

# Suspense and sensibility: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

Michael Comber

As I am writing this, rehearsals are beginning for the National Theatre's forthcoming production of *Oedipus the King*. Woody Allen's re-working of the play in the film *Mighty Aphrodite* is playing to cinemas around the country. Sophocles' play was first produced nearly two and a half thousand years ago, but still continues to be performed, filmed, referred to, and regularly reworked. Max Frisch's novel *Homo Faber* and Jean Cocteau's play *La Machine infernale* are two further examples. What is the play's attraction?

Undoubtedly, the high profile that the play's title has enjoyed this century can be largely attributed to the influence of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Freud analysed the character Oedipus as if he were a real person, and called the situation when a man falls in love with his mother the 'Oedipus Complex'. The Oedipus Complex, however, is unlikely to be what appeals to paying customers. A good deal of the play's fascination must surely reside elsewhere. It lies, as Aristotle first saw, in the excellence of a plot which succeeds brilliantly both as a gripping detective story and, most of all, as a harrowing suspense thriller. Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles does not trace the workings of ancestral guilt through three generations. He does not include Laius' original crime (Oedipus' father kidnapped the son of a friend, thereby bringing a curse upon his entire family). He does not make use of Oedipus' curse upon his sons (who are, in fact, mentioned only once). But he does seem to have seen in the Oedipus story an opportunity to construct a powerful self-contained drama which would keep an audience on the edge of its seat.

## Hitchcockian suspense

For suspense to take hold most effectively, the audience needs to be in on the secret, to be wriggling on the hook of foreknowledge combined with the inability to prevent the outcome. Alfred Hitchcock, who had some experience in these matters, compared the operations of suspense to a time bomb that we know is about to go off. The image of the delayed explosion is well suited to *Oedipus the King* in which the truth is gradually brought home to Oedipus in two stages: first, the lesser crime and only in this play could it be the lesser crime – of regicide (killing a king); then the greater crime of parricide (killing one's father) and incest (in Oedipus' case, sleeping with his mother, Jocasta). But could the members of the original audience be relied upon to have the appropriate knowledge? Despite Aristotle's statement that even the familiar tales were familiar only to a few, there must surely have been hardly anyone who was unaware of the fate of Oedipus. The story is

summarised in the *Odyssey* book 11; two other early epics, the *Oedipodeia* and the *Thebais* (both now lost), covered it, and by the time that the poet Pindar wrote around the beginning of the fifth century, it could be referred to as if perfectly well known. Indeed, the fifth century comic playwright Antiphanes complains that it is too well known: 'If I just say "Oedipus", they know all the rest: his father was Laius, his mother Jocasta, the names of his sons and daughters, what he has done, and what happened to him.'

Antiphanes is only partially correct, at least as far as *Oedipus the King* is concerned. We may know what will happen, but we cannot predict how it will happen. Sophocles' treatment is strikingly innovative and experimental. Unlike every other extant Greek tragedy, the substance of this play is not formed in the present in the theatre. The substance of this play, its action, is the revelation of past actions, criminal actions. And Sophocles introduces a fiendishly ingenious twist: the criminal detects himself. What is more, he does so of his own free will. Much of the play's peculiar power derives from this one bold stroke. We watch with mingled horror and admiration as Oedipus unflinchingly pursues his efforts to uncover the truth even to the point of self-incrimination. Tension mounts; hopes rise and fall; attempts by Jocasta and the Corinthian Messenger to comfort have only the opposite effect; a false trail leads to Creon before the investigation reaches its terrible conclusion. Freud points out that such a painful recovery of memory bears a certain resemblance to the work of psychoanalysis. But he ignores a crucial difference: in this case there is no self-cure.

Surprise, then, as well as Hitchcockian suspense. And, like Hitchcock, Sophocles also knows how to enhance terror by setting off the extraordinary against the ordinary, parricide and incest against the Messenger and the Shepherd, the two common folk through whose hands Oedipus passed, and whose basic human decency is wound into the very heart of Oedipus' unique and monstrous story. Again, like Hitchcock (whose final film is actually entitled *Family Plot*), Sophocles seems at times almost to relish toying self-consciously both with his own plot and the audience. The Teiresias scene is one such occasion. The tension here is two-fold. On one level, there is the fear that the full extent of Oedipus' crimes will be revealed; on the other, the anxiety that the play will thereby come to a premature end and so deny us the peculiar pleasure of tragedy.

### **Mystery and *film noir***

The stress so far has been on suspense. Yet *Oedipus the King* is not to be reduced to a matter of mere narrative mechanics. It does not yield a straightforward moral, apart, that is, from the Chorus' words: 'with your fate as my example, your fate, unblessed Oedipus. I say that for mortals there is no happiness.' But it does capture our worst nightmares, a profound sense of life's inexplicable cruelty, of teetering precariously on the brink of an abyss. This world of pitch black uncertainty finds a later analogue in the themes of a *film noir*. *Film noir* is the name used for a group of films made in the 1940s and 50s which had

elements of the thriller, detective story, western, and melodrama. They portray a world of despair, disillusionment, and corruption. One such example is Tourneur's *Out of the Past*: a hero who is like us, only somewhat better than we are, who is destroyed by a bolt from the past, a hunter who merges with his prey – and for Oedipus the merging, and the consequent confusion, are total: 'I shall fight for Laius', he proclaims, 'as though he had been my father. and shall go to every length in searching for the author of the murder done upon the son of Labdacus, sprung from Polydorus and from Cadmus before him and from Agenor long ago'. Oedipus the king, Oedipus the rationalist and intellectual, is not even master of his tongue; as he unwittingly tracks himself down, so his words constantly slip and slide, twist back to descend upon his own head. Tragic irony, certainly. But is not simply to be packaged up and dismissed as a clever technical device. This irony is devastating, terrifying. This irony lays bare the blurring of identity, the uncontrollability of meaning, the inability of language and intellect to pin down and contain reality. This irony, in short, undermines the most cherished beliefs about human power. 'Thought', the Chorus complains, 'can find no weapon to drive away disaster'. For, in common with *film noir*, what we are dealing with is something impenetrable, unknowable, something that makes no sense: an enigma wrapped in a mystery. And here, the central enigma, the riddle to be solved, is ultimately the protagonist himself: Oedipus, the supreme and self-confident solver of riddles. The Sphinx had asked Oedipus: 'What is it that goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet at eventide?' The answer which Oedipus gave was the simple abstraction 'Man'. This was true as far as it went. But the English essayist Thomas de Quincey suggests that the Sphinx was perhaps too hasty in accepting it as complete. For there is a second and more precise answer, which De Quincey supplies. Not a man in general, but one unique man in general, Oedipus himself. The riddle of the Sphinx, as De Quincey saw, is in fact answered in the life of her destroyer: the weak infancy, the strong independent manhood, the blind man's stick. For all his intelligence, Oedipus had missed the point. He knew many things. But there was one thing he did not know. He did not know the wisdom of the Delphic Oracle, Oedipus did not know himself.

But why should this matter to us? It matters because it is not just one man's personal identity crisis. Oedipus' fate continues to move and disturb us because it is our own. Not exactly, of course. Nor quite as Freud would have it. Yet we too are cursed with a reach that exceeds our grasp. We too tend arrogantly to over-estimate the capacity of science to analyse and understand our world. We too, in the words of Alexander Pope are:

*Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled;  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!*

Finally and unsettlingly, in Oedipus we come face to face with ourselves.

*Michael Camber teaches at St John's College, Oxford. His edition of Sallust's Jugurtha is published soon.*