itself and
directly by itself (cf., "On Soul" 155; 405a 4-5). In the same chapter he explains this movement in relation to the union of body and soul whereby,

...the one acts and the other is acted upon, the one moves and the other is moved; interaction always implies a special nature in the two interagents ("On Soul" 160; 407b 17-19).

Aristotle states that embedded within the soul is the mind, or intellect, which is impassible and incapable of being destroyed. In Book I Chapter 4 of "On Soul" he explains:

Thus it is that in old age the activity of mind or intellectual apprehension declines only through the decay of some other inward part; mind itself is impassible. Thinking, loving, and hating are affections not of mind, but of that which has mind, so far as it has it. That is why, when this vehicle decays, memory and love cease; they were activities not of mind, but of the composite which has perished; mind is, no doubt, something more divine and impassible. That the soul cannot be moved is therefore clear from what we have said, and if it cannot be moved at all, manifestly it cannot be moved by itself ("On Soul" 163; 408b 25-31).
Incapacity in an individual is a consequence of breakdown of the body alone. The soul remains impassible.

What then is the soul and its relationship to the body and how are they responsible for our choices? In his first definition of soul Aristotle says we must understand substance in terms of matter and form, then we must see this compound/complex in its relationship to potentiality and actuality. In Book II Chapter 1 of "On Soul" he writes:

We are in the habit of recognizing, as one determinate kind of what is, substance, and that in several senses, (a) in the sense of matter or that which in itself is not "a this", and (b) in the sense of form or essence, which is that precisely in virtue of which a thing is called "a this", and thirdly (c) in the sense of that which is compounded of both (a) and (b). Now matter is potentiality, form actuality; of the latter there are two grades related to one another as e.g. knowledge to the exercise of knowledge ("On Soul" 171; 412a 6-10).

So, matter refers to the body and its form (or essence) is the soul. And the compound/complex of these constitutes a human being. However, the substance of a human being is not its body but its soul. Aristotle explains that,

...since it is also a body of such and such a kind, viz. having life, the body cannot be the soul; the body is the
subject or matter, not what is attributed to it. Hence the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. But substance [...in the sense of form] is actuality, and thus soul is the actuality of a body as above characterized.

Now the word actuality has two senses corresponding respectively to the possession of knowledge and the actual exercise of knowledge. It is obvious that the soul is actuality in the first sense, viz. that of knowledge as possessed, for both sleeping and waking presuppose the existence of soul, and of these waking corresponds to actual knowing, sleeping to knowledge possessed but not employed, and, in the history of the individual, knowledge comes before its employment or exercise ("On Soul" 171-72; 412a 16-26).

Thus the soul is the actuality of the body and they are one. The soul is also the repository of knowledge which it possesses in potentiality (as one sleeping) and in actuality (as one who is awake). Aristotle concludes his first definition of soul by writing:

That is why the soul is the first grade of actuality of a natural body having life potentially in it. The body so described is a body which is organized.... If, then, we
have to give a general formula applicable to all kinds of soul, we must describe it as the first grade of actuality of a natural organized body. That is why we can wholly dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one: it is as meaningless as to ask whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one, or generally the matter of a thing and that of which it is the matter. Unity has many senses (as many as "is" has), but the most proper and fundamental sense of both is the relation of an actuality to that of which it is the actuality.... What is soul?—an answer which applies to it in its full extent. It is substance in the sense which corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing's essence. That means it is "the essential whatness" of a body of the character just assigned [viz. (sic) organized, or possessed potentially of life] ("On Soul" 172: 412a 27-28, 412b 3-11).

Aristotle defined the soul as the form of the body, and together these comprise the compound/complex that is a human being. This soul, the form of the body, is also the repository of knowledge. This leads to Aristotle's discussion of the human being as a knower. In Book II Chapter 5 of "On Soul" he writes:
We can speak of something as "a knower" either (a) as when we say that man is a knower, meaning that man falls within the class of beings that know or have knowledge, or (b) as when we are speaking of a man who possesses a knowledge of grammar...but there is a difference between their respective potentialities, the one (a) being a potential knower because his kind or matter is such and such, the other (b), because he can...realize his knowledge in actual knowing at will. This implies a third meaning of "a knower" (c), one who is already realizing his knowledge—he is a knower in actuality and in the most proper sense is knowing ("On Soul" 185; 417a 23-29).

These three senses of knowing are relevant to Oedipus Rex. In the first sense Oedipus, as a human being, has the potential to know and therefore not act on his base instincts. He possesses the potential to exercise good judgment. In the second sense he possesses knowledge of right from wrong. He demonstrates this knowledge through the exercise of either virtue or vice. Aristotle says these two potentialities of knowing are transitional. In the third sense, knowing through realization, one moves from being a potential knower to an actual knower. Oedipus comes to this third level of knowing when he finally learns his true family origins and relationships.

Knowledge derives from the mind or intellect, which is embedded in the soul, which is the form of the body, which constitutes the compound/complex that is a
human being. If these senses of *knowing* are fundamental to the universal human experience, then the exercise of freewill is both fundamental to the human being and universal to the human race. Therefore, these same principles apply to the freewill choices of Oedipus.
CHAPTER FIVE: VIRTUES AND VICES

HAPPINESS FOUND IN VIRTUE

The metaphysical realities revealed through Oedipus' actions go beyond the noble/base, advantageous/injurious or pleasant/painful noted above. Oedipus' actions can be further defined as either virtuous (virtue) or vicious (vice). Virtue and vice are metaphysically manifested through Oedipus' actions in the play.

The subject of drama is the action of the characters. If, as Aristotle says, human actions always aim at some good, then people act with the expectation of attaining happiness. Aristotle contends the pursuit of happiness is found in virtue. He concludes in Book I Chapter 7 of the "Nicomachean Ethics" that a life lived in virtue is the human good through which happiness is attained:

Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle...human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete ("Nic. Ethics" 318-19; 1098a 8, 16).

Virtue is human behavior lying in the median or mean. The antithesis of virtue is vice with its two extremes of excess or defect (deficiency). Since human actions concern the exercise of virtue or vice, these terms require definition and explication.
ARISTOTELIAN DIFFERENTIATION OF VIRTUES

In Book I Chapter 13 of the "Nicomachean Ethics" Aristotle asserts two broad categories of virtues, viz., intellectual and moral virtues. In Book II Chapter 1, Aristotle explains that intellectual virtues require both life experience and teaching; and must develop over time. Whereas moral virtues do not come to us by nature but develop through habit. "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit" ("Nic. Ethics" 331; 1103a 24-25).

INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

In Book VI Chapter 3 Aristotle posits five intellectual virtues which the soul possesses either by affirmation or denial. They are as follows:

— scientific knowledge (Book VI Chapter 3):

...the object of scientific knowledge is of necessity.

Therefore it is eternal...and things that are eternal are ungenerated and imperishable.... And all teaching starts from what is already known...sometimes through induction and sometimes by syllogism.... Scientific knowledge is, then, a state of capacity to demonstrate ...when a man believes in a certain way and the starting-points are known to him that he has scientific knowledge ("Nic. Ethics" 426-27; 1139b 22-24, 26-27, 30-32).

— art (Book VI Chapter 4):
All art is concerned with coming into being, i.e. with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being, and whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made...Art, then, as has been said, is a state concerned with making, involving a true course of reasoning, and lack of art on the contrary is a state concerned with making, involving a false course of reasoning ("Nic. Ethics" 427-28; 1140a 10-12, 19-21).

— practical wisdom (Book VI Chapter 5):

...it is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man ("Nic. Ethics" 428; 1140b 5).

— intuitive reason (Book VI Chapter 6):

...the first principle from which what is scientifically known follows cannot be an object of scientific knowledge, of art, or of practical wisdom; for that which can be scientifically known can be demonstrated, and art and practical wisdom deal with things that are variable. Nor are these first principles the objects of philosophic wisdom, for it is a mark of the philosopher to have demonstration about some things. If, then, the states of
mind by which we have truth and are never deceived about things invariable or even variable are scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, and intuitive reason, and it cannot be any of the three (i.e. practical wisdom; scientific knowledge, or philosophic wisdom), the remaining alternative is that it is intuitive reason that grasps the first principles ("Nic. Ethics" 430; 1140b 33-1141a 8).

— wisdom (Book VI Chapter 7):

...wisdom must plainly be the most finished of the forms of knowledge. It follows that the wise man must not only know what follows from the first principles, but must also possess truth about the first principles. Therefore wisdom must be intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge—scientific knowledge of the highest objects which has received as it were its proper completion ("Nic. Ethics" 430; 1141a 16-19).

In the study of Oedipus Rex three of the intellectual virtues are of interest.

First, Oedipus' behavior indicates a lack of practical wisdom, for in Book VI Chapter 5 Aristotle explains, "...it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself...about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general..." ("Nic. Ethics" 428;
An example of Oedipus' failure occurs when he chooses to ignore Jocasta's plea to stop the inquiry into his family lineage.

Second, Oedipus' behavior also indicates a lack of intuitive reasoning vis à vis the first principles, viz., natural law and self-preservation. This happens when he gouges out his eyes.

Third, Oedipus' behavior indicates a failure to grasp philosophic wisdom. Aristotle calls philosophic wisdom the union of scientific knowledge and intuitive reason. Philosophic wisdom concerns, "things that are highest by nature" ("Nic. Ethics" 431; 1141b 4). Despite his patricide, incest and being the source of the plague for which he must be exiled, Oedipus fails to grasp he no longer rules in Thebes. At the end of the play he attempts to exercise his authority after the governance of Thebes has clearly passed to Creon. Between Oedipus' poor choices, demonstrable emotional turmoil and violence, his behavior indicates a failure to exercise these intellectual virtues.

MORAL VIRTUES

Aristotle asserts the soul has a rational and irrational principle. In Book VI Chapter 2 of the "Nicomachean Ethics", he identifies three things in the soul which control action and truth, viz., sensation, reason and desire:

...since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just
what the former asserts...choice is either desiderative reason or ratiocinative desire, and such an origin of action is a man.....The work of both the intellectual parts, then, is truth ("Nic. Ethics" 425-26; 1139a 22-25, 1139b 4, 12).

In Book II Chapter 8 of the "Nicomachean Ethics" Aristotle explains the three dispositions regarding the relationship of virtue (the intermediate) to vice (and its extremes of excess and deficiency):

There are three kinds of disposition, then, two of them vices, involving excess and deficiency respectively, and one a virtue, viz. the mean, and all are in a sense opposed to all; for the extreme states are contrary both to the intermediate state and to each other, and the intermediate to the extremes; as the equal is greater relatively to the less, less relatively to the greater, so the middle states are excessive relatively to the deficiencies, deficient relatively to the excesses, both in passions and actions. For the brave man appears rash relatively to the coward, and cowardly relatively to the rash man; and similarly the temperate man appears self-indulgent relatively to the insensible man, insensible relatively to the self-indulgent, and the liberal man prodigal relatively
to the mean man, mean relatively to the prodigal. Hence also the people at extremes push the intermediate man each over to the other, and the brave man is called rash by the coward, cowardly by the rash man, and correspondingly in the other cases ("Nic. Ethics" 344-45; 1108b 11-25).

So in Book II Chapter 7 (pages 341-44; 1107a 26-1108a 28), Aristotle explains the moral virtues and vices in relation to conduct; listing their various means, excesses and defects (deficiencies). For the purposes of clarity the following table has been constructed from the subject matter of this chapter.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MORAL VIRTUES AND VICES</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>EXCESS</th>
<th>DEFICIENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>courage: feelings of fear and confidence</td>
<td>no name: excess in fearlessness</td>
<td>coward: excess in fear or falling short in confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rash: excess in confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>temperance: pleasures and pains</td>
<td>self-indulgence</td>
<td>no name: not often found</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liberality: giving/taking of money</td>
<td>prodigality: exceeds in spending</td>
<td>meanness: exceeds in taking and falls short in spending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and falls short in taking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proper pride: honor and dishonor;</td>
<td>empty vanity: exceeding desire</td>
<td>undue humility: falls short in desire for honor and is unambitious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concerning small honors; intermediate</td>
<td>for honor is ambitious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has no name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good temper: anger</td>
<td>irascible</td>
<td>inirascible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>truthfulness</td>
<td>boastfulness</td>
<td>mock modesty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ready-witted: pleasantness in the giving of amusement</td>
<td>buffoonery</td>
<td>boor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friendliness: pleasantness exhibited in life in general</td>
<td>obsequious: if there is no aim flatterer: if seeking advantage</td>
<td>quarrelsome/surly: unpleasant in all circumstances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aristotle also considers two passions that are not virtues but are related to conduct (cf. "Nic. Ethics" 344; 1108a 29-1108b 10). The first concerns shame and the second concerns the pains and pleasures at a neighbor's misfortune. A second table has been constructed for clarity.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PASSIONS OF SHAME AND PAINS/PLEASURES AT OTHERS' MISFORTUNE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MEAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>righteous indignation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several of these virtues, vices and passions are applicable to Oedipus' behavior.

VIRTUE OF COURAGE

In Book II Chapter 7 of the "Nicomachean Ethics" Aristotle outlines the virtue of courage:

With regard to feelings of fear and confidence courage is the mean; of the people who exceed, he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name (many of the states have no name), while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward ("Nic. Ethics" 341; 1107a 32-1107b 3).

The exercise of courage requires one to be already in a state of character to be courageous. This derives from the principle that the virtuous person does virtuous
Aristotle asserts when courage is exercised it manifests itself as bravery in the face of something terrible, the most terrible being death; specifically death for a noble cause, e.g., war. In the main section on courage in Book III Chapter 7 he writes:

The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and at the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way the rule directs. Now the end of every activity is conformity to the corresponding state of character. This is true, therefore, of the brave man as well as of others. But courage is noble. Therefore the end also is noble; for each thing is defined by its end. Therefore it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs ("Nic. Ethics" 363; 1115b 18-24).

The consideration of courage is important vis-à-vis Oedipus' behavior, because of its two opposing vices. In Chapter 7 of the same Book Aristotle describes the rash man. This individual exceeds in confidence about what is really terrible. Such a person is boastful but, when situations become intense, the boastfulness disappears and the individual demonstrates the vice of cowardice. Aristotle writes:
The rash man, however, is also thought to be boastful and only a pretender to courage; at all events, as the brave man is with regard to what is terrible, so the rash man wishes to appear; and so he imitates him in situations where he can. Hence also most of them are a mixture of rashness and cowardice; for, while in these situations they display confidence, they do not hold their ground against what is really terrible ("Nic. Ethics" 363; 1115b 29-33).

From his breakdown at the start of his investigation to his self-blinding, this definition of the rash man accurately characterizes Oedipus’ behavior. His royal demeanor is only the mask of a man of courage veiling a rash man. For, in the same chapter, Aristotle concludes:

The coward, then, is a despairing sort of person; for he fears everything. The brave man, on the other hand, has the opposite disposition; for confidence is the mark of a hopeful disposition. The coward, the rash man, and the brave man, then, are concerned with the same objects but are differently disposed towards them; for the first two exceed and fall short, while the third holds the middle, which is the right position; and the rash men are
precipitate, and wish for dangers beforehand but draw
back when they are in them, while brave men are keen in
the moment of action, but quiet beforehand ("Nic. Ethics" 363-64;
1116a 2-9).

VIRTUE OF TEMPERANCE

Temperance is the virtuous mean between pleasure and pain. Aristotle does
not name the deficiency of temperance, but today it might be identified as
abstemiousness. The excess of temperance is self-indulgence which is most relevant to
our study. In Book III Chapter 11 of the "Nic. Ethics", Aristotle explains:

The temperate man occupies a middle position with
regard to these objects. For he neither enjoys the things
that the self-indulgent man enjoys most—but rather
dislikes them—nor in general the things that he should
not, nor anything of this sort to excess, nor does he feel
pain or craving when they are absent, or does so only to
a moderate degree, and not more than he should, nor
when he should not, and so on; but the things that, being
pleasant, make for health or for good condition, he will
desire moderately and as he should, and also other
pleasant things if they are not hindrances to these ends,
or contrary to what is noble, or beyond his means. For
he who neglects these conditions loves such pleasures
more than they are worth, but the temperate man is not 
that sort of person, but the sort of person that right rule 
prescribes ("Nic. Ethics" 372; 1119a 11-20).

As already noted the excessive vice opposed to temperance is self-indulgence. 
Aristotle considers it a voluntary state by which an individual excessively loves 
pleasure. In Book III Chapter 11 he explains:

The self-indulgent man, then, craves for all pleasant 
things or those that are most pleasant, and is led by his 
appetite to choose these at the cost of everything else; 
hence he is pained both when he fails to get them and 
when he is merely craving for them (for appetite involves 
pain); but it seems absurd to be pained for the sake of 
pleasure ("Nic. Ethics" 371-72; 1119a 1-5).

Aristotle considers self-indulgence a matter of deeper reproach because in Chapter 12 
of the same Book he writes, "it is easier to become accustomed to its objects, since 
there are many things of this sort in life, and the process of habituation to them is 
free from danger" ("Nic. Ethics" 372; 1119a 26-27).

Discussion of self-indulgence is important to the analysis of Oedipus' behavior. 
Aristotle considers the conduct of the self-indulgent man equivalent to childish, self-
destructive tantrums. In the same chapter he writes:

The name self-indulgence is applied also to childish 
faults; for they bear a certain resemblance to what we
have been considering.... The transference of the name seems not a bad one; for that which desires what is base and which develops quickly ought to be kept in a chastened condition, and these characteristics belong above all to appetite and to the child, since children in fact live at the beck and call of appetite, and it is in them that the desire for what is pleasant is strongest. If, then, it is not going to be obedient and subject to the ruling principle, it will go to great lengths; for in an irrational being the desire for pleasure is insatiable even if it tries every source of gratification, and the exercise of appetite increases its innate force, and if appetites are strong and violent they even expel the power of calculation. Hence they should be moderate and few, and should in no way oppose the rational principle—and this is what we call an obedient and chastened state—and as the child should live according to the direction of his tutor, so the appetitive element should live according to rational principle. Hence the appetitive element in a temperate man should harmonize with the rational principle; for the noble is the mark at which both aim, and the temperate man craves for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought;
and this is what rational principle directs ("Nic. Ethics" 373; 1119a 33-1119b 17).

Indeed, an accurate characterization of Oedipus’ self-blinding is analogous to the childish self-destructive behavior of children today who cut themselves to alleviate distress. Oedipus’ visceral responses to events during (and prior to) the play indicates the vice of self-indulgence.

VIRTUE OF PROPER PRIDE

The next point of interest has to do with honor and dishonor. The virtue is called pride, or more accurately proper pride. This pride does not have the same connotation as the first of the capital vices of the Christian era. In Book IV Chapter 3 of the "Nic. Ethics", Aristotle describes proper pride:

Pride seems even from its name to be concerned with great things.... Now the man is thought to be proud who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them; for he who does so beyond his deserts is a fool, but no virtuous man is foolish or silly.... The proud man, then, is an extreme in respect of the greatness of his claims, but a mean in respect of the rightness of them; for he claims what is in accordance with his merits, while others go to excess or fall short ("Nic. Ethics" 383; 1123a 33-1123b 2, 12-14).
In the same place Aristotle identifies the excessive vice as vanity. Namely, an excessive ambitious desire for honor.

On the other hand, he who thinks himself worthy of great things, being unworthy of them, is vain; though not every one who thinks himself worthy of more than he really is worthy of is vain ("Nic. Ethics" 383; 1123b 6-7).

The deficiency of proper pride is undue humility, viz., an inadequate desire for honor and lack of ambition.

The man who thinks himself worthy of less than he is really worthy of is unduly humble, whether his deserts be great or moderate, or his deserts be small but his claims yet smaller. And the man whose deserts are great would seem *most* unduly humble; for what would he have done if they had been less? ("Nic. Ethics" 383; 1123b 8-11).

Undue humility does not accurately characterize Oedipus' behavior in his initial exchange with the elders nor his opening remarks for the murder investigation. These behaviors come under the vice associated with truthfulness.

Rather, here, the vice most relevant to Oedipus and matters of honor comes under vanity. As noted earlier, Oedipus had solved the riddle of the Sphinx. He therefore believed that he would prove equally successful in solving Laius' murder,
bringing him even more honor. This ambition for more honor led to his decision to pursue the murder investigation, which led to his downfall.

VIRTUE OF GOOD-TEMPER

The virtue and vices associated with anger are good-temper, irascibility and inirascibility. Aristotle sees good temper as the mean (median) to anger but has difficulty naming the excess and deficiency and settles on the two terms above. In Book IV Chapter 5 he describes the good tempered man as:

The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised. This will be the good-tempered man, since good temper is praised. For the good-tempered man tends to be unperturbed and not to be led by passion, but to be angry in the manner, at the things, and for the length of time, that the rule dictates; but he is thought to err rather in the direction of deficiency; for the good-tempered man is not revengeful, but rather tends to make allowances ("Nic. Ethics" 389; 1125b 32-1126a 3).

However, it is the excess of anger that is relevant to Oedipus. His eruptive behaviors towards the crowd, Tiresias, Creon, the Shepherd and Jocasta demonstrates this excess. Aristotle writes that a person may be angry at various times, and to varying degrees, but not all the degrees at the same time.
The excess can be manifested in all the points that have been named (for one can be angry with the wrong persons, at the wrong things, more than is right, too quickly, or too long); yet all are not found in the same person. Indeed they could not; for evil destroys even itself, and if it is complete becomes unbearable

("Nic. Ethics" 390; 1126a 9-13).

Consequently, the characterization of Oedipus' anger is closest to that of the bad-tempered.

We call bad-tempered those who are angry at the wrong things, more than is right, and longer, and cannot be appeased until they inflict vengeance or punishment...

bad-tempered people are worse to live with

("Nic. Ethics" 390; 1126a 27-28).

Given Oedipus' excessive angry responses and his self-mutilation, the classification of bad-tempered irascibility seems an appropriate vice to apply to him.

PASSION OF SHAME

Shame is a passion, not a virtue. Aristotle calls it a feeling rather than a state of character. He says it is a fear of dishonor and is becoming only in young people who live their lives by their feelings and thereby make many mistakes. In Chapter 9 of Book IV of the "Nic. Ethics" he defines it as:
...a kind of fear of dishonour, and produces an effect similar to that produced by fear of danger; for people who feel disgraced blush, and those who fear death turn pale. Both, therefore, seem to be in a sense bodily conditions, which is thought to be characteristic of feeling than of a state of character ("Nic. Ethics" 396; 1128b 11-13).

In relation to Oedipus’ behavior this feeling of shame is probably responsible for his self-mutilation. It could also be his reason for murdering Laius’ prior to the action of the play. While Aristotle finds shame becoming in youth, even desirable, it is not so for adults. In the same Chapter he writes:

For the sense of disgrace is not even characteristic of a good man, since it is consequent on bad actions (for such actions should not be done; and if some actions are disgraceful in very truth and others only according to common opinion, this makes no difference; for neither class of actions should be done, so that no disgrace should be felt); and it is a mark of a bad man even to be such as to do any disgraceful action ("Nic. Ethics" 397; 1128b 20-25).

Prior to the action of the play, in the heat of anger, Oedipus met and murdered his father. This action manifests the vice of bad-temper. Therefore, when the shame of
this event came upon him late in the play, his excessive self-destructive reaction indicates the shame of a bad man.
CHAPTER SIX: VIRTUE OF JUSTICE

JUSTICE: THE MOST COMPLETE VIRTUE

The exercise of both virtue and vice are the consequence of habitual behavior. It is essential to practice virtue in order to act justly with others. In Book II Chapter 1 of the "Nic. Ethics" Aristotle explains how virtue is perfected through repetition until it becomes a habit:

This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference,
then, whether we form habits of one kind or another
from our very youth; it makes [sic] a very great
difference, or rather all the difference ("Nic. Ethics" 332;
1103b 13-25).

In other words, our state of character is composed of the sum total of actions we take
during the course of our lives. These habitual behaviors become our response to
various stimuli and define our character as good or ill. Consequently, developing
habits of virtue, i.e., doing virtuous acts, becomes paramount as soon as we attain
our age of reason.

Not listed among the moral virtues in Book II Chapter 7 is justice. However,
Aristotle considers it the most complete of virtues. In Book V Chapter 1, he describes
both justice and injustice as,

...that kind of state of character which makes people
disposed to do what is just and makes them act justly and
wish for what is just; and similarly by injustice that state
which makes them act unjustly and wish for what is
unjust ("Nic. Ethics" 397; 1129a 6-10).

In the same Chapter Aristotle explains why justice is the most complete virtue in
relation to others, particularly for a ruler:

It is complete because he who possesses it can exercise
his virtue not only in himself but towards his neighbour
also; for many men can exercise virtue in their own
affairs, but not in their relations to their neighbour. This is why the saying of Bias is thought to be true, that "rule will show the man"; for a ruler is necessarily in relation to other men and a member of a society. For this same reason justice, alone of the virtues, is thought to be "another's good" [per Plato's Republic], because it is related to our neighbour; for it does what is advantageous to another, either a ruler or a copartner ("Nic. Ethics" 399-400; 1129b 31-1130a 5).

While the just ruler does what is advantageous for his subjects, Oedipus violated this mandate in every sense.

RULER AS EXEMPLAR FOR THE POLITY

It could be said that a ruler's virtue is a sign of personal integrity which reflects upon the polity. Warner Berthoff, in his book Literature and the Continuances of Virtue, writes: "That significant virtue is politically collective and yet emanates from the spirit of an individual ruler is of the essence of the classical and imperial ideal" (Berthoff 47).

Bernard Knox, in his previously noted essay "Sophocles' Oedipus", explains the word Tyrannos does not have the same connotation for the ancient Greeks as it does for us. Today, a good king is one who rises to power through heredity, but a tyrant is one who illegitimately seizes power. But the true meaning of the word tyrant refers to someone who seizes power through brains and force and is, therefore, the
legitimate ruler. This is in tune with Knox's previously noted Greek ideal of manifesting their own destiny. However, Knox points out a great paradox here regarding Oedipus' status and relationship to Thebes. Oedipus Tyrannos is an outsider who is also the ultimate insider of the Theban royal family. Knox writes:

This title of Oedipus, tyrannos [sic emphasis added], is one of the most powerful ironies of the play, for, although Oedipus does not know it, he is not only tyrannos, the outsider who came to power in Thebes, he is also the legitimate king by birth, for he was born the son of Laios. Only when his identity is revealed can he properly be called king: and the chorus refers to him by this title for the first time in the great ode which it sings after Oedipus knows the truth (Knox 5-6).

Oedipus is not just a subject of Thebes but the rightful heir to the throne, with all the duties and responsibilities appertaining to his station. When the ruler is virtuous in behavior there exists a state of virtue among the populace of the polity. If, however, the ruler exhibits behavior indicative of a failure to exercise virtue, the same state of moral corruption exists among that populace. This comes at a terrible cost to the ruler and the polity. Although Oedipus should be the exemplar, he is susceptible to the same vices as the common people. If the ruler cannot live a virtuous life, the citizens suffer. Thus Oedipus' behavior brings plague to his city.
The following evidence highlights the metaphysical truth behind Oedipus' actions. Summarizing the vices observed and identified, this is an indictment cataloguing his crimes against King Laius and the people of Thebes:

— Justice is the most complete virtue in the fullest sense because it is exercised in relation to others, in this instance toward King Laius and the people of Thebes. Oedipus is the legitimate heir to the throne and, as heir, is bound through justice and fealty to its Sovereign and subjects.

— Oedipus murdered the rightful ruler of Thebes and brought plague to the city through his failure to exercise the following moral and intellectual virtues:

  ○ Intellectual virtues:

    • Practical wisdom: failure to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself and others, and what is conducive to the good life in general, e.g., when Oedipus ignored Jocasta’s plea to stop the inquiry into his family lineage.

    • Intuitive reasoning: the first principles of existence, viz., an innate sense of natural law and self-preservation; e.g., when Oedipus gouges out his eyes.

    • Philosophic wisdom: the virtue uniting scientific knowledge and intuitive reason; philosophic wisdom concerns things that are highest by nature, e.g., when, despite all the horror he has caused, Oedipus fails to grasp he no longer rules in Thebes.

  ○ Moral virtues:
• Rashness rather than courage.

• Self-indulgence rather than temperance, manifested in base desires and violently childish tantrums.

• Bad temper rather than its mean, viz., good-temper.

• Vanity rather than proper pride, manifested in ambition for honor.

This catalogue of Oedipus’ actions reveals their true nature as vices, i.e., vicious crimes against King Laius and the people of Thebes. Yet, this same indictment clearly highlights the need for the exercise of virtue.

NECESSITY OF VIRTUE FOR THE POLITY

The happiness of the polity and its citizens requires exercise of virtue. In Chapter 9 of Book I Aristotle notes:

The answer to the question we are asking is plain also from the definition of happiness; for it has been said to be a virtuous activity of soul, of a certain kind.... And this will be found to agree with what we said at the outset; for we stated the end of political science to the best end, and political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts ("Nic. Ethics" 323; 1099b 25-26, 29-31).
Oedipus' conduct is the antithesis of the aim of political science, viz., to make his subjects capable of good and noble acts. According to Aristotle, the worst man exercises wickedness towards himself and others, as Oedipus did throughout the play. In Book V Chapter 1, Aristotle distinguishes between the worst man and the best man:

Now the worst man is he who exercises his wickedness both towards himself and towards his friends, and the best man is not he who exercises his virtue towards himself but he who exercises it towards another; for this is a difficult task. Justice in this sense, then, is not part of virtue but virtue entire, nor is the contrary injustice a part of vice but vice entire. What the difference is between virtue and justice in this sense is plain from what we have said; they are the same but their essence is not the same; what, as a relation to one's neighbour, is justice is, as a certain kind of state without qualification, virtue ("Nic. Ethics" 400; 1130a 6-13).

Aristotle asserts that one act of virtue or vice does not make an individual completely good or completely wicked. But the exception to this is the virtue of justice. Aristotle contends the exercise of justice is virtue in its fullest sense, and its contrary, the exercise of injustice, is vice in its fullest sense. Therefore, in violating justice, Oedipus violated the most complete virtue. His embodied actions reveal
intangible concepts of vanity, anger and injustice becoming a tangible and dire reality. Oedipus’ unjust actions constitute vice (i.e., viciousness) in the fullest sense of the word towards the polity and its citizens. Through his violation of the virtue of justice, we see Oedipus’ character.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING WITH CHARACTER

DISTINGUISHING THE VIRTUOUS FROM THE VICIOUS

Character reveals the state of mind of an individual, whether virtuous or vicious. Aristotle considers virtue and vice a universal issue among human beings. In Chapter 2 of the "Poetics" he explains the relationship of virtue and vice to tragedy.

The objects the imitator represents are actions, with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad—the diversities of human character being nearly always derivative from this primary distinction, since the line between virtue and vice is one dividing the whole of mankind. It follows, therefore, that the agents represented must be either above our own level of goodness, or beneath it, or just as we are ("Poetics" 625-26; 1448a 1-4).

Aristotle insists that effective drama requires the moral standing of the characters be either above or below that of the standards of the audience. Virtue and vice are universal constitutive elements of human behavior. So the exercise of virtue or vice distinguishes the moral superiority or inferiority of the characters of a play. In Chapter 13 of the "Poetics" he explains that the protagonist should be an,
...intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-
eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however,
is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by
some error of judgement, of the number of those in the
enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e.g.
Oedipus ("Poetics" 639-40; 1453a 7-10).

Although the ruler of Thebes, Oedipus’ moral standing is inferior to that of his
audience due to his choices on and off stage. And, in Book I Chapter 10 of the
"Nicomachean Ethics" Aristotle defines character as the consequence of cumulative
choices:

If activities are, as we said, what gives life its character,
no happy man can become miserable; for he will never
do the acts that are hateful and mean. For the man who
is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of
life becomingly and always makes the best of
circumstances ("Nic. Ethics" 325; 1100b 33-1101a 2).

As previously noted, Aristotle contends our choices are rooted in the belief
that they will lead to happiness. The cumulative effect of these choices defines
character. Since the human good involves the soul acting in accordance with virtue.
Then goodness ensues from the exercise of virtue. And this goodness results from
things found in the soul where reason and desire reside. In Book II Chapter 6 of the
"Nic. Ethics", Aristotle continues his definition of character through virtue:
Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme ("Nic. Ethics" 340; 1106b 36-1107a 8).

Oedipus’ character is observed through his actions, and they are excessive. They certainly do not demonstrate the actions of a good-tempered man. In Book I Chapter 13 of the "Nic. Ethics" Aristotle notes:

For in speaking about a man’s character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise virtues ("Nic. Ethics" 330-31; 1103a 7-10).
Dramatic action consists of the exercise of virtue or vice by the characters. In *Oedipus Rex* we discern the metaphysical truth behind Oedipus’ actions in the play. So, when we see Oedipus make a choice and take action, we can identify it as either a virtue or vice and indicative of his character. Doing good is what brings happiness, viz., doing virtuous acts. Actions define character and shape the way a person adapts to circumstances. Oedipus, in the exercise of his freewill, was unable to adapt to his changing circumstances. In Book III Chapter 5 of the "Nic. Ethics" Aristotle writes:

The end, then, being what we wish for, the means what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning means must be according to choice and voluntary. Now the exercise of virtues is concerned with means. Therefore virtue also is in our power, and so too vice. For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and *vice versa*; so that, if to act, where this is noble, is in our power, not to act, which will be base, will also be in our power, and if not to act, where this is noble, is in our power, to act, which will be base, will also be in our power. Now if it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise in our power not to do them, and this was what being good or bad meant, then it is in our power to be virtuous or vicious ("Nic. Ethics" 357; 1113b 2-14).
Oedipus’ angry responses to his plight were choices and actions within his power. These same voluntary, freewill choices and actions demonstrate an inability to adapt to changing circumstances as a virtuous man should. Thus wickedness, Aristotle contends, is a voluntary act of the will. And so, Oedipus’ character is revealed, and it is vicious:

The saying that "no one is voluntarily wicked nor involuntarily happy" seems to be partly false and partly true; for no one is involuntarily happy, but wickedness is voluntary. Or else we shall have to dispute what has just been said, at any rate, and deny that man is a moving principle or begetter of his actions as of children. But if these facts are evident and we cannot refer actions to moving principles other than those in ourselves, the acts whose moving principles are in us must themselves also be in our power and voluntary ("Nic. Ethics" 358; 1113b 15-21).

If happiness is found in the virtuous acts of a virtuous man, then Oedipus’ character was not virtuous. His pursuit of the murder investigation was rooted in his pursuit of a good he thought would make him happy. However, matters turned out badly for Oedipus because his pursuit of truth was rooted in vice rather than virtue. He had solved the riddle of the Sphinx and therefore believed he could be equally successful in solving Laius’ murder. His vanity, i.e., delighting in his intellect, can be
discerned from his first encounter with the town elders. But when he subsequently encountered resistance to his efforts, those extreme and excessive aspects of his character emerged. Oedipus' extreme responses are a consequence of self-begetting principles due to life long habits. His vicious outbursts of anger are actions contrary to one who is virtuous. Aristotle attests there is nothing more important for individual happiness than the exercise of virtue. In Book I Chapter 10 of the "Nic. Ethics" he writes,

...no function of man has so much permanence as virtuous activities...he will be engaged in virtuous action and contemplation, and he will bear the chances of life most nobly and altogether decorously ("Nic. Ethics" 325; 1100b 12, 19-20).

CONCLUSION

The human being seeks happiness. We pursue many things to make us happy such as health, home, family, or honor. But we seek these things, and more, for the sake of happiness. Yet, these pursuits do not always make us so. In Book I Chapter 7 of the "Nic. Ethics" Aristotle explains why happiness is so desirable as a final end:

...we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never

83
for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor in general, for anything other than itself ("Nic. Ethics" 317; 1097a 32-1097b 6).

This same pursuit of happiness is the subject of drama. The characters of the play find happiness or misery in these pursuits. So in Chapter 6 of the "Poetics" Aristotle writes:

Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its Fable or
Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing ("Poetics" 632; 1450a 16-22).

Drama represents mimesis of human actions, not mimesis of human beings. Dramatic plots are comprised of the action of human beings. These human actions are a consequence of a need to satisfy the appetitive parts of the soul, viz., desire and reason. This fundamental dramatic action demands a choice of virtue or vice.

Virtue or vice, happiness or misery, are the consequences for pursuing the satisfaction of the appetitive parts of the soul. Oedipus' freewill choices and actions arose from his soul, the form of his body. These cumulative choices and actions define his character. Oedipus' downfall is also a consequence of these freewill choices and actions. And these same freewill choices and actions constitute the Aristotelian metaphysical first principles made flesh through Sophocles' drama, Oedipus Rex. Therefore, the fundamental human struggle, viz., the exercise of virtue and rejection of vice, is a spiritual struggle.
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86


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APPENDIX: THE DRAMATIC ACTION OF OEDIPUS REX

PROLOGUE

A man of importance comes forward to speak to those gathered on the steps of his palace. Compassion colors his words as he speaks to them, inquiring why they have gathered there. His senses have been aroused by the smell of incense and the sound of funereal wailing in the streets. Hearing reports of a tumult from messengers he has now come forward to see for himself. In a gesture of solicitude he helps an old man to his feet and makes him the spokesman for the assembly. The ruler states:

You can trust me, I am ready to help.  
I'll do anything. I would be blind to misery  
not to pity my people kneeling at my feet (Prologue, lines 13-15).

The man of importance apparently identifies with the people and feels empathy towards their suffering. We suspect he may be the ruler of the city. Then the old man speaks and leaves no doubt: "Oh Oedipus, king of the land, our great power!" (Prologue, 16).

The old man explains the distress felt by those assembled, both young and old; identifying himself as a priest of Zeus. He tells Oedipus that the populace prays at the city temples for relief from its suffering:

Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops  
and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,  
and the women die in labor, children stillborn,  
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down  
on the city, his lightning slashing through us—  
raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating

90
the house of Cadmus! And black Death luxuriates
in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes (Prologue, 31-38).

These calamities seem to be total and unrelenting. Despite the people’s prayers there is no relief from this plague. Therefore the Priest and those assembled have come to Oedipus the King for help.

The assembly comes to Oedipus because he is unique among the people. He alone freed them from the Sphinx clearly indicating he enjoys the favor of divine providence. Now they come to him again for help:

Oh raise up our city, set us on our feet.
The omens were good that day you brought us joy—
be the same man today! (Prologue, 63-65).

Oedipus replies to the "children" of his kingdom with heartfelt pity. He is more distressed than any of his subjects:

Your pain strikes each of you alone, each
in the confines of himself, no other. But my spirit
grieves for the city, for myself and all of you (Prologue, 74-76).

Oedipus reveals that after personal emotional turmoil he sent his brother-in-law Creon to the Delphic Oracle to learn the reason for the ravaging plagues. Indeed, Creon is overdue but as soon as he returns Oedipus assures the citizens he will immediately reveal the oracle’s answer and follow its prescription:

But once he returns, then, then I’ll be a traitor
if I do not do all the god makes clear (Prologue, 88-89).

Relieved the Priest remarks that others see Creon approaching wearing a crown of laurel leaves. This indicates welcome news. Indeed Creon enters proclaiming that all will be well. Oedipus, anxious to hear the oracle, asks for a
report. Creon suggests they might enter the palace to discuss the matter but Oedipus will have none of it and says:

    Speak out,
speak to us all. I grieve for these, my people,
far more than I fear for my own life (Prologue, 104b-106).

Creon proceeds and begins with the remedy quoting the oracle:

    Drive the corruption from the land,
don’t harbor it any longer, past all cure,
don’t nurse it in your soil—root it out! (Prologue, 109-111).

Oedipus is perplexed because Creon has not stated the who, what, where, when or why of the plague on Thebes. However Creon continues on about the cure as if in a prophetic state himself. He finally relates the cause of the distress:

    Banish the man, or pay back blood with blood.
    Murder sets the plague-storm on the city (Prologue, 114-115a).

When Oedipus asks who was murdered, Creon relates the tale of Oedipus’ predecessor Laius. Oedipus recalls hearing about the man but, "I know—or so I’ve heard. I never saw the man myself" (Prologue, 118b-119).

Creon continues that Laius was killed and the oracle from Apollo calls for vengeance. "Pay the killers back—whoever is responsible" (Prologue, 122).

When Oedipus inquires as to the whereabouts of the murderers Creon explains they are in the city. Creon explains that Laius was murdered on his way to consult the oracle and there is one surviving witness to the crime and who was sure of only one thing. Oedipus asks,

    What’s that?
One thing could hold the key to it all,
a small beginning give us grounds for hope
(Prologue, 136b-138).
Creon relates that a band of thieves killed Laius. When Oedipus asks why they didn’t pursue the murderers Creon explains,

The singing, riddling Sphinx.
She...persuaded us to let the enemy go
and concentrate on what lay at our feet
(Prologue, 147b-149a).

Oedipus decides to reopen the investigation with a sense of righteous vengeance:

I'll start again—I’ll bring it all to light myself!
Apollo is right, and so are you Creon,
to turn our attention back to the murdered man.
Now you have me to fight for you, you’ll see:
I am the land’s avenger by all rights,
and Apollo’s champion too.
But not to assist some distant kinsman, no,
for my own sake I’ll rid us of this corruption
(Prologue, 150-157).

Oedipus, establishing himself as the avenger of the murder of Laius, sends the assembly to call the city before him for the justice he will bring to Thebes. The Priest leaves overjoyed:

Rise my sons. The kindness we came for
Oedipus himself volunteers himself.
Apollo has sent his word, his oracle—
Come down Apollo, save us, stop the plague
(Prologue, 165-168).

EPISODE 1

Oedipus re-enters from the palace. He addresses the people of the city and states that he will answer their prayers to the gods. Oedipus tells them, as a stranger to Thebes, he has no connection to the crime, but had he been present he would have solved the mystery. Now, as the ruler of Thebes, he orders the populace to reveal to
him the murderers. The only punishment will be banishment, "...nothing worse than exile, totally unharmed" (Episode 1, 261a).

When no one responds Oedipus offers a reward and assurance of gratitude.

Still no one responds. Then Oedipus’ tone changes to one of anger. He orders every Theban citizen to ostracize the murderer and drive him from the city because:

*He* is the plague, the heart of our corruption, 
as Apollo’s oracle has just revealed to me.  
So I honor my obligations:  
I fight for the god and for the murdered man  
(Episode 1, 276-279).

Then Oedipus vents his rage:

Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,  
a lone man unknown in his crime  
or one among many, let that man drag out  
his life in agony, step by painful step...  
(Episode 1, 280-283).

He then utters a severe judgment:

I curse myself as well...if by any chance  
he proves to be an intimate of our house,  
here at my hearth, with my full knowledge,  
may the curse I just called down on him strike me!  
(Episode 1, 284-287).

Oedipus then commands the people to perform these tasks for the sake of Oedipus, Apollo and their country. He berates them for taking no action to find the murderer, even if the gods did not urge it. Laius was their king. Now Oedipus is king holding both Laius’ throne and wife:

I hold the throne that he held then, possess his bed  
and a wife who shares our seed...why, our seed  
might be the same, children born of the same mother...  
(Episode 1, 295-297).
Then, in solidarity with the late king and his house, Oedipus proclaims his resolve to track down the murderers:

So I will fight for him as if he were my father,
stop at nothing, search the world
to lay my hands on the man who shed his blood...
(Episode 1, 301-303).

Oedipus then prays the gods to curse anyone or anything that does not comply with his command:

Let no crops grow out of the earth for them—
shrink their women, kill their sons,
burn them to nothing in this plague
that hits us now, or something even worse
(Episode 1, 306b-311).

But those loyal to Thebes will have divine providence on their side. Then a Leader of the assembly cries out, in fear of Oedipus’ curses, that Apollo should point out the murderer. Oedipus explains that no one can force the gods to act contrary to their will. So the Leader suggests that Tiresias might help:

I still believe...
Lord Tiresias sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo.
Anyone searching for the truth, my king,
might learn it from the prophet, clear as day
(Episode 1, 322b-325).

Oedipus explains that Tiresias has been sent for twice but has yet to arrive. This may indicate Tiresias’ reluctance to appear and prophesy. The Leader asserts that Tiresias must allay the old rumors and with Oedipus’ curses Tiresias should not fear to prophesy about Laius’ murderer. Oedipus responds, "He [Tiresias] didn’t flinch at murder, he’ll never flinch at words" (Episode 1, 336-337).

The Leader announces Tiresias’ approach,

Here is the one who will convict him, look,
they bring him on at last, the seer, the man of god. The truth lives inside him, him alone (Episode 1, 338-340a).

Oedipus addresses Tiresias as the master of the mysteries of their lives.

Oedipus praises Tiresias:

Blind as you are, you can feel all the more what sickness haunts our city. You my lord, are the one shield, the one savior we can find (Episode 1, 344-346).

Oedipus relates the oracle’s command to find the murderers of Laius to end the plague ravaging the city. He begs Tiresias to rescue them. Tiresias’ reply is ominous:

How terrible—to see truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees! I knew it well, but I put it from my mind, else I never would have come (Episode 1, 359b-362).

Oedipus inquires about this dire statement but Tiresias asks to be sent home to bear his burden as Oedipus must bear his. Oedipus interprets Tiresias’ response as an affront to the state and his person. Tiresias is an ingrate to the state that bred him by withholding the god’s words. Tiresias resists Oedipus’ pleading. Their exchange becomes heated and accusations fly. Oedipus comes to a boiling point when he accuses Tiresias of hatching the plot to murder Laius:

Oh I’ll let loose, I have such fury in me—now I see it all. You helped hatch the plot, you did the work, yes, short of killing him with your own hands (Episode 1, 393-396a).

Tiresias, incensed at the accusation, urges Oedipus to follow his own mandate and then reveals the truth:
Is that so!
I charge you, then, submit to that decree
you just laid down: from this day onward
speak to no one, not these citizens, nor myself.
You are the curse, the corruption of the land!
(Episode 1, 397b-401).

Oedipus is appalled and when he asks who made Tiresias tell such a story he replies: "You did, you forced me, twisted it out of me" (Episode 1, 407).

Oedipus rebukes threatens and cajoles the prophet who then reveals more, intimating a disorder in Oedipus’ family:

You cannot imagine...I tell you,
you and your loved one live together in infamy,
you cannot see how far you’ve gone in guilt
(Episode 1, 417b-419).

Oedipus threatens Tiresias again but Tiresias believes truth has the power to protect him. Oedipus further vilifies Tiresias and exclaims:

...you old man. You’ve lost your power,
stone-blind, stone-deaf—sense [sic], eyes blind as stone!
(Episode 1, 422b-423).

The Ruler continues to vent his fury. Calling Tiresias lost in blindness while Oedipus can’t be hurt because he sees the light. Tiresias replies that Oedipus’ destiny is in the hands of divine providence:

True, it is not your fate
to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough,
and he will take some pains to work this out
(Episode 1, 428b-430).

Vexed by Tiresias’ prophecies, Oedipus turns his suspicious anger towards Creon. Tiresias replies that Oedipus is the cause of his own downfall. Oedipus, ignoring Tiresias, begins a tirade against Creon. Accusing him of envy for the throne. He blames Creon for setting Tiresias upon him, whom he labels a quack and a blind
prophet. Oedipus ridicules Tiresias’ prophetic spirit since it was Oedipus, and not Tiresias, who solved the riddle of the Sphinx. Neither Tiresias’ gods nor his bird sacrifices did anything to end that crisis. Asserting his own power and self-reliance Oedipus declares:

No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark
(Episode 1, 451-453).

Oedipus declares that Creon’s plot to overthrow him will fail and those responsible for the conspiracy will pay dearly. The Leader speaks hoping to calm this hostile exchange. However, Tiresias insists on his right to reply. Tiresias serves Apollo and therefore utters this portentous prophecy:

So,
you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this.
You with your precious eyes,
you’re blind to the corruption of your life,
to the house you live in, those you live with—
who are your parents? Do you know? All unknowing
you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,
the dead below the earth and the living her above,
and the double lash of your mother and your father’s curse
will whip you from the land one day, their footfall
trampling you down in terror, darkness shrouding
your eyes that now can see the light!
(Episode 1, 468b-479a).

Oedipus threatens Tiresias with death and then commands him to leave.

Tiresias reminds Oedipus he would not have come except for Oedipus’ command. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of insanity. Tiresias responds that Oedipus’ parents found him quite sane and then prophesies, "This day will bring your birth and your destruction" (Episode 1, 499).
Oedipus dismisses Tiresias' statements as dark and murky riddles but Tiresias now turns the mockery back on the Ruler. "Ah, but aren't you the best man at solving riddles?" (Episode 1, 501).

Oedipus replies that Tiresias' mockery will reveal Oedipus' greatness. Tiresias intimates the irony of Oedipus' ability to solve riddles. "Your great good fortune, true, it was your ruin" (Episode 1, 503).

Tiresias, about to leave, stops to make one final prophecy:

...the man you've sought so long, proclaiming, cursing up and down, the murderer of Laius—he is here. A stranger, you may think, who lives among you, he soon will be revealed a native Theban but he will take no joy in the revelation. Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich, he will grope his way toward a foreign soil, a stick tapping before him step by step.

Revealed at last, brother and father both to the children he embraces, to his mother son and husband both—he sowed the loins his father sowed, he spilled his father's blood!

Go in and reflect on that, solve that. And if you've find I've lied from this day onward call the prophet blind (Episode 1, 507b-526).

EPISODE 2

Having heard reports of Oedipus' accusations, Creon returns to state he would rather die than live with a sullied reputation. The Leader replies that Oedipus' charge may have been provoked by anger. Creon counters that the accusation, that he had forced the prophet to lie, was made publicly. Oedipus enters and castigates Creon for returning to the palace, in view of his treachery:
Your treachery—you think I’d never detect it
creeping against me in the dark? Or sensing it,
not defend myself? Aren’t you the fool...
(Episode 2, 601-603).

Creon asks to explain himself but instead Oedipus pursues his inquiry about
Laius and Tiresias, catching Creon by surprise. Oedipus asks when Laius died and
Creon replies that it was a long time ago. Oedipus asks if the prophet was
prophesying at that time and did he ever accuse Oedipus of the crime. Creon replies
no and then adds indirect advice to Oedipus by replying, "I don’t know. And when I
don’t, I keep quiet" (Episode 2, 635).

Oedipus asks Creon directly if he colluded with Tiresias to blame Oedipus for
Laius’ death. Creon responds that what the seer says the seer says. But he wishes to
ask a question of Oedipus. Detailing his relationship to Oedipus as brother-in-law as
well as third among equals in power (cf. Episode 2, 647), Creon asks the rational
question:

...who in his right mind would rather rule
and live in anxiety than sleep in peace?
Particularly if he enjoys the same authority.
Not I, I’m not the man to yearn for kingship,
not with a king’s power in my hands. Who would?
No one with any sense of self-control
(Episode 2, 654-659).

Creon asserts that his position is better. People curry Creon’s favor to get to
Oedipus. Why would he give that up? He declares:

How could kingship
please me more than influence, power
without a qualm? I’m not that deluded yet,
to reach for anything but privilege outright,
profit free and clear.
Now all men sing my praises, all salute me,
now all who request your favors curry mine.
I am the best hope: success rests in me. Why give up that, I ask you, and borrow trouble? A man of sense, someone who sees things clearly would never resort to treason (Episode 2, 663b-673).

Creon then challenges Oedipus to go to Delphi himself and see whether the oracle was true. He criticizes Oedipus’ rash judgment and condemnation without proof. Creon declares:

But reject a friend, a kinsman? I would as soon tear out the life within us, priceless life itself. You’ll learn this well, without fail, in time. Time alone can bring the just man to light—the criminal you can spot in one short day (Episode 2, 686-690).

The Leader of the assembly states that jumping to conclusions may lead Oedipus to disaster. However, Oedipus, stating a view that is apparent in his behavior, rejects such caution:

When my enemy moves against me quickly, plots in secret, I move quickly too, I must, I plot and pay him back. Relax my guard a moment, waiting his next move—he wins his objective, I lose mine (Episode 2, 693-697a).

When Creon asks if Oedipus wants him banished, he replies he wants Creon dead. Creon asks Oedipus what he would do if he were wrong in judging Creon a mortal enemy. Oedipus retorts, "No matter—I must rule" (Episode 2, 703b).

Jocasta enters and rebukes both men for arguing in public when the city is in distress. Like a parent separating children, and indicative of her influence over Oedipus, she says to him, "Into the palace now. And Creon, you go home. Why make such a furor over nothing" (Episode 2, 713-714).
Like two bickering children Oedipus and Creon each complain to Jocasta about the behavior of the other. Creon then prays that he be cursed if he has wronged Oedipus. Jocasta and the Chorus intercede to ask Oedipus to relent and not condemn Creon on hearsay. Oedipus stubbornly quibbles and says, "Know full well, if this is what you want you want me dead or banished from the land" (Episode 2, 734-735).

The Chorus replies never, they would rather be stripped of the gods and of their loved ones before abandoning Oedipus; but this conflict between the two men is grief too much to bear. Oedipus finally relents and says, "Then let him go, even if it does lead to my ruin, my death or my disgrace, driven from Thebes for life" (Episode 2, 741b-743).

Creon's reply is both an observation and warning to Oedipus:

Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—
you will go too far. It's perfect justice:
natures like yours are hardest on themselves
(Episode 2, 746-748).

The Chorus asks Jocasta to help Oedipus into the palace but she wants to know what has happened. The Chorus explains the angry hearsay exchanged. Because of their distress they won't go into details. Oedipus remonstrates the Chorus for blunting his anger. The Chorus replies they are fully behind Oedipus. Since he has saved them in the past they expect him to succeed in resolving their present calamity:

My king,
I've said it once, I'll say it time and again—
I'd be insane, you know it,
senseless, ever to turn my back on you.
You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed, shattered—
straight on course. Now again, good helmsman,
steer us through the storm! (Episode 2, 761b-767a).
When the Chorus leaves Jocasta implores Oedipus to tell her the problem. Oedipus accuses Creon of scheming against him, through the prophet Tiresias, to blame Oedipus for Laius’ death. At which point Jocasta scoffs and relates how an oracle came from the priests of Apollo that her own son would strike down Laius. However, Laius’ death came at the hand of strangers at a place where three roads meet. Their son had been killed when he was only three days old. Laius fastened his ankles together and had a henchman fling the child onto a barren mountain to die:

There, you see?
Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby no more murdered his father than Laius suffered—his wildest fear—death at his own son’s hands. That’s how seers and all their revelations mapped out the future. Brush them from your mind. Whatever the god needs and seeks he’ll bring to light himself, with ease (Episode 2, 793b-800).

Instead of feeling comforted by Jocasta’s story Oedipus becomes agitated. He explains that hearing her story brought up some disturbing memories. He presses her about the precise location of Laius’ murder and the exact time it occurred. She explained that the heralds reported Laius’ death just before Oedipus arrived and was proclaimed king. Oedipus becomes panicked and demands a description of Laius. Jocasta states the he was just getting gray and his build was like Oedipus’. Oedipus becomes sick at heart:

I think I’ve just called down a dreadful curse upon myself—I simply didn’t know.... I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see (Episode 2, 820-821, 823).

Inquiring further into the circumstances of Laius’ death Oedipus learns from Jocasta that there was a party of five with Laius seated in a wagon. At this point
Oedipus cries out in distress. He learns that the report of Laius’ death came from a lone survivor of the attack, a slave. When Oedipus was crowned king this slave begged Jocasta to send him to the hinterlands. Oedipus wants him brought back quickly. Jocasta feels she has a right to know why he is so distressed. Oedipus, because no one means more to him than Jocasta, tells her how he had been brought up to think he was the son of the rulers of Corinth (Polybus and Merope). Then at a banquet a drunken man blurted out that he was not the son of Polybus and Merope. His parents denied it but Oedipus, true to form, pursued the matter at Delphi. Apollo wouldn’t answer his query. Instead the god gave him a terrible vision: "You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see—you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!"

(Episode 2, 873-875).

To thwart the vision he received at Delphi, Oedipus never returned to Corinth. In his flight he ended up at the intersection of the crossroads where Laius was killed. As Oedipus approached the spot he encountered a man of Laius’ description in a wagon and his retinue. They were about to push him aside off the road as they passed. In his anger Oedipus struck the driver. The man fitting Laius’ descriptions made to strike Oedipus. Instead Oedipus struck first and killed them all on the spot. Oedipus bemoans his earlier rash proclamations:

Oh, but if there is any blood-tie between Laius and this stranger... what man alive more miserable than I? More hated by the gods? I am the man no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house, law forbids it—not a word to me in public, driven out of every hearth and home. And all these curses I—no one but I
brought down these piling curses on myself? (Episode 2, 899-907).

However, Oedipus also bemoans the necessary exile from Corinth lest he kill Polybus and have sex with Merope according to the Delphic vision. His only hope is the surviving witness, a shepherd, who has been summoned. Oedipus tells Jocasta that if the shepherd’s story matches hers then Oedipus has avoided the worst. If the shepherd says that Laius was murdered by a band of thieves then the group Oedipus killed was not Laius’ party, but if it was one man then Oedipus is guilty. Jocasta rejects Oedipus reasoning based on her rejection of prophecy in general:

And even if he should vary his report
by one man more or less, still, my lord,
he could never make the murder of Laius
truly fit the prophecy. Apollo was explicit:
my son was doomed to kill my husband...my son,
poor defenseless thing, he never had a chance
to kill his father. They destroyed him first
(Episode 2, 941-947).

Oedipus again calls for the shepherd, then they both return to the palace.

EPISODE 3

Jocasta enters with a suppliant’s branch and incense. She tells the Chorus that Oedipus is out of his mind with anguish. She remains dismissive of the prophecies:

...he won’t admit
the latest prophecies are hollow as the old—
he’s at the mercy of every passing voice
if the voice tells of terror (Episode 3, 1002b-1005).

She now pleads with Apollo: "I come with prayers and offerings...I beg you,
Cleanse us, set us free of defilement!" (Episode 3, 1008-1009).

An elderly man now enters, who was not sent for, and inquires as to Oedipus’ whereabouts. The Leader of the assembly points out Jocasta the queen. The old man,
a Messenger of Corinth brings news that the people of Corinth want Oedipus to assume the throne because Polybus is dead. Jocasta sends someone to give Oedipus the news. She now feels she has proof of the prophecy's failure since Oedipus was in Thebes when Polybus died:

You prophecies of the gods, where are you now? This is the man that Oedipus feared for years, he fled him, not to kill him—now he's dead, quite by chance, a normal, natural death, not murdered by his son (Episode 3, 1036-1040a).

Oedipus emerges from the palace and learns of Polybus' death. He inquires about the nature of his death and learns it was from sickness and old age. Oedipus now rejoices in mocking the prophecies as well:

But now, all those prophecies I feared—Polybus packs them off to sleep with him in hell! They're nothing, worthless (Episode 3, 1062-1064a).

Jocasta repeats the futility of fearing so-called prophecies:

Fear? What should a man fear? it's all chance, chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth can see a day ahead, groping through the dark. Better to live at random, best we can. And as for this marriage with your mother—have no fear. And many a man before you, in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed. Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—(Episode 3, 1068b-1076).

However, because Merope still lives he remains anxious over the thought that he would couple with his mother. Then the Messenger from Corinth, seeking to allay Oedipus' fear, tells him that Polybus was not his father. When Oedipus asks why he called him son, the Messenger replies: "You were a gift, years ago—know for a fact he took you from my hands" (Episode 3, 1118b-1120a).
The Messenger explains that, while pasturing his sheep, he found Oedipus abandoned on Mount Cithaeron with his ankles pinned together. The resulting disability, his *swollen foot*, is the source of his name. When Oedipus asks who did this to him the Messenger replies that the one who gave Oedipus to him would know, a shepherd who called himself a servant of Laius. "The herdsman was his man" (Episode 3 1146b).

Oedipus, in great desperation, asks if anyone knows the whereabouts of this herdsman. The Leader of the assembly replies,

I think he’s the very shepherd you wanted to see, a moment ago. But the queen, Jocasta, she’s the one to say (Episode 3, 1153-1155a).

Oedipus turns to Jocasta for confirmation of the Messenger’s story. She begins to dissemble:

> That man...
> why ask? Old Shepherd, talk, empty nonsense, don’t give it another thought, don’t even think— (Episode 3, 1157b-1159).

But Oedipus pushes on:

What—give up now, with a clue like this? Fail to solve the mystery of my birth? Not for all the world! (Episode 3, 1160-1162a).

Jocasta begs him to stop for his own sake. Oedipus replies:

Courage! Even if my mother turns out to be a slave, and I a slave, three generations back, you would not seem common (Episode 3, 1164b-1167a).

Jocasta pleads with Oedipus to stop. She warns him: "You’re doomed—may you never fathom who you are!" (Episode 3, 1172b-1173).
Oedipus refuses to relent. He must know and commands a servant: "Hurry, fetch me the herdsman now! Leave her to glory in her royal birth" (Episode 3, 1174-1175).

Jocasta runs back into the palace screaming that Oedipus is the man of agony. The leader asks Oedipus about Jocasta’s departure and the strange silence that has followed. Will it lead to something terrible bursting forth? Oedipus, undaunted, exclaims:

Let it burst! Whatever will, whatever must!
I must know my birth, no matter how common it may be—I must see my origins face-to-face
(Episode 3, 1183-1185).

Then, he mocks Jocasta’s contention that all life is chance:

She perhaps, she with her woman’s pride may well be mortified by my birth, but I, I count myself the son of Chance, the great goddess, giver of all good things—
(Episode 3, 1186-1189).

Then Oedipus makes a sweeping statement about the goddess Chance as rash as his curses against the murderers of Laius: "I’ll never see myself disgraced. She is my mother!" (Episode 3, 1190).

EPISODE 4

An old man, a Shepherd, enters. Oedipus tells the assembly that he does not know the man. Oedipus asks the Messenger if this is the man from whom he received the child? The Messenger replies that it is. Oedipus begins to interrogate the old man commanding him to answer every question.

The old man reveals that although a slave he was born and raised in the palace. He worked as a shepherd most of his life, and grazed his flocks on Mount
Cithæron and its environs. When Oedipus asks him if he knows the Messenger from Corinth he becomes confused. He can’t remember. But the Messenger explains their history to all present:

No wonder he doesn’t know me, master.
But let me refresh his memory for him.
I’m sure he recalls old times we had
on the slopes of Mount Cithæron;
he and I, grazing our flocks, he with two
and I with one—we both struck up together,
three whole seasons, six months at a stretch
from spring to the rising of Arcturus in the fall,
then with winter coming on I’d drive my herds
to my own pens, and back he’d go with his
to Laius’ folds (Episode 4, 1241-1252a).

The Messenger then asks the Shepherd to verify his story but the Shepherd dissembles. The Messenger asks the Shepherd whether he gave him a small child to raise? When the Messenger tells the Shepherd that Oedipus is that same child the Shepherd shouts in rebuke: "Damn you, shut your mouth—quiet!" (Episode 4, 1260).

Oedipus threatens the Shepherd with lashing for not answering and orders the guards to seize him and twist his arms. After being threatened with torture the Shepherd confesses that he did give a child to the Messenger. Oedipus threatens the Shepherd and he in turn tries to avoid telling the story. Finally, under intense pressure, the Shepherd exclaims that the child was the son of Laius and the whole truth comes out:

SHEPHERD. All right! His son, they said it was—his son!
But the one inside, your wife,
She’d tell it best.

OEDIPUS. My wife—
she gave it to you?

SHEPHERD. Yes, yes my king.
OEDIPUS. Why, what for?

SHEPHERD. To kill it.

OEDIPUS. Her own child, how could she?

SHEPHERD. She was afraid—frightening prophecies.

OEDIPUS. What?

SHEPHERD. They said—he'd kill his parents (Episode 4, 1286-1299).

Oedipus asks the Shepherd why he gave him to the Messenger and he replies that he felt pity for the child. He hoped the Messenger would raise him in Corinth but apparently it was only to bring Oedipus to this fate. The Shepherd proclaims: "If you are the man he says you are, believe me, you were born for pain" (Episode 4, 1304-1305a).

Oedipus now sees the truth. He recognizes the fulfillment of the prophecies as a consequence of all his actions:

O god—
all come true, all burst to light!
O light—now let me look my last on you!
I stand revealed at last—
cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!
(Episode 4, 1305b-1310).

EXODOS

Another Messenger enters from the palace to announce that Jocasta is dead by her own hand. He relates the terrible ordeal she suffered. Mourning over her late husband Laius and the child she bore who killed him:

Oh how she wept, mourning the marriage-bed
where she let loose that double brood—monsters—
husband by her husband, children by her child
(Exodos, 1379-1381a).

Then Oedipus burst into the palace in a seething rage. He first demanded a
sword and then Jocasta’s whereabouts. He seemed guided by a malevolent darkness
that led him to the bed chamber. Oedipus broke down the doors bending their hinges.
There was Jocasta, hanged in a woven noose. Oedipus stopped in his tracks:

And when he saw her,
giving a low sob that broke our hearts,
slipping the halter from her throat, he eased her down,
in a slow embrace he laid her down, poor thing...
(Exodos, 1397b-1400).

Then Oedipus, his mood turning from solicitude for Jocasta to anger at
himself:

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins
holding her robes—and lifting them high,
looking straight up into the points,
he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, "You,
you’ll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!
Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen,
blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind
from this hour on! Blind in the darkness—blind!"
His voice like a dirge, rising over and over
raising the pins, raking them down his eyes.
And at each stroke blood spurts from the roots,
splashing his beard, a swirl of it, nerves and clots—
black hail of blood pulsing, gushing down
(Exodos, 1402-1414).

Then the Messenger summarizes the catastrophe:

Now, in one day,
wailing, madness and doom, death disgrace,
all the griefs in the world that you can name,
all are theirs forever (Exodos, 1415-1421a).
Oedipus enters led by a boy. The Chorus is appalled. Oedipus bewails his agony and dark destiny. Oedipus lauds the assembly for staying with him. But they’re probably there because they cannot look away. They ask what supernatural being spurred him to blind himself. He replies:

Apollo, friends, Apollo—
he ordained my agonies—these, my pains on pains!
But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
mine alone—no one else—
    I did it all myself!
What good were eyes to me?
Nothing I could see could bring me joy
(Exodos, 1467-1473).

While the Chorus continues to pity Oedipus he cries out for vengeance on whoever brought him to this day:

I'd never have come to this,
my father’s murderer—never been branded
mother’s husband, all men see me now! Now,
loathed by the gods, son of the mother I defiled
coupling in my father’s bed, spawning lives in the loins
that spawned my wretched life. What grief can crown this grief?
It’s mine alone, my destiny—I am Oedipus! (Exodos, 1489b-1496).

The Chorus asks how can he say he’s chosen for the best? Isn’t it better, under these circumstances, to be dead than alive and blind? Oedipus replies that he has chosen the best because he could not look his father or mother in the eye when he dies. Indeed how could he look at the children he sired with his mother. He can’t even look at Thebes who must now cast him away by his own curses. "Now I’ve exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt, could I train a level glance on you my countrymen?" (Exodos 1516-1517).
Oedipus condemns his time at Corinth, and the triple crossroads that led him to patricide and incest. Oedipus begs the Chorus to destroy him but they shrink away.

Finally Creon appears to the relief of the assembly. The Leader says:

Put your requests to Creon. Here he is, just when we need him. He’ll have a plan, he’ll act. Now that he’s the sole defense of the country in your place (*Exodos*, 1550-1553a).

Oedipus begins to fret because he treated Creon so badly. Creon, however, tells Oedipus that he has not come to gloat or criticize. He commands the guards to escort Oedipus into the palace and rebukes them for letting him suffer this indignity in public. Oedipus is overwhelmed with gratitude at Creon’s behavior and asks to be banished. "Drive me out of the land at once, far from sight, where I can never hear a human voice" (*Exodos*, 1571-1572).

Creon assures Oedipus he would have done so already but he wanted to consult the god for guidance. Oedipus declares that the course of action is quite clear, "death for the father-killer, the curse—he said destroy me!" (*Exodos*, 1576-1577).

While Creon agrees, yet he thought it prudent to consult again to be certain. This time he expects that Oedipus will obey the god’s command. Oedipus states he will obey. Oedipus first commands and then begs Creon to give an appropriate burial for Jocasta. Then for the disposition of himself he says,

never condemn the city of my fathers to house my body, not while I’m alive, no, let me live on the mountains, on Cithæron, my favorite haunt, I have made it famous. Mother and father marked out that rock to be my everlasting tomb—buried alive. Let me die there, where they tried to kill me (*Exodos*, 1587-1593).
He gives himself over to his destiny since he survived certain infanticide only for this ignominious degradation. He then tells Creon that his boys are old enough to care for themselves. But he asks Creon to care for his two daughters, if only he could touch them once more. Oedipus then hears his daughters sobbing as they are led to him. Oedipus marvels that Creon pitied him by bring out his daughters. Creon states he did so because they brought Oedipus so much joy through the years. Oedipus gratefully blesses Creon: "May god watch over you for this kindness, better than he ever guarded me" (*Exodos*, 1619-1620a).

Oedipus then explains to the children the horror that has befallen their family:

Come to these hands of mine,  
your brother’s hands, your own father’s hands  
that served his once bright eyes so well—  
that made them blind. Seeing nothing, children,  
knowing nothing, I became your father,  
I fathered you in the soil that gave me life  
(*Exodos*, 1621b-1626).

Oedipus goes on to bemoan the children’s sufferings yet to come, alienated and alone, unable to marry and start over. How could they risk the perpetuation of the family curse? Oedipus declares:

What more misery could you want?  
Your father killed his father, sowed his mother,  
one, one and the selfsame womb sprang you—  
he cropped the very roots of his existence.  
(*Exodos*, 1638-1641).

Oedipus turns to Creon and asks him to be their father in their hour of desperation. He reaches out to Creon to touch him but Creon withdraws. Then Oedipus turns back to his daughters for one last request, namely, to pray:

Pray for life, my children,  
live where you are free to grow and season.
Pray god you find a better life than mine, 
the father who begot you (Exodos, 1658-1661).

Creon commands Oedipus to cease and go into the palace out of public view. 
When Oedipus dissembles in confusion Creon responds, "Time is the great healer, 
you will see" (Exodos, 1664). 
Oedipus agrees to go but on the condition that he be driven out of Thebes into exile. Creon refuses, saying only the gods can do so. When Oedipus declares that the gods hate him, Creon consents.

Creon tells Oedipus to let go of the children and go into exile. Oedipus resists. Creon rebukes him:

Still the king, the master of all things? 
No more: here your power ends, 
None of your power follows you through life 
(Exodos, 1675-1677).

The Chorus then chants about the rise of Oedipus through solving the riddle of the Sphinx to his fall. They marvel at the terror that has overtaken him and conclude: "Now we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (Exodos, 1683-1684).