

OEDIPUS THE KING—IMAGERY AND HUMANISM

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Oedipus and the Sphinx
Interior of Athenian red-figure *kylix*
Name-vase of the Oedipus painter
Vatican Museum

The use of seeing as a metaphor for knowledge and truth is undoubtedly the dominant motif in *Oedipus the King*. The symbolic opposition of the blind prophet who sees the truth and the seeing man who is blind to the truth, and hence must blind himself so that he may see no more is the most obvious manifestation of Sophocles' imagery. This imagery connects to the theme of knowledge/ignorance in the text and to Oedipus' search for self. However, the text is full of a variety of imagery—much of it mirroring Oedipus' reversal of fortune. I want to focus on some of this other imagery, which is concerned with ideas of human control and agency, interactions between humans and the gods and pollution.

Sophocles establishes Oedipus as an exemplar of humanism at the beginning of the text. He is proud of his reliance on his own intellect. The solving of the Sphinx's riddle has brought him both self-confidence and popular acclaim from the people of Thebes. The imagery used to characterise Oedipus early in the text reinforces ideas of humanism—representing order and human control. In *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Goldhill connects this imagery to the ideas explored in 'The Ode to Man', the second chorus in *Antigone*, furthering the connection to the theme of humanism. In the ode, man's achievements are explored. His mastery of the sea as a sailor, his ability to use the land through farming, his power over animals through hunting and his superior thinking abilities are listed. As the text progresses, this imagery which has been applied to Oedipus is twisted to display the failure of human agency—the imagery, like Oedipus himself, moves from humanism to pollution.

Oedipus as steersman

Early in the text, the idea of Oedipus steering the city towards safety is introduced:

You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed, shattered—
straight on course. Now again, good helmsman,
steer us through the storm!

(694-96 [765-67]¹)

This naval imagery then becomes connected to pollution and incest, twisting the idea of the protective harbour to something taboo and destructive:

One and the same wide harbour served you
son and father both
son and father came to rest in the same bridal chamber.

(1207-10 [1334-36])

Sea imagery further emphasises the move in the text from order to chaos:

Dark, horror of darkness
my darkness, drowning, swirling around me
crashing wave on wave—unspeakable, irresistible
headwind, fatal harbour!

(1313-15 [1450-53])

Here Oedipus is no longer in control as ‘steersman’, but is instead engulfed by the wild sea, taking him to his fated destination.

Oedipus as farmer

When Oedipus is embarking on his search for the murderer of Laius, images of farming are equated, as is common, with sexual fertility:

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
might have created blood-bonds between us.

(259-61 [295-98])

The irony inherent in this passage resides in our knowledge of the incest—and this farming imagery becomes a direct expression of the theme of pollution in the text:

¹ Translations are from Sophocles *The Three Theban Plays*, tr. R. Fagles (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984). Line numbers are those of Sophocles’ text followed in square brackets by those of Fagles’ translation.

How, how could the furrows your father ploughed
bear you, your agony, harrowing on
in silence O so long?

(1211f. [1338-40])

Ideas of fertility and nurture in the text are inverted, as Oedipus' family relationships become destroyed by the knowledge of his true identity. Farming, a source of nourishment for the city, becomes in the imagery a source of plague and death, connecting to the images of blighted fertility explored in the first choral ode.

Oedipus as hunter

The concept of hunting becomes a metaphor for Oedipus' search for the truth:

I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,
a stranger to the crime. If I'd been present then,
there would have been no mystery, no long hunt
without a clue in hand.

(218-21 [248-51])

I'll search out every word.

(291 [330])

The chorus refer to Oedipus' achievement with hunting imagery:

You outranged all men!
Bending your bow to the breaking-point
you captured priceless glory.

(1197f. [1320-22])

Hunting is seen here as humanist endeavour, doomed because man overreaches himself when he steps beyond moderation. As the text progresses, the chorus imagine the murderer of Laius as an animal hunted down by the gods:

That man who left no trace—
after him, hunt him down with all out strength!
Now under bristling timber
up through rocks and caves he stalks
like the wild mountain bull—

(475-78 [540-44])

Oedipus, though predominantly representing human-kind, is also imagined as a god and as a beast, thus spanning all creation and connecting to the ideas of reversal—from king to beggar—in the text.

Oedipus as thinker

Solving the riddle of the Sphinx is Oedipus' defining achievement. He refers to it repeatedly in the text:

There was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve—
it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
you and your birds, your gods—nothing.
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.

(393-98 [447-53])

In order to make the comparison with Tiresias' 'bird-lore' Oedipus uses images of flight to describe his superior reasoning, further emphasising his reliance on human knowledge over divine knowledge.

This imagery, of birds and flight, is also twisted as the text progresses, to become connected to Oedipus's downfall, with a strong suggestion of the furies:

the dark wings beating around him, shrieking doom,
the doom that never dies, the terror—

(481f. [548f.])

winging, swept away on a dark tide—
My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!

(1309-11 [1447f.])

It is through the imagery of thought that the profoundest sense of the movement from order to chaos is achieved, as Oedipus is tormented by the knowledge of his fate, engulfed in literal and figurative darkness.

The gods as bright

This leads us to the imagery used to depict the gods in the text. The image that Oedipus uses for his own intelligence—flight and wings—becomes the threatening gods, who in turn become almost equated with his destiny. However, initially, in the first choral ode, imagery of brightness and speed is used to depict the gods, and the hope placed upon them by the chorus:

Tell me child of golden Hope
warm voice that never dies!

(157f. [178f.])

I call Apollo, Archer astride the thunderheads of heaven-
O triple shield against death, shine before me now!

(162f., [184f.])

O golden daughter of god, send rescue
radiant as the kindness in your eyes!

(188f. [216f.])

Apollo, lord of the light, I beg you—
whip your longbow's golden cord
showering arrows on our enemies...

(203-05 [231-33])

Artemis, Huntress,
torches flaring over the eastern ridges—
ride Death down in pain!

(206-08 [235-37])

God of the headdress gleaming gold, I cry to you—
your name and ours are one, Dionysus—
come with your face aflame with wine
your raving women's cries
your army on the march! Come with the lightning
come with torches blazing, eyes ablaze with glory!
Burn that god of death that all gods hate!

(209-15 [238-44])

Given the connection between light and knowledge in the text, and the theme of blindness towards divine knowledge, this powerful light imagery is ironic, representing as it does a misunderstanding of the relationship between humans and the gods.

This brightness and speed become threatening later on as the chorus unknowingly describes Oedipus' situation:

Cased in armour, Apollo son of the Father
lunges on him, lightning bolts afire!

(469f. [534f.])

Look,
the word of god has just come blazing
flashing off Parnassus' snowy heights!

(473-76 [537-39])

As the chorus comes to realise, and the imagery shows, the brightness of the gods is not necessarily benign. It is used by Sophocles to mark the shift from hope to fear—the failure of human endeavour and the understanding that Oedipus' downfall speaks to the whole human condition.

Even putting aside the dominant blindness/sight, light/darkness imagery, the imagery used in Sophocles' text has great unity. Images usually associated with humanism, order and control are twisted to display Oedipus' failure, and the failure of humanism in the text. Through this, Sophocles successfully creates an overwhelming sense of chaos, pollution and the frailty of the human condition.

References

Translation:

Sophocles *The Three Theban Plays*, tr. R. Fagles (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984).

Other works:

S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: CUP 1986).

C.P. Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP 1995).