

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Oedipus 1717 (a version of Sophocles' *Oedipus* (429 B.C.) Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)

OVERVIEW

The classical tradition in the arts—in drama, lyric, architecture, epic—formed, but was at the same time formed by the achievements of the Greeks and Romans. Education in classical languages and texts continued surprisingly intact until the early modern period, when with the advent of scientific learning new systems of pedagogy and new scientific perspectives were introduced into national curricula. As the ancient classics sacrificed some of their ground level instructional power they moved increasingly onto the stage, where they were able to regain their cultural centrality. It is to this kind of example, of the durability of the Classics that we turn in reaching to an early 18th century instance of the revival on stage of an ancient Greek worldview. It will be easy to keep in mind, throughout these reflections, that the translator becomes a central figure in the historical process taking place here.

CHARACTERS

Oedipus. King of Thebes. Prophecy haunted ruler, destined to murder his father and marry his mother. Famous for having solved the riddle, the mystery of the Sphinx, but under heavy suspicion, from the start, for having failed to dispel the plague which is destroying his own kingdom.

Jocasta, Queen of Thebes. Mother of Oedipus, former wife of King Laius, current wife to Oedipus.

Creon, Jocasta's brother, and Oedipus' brother-in-law. Major figure in the governance of Thebes.

Teiresias, the superannuated seer of Thebes, who will reveal the dark story of the past of Oedipus.

Chorus of the community voices of Thebes; opinions of the man on the street.

Apollo The god who drives much of the plot of Oedipus.

PLOT.

It is to note, from the start, that Voltaire adds his own interpretations to the plot of Sophocles, the original Greek author of Oedipus the King. It appears to be Voltaire's intention, in this, to make the motivation in the play conform to the expectations of an Enlightenment audience. Rational explanations are provided for the length of time required to investigate the murderous guilt of Oedipus, as well as to explain away the evidence for mother-son incest between Jocasta and Oedipus. Concurrently, Sophocles' stress on the importance of the Gods is minimized. Would we call these modifications revisions or reinterpretations?

The plot is for the most part congruent with the original Sophoclean script. We open in the city of Thebes, which is being decimated by a terrible plague, and the Great Oracle at Delphi announces that only one move can alleviate the devastation. The Theban ruler, Oedipus, must find and punish the killer of the former ruler of Thebes, Laius, who is known to have perished long ago, in a roadside accident. In response to this order from the Oracle Oedipus, the ruler of Thebes, launches into an immediate investigation, sending out inquiries throughout the land.

At this point, in the play of Sophocles, Oedipus is increasingly suspect of having married Jocasta, Laius' wife, but Voltaire adds a new wrinkle, the character Philoctetes, who is a suitor of Jocasta, a move congenial to an audience susceptible to romance; Oedipus is thus, in Voltaire's account, more lengthily exempt of the full charge which will ultimately be levelled against him. Oedipus will be viewed as having been a suitor for Jocasta's hand, rather than having been the son and mate to Jocasta. (Here for Voltaire's time, lay the sticking point). In this regard, it is worth adding that for Sophocles fate exercises total control over the inevitable downfall of Oedipus, while for Voltaire the downfall of Oedipus is linked to corruption and rivalry at court—always central concerns for Voltaire and his world.

From the moment of revelation of the events that have preceded the dreadful plague on Thebes, the drama moves into its finale Jocasta stabs herself to death,--rather than hanging herself, as

in Sophocles. Oedipus, realizing his parricide and incest, blinds himself and goes into exile—terminating a play which, in Sophocles' version, leads on out into a sequel, notably Oedipus at Colonus, in which Oedipus is converted into a transcendent figure, and vanishes into the empyraean of the gods.

What has Voltaire done with Sophocles' play? He has rationalized the judicial process, which Oedipus establishes, in his search for the cause of the Theban plague. He has provided a suitor for Jocasta, in order to milder the spectator's pain at concentrating on Oedipus' raw incest. He has attributed the horrifying events of the play to dreadful human behavior, rather than to the stark will of the gods. Voltaire has reached for settings and motivations which are intelligible to rational eighteenth century aristocrats living in Western Europe. This play, the first drama of a young man who was at the time imprisoned in the Bastille, for writing naughty verses about the reigning monarch, went on to century long popularity, evidence of Voltaire's skill, at judging the temper of his own audiences.

THEMES

Homicide detection. It is the task of Oedipus to uncover the past evidence that will help to explain the dreadful plague that is decimating the City of Thebes. However that evidence is deeply buried in the story of the murder of Laius, King of Thebes. Oedipus is adamant that the mystery be solved, but doesn't realize that the mystery lies buried inside him, himself. The theme question is, how to unlock the mystery that explains the fashion by which the world has gone crazy.

Fate. For the fifth century Athenian fate was a lock on historical events, which clicked into gear at dramatic moments, and accepted no alternative pathways. For a modern thinker, like Voltaire, this view, of the way time plays out in human affairs, should be replaced by a more nearly pragmatic, cause and effect based, view of the causative interventions that shape the patterns of events. It would also, for those philosophers of history increasingly observable on the European landscape, accentuate the ancient-modern difference on the interpretation of the nature of history. More room would henceforth be accorded, for choice and free will in human events.

Incest. Voltaire's decision, to excise any reference to Jocasta's incest, from the present play reflects his time's conviction that it had risen above such behaviors as incest, and would be happier not to be reminded of that human potential. The fact may have proved the author right, to judge from its continuing popularity. The author's judgment may well have had its personal basis, too, for Voltaire had been imprisoned, on the occasion of writing this play, on a charge related to incest. He was accused of having written saucy lines of verse concerning the monarch's incest with his daughter.

Romantic love With the introduction of Philoctetes, who was not in Sophocles' original version of the play, it was possible to heighten interest in the role of Jocasta, in the tragic events which cram the present drama. Voltaire goes, here, for the elements of interest and curiosity, which in Sophocles are subordinated to the austere working out of the bare bones mystery of the plot.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Drama reflects a culture's taste and values. Voltaire offers a good example of the dramatist's desire to tailor his work to the tastes and tolerances of his own time. We have noted that Voltaire downplays certain issues—incest, intense stress on the power of the gods—which he feels unsuitable for his spectators, and promotes issues, like the introduction of Philoctetes, which lend a familiar and realistic aura to the entangling plot developments. What would you say to the dramatic practice of reshaping older scripts to the styles and tastes of later generations? Does this practise seem to violate the healthy norms of originality in creative work? Or is there a case for thinking of theater as a collective creative process, in which the past text is forever generating new versions of its future.

Voltaire clearly felt that he was able to update an ancient Greek play into the cultural atmosphere of his own Enlightenment century. Can other arts than drama be thus updated? How about arts like architecture or poetry? Doesn't it seem that the arts of language— theater, epic, or lyric—are more updatable than the plastic arts? Language, and its arts at any period, are in motion, as reinterpretation, from the moment they are first formulated. A lyric poem from ancient Greece can be translated, but can an ancient Greek temple?