

CHAPTER THREE

SOPHOCLES AND OEDIPUS REX

The greatness of man, nobility and heroism and all attributes that made man the apex of virtues can be traced in the tragedies of the Greek masters. It could be traced from the advent of the Greek city-state when men started to define what made a person become the proud possessor of this set of virtues. Professor Jaeger interpolated the workings of the Greek mind from antiquity and compared the word arete which has a special connotation with a number of contemporary words led by nobility. He said that there was no complete equivalent for the word arete in modern English: its oldest meaning being a combination of proud and courtly morality with warlike valour. He insists, however, that the idea of arete is the quintessence of early Greek aristocratic education. It was used by Homer in a wide sense, to describe not only human merit but the excellence of non-human things--the power of the gods, the spirit and speed of noble horses. Arete is the real attribute of the nobleman. The Greeks had always believed that surpassing strength and prowess were the natural basis of leadership

and it was impossible to dissociate leadership and arete. It was natural for the Greeks, who ranked every man according to his ability, to use the same standard for the world in general, which is why they could apply the word arete to things and beings which were not human, and that is why the content of the word grew richer in later times.

Later on, he traces this word to imply the combination of nobility and valour in war. It meant sometimes "noble" and sometimes "brave" or "capable": but it seldom meant "good" in the later sense, any more than arete meant "moral virtue". In the works of Homer, a more general ethical sense was discovered. Both meanings, the military connotation and the latter one, denote the gentlemen who possess (both in war and in private life) standards which surpass those meant for the common people. In Homer, the real mark of a nobleman is his sense of duty. He is judged and proud to be judged, by a severe standard. And the nobleman educates others by presenting to them an eternal idea, to which they have a duty to conform. The nobleman's pride in high race and ancient achievement is partnered by his knowledge that his pre-eminence can be guaranteed only by the virtues which won it. The aristoi (nobility) are distinguished by that name from the mass of the common people: and though there are many aristoi, they are always striving with one another for the prize of arete.

The Iliad bears witness to the high educational ideals of the early Greek aristocracy. It shows that the old conception of arete as warlike prowess could not satisfy the poets of a new age: their new ideal of human perfection was the character which united nobility of action with nobility of mind. The word arete had originally meant warlike prowess; which the later age found no difficulty in transforming the concept of nobility to suit its own higher ideals, and that the word itself was to acquire a broader meaning to suit this developing ideal.

An essential concomitant of arete is honour. In a primitive society it is inseparable from merit and ability. Jaeger quoted Aristotle's description of it as a natural standard for man's half-realized efforts to attain arete. "Men," he says, "seem to pursue honour in order to assure themselves of their own worth--their arete. They strive to be honoured for it, by men who know them and who are judicious. It is therefore clear that they recognise arete as superior." The gods themselves claim honour whenever due. They jealously avenge any infringement of it, and pride themselves on the praise which their worshippers give to their deeds. To honour both gods and men for their arete is a primitive instinct. Homer shows Achilles and Ajax who were

offended by not being offered honour when due. A great ambition is, for Greek sentiment, the quality of a great hero and Achilles' indignation at his comrades and his refusal to help them, do not spring from an exaggerated individual ambition. The weapons of the dead Achilles are awarded to Odysseus, although Ajax had done more to earn them and Ajax' life ends in madness and misery. Honour due, is claimed and the claimant feels affronted when unjustly deprived of it.

Pride or highmindedness is also considered a virtue by the Greeks of the time. Aristotle does not believe it to be an independent virtue like the others, but one which presupposes them and is "in a way an ornament to them." The great Athenian thinkers bear witness to the aristocratic origin of their philosophy, by holding that arete cannot reach true perfection except in the high-minded man. Both Aristotle and Homer justify their belief that high-mindedness is the finest expression of spiritual and moral personality by it on arete as worthy of honour. Jaeger states:

For honour is the prize of arete; it is the tribute paid to men of ability. Hence pride is an enhancement of arete. But it also laid

down that to attain true pride, true magnanimity is the most difficult of all human tasks.¹

Further implications of arete is set forth by Aristotle and is quoted and elucidated by Jaeger. Aristotle's view is that human effort after complete arete is the product of an ennobled self-love and Aristotle admires self-love, just as he prizes high-mindedness and the desire for honour. Jaeger's interpretation of the final quality of arete is a concept worthy of note:

In this connection, the Self here is not the Physical self, but the ideals which inspires us, the ideals which every nobleman strives to realize in his own life. If we grasp that, we shall see that it is the highest kind of self-love, which makes man reach out towards the highest arete: through which he takes "possession of the beautiful". The last phrase is so entirely Greek that it is hard to translate. For the Greeks, beauty meant nobility also. To lay claim to the beautiful, to take possession of it, means to overlook no opportunity of winning the prize of the highest arete.

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

¹ Werner Jaeger, trans. Gilbert Highet, Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945) p. 12.

But what did Aristotle mean by the beautiful? Our thoughts turn at once to the sophisticated views of later ages--the cult of the individual, the humanism of the eighteenth century, with its aspirations towards aesthetic and spiritual self-development. But Aristotle's words are quite clear. They show that he was thinking chiefly of acts of moral heroism. A man who loves himself will (he thought) always be ready to sacrifice himself for his friends or his country, to abandon possessions and honours in order to "take possession of the beautiful". The strange phrase is repeated: and we can see why Aristotle should think that the utmost sacrifice to an ideal is a proof of a highly developed self-love. "For," he says, "such a man would prefer short intense pleasures to long quiet ones" would choose to live nobly for a year rather than to pass many years of ordinary life; would rather do one great and noble deed than many small ones."²

Of the three tragedians whose works are chosen for analyses, none is more greater in stature than Sophocles who is considered with undiminished awe and respect to the present day by contemporary dramatists. The fact remains that all attempts to satisfy the changed tastes of today by putting Aeschylus and Euripides on the modern stage have failed--apart from a few experimental productions before more or less specialized audiences--while Sophocles is the

²Jaeger, pp. 12-13.

one Greek dramatist who keeps his place in the repertoire of the contemporary theatre. The ineffaceable impression which Sophocles makes on us today and his imperishable position in the literature of the world are both due to his character-drawing. The special mark of Sophocles' procedure was the delineation not of character in and for itself, but of noble character faced with, and in its special way responding to, a situation that serves as a complete and ultimate revelation of its nature. In this connection, C.M.Bowra in his Sophoclean Tragedy contrasted Shakespeare with the Greek tragedians and concluded that Sophoclean tragedy presents an element which is absent in Shakespeare's plays:

The tragic emotions are as great as in Shakespeare; the excitement of the action is hardly less great. But in all the excitement and horror there is an element which is absent from Shakespeare. The tragic events are such that we inevitably try to explain them to ourselves and to find out how the poet explains them.

The reason of this is that while the conflict in Shakespeare is between men and men, in Sophocles it arises in the last analysis between men and gods. ³

³ C.M.Bowra, Sophoclean tragedy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 13.

The greatness of Sophoclean tragedies and the nobility of his heroes can be seen with the background of the conflict between man and gods. A truly religious poet, Sophocles has never blasphemed religion nor has he cast aspersions on religious precepts. Yet his heroes struggled through various tragic events pre-ordained by the gods and in the process rose to heights unattained by their peers.

Oedipus, the greatest hero of Sophocles' Greek drama, and possibly the greatest ever known since, personified arete, the greatest virtue prized by the Greeks. He was the ideal man of the times, because he possessed all the noble attributes which defined arete. The first virtue being of noble birth which is a prerequisite. Oedipus was born of the ruling King and Queen of Thebes. The second virtue of being brave in war and battle could be seen in his fight against his father Laius' little band, whom he bested and killed all except for the one attendant who ran away and escaped. His prowess in combat therefore is unquestionable. The third essential concomitant--namely honour--is possessed in abundance by Oedipus. He pursues honour in order to assure himself of his own worth--his arete. Firstly, he is able to answer the riddle of the Sphinx, thereby showing his intelligence and secondly, he does his best to solve the

problem of the drought and decay to his country. He was honour bound to proceed with the investigation of the pollution and when it came to light that vast perils await the outcome and those that were near and dear to him entreated him to stop, he still carried on. It was his honour that made him carry through to the end. He had pride, the fourth virtue, which was what critics accused him of, because he treated his brother-in-law Creon and Teresias badly. He had self-love, the fifth ingredient of arete which he showed in his love of his country and "take possession of the beautiful". It showed his love for his country and he is ready to sacrifice his life for his people. It is an act of moral heroism when he wandered round the country revealing to the people the consequences of a great sinner. No ordinary man would dare do this final act of revelation, and exhibit himself round the country. No one urged him to abandon his possessions and honour in order to "take possession of the beautiful". He did the deed to achieve the final goal in a man's life as sought by Greeks. Oedipus is the ideal man in Greek culture--he was the man who personified arete. He had done his duty to his countrymen.

Oedipus had been polluted by the hamartia of parricide and incest. Severally, these sins must have been unforgivably heinous, but jointly committed by a single person, they would have rendered a person hopeless and beyond redemption. Yet the hero managed to show his greatness in a number of ways before, during and after the reversal to move the audience with admiration. He had resisted the pre-ordained will of the gods by fleeing his home, Corinth, where he was held to be the son of the King, Polybus, and the reason for his self-exile was a Delphic oracle. Apollo had declared that he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother. At the time of the play's opening, he had become a king in Thebes, by performing feats of cerebral excellence, in answering the Sphinx's riddle. Thebes was suffering a spate of drought, infertility of women and general decay and the people had come to him as a last resort and deliverer from evil. He promised his adopted country the riddance of the plague and the culprit responsible for the calamity who was the source of the evils that had befallen his beloved country. He went on to reveal the miscreant with all means at his disposal, despite the entreaties of everyone near and dear to him not to proceed any further while the revelation was in progress and to the detriment of his own self, prestige and beliefs. He was

finally made to discover the perpetrator of the parricide and incest. The act of self-flagellation in blinding himself was over and beyond the limits set by the gods, thereby showing the heights of human magnificence, heroism and self-sacrifice. All these punishments namely self-banishment, self-blindness, and self-exhibition around the country, were not done for personal gain, religious necessity, egotism and masochism nor were they accomplished to make the burden of himself and his family's future bearable. We could foresee that his descendants were not favoured by the gods--the last statement to Creon bears witness to the fact--yet he did not flinch but carried out all these deeds for his people, for his adopted country, for mankind as his bounden duty and for the finest reason of them all--for himself. Oedipus as a man with arete, could not live, without atonement of this magnitude, with himself. He was made that way.

Sophocles uses the age-old myth to portray the greatness of his hero in his own unique way. The tragic fall of Oedipus cries for comment or justification. It could be justified in different ways' and in fact it has been done by various authorities:

1. Due to hereditary doom or curse on the House of Laius, his father.
2. As a punishment for Oedipus' own pride.
3. As caused by some mistake or faulty judgement of his.

Arguments could be found in support of each, but none seems to be entirely satisfactory. Sophocles might have used any or all of them. Of most he seems to have been in some degree, conscious, so that he makes his characters assume one or other of them at different moments of the play. But if we follow him carefully, it is clear that none of these theories meet every need, that Sophocles' central idea was something else. He had his own explanation for the fall of Oedipus, and it too had its roots in Greek thought.

Aeschylus whose chief concern was the unbroken course of the fate of a family, because it alone formed a whole large enough to demonstrate the working-out of divine justice, which even religious faith and moral sentiment can hardly trace in the doom of one individual, subordinated in his play the single character against the main theme. Aeschylus had traced through several generations of the Labdacid house the destructive effects of the curse which the family had brought on itself by early guilt. Euripides also

is of the same opinion that the curse of the gods was on the family and Laius's sin of begatting a son against the will of the gods was the source of all evil that had befallen Oedipus. Bowra's comments on the subject would suffice:

Aeschylus explained the fall of Oedipus by hereditary guilt, by the sin of the father visited upon the son. Laius begat a child in defiance of the Delphic oracle and the son paid for the father's fault. This explanation is embodied in the Seven Against Thebes and may be assumed to have provided the scheme of Aeschylus' Oedipus. It reappeared in Euripides' Phoenician Women, where Jocasta makes it the source of all the woes that befall the House of Laius.⁴

Jocasta's speech stresses this sin of Laius in Phoenician Women. On the contrary, Sophocles did not stress it. He made the oracle leave no choice to Laius but simply foretold that he would be killed by his own son. This change must be intentional. Sophocles must have felt that the theory of inherited doom was not satisfactory. Bowra has, at length, refuted this theory of inherited doom:

Oedipus feels that he comes of an accursed race.

⁴ Bowra, p. 163.

...But for him to think that the gods hate his family or that his father was impious is not the same as determined by a single act of Laius which brings down the anger of heaven on father and son alike.⁵

Oedipus did not kill Laius in wanton aggression. He is not punished for his own presumptuous insolence. He is not a murderer in the complete sense of the word. Sophocles described the killing showing Laius as the aggressor and got what he deserved. Oedipus would be innocent legally, but of course, he would be polluted and would have to be exiled all the same. Sophocles did not portray Oedipus as possessing wanton pride; for the proud are punished by the gods for acts of quite a different character. He would, however, be guilty of insolent pride; not for killing his father, but for being in general proud and aggressive, as he certainly shows himself in the scene with Teresias and Creon. Bowra states that Oedipus is guilty of this pride:

...in these scenes Oedipus transgresses the Mean and is almost swept away in a blind frenzy of pride when he accuses Teresias of fomenting conspiracy or wishes to kill Creon on a baseless suspicion.⁶

⁵Bowra, p. 164.

⁶Bowra, p. 165.

Bowra does not, however, consider that Oedipus was punished for his aggressive insolence. He cites Teresias' speech which does not include Oedipus' coming woes as if they were punishment and points out that the Chorus did not return to their suspicion but for a different view of Oedipus' fall when it happens. Even Oedipus, he claims, does not think that it is punishment for his pride during the horror of his humiliation. Some critics take this pride and over-confidence together with his unjustified suspicions against Teresias and Creon to be tragic flaws as defined by Aristotle as "megale hamartia", the greatest in the genre, but even if it did, it would have no direct relevance to the question at issue: namely punishment for the flaw of pride and over-confidence. E.R.Dodds has demolished the theory succinctly in his "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex":

Years before the action begins, Oedipus was already an incestuous parricide; if that was the punishment for his unkind treatment of Creon, then the punishment precedes the crime--which is surely an odd kind of justice.⁷

⁷ E.R.Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex" in Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy, ed. Erich Segal, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 179.

The theory of Oedipus' fall being caused through a mistake was also advocated by Aristotle, which although plausible does not altogether seem satisfactory. If Aristotle means an error of judgment, or an intellectual mistake, his own views would lead to Oedipus' acquittal. For he says that such mistakes originate not in vice or depravity but in ignorance of fact or circumstance, are not voluntary and should be forgiven, as the killing of Laius by Oedipus was done in total ignorance of the facts of paternity. If, however, Aristotle means a different kind of mistake, something more like a fault in character which leads a man to see wrongly, it might have been more possible. Bowra does not agree with both views:

Neither interpretation of Aristotle's view of tragic mistake meets all the facts of the play. Whichever we prefer, Aristotle missed one vitally important element in King Oedipus. He says nothing about the part taken by the gods in the rise and fall of Oedipus. His omission is understandable since he was apparently, not interested in this aspect of tragedy and did not discuss it in his Politics. But it seriously impairs his view. For though Oedipus' mistake in killing his father leads to other disasters, it is itself fore-ordained by the gods. The tragic career of Oedipus does not begin with it. His doom is fixed before his birth.⁸

⁸ Bowra, pp.166-167.

Bowra maintains to the end that Oedipus was the victim of the gods and his fate was fore-ordained. The acts that made him lose his good sense and the hand that works the destruction of Oedipus is his but behind the action is Apollo:

Apollo ordains; Oedipus fulfils.
...Oedipus, then, acts under the influence and pressure of a supernatural power which is in turn determined by the gods, Zeus or Apollo.⁹

Bowra's contention that Oedipus was willed by the gods to suffer such tragic consequences could be accepted to a certain point. But when it implies that Oedipus' greatness and nobility was due to such action, whether indirectly or directly, it is not acceptable. It is this crucial fact that differentiate other people from Oedipus. Many a man had been ordained to suffer, whether justly or not, a series of misfortunes. Some wrecked their lives through their own follies and some by the will of the gods and some through the combination of both. Creon in Antigone was the first type of character who adamantly stuck to the rules to the

⁹ Bowra, pp. 182-183.

detriment of good sense and humaneness. He was destroyed as well as his child. Ajax in Ajax was another example whose pride made compromise unacceptable and who finally committed suicide. The House of Laius was destroyed by the gods and it was fore-ordained. Yet what made Oedipus rise above all is the fact that he tried at every step to resist the oracle. He tried with all his resources at his disposal to find out the truth of the plague and promised just punishment of the culprit and lastly when it was found out that he himself was the murderer he sought, he decreed punishments over and above the call of duty and the fore-ordained oracles of the gods.

In the conflict between man and gods, Oedipus Rex is a prime example of human ingenuity and unremitting defiance to the unjust decrees of the gods. In Prometheus, the hero is a Titan and possessed certain divine powers to implement the insurrection. Oedipus was a mere mortal but in his struggle, he was definitely superhuman. Some have criticized him for putting up a useless fight. It was fore-ordained and the gods will win eventually, so any form of evasion would be impiety to the deities, was the argument. The resistance of Oedipus towards the oracle, which was Apollo's decree, was done because of obvious reasons.

The first was because the Delphic oracle of Apollo's decree might in itself be false. The soothsayer(s) might themselves have interpreted the will of the gods wrongly, or might have assumed a saying of their own in the name of Apollo. It might be a false rendition of a genuine prediction or at the very least, a false interpretation of a poetical or rhetorical verses which shroud such divine wills. It is sad, however, that in this particular instance Oedipus, as well as Laius and Jocasta, were given unequivocal predictions, and misinterpretation was impossible. It is the greatest hope of Oedipus that these predictions be found false, and he struggled to prove them so until the last moment of revelation. The second reason was because they were so unjust and cruel, and inhuman. The gods decreed that he marry his mother and kill his father. No one in their right senses would take this sort of thing without a struggle, and Oedipus was no ordinary human being. Muller in his Greek Tragedy, sides with him:

The whole action of the play demonstrates only the power, never the justice, of the gods. Who can blame Oedipus for "resisting" the heinous destiny they had decreed at his birth? At that he did not simply resist. The tragedy results from his fierce insistence on finding out the truth, at whatever cost to himself--from his integrity and nobility of soul, not his flaws. His heroic temper makes possible the quickening tempo and the

deepening irony that make the drama technically so impressive. His wife-mother Jocasta is as innocent a victim of "the divine order of the world". If she was impious in expressing doubt of the oracle, she had good reason to cry out against oracles that made a horror of her own life; it was in respect for them that she had consented to the exposure of her infant son to die.¹⁰

The injustice of the gods was obvious and as Muller pointed out other minor characters suffered as well as the two. The kindly Messenger; the Shepherd who had disobeyed orders because of pity; the two daughters, all suffered. If we are to be shocked by the suffering of the innocent, as Aristotle said, then the ending of Oedipus is simply shocking, said Muller,

Oedipus, the hero of Sophocles, was not a man of mediocre talents and temper. It should be obvious that Oedipus did not intend to suffer from the fate decreed by the oracle without resisting to the best of his ability. The first thing he did was to flee Corinth to escape from killing his father and marrying his mother. It was his first attempt at making the oracle not come true. On the

¹⁰Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 75.

way, he met a party of travellers who insulted him physically and in the ensuing conflict, he killed all the people in that party except one who fled. It is in character for Oedipus to fight and overcome insulting aggressors. He was a young prince, physically strong and brave. It would be out of character to submit to another's insults and physical assaults simply to avoid killing an older person and to evade the predictions of the oracle. The mental and physical make-up of Oedipus was such that he could not withstand any person's offensive manners when he thinks them unjustified. He was made to be a leader of people and the noble blood inside him would be stirred on such occasions. If he were to avoid conflicts with older people at all costs, he might have escaped that episode, but that is hindsight and Oedipus would not be Oedipus at all but another meek character impersonating him. Even then, the gods might think up some other means to drag him down, for they were so powerful. His reaction in this killing might be hasty, precipitate and his decision faulty, But it was inbred reaction and was totally in character. If he was punished for this offence it was not justified at all.

At Thebes, he met the Sphinx, whose riddle he successfully answered and was offered the throne as a

reward. The reigning Queen was an additional inducement for him to stay as a victor and well-deserved ruler. It must be the practice in times like those and in ancient countries to make offerings in this manner. He had no choice but to accept the just reward. If critics blamed him for marrying an older woman to evade the oracle, it would be like hindsight again. Women, especially queens, do not resemble older women when compared to rough, well-travelled fighting men. He could not ask the date of birth of Jocasta to compute the age difference and the possibility of child-bearing of an adult. He would have to stay single and to avoid all women before making sure that she could not, in all circumstances, bear children his age. That, too, is against his character which was precipitate in action and would be most unnatural for a young and noble natural ruler of men.

When the priest reveals to him the nature of the plague, that is descending on his beloved country, Oedipus promised to resolve the problem, and when the problem is made known to him--that the murderer of Laius, his predecessor, was the cause of the catastrophe--he goes a step further by promising to unmask the culprit and have him punished properly. The unravelling of the mystery of the

crossroads brought to the audience as well as to certain important characters of the play, an inkling of the truth--a horrible realization that the king himself might be the murderer. In vain would they entreat on him not to proceed any further and in vain would Oedipus refuse to listen to their entreaties. Jean-Pierre Vernant highlights this aspect:

In this drama where he is the victim, Oedipus and Oedipus alone leads the "play". Nothing except his stubborn will to unmask the guilty, the lofty idea which he has of his burden, of his capacities, of his judgment, his passionate desire to know the truth at any price--nothing obliges him to push the enquiry to its end. Teresias, Jocasta, the Shepherd try successively to stop him. In vain. He is not a man to content himself with half measures, to accommodate himself to compromise. Oedipus goes to the end.¹¹

If the search for the truth could be named pride and over-confidence, then Oedipus surely earned those attributes for he indulged in these searches with abandon and all the time he was trying his best to evade the sayings of the oracle. William C. Greene in his Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought remarks on this particular aspect of Oedipus' character :

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Ambiguity and Reversal: Oedipus Rex" in Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy, ed. Erich Segal, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 191.

Oedipus was more sinned against than sinning. Finally, over and above the potentialities of a noble nature, the product of inheritance (physis) and aristocratic training, there is a personal code of the hero, his sense of honor or "arete", which gains strength with the demands that are made on it, and which knows no compromise with lesser loyalties or even with fate.¹²

Oedipus was not content to rest in half-measures and half-revealed truths. The audience and major characters had all suspected the truth by this time, and Jocasta and the Shepherd tried in vain to stop him at all costs. Any other person, of a lesser character, would have been persuaded but not Oedipus. It would have gone against the grain of his very soul. He goes right to the very end. Some have named this insistence as excessive pride and have commented that he would have been securely esconced on his throne, had he listened to such sound advices. It is here again that Oedipus excelled his peers, and he would go once again to the ends of human endurance once further developments revealed to him that he was not what he had always assumed to be.

Oedipus was a good man, well-loved by his fellow men. In the eyes of the Priest in the opening scene, he is the

¹²William C. Greene, Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 141-142.

greatest and the noblest of men, the Saviour of Thebes, who with divine aid rescued the city from the Sphinx. The Chorus has the same view of him; he has proved his wisdom he is the darling of the city, and never will they believe ill of him. Yet he had violated the most sacred of Nature's laws and thus incurred the most horrible of all pollutions; but he did so without intention (poneria) for he knew not what he did. Had he acted knowingly, he would have been an inhuman monster, and we would not have felt for him that Pity which tragedy ought to produce. As it is we feel both pity, for the fragile estate of man, and terror, for a world whose laws we do not understand.

From the very first scene when he was enquiring about the plague that had beset his city, he had already directed Creon to consult the Oracle and was expecting the answer any moment. When he discovered the cause of the pollution was the murderer of Laius, the former king and his predecessor, he at once promised that justice would prevail and the murderer banished. Little did he know then that he was looking for himself and that the punishment he promised would be awarded to himself. Banishment from his beloved city and his family was the outcome of the investigation. Yet when the time came for him to bear the sins of the curse

and cleanse the city of his adoption, he did not for once hesitate, he bore his punishment like a hero. Dodd's comments illustrate this point.

Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position, for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream but in virtue of his inner strength; strength to pursue the truth at whatever cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found. "This horror is mine" he cries, "and none but I is strong enough to bear it"; Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for "all" his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible, but though subjectively innocent.¹³

The punishment for parricide was banishment for extreme pollution, and Oedipus accepted the penalty for the crime. Where he went beyond the punishment ordained by the gods and the society was the self-inflicted blinding and the display of the horribly tainted human specimen to all people in the hope that every one who see would refrain from committing such horrendous crimes. By going beyond the call of human duty and normal sacrifice, Oedipus has once again revealed his greatness and nobility in his nadir. Many authorities placed this last act of the hero in many different categories, such as Aeschylus' explanation that Oedipus was

¹³Dodds, p. 187.

"mad at heart" to inflict such a punishment on himself. Sophocles might also have adopted such a view as he had the Chorus echo such a thought of madness. But Sophocles soon shows that Oedipus was not mad, that he knew what he was doing and had his reasons for it. Oedipus is not the victim who does not know what he is doing. His good sense is not destroyed. Bowra states:

The real explanation of his decision to blind himself is in his own words. When he does it, he cries out that his eyes shall no longer see such horrors as he has been doing and suffering and henceforth must look on the dark,

... He has blinded himself because he wishes to be cut off from the living and the dead.

Oedipus' explanation suggests that he sees himself as a scapegoat, a polluted being whose expulsion from the city will purify it. When grave impiety has been committed, it was right to send out such a scapegoat who might well be the defiling or guilty person himself.

... So Oedipus wishes to be treated. He feels that such a punishment is right for him because of the curse which he had laid upon himself. Nor is expulsion enough for him. His blindness too is necessary to complete his severance from the light of day and the company of men. Only by this can he really cut himself off and carry out the penalty which he has called down on the murderers of Laius. He must not live like other men. He must have a special, separate life such as he can have if he is blind and an outcast. He will rid the city of pollution; he will carry out to the full the curse which he had laid on himself.¹⁴

¹⁴ Bowra, pp. 183-184.

It is obvious now that the hero, in his hour of doom, was thinking of his people, his city and the gods who had willed such a fate on him. It was not normal for people to think of others in times like these, but Oedipus was not of the ordinary genre. As a parricide and incest, he will exile himself from Thebes which he pollutes and from human society with which he can have no normal relations. To carry out his curse he inflicts a fearful injury on himself. The curse has still to run its course. Oedipus knows this, makes no attempt to resist it, rather does his best to help it. There is no question of guilt or punishment. There is much to pity when Oedipus blinds himself, but also much to admire. His willingness to shoulder the burden of his pollution, his desire to do at all costs what is right, show that even in the worst crisis of his fortunes, he keeps his essential nobility.

Bowra advocates for Oedipus:

He is not to be condemned for resisting this destiny, but to be admired for accepting it in all its horror and for being ready to work with the gods to see that he makes full amends. He who has been the victim and the sufferer regains the initiative and takes his destiny into his own hands.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bowra, p. 185.

Oedipus shows himself as a sort of man to defend himself when attacked, to answer riddles and assume great responsibilities. But the same characteristics which brought him success make his downfall more tragic and are almost detrimental to it. It is because he is such a superior human being, angry when attacked, capable of brief and brilliant action, self-confident and rapid in decision, that his discovery of the truth takes so tragic a turn. His fated life is his own life. It is his character, his typical actions, that makes his mistakes so intelligible and fit so naturally into the gods' plan to humble him. The horror of the fall is, therefore, so great because he is a superior being, gifted with great possibilities of nobility. Even his fine qualities prolong and make more painful the process by which he comes to see himself as he really is. His love of action, his desire to know everything, his occasional ruthlessness in forcing the truth from an unwilling witness, lead to nothing but his own humiliation.

It was at the end of the play that Oedipus reveals the greatest of his nobilities of soul and integrity. Few people who had committed the crimes of moral laxity would dare to reveal themselves in public. Few would dare blind themselves for reasons beyond the call of ordinary

punishment and the will of the gods. Few would banish themselves from a position as exalted as a monarch. And none would dare go on living after such a life of dreaded sins--the double sins of parricide and incest. They would have taken their own lives, as did poor Jocasta, who had committed only one of the unpardonable sins. Yet Oedipus lived on--an old outcast-- a living reminder to the world of his horrendous crimes, crimes which though objectively obnoxious and horrible were subjectively, for him, innocent. He displays himself for all to see and beware. He only asks one thing and this too not for himself. Oedipus rises above his own misery only to ask for his daughters, to express the hope that Heaven will be kinder to Creon for bringing his daughters to him, and weep in the knowledge that Heaven will not be kind to them. Only a great man would momentarily forget his own abject misery and think of others in this moment of his nadir.

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย