

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

TEIRESIAS

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Teiresias (in Sophocles' *Oedipus*) extravert

Overview Greek mythography abounds in references to Teiresias, a renowned seer, augurer, sisionary, and mystic. Among the many tales about Teiresias is the story of his extermination of two copulating serpents, for which the gods punished him. He was turned into a woman for seven years, married and gave birth, then reverted to male form for withholding, later, from trampling two copulating serpents. No wonder, we may say, that Teiresias was known for 'acquaintance with all sides of human experience,' including the experience that the truth will come to be whether we act on it or not.

Character Teiresias is polysexual, and more widely liminal, a figure that emerges at the boundaries between earth and sky, humans and the gods, and the erotic and the chaste. Hence the mysterious presence Teiresias brings with him; the only figure, for instance, who met Odysseus at the very entrance to the Underworld in the *Odyssey*. He is typically mysterious in *Oedipus*, where he seems to be more interior to Oedipus than Oedipus is to himself. Teiresias comes over as a figure who knows the will of the gods—through vision, through auguries, through intimations from the god Apollo-- but will not tell it, because it is useless to declare what will take place anyway.

Parallels Ancient Judaic tradition relied heavily on prophetic testimony—cf. esp. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel—for their actions inside history; and were in this closely followed by practices of the Greco-Roman tradition, which took for granted the importance of visions, oracular pronouncements from holy sites like Delphi, and the interventions of deities like Athena, who prompt their favorites, like Odysseus, to make or move within history. Prophetic historicizing, via the prophet T.B. Joshua, is widely consulted among religious communities not only in Nigeria, but throughout Africa, from which heads of state travel regularly to be freed---like Oedipus?—from the demons clambering for expression in them.

Illustrative moments

Trigger Dramatically speaking, Sophocles needs to provide a trigger to Oedipus' hot temper—the initial sign that he might have a significant 'character flaw.' (Creon's report back from the oracle was informative, but not provocative, to Oedipus.) Teiresias provides this trigger, for he at once awakens Oedipus' aggressive search-spirit. When Oedipus attempts to detain Teiresias, he gets the following provocative reply: 'Let me go home; prevent me not, t'were best that thou should'st bear thy burden as I mine.' By withdrawing from the quest, with the implication that he alone knows the full truth, Teiresias galls Oedipus.

Analyst Teiresias gets at Oedipus, by knowing (or seeming to know) what Oedipus wants to find out, and to know it effortlessly, by natural gift. Sophocles is a master at making the provocations from Teiresias into spurs for plot development—as well as into goading bits of repartee like the following: 'Thou blamest my mood and seest not thine own, wherewith thou art mated.' Sharply seizing the context, in which Oedipus convinces himself he is seeing clearly, Teiresias accuses Oedipus of simple reflection of the seer's own thoughts and feelings. The crumbling foundations of Oedipus' brash self-confidence are beginning to litter the ground the ruler walks on.

Accuser Teiresias grows closer and closer to accusation, as the plot unfolds to reveal one inculpatory detail after another. (Each development seeming to justify Oedipus' innocence turns out, unexpectedly, to play into a theory which includes his guilt.) At a certain stage in these revelations, Teiresias feels justified in leveling a direct charge: 'I say thou livest with thy nearest kin,' he hurls at Oedipus, who cannot have realized—or could he on some level?—that in taking over the kingdom

where he currently rules he took as his own the ruling queen, who was his mother. As this information hardens, Jocasta feels it coming, and hangs herself.

Philosopher Teiresias is mysterious both because he is a liminal figure—existing on all of life’s defining borders—and because he adopts an ambiguous attitude toward the truth. On the one hand, because he is a seer, he feels confident he knows the future. On the other hand he knows that the future must unfold at its own pace. He continually (and insultingly) rejects Oedipus’ gestures toward dialogue, by saying that Oedipus is headstrong, and wrongly supposes that he can bull his way through to an explanation of the city’s problems. Take it easy and wait for destiny, is Teiresias’ message, but it is unpalatable to Oedipus, who has a plague to cure, and a profound sense of personal unease.

Discussion questions

Teiresias makes only one extended appearance in Sophocles’ play. From the dramaturgic view point why does Teiresias’ appearance come when and where it does?

Is Teiresias hostile to Oedipus, or an ultimately benign ally, who wants to save the ruler from useless suffering?

How does Teiresias’ liminal personality—openness to all experience—play out in the development of the plot of *Oedipus*?