Oedipus King of Thebes: Translated into English Rhyming Verse with Explanatory Notes

Sophocles

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OEDIPUS

KING OF THEBES

BY

SOPHOCLES

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH RHYMING VERSE

WITH EXPLANATORY NOTES BY

GILBERT MURRAY

LL.D., D.LITT., F.B.A.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF GREEK IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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PREFACE

If I have turned aside from Euripides for a moment and attempted a translation of the great stage masterpiece of Sophocles, my excuse must be the fascination of this play, which has thrown its spell on me as on many other translators. Yet I may plead also that as a rule every diligent student of these great works can add something to the discoveries of his predecessors, and I think I have been able to bring out a few new points in the old and much-studied _Oedipus_, chiefly points connected with the dramatic technique and the religious atmosphere.

Mythologists tell us that Oedipus was originally a daemon haunting Mount Kithairon, and Jocasta a form of that Earth-Mother who, as Aeschylus puts it, "bringeth all things to being, and when she hath reared them receiveth again their seed into her body" (_Choephori_, 127: cf. Crusius, _Beiträge z. Gr. Myth_, 21). That stage of the story lies very far behind the consciousness of Sophocles. But there does cling about both his hero and his heroine a great deal of very primitive atmosphere. There are traces in Oedipus of the pre-hellenic Medicine King, the _Basileus_ who is also a _Theos_, and can make rain or blue sky, pestilence or fertility. This explains many things in the Priest's first speech, in the attitude of the Chorus, and in Oedipus'

own language after the discovery. It partly explains the hostility of Apollo, who is not a mere motiveless Destroyer but a true Olympian crushing his Earth-born rival. And in the same way the peculiar royalty of Jocasta, which makes Oedipus at times seem not the King but the Consort of the Queen, brings her near to that class of consecrated queens described in Dr. Frazer's _Lectures on the Kingship_, who are "honoured as no woman now living on the earth."

The story itself, and the whole spirit in which Sophocles has treated it, belong not to the fifth century but to that terrible and romantic past from which the fifth century poets usually drew their material. The atmosphere of brooding dread, the pollution, the curses; the "insane and beastlike cruelty," as an ancient Greek commentator calls it, of piercing the exposed child's feet in order to ensure its death and yet avoid having actually murdered it (_Schol. Eur. Phoen._, 26); the whole treatment of the parricide and incest, not as moral offences capable of being rationally judged or even excused as unintentional, but as monstrous and inhuman pollutions, the last limit of imaginable horror: all these things take us back to dark regions of pre-classical and even pre-homeric belief. We have no right to suppose that Sophocles thought of the involuntary parricide and metrogamy as the people in his play do. Indeed, considering the general tone of his contemporaries and friends, we may safely assume that he did not. But at any rate he has allowed no breath of later enlightenment to disturb the primaeval gloom of his atmosphere.

Does this in any way make the tragedy insincere? I think not. We know that people did feel and think about "pollution" in the way which Sophocles represents; and if they so felt, then the tragedy was there.

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I think these considerations explain the remarkable absence from this play of any criticism of life or any definite moral judgment. I know that some commentators have found in it a "humble and unquestioning piety," but I cannot help suspecting that what they saw was only a reflection from their own pious and unquestioning minds. Man is indeed shown as a "plaything of Gods," but of Gods strangely and incomprehensibly malignant, whose ways there is no attempt to explain or justify. The original story, indeed, may have had one of its roots in a Theban "moral tale." Aelian (_Varia Historia_, 2, 7) tells us that the exposure of a child was forbidden by Theban Law. The state of feeling which produced this law, against the immensely strong conception of the _patria potestas_, may also have produced a folklore story telling how a boy once was exposed, in a peculiarly cruel way, by his wicked parents, and how Heaven preserved him to take upon both of them a vengeance which showed that the unnatural father had no longer a father's sanctity nor the unnatural mother a mother's. But, as far as Sophocles is concerned, if anything in the nature of a criticism of life has been admitted into the play at all, it seems to be only a flash or two of that profound and pessimistic arraignment of the ruling powers which in other plays also opens at times like a sudden abyss across the smooth surface of his art.

There is not much philosophy in the _Oedipus_. There is not, in comparison with other Greek plays, much pure poetry. What there is, is drama; drama of amazing grandeur and power. In respect of plot no Greek play comes near it. It contains no doubt a few points of unsophisticated technique such as can be found in all ancient and nearly all modern drama; for instance, the supposition that Oedipus

has never inquired into the death of his predecessor on the throne. But such flaws are external, not essential. On the whole, I can only say that the work of translation has made me feel even more strongly than before the extraordinary grip and reality of the dialogue, the deftness of the construction, and, except perhaps for a slight drop in the Creon scene, the unbroken crescendo of tragedy from the opening to the close.

* * * * *

Where plot-interest is as strong as it is in the _Oedipus_, character-interest is apt to be comparatively weak. Yet in this play every character is interesting, vital, and distinct. Oedipus himself is selected by Aristotle as the most effective kind of tragic hero, because, first, he has been great and glorious, and secondly he has not been "pre-eminently virtuous or just." This is true in its way. Oedipus is too passionate to be just; but he is at least noble in his impetuosity, his devotion, and his absolute truthfulness. It is important to realise that at the beginning of the play he is prepared for an oracle commanding him to die for his people (pp. 6, 7). And he never thinks of refusing that "task" any more than he tries to elude the doom that actually comes, or to conceal any fact that tells against him. If Oedipus had been an ordinary man the play would have been a very different and a much poorer thing.

Jocasta is a wonderful study. Euripides might have brought her character out more explicitly and more at length, but even he could not have made her more living or more tragic, or represented more subtly in her relation to Oedipus both the mother's protecting love and the mother's authority. As for her "impiety," of which the old

commentaries used to speak with much disapproval, the essential fact in her life is that both her innocence and her happiness have, as she believes, been poisoned by the craft of priests. She and Laïus both "believed a bad oracle": her terror and her love for her husband made her consent to an infamous act of cruelty to her own child, an act of which the thought sickens her still, and about which she cannot, when she tries, speak the whole truth. (See note on p. 42.) And after all her crime was for nothing! The oracle proved to be a lie. Never again will she believe a priest.

As to Tiresias, I wish to ask forgiveness for an unintelligent criticism made twelve years ago in my _Ancient Greek Literature_, p. 240. I assumed then, what I fancy was a common assumption, that Tiresias was a "sympathetic" prophet, compact of wisdom and sanctity and all the qualities which beseem that calling; and I complained that he did not consistently act as such. I was quite wrong. Tiresias is not anything so insipid. He is a study of a real type, and a type which all the tragedians knew. The character of the professional seer or "man of God" has in the imagination of most ages fluctuated between two poles. At one extreme are sanctity and superhuman wisdom; at the other fraud and mental disease, self-worship aping humility and personal malignity in the guise of obedience to God. There is a touch of all these qualities, good and bad alike, in Tiresias. He seems to me a most life-like as well as a most dramatic figure.

As to the Chorus, it generally plays a smaller part in Sophocles than in Euripides and Aeschylus, and the _Oedipus_ forms no exception to that rule. It seems to me that Sophocles was feeling his way towards a technique which would have approached that of the New Comedy or even the Elizabethan stage, and would perhaps have done without a

Chorus altogether. In Aeschylus Greek tragedy had been a thing of traditional forms and clear-cut divisions; the religious ritual showed through, and the visible gods and the disguised dancers were allowed their full value. And Euripides in the matter of outward formalism went back to the Aeschylean type and even beyond it: prologue, chorus, messenger, visible god, all the traditional forms were left clear-cut and undisguised and all developed to full effectiveness on separate and specific lines. But Sophocles worked by blurring his structural outlines just as he blurs the ends of his verses. In him the traditional divisions are all made less distinct, all worked over in the direction of greater naturalness, at any rate in externals. This was a very great gain, but of course some price had to be paid for it. Part of the price was that Sophocles could never attempt the tremendous choric effects which Euripides achieves in such plays as the _Bacchae_ and the _Trojan Women_. His lyrics, great as they sometimes are, move their wings less boldly. They seem somehow tied to their particular place in the tragedy, and they have not quite the strength to lift the whole drama bodily aloft with them.... At least that is my feeling. But I realise that this may be only the complaint of an unskilful translator, blaming his material for his own defects of vision.

In general, both in lyrics and in dialogue, I believe I have allowed myself rather less freedom than in translating Euripides. This is partly because the writing of Euripides, being less business-like and more penetrated by philosophic reflections and by subtleties of technique, actually needs more thorough re-casting to express it at all adequately; partly because there is in Sophocles, amid all his passion and all his naturalness, a certain severe and classic reticence, which,

though impossible really to reproduce by any method, is less misrepresented by occasional insufficiency than by habitual redundance.

I have asked pardon for an ill deed done twelve years ago. I should like to end by speaking of a benefit older still, and express something of the gratitude I feel to my old master, Francis Storr, whose teaching is still vivid in my mind and who first opened my eyes to the grandeur of the _Oedipus_.

G. M.

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

OEDIPUS, _supposed son of Polybus, King of Corinth; now elected King of Thebes._

JOCASTA, _Queen of Thebes; widow of Laïus, the late King, and now wife to Oedipus._

CREON, _a Prince of Thebes, brother to Jocasta._

TIRESIAS, _an old blind seer._

PRIEST OF ZEUS.

A STRANGER _from Corinth._

A SHEPHERD _of King Laïus._

A MESSENGER _from the Palace._

CHORUS of the Elders of Thebes.

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