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Sophocles' Portrait of Oedipus the King

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SOPHOCLES' PORTRAIT OF
OEDIPUS THE KING

by
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the Requirements for the Degree of
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LIFE

Norman George McKendrick, S.J., was born in Van Dyke, Michigan, December 25, 1928.

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The author has published nothing.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Oedipus Tyrannus has been regarded since antiquity as a masterpiece of dramatic art. It has always been considered one of Sophocles' more excellent depictions of character. With these two facts in mind, we are going to consider the character of the hero in the situations in which the plot of this tragedy place him. Our purpose is an obvious one; to come to a determination of the character of Oedipus based on the facts which are afforded by the dramatist himself in the body of the play. Greek tragedy was so arranged that the plot and character worked a mutual influence on one another; although plot was always the main thing since it consisted in the actions of the characters, character itself was the source of much of the action. In order, then, to understand a tragedy which is so centered around one man as is the Oedipus Tyrannus, we must know that man very well. The purpose of this thesis is to help toward that knowledge.

Our aim is not to psychoanalyse the hero or to theorize on the basis of contemporary history. We are interested, rather, in a portrait of Oedipus drawn exclusively from the facts which are presented in the drama itself. We will indulge in theorizing
only as it proves necessary for this end.

Moreover we will confine ourselves to the play: Oedipus Tyrannus. As an individual tragedy it has its own conception of the hero and his interaction with the other characters. A correlative study of the Oedipus Colonus, although helpful for some things, would seem to aid more to an understanding of the psychological development of Sophocles than of Oedipus. The tragedy which we are going to consider (a model tragedy for Aristotle), has a beginning, middle, and end in the true metaphysical sense, and it is this tragedy as a unified whole in which we are interested.

Before an intelligent consideration can be given to the character of any hero, we must know just exactly what we mean by the word character. We must know the distinction between character and personality in order to keep our concepts, and therefore our conclusions, clear and concise. Therefore our second chapter will be concerned with the precise meaning of character, its divisions, and the forces which contribute to its formation.1 We will then go on to consider this definition as applied to our hero and see what conclusions we can draw from this regarding the character of Oedipus. In another chapter we will discuss the

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1 It is well even this early in the thesis to express debt to Father Raymond V. Schoder, S. J., for his manuscript "The Nature of Human Character," taken from his dissertation; "Homer's Portrait of Achilles." Chapter II is especially indebted to him.
various methods which Sophocles has employed in his delineation of this character. We will conclude with a brief summary of the meaning of character, its determinants, the manner in which our play verifies these notions, together with a statement of the means used by Sophocles to do so and, finally, a resume of the character of the King.

It will be seen that our study is primarily literary, not philosophical. Much philosophy will, of course, be included but only as a means to a better esthetic appreciation of a work of art. The point cannot be stressed too instantly that we are not attempting a psychoanalysis. Rather, we are attempting to understand the literary portrait of a man as found in the very words in which he is depicted by the artist.

The effect of this thesis should be a fuller appreciation of the beauty of what is universally conceded to be one of the greatest tragedies of all time, together with a knowledge of the means employed in producing such a masterpiece.
CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF HUMAN CHARACTER

One of the central problems of this thesis is to establish a consistent, correct, and effective definition of the elusive word, character. In its etymology the word presents something of a problem, although even more troublesome are the vagaries which centuries of usage have attached to it. The word has acquired its present technical meaning through a long process of development. The Greek noun χαρακτήρ, which is allied to the verb χαράζω (meaning to sharpen, to brand, or to stamp a distinctive sign on something) originally meant a distinctive mark or brand by which a thing is known from others. A clever, if less accurate, etymology is given by Father Bull:

For originally the word meant merely the mark impressed on a coin or seal, indicating its nature and value, and distinguishing it from others; and thus in its applied sense character comes to mean marked individuality.


2 Ernest R. Bull, S. J., Formation of Character, St. Louis, 1926, 12.
Before proceeding any further it will be well to meet a problem which is intrinsic to our subject, the confusion of character with personality. Frequently the words are used interchangeably even by reputable authors. The point at issue is merely to determine on some one meaning of the words for the sake of consistency in this thesis. Personality is even more elusive in its varied denotations and connotations than character, and in at least one volume of psychology no less than fifty definitions are listed. The essential difference between the two words is that character refers to the use of the various powers of man. This is clearly an ethical concept and differs from the psychological concept of personality which signifies in itself only the complete complexus of the human individual with all his powers and all his acquired experience, irrespective of their use. Gordon W. Allport whose book is one of the sanest on this entire question of personality arrives at the following definition: "Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment." The fundamental note will be seen to be organiza-

3 Gordon W. Allport, Personality a Psychological Interpretation, New York, 1949, 51.
4 Ibid., 49.
5 M. H. G., 128.
7 Allport, Personality, 48.
Another definition of this same word will bring out more clearly the significance of some of the underlying meanings of the word as depicted in Allport's technical language:

Personality, then, is the given individual human composite as at present existing in its own unique complex of developed powers and experience, preceding from how these are used with regard to moral ends. It is the sum-total of a man's native endowment and his acquired habits; the total qualitative disposition of his powers and behavior, on the psychological rather than moral plane; the whole man in his individual combination of functional capacities in their present state of maturity and stable scheme of operation.

To go further and strive to determine our concept of personality by negation would require too much space. The central point to be held in mind is that character stresses the use of the powers of man, which is not true of personality.

"If personality is a psychological entity, character is an ethical entity." It is, therefore, the ethical concept to which Aristotle is referring in the Poetics: ξοιν δε θεος μεν το τοιουτον δ ηλοτ την προαιρεσιν, ωσποδ τις ειν οικοι και ειν οηλον η προαιρεται η φευγει . . . ."11

Character is variously defined by different authors. Maher calls it: "The total collection of a man's acquired moral

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8 N. H. C., 63, 94; Rudolf Allers, The Psychology of Character, trans., E. B. Strauss, New York, 1939, 10; Bremnan, Thomistic Psychology, 292.
9 N. H. C., 58.
10 Bremnan, Thomistic Psychology, 292.
11 Aristotle, Poetics, 1450b, 11-12.
habits grafted into his natural temperament make up his character."12 Morrison refers to it as "... the dynamic organization of life according to and dominated by principles."13 This is very close to Hull's wording of the same idea: "Character is life dominated by principles, as distinguished from life dominated by mere impulses and circumstances."14 After discussing the entire make-up of the nature of man relative to character and personality Father Schoder gives the following synthetic and analytic definition which seems to include all the accuracy of the shorter definitions while making explicit much that was merely implicit:

The culminating factor of individuality, in which all the elements we have hitherto treated are caught up into their ultimate integration and incommunicability, is character. This is the ethical structuring of an individual's behavioral capacities into a consistent pattern deliberately impressed upon the temperament under the dominance of those principles of moral conduct which constitute this individual's life-ideal. It is the factor determining the good or bad use to which one's developed personality is freely and habitually put. In it lies the fulfillment of individuality.15

Allport, although he questions the wisdom of separating the terms personality and character, nevertheless admits that it is common usage.16 It is not to be supposed that we are main-

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14 Hull, Formation of Character, 13.
15 W. H. G., 72.
16 Allport, Personality, 51.
taining any dualistic division of the two entities in their concretized existence within the individual. We are merely adopting the scholastic mode of considering things according to formalities in order the better to understand them. Allport puts the matter very concisely when he says: "Character is personality evaluated, and personality is character devaluated." Thus it will be seen that character is more inclusive than personality because all man's faculties are to some extent subject to the will.\textsuperscript{18} Materially, character is the total, developed individual as a human agent, ethical character embracing and informing all lower determinations such as personality, temperament, and person. The essence of character, then, is the norm according to which a man makes his choices, or makes use of the faculties which are his. This norm will take the form of "... a stable value-set of ethical ideals, and a tenacity of adherence to this standard in all conduct and circumstances."\textsuperscript{19} As Brennan says, character is constituted by "... the sum total of all our moral habits grouped around the axis of the will."\textsuperscript{20} This stressing of the role of the will is especially valuable in a consideration of any work of Sophocles, for as Croiset puts it:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 52.
\item \textsuperscript{18} N. H. C., 73-74.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 74.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Brennan, Thomistic Psychology, 292.
\end{itemize}
Le véritable ressort tragique pour Sophocle, c'est la volonté de l'être humain, telle qu'elle est dans une conscience saine, non plus idéalisée par conséquent... la volonté réduite à ses seules forces, la volonté raisonnable et réfléchie, celle qui fait l'homme, et qui l'honore alors même qu'elle le perd. Une résolution ferme et haute, appuyée sur des motifs parfaitement clairs, tel est, dans toutes les tragédies de Sophocle que nous connaissions, le fond même du drame, ou plutôt, son âme.21

Une résolution... appuyée sur des motifs... leads us to another point which is one of the essential notes of character. The first note is a norm, a value-set of ideals, as was seen above. However many writers have treated character as though it were merely the safety valve on personality, an inhibiting force which channels the instinctive powers of man.22 This is to make character a negative thing which is not the sense in which we purpose to use it. Allers, though using Kantian terminology, comes closer to the truth when he calls character a sort of composite individual categorical imperative.23 In ordinary language this means a positive adherence to an ideal or goal in such a way as to restrain any actions which would tend to render the ideal impossible or more difficult of attainment.

The very heart of character, then, is a fixed value-


23 Allers, The Psychology of Character, 52, 56.
preference and purpose. As the driving-force of human conduct, it is the principle underlying all a man's voluntary acts, determining his choice of action and the basis on which he justifies his conduct.24

Having arrived at the essential determination of character we face the pertinent question of how to recognize character when it is seen. How does one go about recognizing what the norm, the value-set of ideals, the purpose is in a man's activities? The clue is the word use. In any character there will be a set of values, of ideals, according to which the actions of the individual will be governed. The ideals cannot, of course, be seen, but the actions in which they issue can be observed and from these actions illations made to the ideals themselves which direct them. It should be obvious that we cannot determine a man's character from isolated facts. Some acts may be sporadic, fortuitous, consequently not a reflection of the self-determined pattern of behavior which is the result of character. Characterology is not an a priori science; it is, on the contrary, largely empiric. Observation of the deeds of a man,25 over a sufficiently long period of time, and this alone, results in a recognition of the ideals and purpose which underlies them, and in this combination of ideals and purpose is the essence of character.26 Deeds, of course,

24 N. H. G., 75.
25 Allers, Psychology of Character, 52, 56.
26 See again page 8.
are of varying degrees of subtility. For example, sternness, self-command, or weakness may be evident in the very facial expression of a man, or in his bearing. Many other traits of character may be recognized by typical acts which are immediately distinctive of them, and do not require analysing the entire gamut of other determinants which produce the harmony of the whole psychological-ethical composite. These immediate illusions are, nevertheless, but a poor substitute for the detailed consideration of the person in the light of the factors in their entirety which go into the making of his character.

The determinants of character as given in Father Schoder (he is in substantial agreement with the major authors on the subject and incorporates the contributions of each), are six in number.

First of all there are the native factors. All psychologists and ethicists recognize the influence of native factors. They are due largely to the different status of the faculties which prevails in various individuals, propelling them more towards one type of motivation than another, making one faculty more acute than another, and so forth. It is clear that to individuals with such varying strength of faculties, objects will appear in greatly disparate power of attraction or repulsion.

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27 Morrison, *Character Formation in College*, 119; Roback, *Psychology of Character*, 338-344; etc.
Another factor is physical endowment, for instance, a good physique or a poor one, a handsome face or a homely face, natural athletic ability or the complete lack of it. In addition to this the recognized influence of endocrine glands on emotions will differ with the individual and have a large effect on choice, since they have a tremendous influence on one's temperament, and will also, as a result, have an influence on one's primary reactions (actus primo præmi) to various situations, with obvious effect on the will's final decision. Instinct is another force which has a large part to play in the determination of character. Instincts are a sort of "unlearned motives" which are occasions for certain actions over which the will must exercise constant control, thereby revealing the individual's ideals of conduct. Self-assertion or the perfecting of self are basic instincts which have a clearly perceived effect on the growing and completed character pattern which are evolved from them. The intensity and depth

28 N. H. C., 24: Allport's definition of temperament is adequate for our purposes in this work, "Temperament refers to the characteristic phenomena of an individual's emotional nature, including his susceptibility to emotional stimulation, his customary strength and speed of response, the quality of his prevailing mood; these phenomena being regarded as dependent upon constitutional make-up, and therefore largely hereditary in origin." Personality, 54.

29 Morrison, Character Formation in College, 119; Roback, Psychology of Character, 336-344; (as in footnote 12).


31 Allers, Psychology of Character, 62-79.
of a man's emotions will effect his reaction to his surroundings and to people, though they are natural and antecedent to his deliberate conduct.32

Another determinant of character is environment and the example of others. It should be obvious, since nihil est in intellectu quod non prius in sensu, that the surroundings in which the young mind matures will exert great influence on the final cast of his character. This environment will include physical surroundings, for example, whether he lives in the midst of fine architecture or in novels; also the people with whom he will come in habitual contact, especially his relatives who have an undoubted influence, as he will tend to imitate not only their view on life and their standards but also their manner of expressing them. This accounts, along with geographical similarity, for the quite consistent national characteristics of nations.33 Even if a youth does possess a high standard of values in a poor environment, he will tend, under the constant influence of the example of adults, to lower his ideals to their level.34 Plato saw this truth as is evidenced from the Republic where he insists on regulation of the environment of youth even to the extent of con-

32 Brennan, Thomistic Psychology, 164.
33 Plato, Republic, 395b-c; Laws, 656b; Compare Aristotle, Ethics, 1115b 26-28; Politics, 1327b 23.
34 Hull, The Formation of Character, 90, 94-96, 103-104.
trolling the vicarious experiences of literature.35 Man is naturally mimetic, as Plato says in this same place, and this comes out particularly in his imitation of his immediate milieu.36 Children will adopt the mode of walking, the vocabulary, the prejudices and even the attitudes of their elders. This is all a part of what may be termed "social heritage." On the other hand a conscious inferiority may lead a youth to strive to compensate by developing a special skill which the rest of his family does not possess.37

The forces that shape character are of three kinds, not only in the period now under discussion (adolescence), but generally speaking. The reason for our postponement of this matter is that one of these groups of forces does not seem to be of importance in the years preceding adolescence. The three groups are as follows: (i) The directly discerned motives of action; (ii) The demands coming from the outside world, which are felt to be more or less binding, though the reason for them is not always entirely discerned; (iii) The undiscerned, unreflective motives, which are largely bound up with vital values, and on this account are frequently regarded as 'impulsive,' although this is incorrect if the usual connotation of 'impulse' be retained in this connection.38

Thus far we have considered two of these at least partially: (ii) and (iii) as above. We will now proceed to treat the first of Aller's divisions.

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35 Plato, Republic, 435e.
38 Ibid., 301.
The essential determinant of character is rational motives as integrated into an ideal. A motive is:

... an intellectually perceived principle of practical conduct soliciting the will to pursue a definite course of action; a driving-force toward some goal, existing in the will as a form determining the particular good which ought now to be pursued.

Motives take the form of ends to be achieved and thus direct all of our activity by the principle qui vult finem vult et media. By a process of selection and mutual exclusion with regard to the other determinants, motives come to consolidate themselves into an ideal which will govern every facet of a man's life. Indeed, one of the indications of maturity is the stability and predictability which results from this determined set of ends. Very much to the point is Allport's statement regarding mature personality, the application to our present problem being patent:

One of the chief characteristics of the mature personality is its possession of sophisticated and stable interests and of a characteristic and predictable style of conduct. Convictions and habits of expression are definitely centered. Evaluations are sure, actions are precise, and the goals of the individual life are well defined.

To speak of motives as "rational" does not exclude the

39 N. H. C., 82.
40 Ibid., 82.
41 Ibid., 83; Hull, Formation of Character, 14; Morrison, Character Formation in College, 61-62; Allers, Psychology of Character, 190.
42 Allport, Personality, 190.
emotional element. In fact, to be truly operative and to achieve their full end, motives must excite the love as well as the intellectual assent of man. In short, motives must form a vital ideal which can permeate every phase of a man’s life, something of an ideal self on which the individual attempts to model himself. The function of an ideal then, is to give unity and stability of motivation amid the constant flow and change of circumstances.

We have seen that character contains elements of intellect and volition. In fact, intellect is a means to the exercise of the will. Now a consideration of the practical implementing of the ideal of character is in order. The most obvious means of assuring the attainment of an ideal is to make a resolution first of all to attain one’s ideal in general and secondly to cope with any individual set of circumstances which might arise contrary to the ideal. This will amount to a select

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44 "... an ideal is a collection of principles of action covering the whole of life; a composite standard of excellence representing in a unified whole, rationally, imaginatively, and emotionally assimilated, that concrete set of life-values in whose personal realization in practice one places the goal, perfection, and happiness of life; the man one ought to be." N. H. C., 83.

45 Confer footnote 41.

and concrete order of procedure or mode of action which is calculated to lead to the ideal itself. This order will be the result of deliberate choice. We will be stronger or weaker in character insofar as we keep or break the resolutions which we have determined upon. These resolutions, which are general principles, must be further implemented by rules and regulations to insure their effectiveness. Such rules are concerned with concrete acts which are to be done or omitted under penalty. Their real purpose is to safeguard the basic principles by avoiding debates on ambiguous issues and forestalling the claim of ignorance as to the practical application of the general principles in any given situation.

Law, as an external force which embodies an ideal, is one excellent aid towards gaining character. The purpose of good laws is to direct the citizens into paths of behavior calculated to achieve at least some part of every objectively good ideal. This works out because law insists on habits of righteous conduct. The laws when observed are designed to lead to the perfection of man as a social animal, they are attuned to the nature and destiny of man, which are certainly a part of any real ideal. Law, moreover, as a reflection and expression ultimately of eternal law which guides mankind to its moral goal, cannot but be a

48 St. Thomas, *In Ethica*, 10.14; 1.19; Summa 1-2.90 1-
powerful force in the formation of strong character.\textsuperscript{49}

The will, as that faculty which reaches out to embrace what is proposed to it as good is also the faculty which determines on the choice or rejection of an ideal, as well as of the regulations, rules, and laws to be employed in arriving at the ideal. It is the will that considers two or more possible courses of activity, various possible proximate ends in life, alternative concrete plans of achieving these ends, and accepts one while rejecting the others.\textsuperscript{50}

It is in the province of the will to offset whatever opposition to sound character development which may come from a man's temperament or physical surroundings. By its deliberate governance, the will determines the final character of the individual. Thus a man's greatest dignity is not controlled by exterior forces, but rather is ultimately controlled by his own free will. Free will as a specifically human possession belongs to all of us and hence, other things being equal, we all have an equal chance to achieve character, a fact which would not be true if character depended on the possession of great physical strength or intellectual talent.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Traditional scholastic doctrine.
\textsuperscript{51} Plato, \textit{Laws}, 904c-d; \textit{Republic}, 617e; Aristotle, \textit{Ethics}.
It is the common consent of mankind that an individual is responsible for the choices which he freely and deliberately makes. Hence it follows that a man is responsible for his character since it is so formed. Morality is a product of choice and intention and these are also, as Aristotle tells us, the determinants of ethical character. Responsibility in this matter extends both to the habits which constitute the character and the concrete individual acts which result from these habits. Both are freely chosen, and no coercion is possible here. The only acts which do not fall under some degree of responsibility are those performed with no advertence or consent. This same principle governs the proffering of censure or reward. Brennan phrases the point in a very telling manner: "When the matter is sifted down, the happiness of every man's soul is in his own hands, to preserve and develop or to cast away."

The development of a character is a complex problem, as is clear from the factors which we have discussed. Each one of these factors bears a direct relation to the end product, character.

The first obligation in this matter of development rests

114b22-115a3; Hull, The Formation of Character, 79.
53 Brennan, Thomistic Psychology, 34.
with the parents as the chief force in controlling the environment and habits of youth. Next to them are the forces of education, the Church and the State. It is the duty of parents and teachers to treat as an individual problem each of their charges and, with consideration of the person's native ability, provide the necessary stimulus and assistance in the right direction. From childhood on, the correct ideals and ideas must be instilled if the child is to have any facility in meeting the conflicts of later life. Hull puts this point very effectively:

The great business of training therefore is, first to lay before the child the best and noblest possible ideal; secondly to get that ideal stamped into his mind in the concrete form of sound principles; thirdly so firmly to establish the habit of acting according to those principles that it will last for the rest of his life.

The natural human drive towards pleasure and aversion from pain must be subordinated to moral realities so that the youth will learn to find his pleasure in virtuous behavior even at the cost of physical pain. To do this requires early and constant training. Eventually, of course, it is still up to the individual to work out his own character with the aid of the

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54 Allers, Psychology of Character, 58-59.
56 Plato, Republic, 377b: Laws 792d-e, 643b-d.
57 Josephus Frobos, S.J., Psychologia Speculativa, Friburg, 1927, II, 152.

"Educatio... prae aliis appetibilia... facile... eligantur"
various stimuli to which we have adverted. To strive persevering-
ly towards his own fulfillment the person must be convinced of
his own value and possibilities, that he has a real worth in the
sight of God and men. When a young man is properly inspired by
the right ideals early in life, when he is shown practically what
he can do, when, moreover, he is tendered the necessary under-
standing, encouragement, and sympathy, he will strive for a charac-
ter which will be of benefit not only to himself but also to the
society of which he is a member.58

To reduce characters to types in any strict scientific
sense will meet with slight success. A constant to serve as a
basis of division is hard to arrive at when dealing with the fac-
tor of personal individuality. Moreover, as we saw, free will is
the major force in forming character and it can never be forced in
to a strict antecedent category relative to its choices. Develop-
ment and change plus constant variation make it impossible to set
up divisions which are univocally valid of each individual in
them.

Nevertheless, understanding these intrinsic drawbacks,
some general observations can be made. For guidance we shall re-
ly on Father Schoder's division of types, which is at once ac-
curate and practical:

As the ethical structuring of a man's life, prescinding from his individual personality, a character may be classified on the basis of the various correlation it reveals to the two factors of consistency and selflessness. On the former count, characters are either strong or weak, stable or vacillating, in various degrees of preponderance; on the latter basis, characters are to be placed somewhere on the scale of generous-selfish, altruistic-egocentric, and extrovert-introvert (in basic focus of interests).59

The culmination of the perfect development of all man's powers, so that in every act, in every set of circumstances, he reacts in the most truly human fashion, would constitute an ideal character. Such, of course, was Christ. The Saints in their varied unity proclaim the numerous facets of this one great Ideal.60 Every conceivable character will find here a gauge which is objective and can be used as a measure of itself.

We have seen now what character is and what personality is, together with the distinction between them. The essence of character has been outlined and seen to consist in two notes: a preferred value-set and a tenacity of purpose. We have elaborated the six major determinants of character, stressing particularly the ideal and the role of the will. We indicated briefly and in general the methods of character development, and finally considered in passing the ideal character. With this background we should be adequately prepared to consider the very interesting character of Oedipus, son of Laius, as Sophocles portrays him.

59 N.H.C., 18.

60 Maher, "Character", in Catholic Encyclopedia, 586.
CHAPTER III

THE CHARACTER OF OEDIPUS

THE KING

In any complete consideration of the character of a man two things are necessary: first, the facts of a man's life must be known in order to evaluate correctly their effect on the character which he now possesses; secondly, these facts must be given objective scrutiny in the light of the person's present actions in order to find the central theme or principle which dominates the various other parts of character, giving it its unity. When dealing with a character as represented in a tragedy an added difficulty presents itself, for we are apt to be overwhelmed by the tragic character to such an extent that we neglect forming a complete picture of the man in question. The tragic character of a man, at least in the Attic tragedians, is dominated by a flaw, a 

hamartia, from which with a causal necessity the hero approaches the climax and calamity of the play and its consequent enlightenment and purification. Doubtless this hamartia will figure largely in any consideration of the character of a hero, yet to delineate the complete, unified whole of his character, in a way at all satisfactory, it is obvious that more attention will have to be
given to the other facets of his character. ¹

The first of the two necessities mentioned above easily resolves itself, for Oedipus himself gives all the facts necessary for background to his character. ² Before going on to relate these facts, however, it might be well to consider briefly Sophocles' position on tragedy and above all on the tragedy with which we are concerned.

To Sophocles, the tragedy of life is not that a man is wicked or foolish, but that he is imperfect; unequal, even at his best, to a sudden demand made by circumstances. The tragedian is not bent upon showing that we are automatically punished by shortcomings. ³ Nowhere is this more evident than in the Oedipus Tyrannus. Here he pictures a hero far above the average in intelligence and prudence, who is confronted with circumstances which are also far above the ordinary, and to which he is not quite equal. The tragedy and the pity of it is that a man should be so great and yet, because of one glaring fault, lose it all; that he should be so very strong and noble, and be brought low by circumstances which are even stronger. This is precisely what Sophocles has done in

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² Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus, 771-833.

his creation of Oedipus. He shows a man grappling with something that is simply above his power. The logical working out of this struggle, according to strict rule of cause and effect, is the chief beauty of the tragedy. We need not wonder then at the critical summary given by a modern classicist: "Aristotle and most subsequent critics regard Oedipus as the model Greek Tragedy. Each step in the intricate and perfectly dove-tailed plot is motivated, and none seems contrived; . . ."\(^4\)

Let us now begin our work with the complete story of the play.\(^5\) Laius, king of Thebes, and his wife Jocasta, were childless. The king went to inquire at the oracle of Delphi whether or not he would be blessed with a child, and was told that if a child were born it should kill its father. Hence, when Oedipus was born, the king resolved to destroy him. He did not, however, have the heart to kill his own son so Jocasta gave him to a shepherd to be exposed on a mountain nearby, Cithaeron. This was the crude but effective mode of ridding oneself of an undesired child in those simple days, and the infant's ankles were pierced and fastened together to avoid any possible escape. The shepherd also


\(^5\) The story as told here is taken from references to it found in the play itself, particularly: 771-833. There are several versions, each differing in detail from the others. e.g. that the baby was suspended by the heels from a tree and was rescued by the Corinthian shepherd. A lengthy discussion of such minor details is not warranted in view of our primary goal.
had pity on the child and, instead of exposing him as directed, gave him to a friend of his, the shepherd of King Polybus of Corinth. It so happened that Polybus and his wife Merope were also childless, so they adopted the infant and raised him as their own, never telling the youngster that he had been adopted. One day at a banquet a drunken man taunted Oedipus with his unknown origin. Oedipus, greatly disturbed, made inquiries of the king and queen, who told him to ignore the drunken remark. Doubt, however, preyed on the mind of the young prince, and so he made his way to Delphi to inquire of Apollo an answer to his difficulty. Apollo did not answer his precise question, but told him that he was destined to kill his father and violate the bed of his mother. Horrified, Oedipus turned away, resolved never to return to Corinth, lest he fulfill this terrible prophecy on his supposed parents. At this exact moment Laius, his real father, was also on his way to Delphi to find a solution to the problem of the Sphinx, a monster with the body of a lion and the upper part of a woman, which terrorized the highway near the city of Thebes. Hera had instigated this pest in her hatred for Thebes, for the town was the chief rival of her favorite city, Semele. Death was the punishment for failure to answer the Sphinx's riddle: What animal is that which in the morning goes on four feet, at noon on two, and in the evening upon three? Thus far none had answered the question correctly. In the meantime the city was in sore straits.

The father and son met at a place where three roads meet.
quarrelled, and the angry and hasty Oedipus killed the king and all but one of his attendants. This fulfilled the first part of the prophecy. He continued to Thebes, answered the famous riddle with the word man, was elected king, married the queen Jocasta, and thereby fulfilled the second part of the prophecy. The sole survivor of the slaughter in the cross-roads finally made his way back to Thebes and at his own request was sent out to the fields as a shepherd.

For about sixteen years there was prosperity in the city. Oedipus and Jocasta had four children. Oedipus was renowned the length of the country as a man of great wisdom, and as a good king. Then a calamity arose, a terrible plague struck the city. Crops were blighted, droves and whole flocks perished, women failed to bring forth children. The play opens as the people of Thebes present themselves at the gate of the palace to beg their king to find an answer to the problem. Oedipus is a noble, generous man bent upon solving the problem of his people, using all his tremendous power to do it, but he is balked by a force which is simply too much for him. In this moment of stress the one crack in the armor of his character is found and pierced—his insufficient prudence, his precipitous judgements, his too great confidence in his own intellectual ability. It is this "crack" which we will call his hamartia.

6 Jebb, Plays and Fragments, xxi.
The flaw in Oedipus' character bears a remarkable resemblance to a heresy which attacked the Church in the early fifth century—Pelagianism. The point at which this heresy assists us in an understanding of the flaw in Oedipus is its insistence on the independence of man, on the error that man could achieve his last end without the assistance of divine grace, or at least with nothing but extrinsic graces. In Oedipus we see this same independence, this same insistence on his own powers of intellect. He says in one place:

\[ \text{ὡς οὔτ' ἀπ' οἴων ὁδ' ξοοῦν οὐ προοφάνης ἔχων} \\
\text{οὔτ' ἐκ θεῶν τού γνωτόν ἂλλ' ἐγὼ μοιλών,} \\
\text{ὁ μηθὲν εἰόδος οἴνοποις, ἴκαυσα νιν,} \\
\text{γνώμη κυρῆσας οὔτ' ἀπ' οἴων ὁμαλάν.} \]

Earlier in his life the young prince had shown signs of his imprudent and hasty use of knowledge. When taunted by a drunkard, he asked Polybus and Merope the truth of his origin, he was assured that there was no foundation to the accusation. Without a word to anyone he went off to Delphi to find out for himself. Upon receiving the terrible answer he was prudent, but not prudent enough. He acted in haste, and failed to consider all the possibilities. His precipitous rush away from Corinth, and equally


8 Oedipus Tyrannus, 395-398, Jebb's edition, henceforth referred to by the abbreviation "Q. T.", is cited throughout.
precipitous determination never to be seen there again, was natural to a man of his character, but it was not completely becoming a man, rather it was somewhat childish. Oedipus had yet to learn the greatest lesson of all, that which was etched above the door there at Delphi, the greatest of Greece's shrines: "Know thyself." At this early point in his life he ignored that principle and while on his way to Thebes he broke the other principle of the Delphic religion; μηδέν ἄγαν. He encountered the retinue of Laius and, upon what would seem to be a little offense on their part, went into a rage and killed all but one of them. This, of course, fulfilled the first part of the curse and was the beginning of his troubles.

We shall return to this hamartia of our hero at the end of this chapter, to enlighten it by way of conclusion. Right now however, let us, for the sake of unity and coherence, take the major traits that can be found in the character of the king and see them as they reveal themselves in the play itself. Having done this, we shall be in a position to perceive the wedge that his fault formed in an otherwise almost impregnable defense. We are now, then, to discuss the character of Oedipus in general, not specifically his tragic character as such, although the two are identical in many aspects. What we shall do is try to understand the whole man that Sophocles has portrayed for us in this his masterpiece.

Croiset remarks that the key to Sophocles and to the
Oedipus Tyrannus is the use of the will in the development of character in the hero. We will certainly not deny this, after arriving in the preceding chapter at the conclusion that the will is the principal determinant of character. We will find that for Oedipus, to know something as reasonable was to will it. His will was completely subject to his intellect. But it is the intellect that is emphasized by Sophocles in our play, and if Oedipus is κλέινος it is due principally, in the mind of his subjects to the fact that he was the one:

δς γ′ ἐξέλυσας, ὅσον καδμιεύον μελόν, σκληρὰς δοίδοσ δασμὸν ὅν παρείχουμεν· καὶ ταῦτα ὃτ' ἦμων οὐδὲν ἐξειδίκευσιν τῶν ὑπὸ ἐκδίδακτον κλέον ὑπὸ έκδοξάσθείς, ἀλλὰ προσέθηκα θεοῦ λέγει νομίζει θ' ἦμιν ὀρθώσαι βίον.¹⁰

Under the heading of knowledge, then, let us consider first of all Oedipus' quest for knowledge, then his pride in knowledge together with his accompanying violence and impatience.

We have already seen how inquisitive was his nature even in his youth when he went to Polybus and Merope and insisted on knowing the full truth about his ancestry.¹¹ There followed his trip to Delphi and the prophecy. Eagerness to know was therefore part of our hero even as the play opens, and characteristic-

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⁹ Croiset, Histoire, 262.
¹⁰ O. T., 35-39.
¹¹ Ibid., 761-783.
cally enough, the second line of the play finds Oedipus asking a question, a practice which signalizes him among all other tragic heroes. There are 199 questions in the Oedipus, one to every six lines. Of these Oedipus asks 123. The play could easily be divided into scenes between Oedipus and the people with whom he comes into contact. With each of these he is seen as the questioner, constantly trying to perfect his incomplete knowledge of the details of the death of Laius and of the curse which surrounds his own birth.

It would be out of proportion to our effort to attempt to list in the body of this thesis every instance of his questioning, of his quest for knowledge. We will content ourselves with the more evident, important, and characteristic instances.

Having learned the mission of the suppliants, Oedipus tells them that he is not unaware of their problem, in fact that he has given it a great deal of consideration and has chosen the only possible solution, which is implemented by his having sent Creon to the Delphic oracle. He now awaits impatiently the return of his emissary. He is so eager that when Creon approaches he shouts to him at a distance and immediately begins to question him. The stychomythia which begins at line 84 and goes to line

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13 O. T., 59-77.
131 is almost entirely a search for knowledge. In this section of the play Oedipus finds out that the source of the plague is the unavenged murder of Laius,\(^\text{14}\) and that until the murderer is ejected from the country the plague will continue.\(^\text{15}\) He vows that he will rid the country of the pest.\(^\text{16}\)

The chorus of Theban elders enters at this point. They are confused, even as the king is. They do not know what the oracle can possibly mean. However, there is a difference in their reaction to the puzzle. They turn to Apollo and the patron gods of the city for light, because as they say:

\[
\ldots \, \tau\ddot{o} \, \delta \varepsilon \kappa\iota\tau\iota\alpha\mu\alpha \, \tau\omicron\omicron\omicron \, \pi\mu\mu\alpha\nu\tau\omicron\omicron\dot{o} \, \varepsilon \kappa\iota\varepsilon\iota\nu, \, \delta\omicron\omicron\iota\varsigma \varepsilon\iota\gamma\gamma\alpha\omicron\omicron\alpha \tau\iota\varsigma \, \pi\omicron\omicron\varsigma.\text{17}
\]

If Oedipus wants to find out the murderer the only source can be the divine source. It is Apollo who has sent this curse, it is Apollo who must rid them of it. But if the god refuses to give the answer the next best course is to appeal to one of his close servants, the seer Teiresias. Oedipus has already taken this step.\(^\text{18}\) As he says, he is a stranger to the city as far as news concerning the murder is concerned, and in his love for the truth

\[\begin{align*}
\text{14} & \text{ Ibid., 106-107.} \\
\text{15} & \text{ Ibid., 100-102.} \\
\text{16} & \text{ Ibid., 132-138.} \\
\text{17} & \text{ Ibid., 278-279.} \\
\text{18} & \text{ Ibid., 287-289.}
\end{align*}\]
he refuses to attempt a conclusion without the necessary facts on which to base it.\textsuperscript{19} It is not in an incorrect use of the syllogism that Oedipus errs; but in the incorrect ingredients which he puts into it.

This failure to use the correct ingredients becomes evident in the next scene, the scene with Teiresias. At first the seer refuses to answer, then under the bite of Oedipus' taunts, he is forced to cry out:

\[
\text{ἀληθεῖς; ἐννέα πεῖ τῷ κρυγματὶ}
\]
\[
\text{ἀφερ προσέπας ἐμμένειν, καὶ ἤμερας}
\]
\[
\text{τῆς νῦν προσαναθαν μήτε τοὺσδε μήτ' ἐμέ,}
\]
\[
\text{ὡς ὅστι γῆς τῆσδ' ἀνοσίῳ μιδᾶτορι.} \textsuperscript{20}
\]

The seer had not wanted to answer the questions, for he knew where they would lead; but Oedipus, impatient and violent, especially when faced with a situation where he was the ignorant party, forces the issue and receives the horrible truth. He is the defiler of the land. He breaks into a rage at this news and accuses Teiresias of taunting him, at which Teiresias repeats his revelation. Oedipus is then beyond himself in a rage which becomes tinted with scorn. Teiresias, now fully angry himself, proceeds to the second part of the dreadful truth and tells Oedipus that he is living in consort with his nearest kin, the words summing up Oedipus' sorry state:

\textsuperscript{19} Carroll, "Questions in the Oedipus Tyrannus," \textit{P} 12.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{O. T.}, 350-353.
Oedipus at this point has no reason for believing the seer, other than his dignity as a religious man. He feels certain he has averted the prophecy of his marriage with his mother by fleeing Corinth; and he could not have been the murderer of Laius, for he has never seen Laius. Therefore the seer is hiding something. For some reason or other the seer was trying to undermine his reputation before the people. He reminds Teiresias, that being a blind man, he cannot hurt one who has full use of his faculties. The seer merely replies that it is not from him but from Apollo that the plague will be cleansed. We can imagine Oedipus' mind working frantically during these few moments trying to find the key to the obvious lies that the seer has told and with it the key to the terrible plague. The possibility that the seer is telling the truth is brushed aside as absurd. But why, what possible good could the seer gain by undermining his kingship? Who would be king in his stead ... and a light begins to dawn on Oedipus. Of course, why hadn't he thought of it before! Κρέοντος ή σοῦ ταῦτα ταξιευρήματα; 22 So that was it, it

21 Ibid., 457-460.

22 Ibid., 378.
was Creon who wanted to be king. It all followed now. Creon himself had suggested sending for the seer, and doubtless he knew what the seer would say. They were in collusion to overthrow Oedipus and take over the kingdom for themselves. The seer replies to his question that it is not Creon who is the source of his difficulties, but Oedipus himself, \( \text{Kρέων δέ σοι πῆλ' οὐδὲν,} \) \( \text{ἀλλ' αὐτὸς σὺ σοι'} \). By this time, however, Oedipus is not listening, he is reflecting on the most bitter sorrow a man can receive, the betrayal by a friend—when a friend who is trusted becomes more enamoured of wealth and power than of the person of his friend. Oedipus enters into a tirade against Creon into which he weaves insults against Teiresias. Why did not the seer use his powers to deliver the city from the Sphinx? By the end of the speech he refers to Creon as \( \text{συνήθις τὸδε,} \) the plotter of these things, and to Teiresias as his assistant. The condemnation has been conceived in anger and declared in bold haste. The chorus alone retains composure as they plead with the two men to think the difficulty out coolly, and not in the heat of anger. But the matter has gone too far by now, and Teiresias begins an oracular speech which foretells Oedipus' downfall. At this point

23 Ibid., 379.
24 Ibid., 401.
25 Ibid., 404-407.
26 Ibid., 446-462.
an air of foreboding, an ominous air, enters the play. Teiresias bids Oedipus go in and consider what he has been told.

The chorus enters worried and excited:

οὔτε δοξοθυτ' οὔτ' ἀποφάσκονθ'· δ' τι λέξω δ' ἄπορω. πέτομαι δ' ἐλπίσιν, οὔτ' ἐνθέδ' ὄρθων οὔτ' ὀφισμ.27

They are torn between their devotion to Oedipus as the saviour of the city and their respect for Teiresias as the seer of Apollo. In the end they resolve to stay by Oedipus until certain knowledge is attained:

ἄλλ' οὔποτ' ἔγγυτ' δὲν, πρὶν ἰδοίμ' ὀρθὸν ἔπος, μεμφομένων δὲν καταφαίην.

.................................................................

τῷ ἄθρ' ἐμές φρένος οὔποτ' ὀφλησει καθίαν.28

When Oedipus returns and finds Creon standing before the palace, he is enraged. The chorus' attempts to placate the anger of Creon vanish immediately as Oedipus boldly declares that Creon is the proven assassin of the master of this house.29 There follows an excited altercation between the two men. After this Creon tries to show Oedipus how foolish it would be for him to wish to be king, with all the difficulties that office involved.30 The reasoning in his speech is very good and true, but

27 Ibid., 485-486.
28 Ibid., 503-504, 511-512.
29 Ibid., 534-535.
30 Ibid., 583-615.
Oedipus is not convinced by it and Sophocles has formed the speech in such a way that it would not be too convincing. It strikes one as a collection of pious truisms with little bearing on the actual state of events. One good piece of advice is contained in the speech, however, for Creon urges Oedipus to move more slowly, to test his information. The chorus concurs with Creon in this opinion. At this point Jocasta enters from the palace.

The tragedy begins to quicken as Oedipus explains the source of the difficulty to his wife. Jeering at the thought of his having killed Laius, she says the oracles were not to be trusted, because they declared that Laius was to be killed by his own son, but he was killed by robbers at the place where three ways meet. Therefore she bids Oedipus discount whatever they might have told him. But Oedipus has changed in the few minutes of her speech; fear and dread begin to appear on his set face, and he turns to his wife and says:

οὗν μὲ ἀκούσαντ' ἄρτιώς ἔχει, γύναι, ψυχής πλάνημα κάναξίνηςις φρενῶν.  

Jocasta is startled at the effect of her speech on her husband. She had expected just the opposite reaction. What was the matter

32 O. T., 608.
33 Ibid., 726-727.
with him? Oedipus then questions her more accurately as to the
details of Laius’ death: the time, the place, the company, his
stature. By the time Jocasta has replied to each of these ques-
tions in turn, the awful truth begins to dawn with tremendous
weight on the soul of Oedipus: αἱ ἀκούσα ἔστη διαφανής.34 He in-
sists that the sole survivor of Laius’ train be sent for and then,
at Jocasta’s request, tells her the story of his life. It is a
calmer Oedipus who relates these facts and draws their conclusion.
All things point to his having been the murderer of Laius, and he
recognizes the fact. The anguish is made double by the fact that
he could not return to Corinth since he was under the prophecy of
Delphi. There is but one hope left. He would not draw his con-
clusions beyond the premises, he must wait and see what the eye-
itness would say. The shepherd had already told Jocasta that the
king was murdered by a band of robbers, and if this was true, then
Oedipus is free.35 On that slim hope rests the happiness of the
couple as they cede the stage to the chorus.

The chorus sings of the necessity for reverence to the
gods and the evil effects of pride and unholy deeds which rise
frequently from wealth and power. They are disquieted by some of
the remarks of Jocasta regarding the oracles. But as they finish
Jocasta returns with an offering for the god Apollo, that he might

34 Ibid., 754.
35 Ibid., 842-847.
give some relief to the fears that afflict the leader of the state. She has no sooner finished her prayer than the Corinthian shepherd arrives with news that Polybus is dead from natural causes. Jocasta, of course, is overjoyed, thinking that this fact will render impossible the fulfillment of the dread prophecy about Oedipus killing his father. Oedipus reenters and, when he learns the message which the shepherd has brought, joins Jocasta in abjuring faith in oracles. It is obvious that he has not killed his father. However his exultation is sobered by one thought. His mother, Merope is still alive, and the most revolting part of the prophecy concerned her. This at least he must still continue to fear. We see here the prudence of Oedipus in operation; he will rejoice insofar as the news warrants but no further. He is a different man than he had been with Creon and Teiresias. Then he had been brash and overconfident, now his self-confidence is somewhat shaken, and he wants to be certain of every step. With Creon and Teiresias his mind was still accustomed to having the correct answer immediately; it was impatient of delay and doubt, violent at opposition, and stubborn in maintaining its first conclusion. Even at that time he was not completely imprudent. The slight grounds were there, as we pointed out, for his condemnation of Creon, but they were insufficient, his action was precipitous.

36 Ibid., 964-972.
37 Ibid., 976.
Now under the sobering influence of the information gained from Jocasta and his own recollection of the incident of the three roads his impatience has quieted down, he is ready to hold his decision until the last piece of evidence is in. Before he gives himself over to relief and joy, he must worry about the possibility of violating the bed of his mother, Merope:

καλῶς ἐκαντα ταῦτ' ἐν ἐξειρητῷ σοι, εἰ μὴ 'χύρει ζῶσ' ἡ τεκοῦσαι νῦν ὁ', ἐπεὶ ζῇ, πᾶς ἀνάγκη, κεὶ καλῶς λέγεις, ὑψεῖν. 38

At this point the beginning of the end is in view with regard to his quest for knowledge. He has but a few more facts to gather and the awful complete truth will rest upon him with all its unavoidable consequences. The Corinthian shepherd, on questioning finds that it is Merope whom Oedipus fears, and further learns that his fear is founded in this dreadful prophecy. He tells Oedipus to cease fearing and in the excited stychomythia which follows between Oedipus, the shepherd and Jocasta the whole truth comes out. 39 Jocasta recognizes at once the full import of the shepherd's report. Oedipus mistakes her reluctance to search further as womanly pride and ignores her pleas. He has gone this far, he must know the entire truth. He is after all really the child of fortune, with every extreme of fortune his lot, from the

38 Ibid., 984-987.
39 Ibid., 984-1072.
very best to the uttermost evil. Come what may he must know his origin:

οποια χρηκει δηγνυτω τονδον δ' εγω,
κει συκιχον εστι, σπέρμ' ιδειν βουλησομαι.  

The chorus enters joyous in their conviction that he will prove to be the son of a god.

The climax of the play approaches with the entrance of the Theban shepherd. Oedipus is still showing his characteristic trait, the quest for knowledge. The questions fly thick and fast between himself and the two shepherds, until, under threat, the Theban shepherd admits that it was Oedipus whom he had received from the king to slay. This knowledge dawns on Oedipus slowly as piece by piece the story falls into place. He was not found, he had been received from another; the other was a servant of Laius, the same Laius who was the king of Thebes before him; the shepherd had received him from the child's mother, the mother was Jocasta. Very little time is required for all this

40 Ibid., 1076-1077.
41 Ibid., 1039.
42 Ibid., 1042.
43 Ibid., 1044.
44 Ibid., 1173.
45 Ibid., 1175.
to transpire and the full tragedy and truth of his situation ends Oedipus’ search for knowledge in line 1182, as the tension built up by the Theban’s reluctance reaches its climax in the horrible cry:

Ioú, Ioú τά πάντα δὲν ἔχω σαφῆ.
ὅ φῶς, τελευταίον σε προσβλέψαμι νῦν,
δοτις πέφασμαι φύς τ’ ἄφ’ δὲν οὐ χρῆν, ἔιν οῖς τ’
οὐ χρῆν δυνάθον, οὔτ’ ὑπ’ ὑμῖν ἔδει κτανὼν. 46

Oedipus has carried on in his dogged determination to know the whole truth. Every person with whom he comes in contact in the entire drama is encountered solely as a means to increase Oedipus’ knowledge of his past and that of his family. Each of these persons has tried with all their strength to extricate the king from his problem and have been convinced that they were doing just that, but each of them, in reality, was leading the king slowly but surely to the terrible realization which his shrouded past contained.

We have seen that the basic characteristic trait in the character of Oedipus is his love for and determination to possess knowledge. We have gone through the entire play save the denouement, and at every turn found this verified. Yet this is not his only trait, nor is it the only aspect of his craving for knowledge. A second appraisal of the evidence reveals another aspect.

46 Ibid., 1182-1185.
This second aspect is the king's pride in knowledge, in his own intellectual ability. An independence, which was born of the superior intellectual ability he had shown in the past, is a very important part of the tapestry of the Oedipus Tyrannus.

We have already gone through the major part of the play in great detail and will not repeat what has been handled in the earlier parts of this chapter. That Oedipus has a great pride in his knowledge is evident in many speeches throughout the play. In the very beginning he speaks of himself as οἶδαίδικος, who is well aware of the situation in Thebes and has thought the difficulty over long and carefully, to arrive finally at the only solution. He is somewhat perturbed at the ignorance of the suppliants, for he cannot understand why the matter was not looked into earlier when the clues to the murderer would still have been fresh. This would have been the only wise move, the one he would have made. Finally, he bids them not to fear, that he will again make dark things light; he and Apollo will solve the problem, and he will indeed be the avenger of the god:

έπαξίως γάρ φοίβος, άξίως δέ σύ
πρὸ τοῦ θεανόντος τῆν θεσθ' ἐπιστροφήν
μοι' ἐνδικήσεις δέσεθε κάμε σύμμαχον,
γῇ τῇ δὲ τιμωροῦντα τῷ θεῷ δ' ἢμα.49

47 Ibid., 8.
48 Ibid., 67-69.
49 Ibid., 133-136.
Here Oedipus shows beyond any reasonable doubt that he has a great and exaggerated confidence in his own intellectual power.

Again with Teiresias, we have seen the king's pride in his own knowledge and in his ability to solve any mystery. He brags because of his past prowess: How, without the need for oracles or portents of any kind, but with the mere use of his own intellect he had solved all alone the problem of the Sphinx, which the seer and his cohorts had been unable to solve. When Teiresias taunts him with the uselessness of his supposed intellectual power, Oedipus only answers that it is sufficient to have saved the city. Then he passes off the seer's remarks with the declaration: τοιαύτη ονείδική τοίχος ἐρήμος μεγαν.51

In the scene with Creon, pride is the keynote of the dialogue. He refuses to listen to Creon's attempted explanation. There is nothing that Creon can tell him.52 He asks Creon scornfully if he had taken him for a fool who would not see the plot creeping up on him. Did not Creon know that it was by wealth and armies a kingdom was taken, and not by secrecy and trickery?53

Jocasta brings a new note into his search for knowledge. With her, Oedipus' pride wanes as she reveals what is to be the

50 Ibid., 396-398.
51 Ibid., 441.
52 Ibid., 548.
53 Ibid., 536-542.
source of his downfall. There is an occasional burst of pride after this revelation, as when he exults over the Corinthian shepherd's news that Polybus is dead, but on the whole it is a far humbler Oedipus who sets his whole mind on solving the problem which contains the secret to his happiness or wretchedness for the rest of his life. There still remain the impatience and the violence, but the real pride has decreased a great deal.

The independence implicit in Oedipus' pride is as evident from the same sources as the pride itself. Following on this are two other noteworthy aspects of his character, violence and impatience. We have mentioned them before, let us now show how they are revealed in the play.

Violence is a common concomitant of an independent pride. It is the natural bent of a man who, allowing nothing to stand in his way, is forced to depend on himself to remove all obstacles. Violence is opposed to the calm, reasonable attitude of the man who has the situation well under control, who knows just where he stands with respect to his fellow men and his surroundings. Oedipus shows signs of this violence in the antecedents to the play when he slays Laius and his retinue, for their death seems to be a punishment out of all proportion to their offense. Again, early in the play he comes out of the palace and lays a dreadful curse and a violent penalty on the unknown murderer of Laius, when one should expect him to withhold all talk of such severe penalty until the culprit has been actually found and
in his power and the full circumstances could be ascertained.
The chorus of Theban elders, in their older wisdom, take occasion
to rebuke Oedipus for his rashness with Teiresias:

Their protest is an eminently reasonable one: the need now is not
for anger and precipitous judgments but rather for a cool consider-
ation of all the information at hand, and a just decision based
on it. They do not succeed in quelling him, however, and not
long after this the play shows Oedipus ordering Teiresias from
his door. Creon is the next victim of his rage as he sentences
the innocent man to death for plotting his overthrow. Creon's
attempts to interpose his explanation are of no avail as Oedipus
declares he refuses to be convinced by such a man as Creon who
is proven to be the culprit.

Even when, at the behest of
Jocasta and the chorus, he yields, it is with very poor grace and
against his will:

54 Ibid., 404-407.
55 Ibid., 429-431.
56 Ibid., 531.
57 Ibid., 1123.
He remains adamant in his false convictions. He is a trifle short with Jocasta but never really violent, and the next real victim of his violent nature is the Theban shepherd. The old man tries to conceal the awful truth in order to protect the king from his past. He is a feeble old man, unused to violence of any sort, for he is one of the house slaves of Laius, and not one that was bought.\textsuperscript{58} Still he is slow to tell the whole truth, so Oedipus orders him to be pinioned\textsuperscript{59} and then threatens to do even worse if the whole truth is not in his possession within the next few moments.\textsuperscript{60} Even his mutilation of himself is an indication of his violent temperament. Faced with a truth so heinous, he immediately goes to the extreme and in a matter of minutes, in a wild frenzy, gouges out his eyes.

Impatience and haste are other characteristics which we would expect to find in a man of Oedipus' temperament and we are far from disappointed. Examples are too numerous to even justify our going through them person by person. He is impatient with each of the other characters in the play, even with Jocasta. He cannot wait for Creon to enter the stage before shouting to him for an answer to his question.\textsuperscript{61} In interrogation he is short

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 673-675.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 1154.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 1166.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 84-86.
and curt with those he is questioning, expecting them to give him the full answer before he has asked the question fully; or, at least, he cannot be patient enough to wait the few extra minutes which would see revealed all he wanted to know. He moves with such haste throughout the whole play. The prologue is barely over when he is seen uttering the first of his condemnations. He gets a bare indication from Teiresias and is off on a tirade against Creon, culminating it with the death sentence. When the Theban shepherd comes he will have the complete answer at once or the man's life. The very structure of the play highlights this haste and impatience. The dialogue is cast in large part into two- or three-line speeches, even half line parries in some sections. Oedipus, somewhat like the proverbial if comic District Attorney, not only wants to know, and know right now, but he wants a conviction, and he wants that right now too.

In considering Oedipus in relation to knowledge, we have seen the good and the bad aspects of the king's inquisitive mind. He was not the type of man to fool himself. He wanted, unlike Jocasta, to know the whole truth even when he suspected that the truth might bear nothing but ill for him. κᾶγων ἀκούειν· ἀλλ' δυσὶς ἀκουστέον. Usually he insisted on sufficient grounds for his conclusions, and though he was precipitous occasionally in

62 Ibid., 86-131.

63 Ibid., 1170.
his judgments there were certain alleviating circumstances. He had the real Greek urge to know all the answers, an urge which in the time of Sophocles was degenerating into the sophistic movement. There remains throughout the play a reverence for the gods in his attitude, again in contrast with Jocasta. True, at one time, he joins her in impious exultation, but this is only momentary, and there are other indications of true piety. Still his dependence on the god is strictly for the necessary external facts with which to work. He is bound and determined to do the solving of the mystery himself, and in this he differs from the chorus which expresses its real dependence on Apollo in no uncertain terms.

Throughout the play the pride of Oedipus in his knowledge is evident. He is too sure of himself. To anyone acquainted with Greek tragedy it becomes evident soon that he is heading for a fall, and that the fall will take place in connection with this overestimated faculty. Pride brings in its wake violence and impatience and haste. Thus we see at least a partial picture of the king. He is a man with a naturally inquisitive mind and a facile wit, with the strength of his convictions and the courage to follow them to the end, whatsoever it might be. But he is not quite intelligent enough, he lacks the knowledge of

64 Ibid., 964-973.
65 Ibid., 151-166.
that most important of things—himself—which will bring with it humility, patience, and above all prudence, as he sees his dependence on more than himself.

We have not seen the entire character of Oedipus as yet. There are more principles than the ones outlined above that rule his life. One of these basic principles brought out in the play is his fatherly love for his people in his role as the great king. The play opens with his addressing the assembled Thebans as τέχνια, 66 a word which he repeats in the sixth line of his same opening speech. After the priest of Zeus has made his request on the behalf of the people Oedipus speaks to his children and his accents are those of a father:

Again, when Creon asks whether or not he should tell the news from Delphi in the presence of all, Oedipus bids him speak out so that all the people can hear since:

Again, when Creon asks whether or not he should tell the news from Delphi in the presence of all, Oedipus bids him speak out so that all the people can hear since:

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66 Ibid., 1.
67 Ibid., 58-64.
68 Ibid., 92-93.
After his denunciation of the man who has brought this plague on the city and the statement of his punishment, Oedipus adopts a much softer tone in addressing:

υμίν δὲ τοῖς ἡλλοις Καθεδροίς, ὅσοις τάδε ἐστὶν ἀρέσκονθε', ἡ τε σύμμαχος ἄληχη χοὶ πάντες ἡ ἐννεῖτεν εἰςαεί θεοί. 69

Throughout the play he shows singular deference towards the chorus of Theban elders and reiterates frequently his desire to cleanse the city of this terrible stain.

In all things Oedipus bears himself in a kingly fashion. He is the great king in the eyes of his subjects, as is witnessed by the spokesman for the people who gives Oedipus a summary of their attitude towards him:

ἀνδρῶν δὲ πρῶτον ἐν τε συμφορᾶς βίου κρίνοντες ἐν τε δαιμόνων συναλλαγές. 70

He has merited the title of the great king, the κράτιστον ἀδείν 71 by his conquering of the Sphinx and his continued just and prosperous reign right up to the present day. He speaks with authority and determination to all as they appear opposite him during the drama. The chorus speak of their confidence in him and refuse to accept the idea that he is the polluter of the land, they are

69 Ibid., 273-275.
70 Ibid., 33-34.
71 Ibid., 40.
willing to consider him as a son of the nymphs or some god. To repeat instances of this fact would be to fill a page with unnecessary citations and explanations. It is more a question of a general attitude which cannot be missed in almost every situation in which the king appears in the course of the play. Even when he is in a rage, the rage is born of his royal indignation at being thwarted in his attempts to discover the truth. Everything Oedipus does is done in true regal fashion, in a large way. There is nothing small about him; he meets Aristotle's demand for a heroic character. Bravery and honor go along with his position as a king and he possesses both characteristics. It certainly took bravery of a sort to encounter single handed the five man retinue of Laius, but his moral bravery is even more noteworthy as he persists despite all dissuasion in finding the truth about himself. The cowardly thing to do would have been to accept the status quo; it took a real man to pursue a path which seemed to lead to his own destruction, a man who had at least a great part of the Delphic desire to know himself. Oedipus reveals himself as an honorable man when he delineates one of his principles of life for Teiresias, a principle which might well be committed to memory as a gem of Greek thought:

72 Ibid., 511-512, 1098-1109.
73 Aristotle, Poetics, 1453a 7-12.
No, Oedipus is not a despot, but rather a true and loving father to his people. As a man his principles are unimpeachable. He is convinced that the best use to which he can put his superior ability and attainments is the aid of those who are not so fortunate. He is not a small man who would disgust us and whose downfall would satisfy us; he is a big man whom we admire and whose downfall excites our sympathy.

Another interesting aspect of Oedipus' character which we have not touched as yet is his relation to those who are closest to him, his wife and his children. He displays a touching tenderness towards them and a never faltering concern for them. Every time Jocasta enters the scene she is greeted with great respect and is always treated with deference. When she asks him the reason for his disquietude, he tells her the whole story since she is so close to him and has a right to know, as he says:

\[ \ldots \; τὸ \; γὰρ \; ἀν \; καὶ \; μείζονι \; λέξαι \; αὐτῷ \; ἡ \; σοὶ, \; διὰ \; τοῦχης \; τοῖς \; ἰῶν; \]

He is only short with her once and circumstances justify it.

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74 O. Π., 314-315.
75 Ibid., 772-773.
76 Ibid., 1062-1063, 1069-1070.
Oedipus' children do not enter on the scene until the very end of the play when the now blinded father begs to be allowed to touch them once again. This scene with his children is one calculated to draw the tears of any audience. His interest in their care, education, and fortune is a touching example of fatherly solicitude. In his agony he thinks not of himself but of them, and he ends by praying that their fortune may not be as was his, that they learn from his experience and not by their own suffering.77

The final speech brings out his utter selflessness in his suffering. He asks three favors: that Jocasta be buried as befits her rank (he does not mention her name in his grief); that his children be cared for, especially his daughters upon whom he bestows some fatherly advice; lastly, for himself, that he be cast out of the city so that his pollution may no longer harm the people he loves.

This is a vastly different Oedipus who speaks in the closing scene of the play. The violence and impatience are gone, a softening glow of humility shines through most of his statements. He is sorry for the wrongs he has committed and in his apology to Creon is contained the real evidence that he has achieved the true lesson that suffering through its purifying power should bestow—prudence, moderation, and a knowledge of himself. As Creon approaches Oedipus gives words to the emotions

77 Ibid., 1511-1514.
of repentance that are filling his heart in the presence of his old and wronged friend:

οἴμοι, τί δήτα λέξομεν πρὸς τὸν ἔπος; 
τίς μοι φανεῖται πίστις ἐνδικὸς; τὰ γὰρ 
πάρος πρὸς αὐτὸν πάντ' ἐφεύρημα κακὸς. 78

Once earlier in the play he has admitted that his action was completely out of proportion to the facts, 79 but now the recognition is complete and the repentance perfect. There are nevertheless still vestiges of the old Oedipus, as when Creon responds to his plea to keep his daughters with a sentence redolent of the Delphic motto, again Oedipus wishes to control everything, once more he seems to be tending towards the extreme of impatience, hence Creon's admonition:

... πάντα μὴ βουλου κρατεῖν' 
καὶ γὰρ ἀκράτης οὸ σοι τῷ βιῷ ἑκνέσκεσθε. 80

This is the moral of the entire play, and it is well taken by an Oedipus who has learned through suffering that the best way is that of moderation, and the most important knowledge is of oneself.

In discussing human character in general, we considered a division of characters into types. 81 We saw that characters

78 Ibid., 1419-1421.
79 Ibid., 777-778.
80 Ibid., 1522-1523.
81 Cf. page 21; also Maher, Psychology, 392.
can be classified according to their correlation to the two factors of consistency and selflessness. Under consistency, we would place characters who are strong or weak, stable or vacillating; under selflessness, they would appear somewhere between the extremes of generous-selfish, altruistic-egocentric, and extrovert-introvert (in basic focus of interests). Now, as we approach the conclusion of our chapter on the character of Oedipus, let us attempt to determine his character according to this scheme.

We have at our disposal all the data necessary for such a classification. We have seen that Oedipus is eminently consistent, a strong and stable character. This is true particularly with regard to his basic characteristic—desire for knowledge. Further elaboration of this point seems unnecessary in view of the tenor of our entire treatment of Oedipus. With regard to the second of selflessness we can easily agree that the king was generous, but his altruism will require a little more consideration.

Throughout the play Oedipus is striving to find the answer to the plague, trying to relieve his people. This fact, at first glance indicative of altruism, requires closer scrutiny. It is perfectly possible for a man to seek the good of another for his own self-exaltation. In other words the question here is not the effect of the works of Oedipus but their intention.
Did he strive so mightily for the exclusive sake of his people, for others? Or did he have in the front of his mind his own glory? It would seem that the answer is a mixed one. People who are given to pride as was Oedipus, strong people, grow accustomed to finding themselves on the winning side of any conflict, and opposition spurs them on to greater efforts. We saw that the attitude of the king with regard to the recalcitrance of Teiresias reflected a pride in his own intellect, despite the undoubted fact that his main interest was the safety of his people. We can therefore claim that Oedipus was basically altruistic as he is depicted in this play, but we must advert also to the fact of his own personal pride which, as we saw, seems at times to tint his altruism with egocentricity. We are dealing here with the classification of a man within two extremes and absolute accuracy is impossible, for too many factors would have to be ascertained and perfectly accurate moral judgments are impossible. This same is true of the other two extremes of introvert-extrovert. These two terms are psychological divisions and indicate a tendency to inner consideration, moodiness, and so forth, in contradistinction to a tendency to outward activity. A person who is classified as one or the other is really abnormal, for the classification should rather indicate a polarization towards the one or the other. With this in mind it would appear that the most apt classification for Oedipus would be one tending
more to the extrovert than to the introvert. This is based on the obvious fact that the king is preoccupied with activity: he is faced with a problem and at once is immersed in activity of all kinds to solve it. This can also be noted from his manner of bearing himself with the other characters in the play, particularly Creon, Teiresias, and the shepherds. His manner is forward and frank, he wants to let the world know what he is thinking and planning, his attitude is almost brash, which is just the opposite of the quietness one would expect of a man who tended to introversion. Moreover, we would naturally expect a king to tend more to extroversion than to introversion in his basic focus of interests: his duties of state call him into the public eye constantly and he lives a quasi-public existence in his court.

We can, then, consider Oedipus as a strong, stable, generous, basically altruistic, and relatively extroverted character.

As a conclusion to this chapter on the character of Oedipus it would be well to reflect somewhat more specifically on his tragic fault. So far we have seen the entire character of the king unfold before us in the course of the play. Let us now emphasize just those facts which constitute the tragic fault, the flaw which vitiates what would otherwise be an impregnable character. The opinion which we would adopt is put concisely by
a comparatively recent author:

Oedipus, then, like all human beings, has both good and bad qualities. He is a man of thoughtless impetuosity, of over-confidence, of a capacity for fierce anger which sometimes causes him to be unjust and frequently carries him to extremes ... He is possessed of deep religious faith, of a strong sense of duty and moral responsibility, of force of will, of sincerity, of courage, and of nobility to the point of self-sacrifice. His tenderness is shown in his concern for his daughters. ... 82

So much for a statement of the character of Oedipus.

The tragic fault, the hamartia, is that characteristic trait of an individual from which with a causal necessity his downfall proceeds. The tragedy itself consists in the unfolding of this trait within the individual. The dramatist points to a man who is noble and generous and possessed of many other virtues. He asks in effect how it is even imaginable that such a bulwark of virtue could fail to succeed in life’s struggle. But then he draws out attention more closely to one aspect of this individual, one weakness, one rift in the dyke. Then the tragedian adds: let us see what will happen when this particular weakness is put under strain. It is this strain on one particular weakness and the consequences thereof which constitutes the tragedy. The lesson of the tragedy is, of course, the Delphic lesson. If this man, with all his strength and qualities which you do not even begin to equal, could come to such a sorry pass

because of one fault, a fault of which he was ignorant, in what can confidence be placed? The answer is the Delphic response:

To a great extent we may find the key to the Greek character in her favourite proverb, 'No Excess,' in which are expressed her favourite virtues of Aidos and Sophrosyne, reverence and self-restraint. 'Know thyself' was the motto inscribed over her principal shrine. Know and rely on thine own powers, know and regard thine own limitations.83

Another author elaborates on this and applies it to our hero:

The Delphic temple had two inscriptions for the edification of the worshipper. One was the negative 'Nothing Too Much,' the other was positive, but closely akin to the first: 'Know Thyself.' That meant for Oedipus the tragic discovery of his pollution. It means also this: 'Know that thou art but a man the creature of a day; and, knowing this, be modest and be prudent. Remember that the greatest gift of the gods is not cleverness nor power nor wealth nor fame, but the spirit of Sophrosyne.' Now Sophrosyne is the spirit of the man who knows that he is mortal, and in all things shuns excess.84

In Oedipus the fault was a pride and overconfidence in his intellectual ability which led to haste and acts of impatience with their attendant injustice. This flaw reaching its logical conclusion in the play brings about the calamity. At the calamity the spectator's true reaction to the tragic fault is one of pity and fear. Pity, because there is so much that is noble and loveable in Oedipus; fear, because each of us in looking at this maimed king can say, "there but for the grace of God go I."

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The true poignancy of the tragedy reaches its climax in the conclusion, "and it was his own fault." Overconfidence linked with imprudence is thus revealed as the fault which can lead most easily to destruction. Oedipus certainly did not dream that this fault was ruining him, and he was far more talented than the ordinary. Therefore, Sophocles implies know yourself, and your limitations, do nothing in excess, find your place in the order and harmony of the universe and keep it, otherwise a very similar tragedy could be enacted in your own life.
CHAPTER IV

THE DRAMATIC ART OF

SOPHOCLES

"This is the unapproachable play."¹ Thus Professor Waldock admonishes all critics against an attempt to analyze the Oedipus Tyrannus. We are, however, in good company; for a whole galaxy of scholars have ignored his admonition, and in the van-guard of their number is Aristotle. Since Aristotle's Poetics was a practical handbook of his day on how to write a tragedy, and since the author uses the Oedipus Tyrannus as an example of what he is trying to teach, surely we can do no better than use him as our primary source of criticism on the dramatic art of Sophocles and particularly on that art as it touches the portrayal of character. Two general qualities mark Sophocles as an excellent draughtsman of character: his ability to bring out the detail in a character; and his ability to idealize his characters while bringing out this detail.²


² T. B. L. Webster, An Introduction to Sophocles, Oxford, 1936, 100.
Now, in order to consider character-portrayal, we must first consider plot-formation. The plot is after all the most important part of the drama in which the character is represented, in which, in fact, the character develops through and by means of the plot. It is the actions of the characters which form the plot. This indicates more or less our objective in this chapter. It might be put in the form of a question: What, we now ask ourselves, is to be sought, what avoided, in the construction of a drama? and how does the Oedipus Tyrannus compare with the ideal picture.

The qualities of the plot of the Oedipus are worthy of all the praise that Aristotle and subsequent critics have lavished on it. Its unity is patent and answers perfectly to Aristotle's demands, for not a part could be omitted without ruining the whole. The constant search for knowledge on the part of the principal actor is but another facet of the unity of plot:

The genius of this famous plot lies in the fact that the evidence on which the various characters draw their various conclusions leads truly to those conclusions. There is no element of blind folly, hybris, or unwillingness to learn.4

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3 Aristotle, Poetics, 1451a 31-35.

That most important part of any play, the plot, is the artistic ordering of events. For the essence of tragedy is to imitate actions, not persons, and character is included only as a vehicle of the action.\(^5\) As we have indicated in various places Oedipus is developed in relation to and in opposition to circumstances. The ordering of these circumstances, and the internal and external action of the character with respect to them, constitutes the plot. As Aristotle tells us, "the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all."\(^6\)

There is only one inconsistency in the entire play, that the Theban shepherd appears to have come direct from the killing of Laius to find Oedipus already on the throne. There are many manipulations that could be made to explain it, but it seems preferable to say that Sophocles, arriving at this point of his play, had riveted his attention on the fact that the man had actions, i.e. consequent on the plot. In saying this he believes he is differing essentially from Aristotle whom he accuses of "superficiality" in making the plot the chief part of tragedy. We would say, rather, that the difficulty is in a misconception on Mullen's part—his failure to understand Aristotle's notion of unity of drama which depends on a metaphysical theory of causality. Aristotle is merely saying that tragedy flows from actions in a causal sequence, which seems to be exactly what Mullens is also saying in his attempt to differ from Aristotle. The emotions are, after all, a result of the actions.


6 Ibid., 1450a 22-23.
found Oedipus on the throne, and in his sweep of composition he overlooked the minor inconsistency.

The inconsistency most frequently cited is one which is one which is really not in the play itself, but which Aristotle calls outside the tragedy. It seems incredible that Oedipus should be ignorant of the story of Laius. In the play he shows that he did know Laius was dead and by a violent end. But he does not know where or how. Then he hears, as if for the first time, the oracle given to Laius, and in turn, tells his wife (again as if for the first time) the story of his life. True it can be alleged that there would be a natural reticence in speaking about Jocasta's previous husband; and Oedipus, due to the nature of the response he received at the oracle of Delphi, would just as soon not mention it. Yet considering all this, it would still seem that the ignorance displayed by Oedipus is extraordinary, especially for a man with an inquiring and astute mind. The point to be recalled, however, is that the inconsistency does not occur in the play itself but in the antecedents. We must simply admit that this was a weak spot in the conception of the play, indicative of the method of tragedy still in vogue, which allowed itself rather large freedoms.

7 Ibid., 1454b 6-8.
If there is one thing that the spectator or reader does not worry about in this tragedy, it is whether or not these things actually happened. In the play as it exists there is no wondering at all about it. These things not only could have happened, they do happen, they have to happen. By this is meant that the actions are the logical and really inevitable outcome of the circumstances. As Oedipus questions first his wife, then the Corinthian shepherd, and finally the Theban shepherd, there is no chance about it... given his character as it is portrayed, he could not have done anything else. Moreover, again considering his character, the result of the discovery would not have been otherwise. The play transcends, as all great art must, the mere particular. Its field is the transcendent, its characters are typical, its conclusions are universal.

The chief characters (and some of the other characters too) have to face situations, caused by their own personality or by external circumstances, in which their piety and modesty may break down. In the main their actions conform to the standards which we have discussed in the last chapter; when they deviate, they are criticized. In this sense Sophocles' claim to draw ideal characters can be understood.

A man under the buffeting of circumstances holds up well until the only vulnerable spot is found, and then, despite all his won-

10 Ibid., 1451b 5-8; see again footnote 4.
11 T.B.L. Webster, An Introduction to Sophocles, Oxford 1936, 82. It is conformity to standards which lends universality.
derful qualities, he is undone by this one chink in the wall. This pattern is not confined to the story of a Theban king, it applies to all of us; and with the necessary provisions for providence, it applies even to Christians. It is this universality that provides the basis for the remark which pity and fear elicits from each of us: "There but for the Grace of God, go I."

For the most part Ancient Tragedy is concerned with the adventures and sufferings of the heroes of a few great families, whose stories are handed down in the legend and mythology of heroic Greece. This would seem at first sight to limit the artist in his creative urge, and to some extent it does, yet we must not envisage any strict regimentation to all the details of a myth. The essentials of the story are to be maintained to avoid the shock any change would cause the enlightened audience, but circumstances are at the complete discretion of the artist. He may cast any complexion on the traditional tale he sees fit, to which liberty the various plays we know on the same theme are eloquent testimony. Sophocles avails himself of the privilege twice in the present play. Once, in having the infant Oedipus brought to and reared by King Polybus; again, in transferring the place of the death of Laius to the three roads near Daulia in

12 Aristotle, Poetics, 1453a 18-19.
Phocis. 14

In achieving the necessary unity of a tragedy it is most important to master the art of handling episodes. Here, more than any place, the causal sequence of a play can be disrupted by unnecessary and irrelevant additions to the play.15 To gain the expected length,16 it may be necessary to introduce unnecessary matter into the plot, yet this will harm the plot but little if the poet is a really good one. If the poet should be mediocre, however, it will destroy it.17 The Oedipus is free of all these censures. The episodes are all necessary, in the poetic sense of the word, to the full development of the plot. Each encounter of Oedipus with another character reveals an entirely new facet of his character and personality, and increases the poignancy of the inevitable fall.18

The play opens with the suppliants arriving at the door

14 R.C. Jebb, Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus, xviii.
15 Aristotle, Poetics, 1451b 33-35.
16 Ibid., 1451a 9-11.
17 Ibid., 1451b 36-39.
18 Whitman, A Study of Heroic Humanism, 131; Webster in his Introduction to Sophocles, 89, gives the following scheme depicting the contrasts in the Oedipus:
Oedipus v. priest -- king v. subject.
Oedipus v. Teiresias -- human skill v. supernatural knowledge.
Oedipus v. Creon -- prejudice v. reason.
Oedipus and Jocasta -- sympathy of kinship.
Oedipus v. Theban herdsman -- frankness v. concealment.
of the palace to beg help from the strongest source on earth they know. Oedipus enters and in his first few lines our hearts are captured. These poor wretches are the "children of his care," he has come to help them himself, not through the accustomed messenger. If their sorrows are heavy, they must not think that they have aroused him from a bed of comfort and rest, for he has wept bitterer tears than theirs. They have only their own personal sufferings to consider, his care is the pain of the entire city. All the nobility, the kindness and yes the sweetness, that is so admirable in a man of power is here. We are drawn to him immediately. He ceases to be a figure in a play, he is someone we know; his joys and sorrows mean something to us, they mean almost as much as if they were our own. It is the natural sympathy of one human being for another. This identification of emotions continues throughout the play as the Theban King rises and falls, and rises—only to be precipitated into another fall. Many times in the Oedipus we would wish to shout out to him, to warn him. The feeling and the urge are strong within us, for we feel as sorry for Oedipus as if we met him face to face. When Jocasta speaks the line telling of Laius' death where three roads meet, we find that we too are caught up into the movement of

19 O. T., 1-55.
20 Ibid., 58-77.
21 Ibid., 715-716.
the drama, we are chilled with fear. As piece fits in with piece in the whole of the tragedy, we find ourselves almost panicky watching Oedipus just fail to grasp the meaning of things by a thread, as for instance, when he fails to understand the statements of Teiresias. Nothing in the play happens by chance; everything is the logical development of what preceded.

The plot is complex, having its focal point in the combined reversal and discovery, yet there are really two discoveries in the play. A minor one when Oedipus realizes that he is the murderer of Laius; and the major one when he realizes the whole truth. The reversal is simultaneous with the second discovery. Aristotle considers this combined reversal and discovery the best, referring to the Oedipus as an example.

The tragedy builds to a real calamity (exōc) —the putting out of his eyes by Oedipus and Jocasta's suicide in the

23 O.T., 316-462.
24 Aristotle, Poetics, 1452b ll-13. "A complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such reversal, or by recognition, or by both."
25 O.T., 726; 771-833.
26 Ibid., 1181.
27 Aristotle, Poetics, 1452a 33-34.
28 Ibid., 1452b ll-13.
secondary plot. It is interesting to note the nature of this calamity, which seems to fit in perfectly with the tragic fault of Oedipus. He was too enamoured of his own intellectual ability and as a punishment he lost the chief gate of knowledge that a man possesses.

Thus we see that the pity, fear, and calamity rise immediately from the essence of the plot. The incidents lead along a path that stirs inexorably the tenderest pity and profoundest fear, only to culminate in a most painful calamity which is the poetically fitting consummation of the action. This is so true, that we today can experience the same emotions by simply reading the play, without the activity of actors and the assistance of the music of the chorus. The pity is heightened by the fact that the three people involved are united in such a horrible kin-ship. Moreover the deeds leading to the reversal and calamity are done in such complete ignorance as to cause astonishment on the discovery of their true nature.

It is obvious now that Sophocles was a consummate artist.

29 William Nickerson Bates, Sophocles Poet and Dramatist, Philadelphia, 1940, 22. "The modern reader may be unduly disturbed by such scenes, but it should be remembered that Aristotle declared that suffering (kakos) was an essential part of tragedy."

30 Aristotle, Poetics, 1453b 3-6.

31 Ibid., 1453b 19-23.

32 Ibid., 1453b 29-31.
a master of the playwright's craft. His plot moves forward to its appointed climax with a controlled interweaving of circumstances and character. So far we have considered only partially the second of these ingredients, for plot is the more important. Now, let us take a closer look at Oedipus, as a revelation of the skill for which Sophocles is best known among dramatists—the delineation of character. Let us note the means he used to achieve this end. In the Oedipus we see character as it is best seen, in a man alone, struggling against a catastrophe which is greater than he and which he has to meet helplessly.

The creative imagination of Sophocles was such that he could make an Oedipus who was much bigger than the mere events which befell him, striking though these were. Sophocles was not especially indebted to them; they added distinction to his play, but they did not make it. What makes it is the conception of Oedipus which enables Sophocles to augment his plot with the long scenes for Creon and Teiresias without sacrificing unity or losing interest. The man Oedipus bestrides the play like a colossus, an apparently inexhaustible source of dramatic interest.33

Fate seems to sweep him irresistibly to his doom, but even in his apparent helplessness he is heroic. The vision of a man, a hero, fighting as it were against a cosmic and elemental force and having the courage and nobility to fight to the end, is a revelation of a character typically Sophoclean.

33 Humphrey D. F. Kitto, Greek Tragedy, A Literary Study, London, 1939, 180. The one point to be noted is that the character of Oedipus is stressed. It is not our intention in this quotation to weaken our opinion on the relative position or importance of plot and character, as on page 64.
In general the trying situations in which his principal characters find themselves as his various plots develop are due in each case to some defect in the characters themselves. This is in accord with Aristotle's declaration, that the tragic hero should be neither a very good nor a very bad man, but one of distinction who meets with disaster through some failing of his own. 34

Oedipus again and again insists on following his inclination, his principle, to solve the problem by reason after he has ascertained the facts. Jocasta like a child, and like a woman, would rather have him stop his inquiries when it becomes clear to her where they are leading. 35 She knows that this could never be a permanent solution, but she is interested only in the present moment. If that can be maintained in peace and quiet she is satisfied. Not so Oedipus.

Not only in the great actions and decisions is character revealed, however. Frequently when a choice must be made in which the motive is not an obvious one, we can get an insight into the scale of values of a man. For instance in the opening speeches of Oedipus there is indicated the selflessness of the king's action, the height of his moral ideals. Another facet of his character is brought into bold relief in his storming at Teiresias and Creon; and again in his hasty and complete condemnation of the murderer of Laius, and perhaps most of all in

34 Bates, Sophocles Poet and Dramatist, 16-17.
35 O.T., 1054-1071.
the curse contained in the closing lines of the speech. Character as we saw is also revealed in indifferent actions, yet there is not an indifferent action in the play. Oedipus is far too strong and insistent a man, especially intellectually to allow anything to be indifferent to him.

Although spectacle was not considered essential to tragedy, and was considered outside the poetry proper, there are many opportunities for a clever and telling subordinate use of sets in the Oedipus. For example, the set employed by Laurence Olivier in his Old Vic production of the Oedipus lent the play an ominous, foreboding air. That of the Catholic University indicated the idea of frantic struggle by the severe gray lines of the stage and the twilight lighting effect. These externals serve to dramatize for the imagination and the eye whatever struggle happens to be going on in the soul of the actors, and although secondary to the other quantitative parts of tragedy, spectacle has much to add. J.R. Wheeler makes an observation to our point in this regard: "To make this portrayal of character effective, striking scenes are needed, and situations which require the exercise of judgment and choice." 38

36 Ibid., 269-272.
37 Aristotle, Poetics, 1450a 17-21.
Sophocles was not unaware of this fact and has made good use of situations that help portray the inner struggle he is interested in. The opening scene with the altar in the center and the various ages and classes of people gathered around in front of the palace doors, the last scene with the maimed Oedipus appearing and showing forth to all the results of his inner tragedy, are instances in point. \(^{39}\) The different dances and costumes of the chorus with the melody expressive of the predominant mood of the play would seem to fit under spectacle as well as under other divisions of the drama. All this is merely an application of a well-known truth: the more subtle the point that is to be gotten across, and the larger and more varied the audience, the more appeal must be made to the whole man, not merely to his intellect. Although imagination can be appealed to by means of narrative, still spectacle when used moderately is a more natural means to portray the inner struggle. Needless to say, purely marvelous stage effects have no place in tragedy at all. \(^{40}\)

Irony in general is a literary device in which the intended implication of a word or words is the opposite of their literal signification. A special form of irony is known as

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\(^{39}\) Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*, Boston, 1928, 153. In this place Norwood praises Sophocles' skill in bringing Oedipus back on the stage after the calamity, as a peculiar Sophoclean trait.

\(^{40}\) Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453b 7-10.
dramatic irony, in which the author wishes us to attribute one meaning to the speaker in the play but to retain another which is the one he considers more fundamental as being his own idea and belonging to the plot.41 A third type of irony has come to be called Sophoclean irony. It is that in which the particular speaker is unaware of a true signification which his language possesses. Obviously the common source of all irony is the double meaning which words may possess.

Irony will almost invariably be found just preceding the peripeteia.42 In this position it serves to foreshadow the reversal that is imminent. An instance in point of this usage is Oedipus' speaking of the horrible vengeance that will be exacted from the murderer when he is found, not knowing that he himself is the murderer.43 It is evident from this one example how an element of terror could result from a clever use of irony, a terror born of watching a man embroil himself deeper and deeper in a situation which will eventually prove his downfall. The other relation with pity and fear is consequent upon irony's connection with the peripeteia and does not seem to need fuller elucidation.


42 Aristotle, Poetics, 1452a 23-25.

43 There are many more examples which come to mind, but an exhaustive listing of them is not consonant with our aim here; it would constitute another thesis.
in view of our reference to it above.

Although the vehicle of irony is speech and as such its appreciation depends on the intellect, still, as we have tried to point out, the main appeal does not necessarily have to be intellectual. On the contrary we would say that it is mainly emotional and bears a close connection with pity and fear. The instrument used is an intellectual one but the end is primarily emotional, and once more the end is the chief thing of all:

The audience shudders: for it is forcibly reminded of the mental blindness of Oedipus. Language the full significance of which is not perceived by the speaker, was used by Sophocles (in a more masterly manner than by any other dramatist) to bring home to us the blindness of man.44

This quotation will also serve to show the close connection between character portrayal and the use of irony.

We have seen in the course of our third chapter that Oedipus was possessed of a very inquisitive mind. This inquisitiveness naturally led to a large number of questions in an attempt to gain fuller knowledge. It is to these questions as a vehicle of character portrayal that we now turn our attention.45

One of the characteristics of the questions in the Oedipus is their ability to echo former scenes, thus keeping the entire tragedy before our glance at one time. This effect is


45 Our remarks here are taken from the source in note 50.
produced either by the content of the question or by its mere form. We will consider the questions of Oedipus alone. He questions Creon at his entrance, and we are immediately reminded of the paternal ruler of the opening speech. The word ὀδυσσεία in the questions that Oedipus asks of the Corinthian serves to recall the scene with Creon, and the open charge of his plot with Teiresias. We will close our discussion of this point with a summarizing quotation:

And now from this brief study of the questions in the Oedipus Tyrannus, I think we may draw the following conclusions: King Oedipus was endowed at birth with the heritage of the 'riddler's mind,' which by constant use throughout the course of his life he sharpened and brought to greater perfection than it had had in his parents. Considered as a dramatic device, this penchant for interrogation lends incomparable charm to the play by means of its superb echoing; moreover it manifests to us in a singular way the interior workings of Oedipus' delicately adjusted mind, and thus makes his actions more intelligible, while by evidencing the wanton self-sufficiency of the king which leads to his downfall, it supplies the touch of irony to the play and makes Oedipus' character truly tragic. Finally, since all this has been shown to be clearly intentional on the part of the dramatist, it gives us the right to add one more sprig of laurel to the imperishable crown of Sophocles.
We have seen now, at the various points in our discussion, the reasons which give us the right to call Oedipus a truly tragic figure. We have seen also all of the important and some of the less important means used by Sophocles in the presentation of this figure who is tragic in the best sense of the word. In the last analysis, as is always true, the reading of the play is the best justification of the praise heaped on Sophocles, from ancient times down to our own, as a draughtsman of character. Yet, in this perfection of character portrayal Sophocles also achieved perfection of plot. As a modern admirer of Sophocles and Oedipus put it:

It has already been pointed out that the tragedies of Sophocles are distinctly studies of character. That such is the case with the Oedipus Tyrannus one sees very clearly in reading the play. In fact, for his purpose, the dramatist could not have found a better subject than the Theban King. Governed by a destiny which he is helpless to control, through no intentional wrong-doing on his part, he experiences all the vicissitudes of fortune from extremely good to extremely bad. In the early part of the play he is a mighty monarch, absolutely self-confident, master of himself and of his people, and devoted to his wife. At the end he is a wretched blind man suffering tortures in mind and body wrought by himself. He thus conforms to Aristotle's ideal tragic hero. The skill with which the dramatist brings about the transition could not be surpassed, and it is here that he shows himself the great master of plot.

51 Aristotle, Poetics, 1452b, 53a.

52 William Nickerson Bates, Sophocles, Philadelphia, 1940, 56. The central point in this quotation with reference to this thesis is the emphasis placed on Oedipus achieving his final status by his own agency, through the plot, "wrought by himself."
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND REEVALUATION

In this our last chapter we should like to be able to present a brief conspectus of the entire thesis, to review and renew the conclusions we have arrived at. In particular we are anxious to end with a restatement of our conclusions regarding the character of Oedipus, giving, as it were, a composite and complete final portrait of the hero.

We saw that in order to consider the character of a man with any benefit we would first have to clear the path which a loose use of words, in our case the words "character" and "personality" has left us. We established that character is primarily an ethical concept which consists in a value-set, a purpose, "a structuring of an individual's behavioral capacities into a consistent pattern, deliberately impressed on the temperament under the dominance of those principles of moral conduct which constitute the individual's life-ideal."¹ Personality, on the other hand, is the complex of psycho-physical systems which are put to use by this ethical structuring.

¹ See again Chapter I, page 2.
We found that the essence of character lies in the preferred value-set and purpose which consciously or unconsciously influence one's choice of one thing rather another. When considering the several determinants of character we stressed as most important the ideal and the role of the will. After this we saw how a character develops and closed our analysis with a few words on the ideal character.

In our chapter on Oedipus we endeavored to find an objective picture of his character from the play itself. Secondary sources were for the most part avoided, since we were primarily interested in the way in which Sophocles himself had depicted his great hero. We saw that one of the outstanding traits of Oedipus centers around knowledge, that all the action in the play stems from either his quest for knowledge or his pride. We observed also that his pride in knowledge is accompanied by such faults as are only to be expected from a nature as fiery as his: violence, impatience, impetuosity, precipitous judgments.

We saw also that he was the father of his people, that he put himself second to their interests always, that he was a great man who wept over their woes and sorrowed in their pain. He proved to be a truly great king, a king whose main interest was his state, a king of nobility and courage. If he had his faults, they too were the faults of a king.

The family of Oedipus gave us another insight into his
make-up. One of the tenderest moments in tragedy is the last scene in the Oedipus Tyrannus, when this great wounded man shows how captive he is to his two daughters. It is an episode which is invaluable for its expression of the humanity of our hero. On all other occasions he is dealing in great matters in a semi-divine manner, but with his daughters he is just another man who realizes that he must leave the most precious thing in life, and leave them in such a sorry condition. Of a piece with this is the king's constant devotion to the queen throughout the drama. She is always referred to with respect, and deference is given her views at all points in the play. Only once does he speak harshly of Jocasta, and soon after he is asking Creon to give her an honorable burial.

We saw that if he had sinned in his impetuosity and rash judgments, he had the stature to repent. He regreted his actions towards Creon particularly, and his greatest sorrow was having brought such a blight on the city which he had come to love so much.

We then considered the ways and means which Sophocles used to produce this wonderful portrayal of character. For this we used the tenets of artistry found in the Poetics of Aristotle. Since Aristotle considered the play one of the models of all Greek drama, we found a consideration based on his logical plan of reasoning quite easy.
Oedipus is, then, a very noble figure, with great intellectual and moral gifts. He is bent on spending himself for others, and few finer characteristics can be found in a world where so much is devoted to self. There is, however, one loose strand in the fabric of his character and it is formed of several threads: his impetuosity, his impatience, his too great pride in his own intellectual ability which breeds a harmful independence of thought and action. The one gift that Oedipus does not possess sufficiently is prudence, that ability to look the situation over completely in all its aspects and then decide what is necessary at the present moment. In his quest for knowledge of things about him, the king neglected the one great science which every man must master, the science of self-knowledge and the principle of the golden mean. The play is a tragedy of a man who through suffering and mistakes comes to a purified knowledge of himself and of the value of the other Delphic motto (Nothing in excess). In this Sophocles has shown us the elemental struggle which takes place in the soul of every man of any strength or ability as he attempts to find his place in the world of men and gods.

That the fault of Oedipus should be so connected with the intellect is only to be expected of a Greek civilization, particularly at the time of the Sophists. At that period of history the Greek people tended to divinize the intellect and to
reject the belief in the gods or at least their necessity in the
life of a man. It is thus that Sophocles has really depicted in
this play the tragedy of the Greek people themselves, the same
tragedy which Thucydides painted with a different brush.
Thucydides found his climax in the condemnation of Mytilene, and
its calamity in the Sicilian expedition and the destruction of
the walls of Athens in 404 B.C. The episodes are different, but
the souls of the tragedies are the same: the need for the modest
measure and for knowledge of self, and the inevitable disastrous
results of scorning these.

The best and only really sufficient commentary on the
play is still in the reading of it. In a work of this size we
can only, as it were, pick at the skeleton of the vibrant whole
which constitutes Sophocles' great contribution to Western cul-
ture. In the play itself, with all its beauty of rhythm and
melody, with the stately progress of scene upon scene, Sophocles
achieves poetic identification with his audience. The tragedy of
Oedipus is no longer the story of a stranger, but a thrilling
revelation of our own basic conflicts—conflicts which are rooted
in man's desire to possess the knowledge of good and evil. For a
man to possess this knowledge safely he must appreciate Creon's
wording of the principle which started our discussion: ΠΑΝΤΑ ΠΑΡ
ΚΑΙΡΟΣ ΚΑΙΛΑΙΩΣ

2 O.T., 1516.
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The thesis submitted by Norman G. McKendrick, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of Classics.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Oct. 15, 1954
Date

Raymond V. Schoder, S.J.
Signature of Adviser