

---

Tragic Irony in "Oedipus Rex"

Author(s): Francis P. Donnelly

Source: *The Classical Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 15 (May 3, 1948), pp. 229-230

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4342453>

Accessed: 01-04-2020 15:28 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The Johns Hopkins University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Classical Weekly*

he would not marry his supposed mother in Corinth.

Throughout the play Oedipus displays the same intense devotion to duty. The Greek *pas*, 'all, is continually on his lips. 'Tell *all*,' 'I examine *all* statements,' 'I curse *all*,' 'I killed *all*,' these phrases are indicative of Oedipus, and a search of other plays of Sophocles shows that *pas* is not a Sophoclean but an Oedipodean trait. When finally he knows the whole truth, he catalogues all his crimes as before he catalogued all possible criminals. His devotion to truth will brook no opposition. Spectators breathlessly watch him rushing towards a precipice, wondering what the truth will do to this human question-mark. In his doom he still looks at truth full in the face and attains to the summit of truth, Christian humility of soul.

Students in the calm of retirement may wonder why the solver of enigmas failed to see the truth at once and read the riddle of his life. The swift action of the drama prevents too subtle analysis in spectators. The success of Oedipus has made him too quick in his theories. The truth for him was too close in reality and too remote from a loving heart to be seen at once. In his own person he was Sohrab and Rustum, Hamlet and his uncle, a Sherlock Holmes searching to discover himself. If religious oracles were disregarded, it was blinded love which prompted the disregard, and the retribution was complete, but the pity of spectators for the doom and the fear awakened by the penalty, though keen, would not be depressing. Every heart would follow Oedipus and accompany his exile with profound sympathy.

FRANCIS P. DONNELLY, S.J.

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

### TRAGIC IRONY IN *OEDIPUS REX*

It was Thirlwall, the English bishop and scholar, who coined the phrase, 'tragic irony'. Ruskin's 'pathetic fallacy' is a notorious misnomer, and tragic irony may be misleading unless clearly understood. Campbell, the Sophoclean editor, objected to the phrase and suggested another term which has not found favor.

Tragic irony has none of the accomplishments

of ordinary irony. By the tone of the voice, by intentional exaggeration, by explicit contradiction, ordinary irony shows that the words uttered are to be taken in a directly opposite sense. Ironical statements are sometimes to the dismay of an author taken literally. It was a student of Holy Cross, Worcester, an ardent Irishman, who years ago wrote a panegyric of England and in a postscript declared: 'This is irony'.

Tragic irony has, indeed, two senses, but it has not the sarcastic accompaniments of ordinary irony. The play of Oedipus, the King, has perhaps more tragic irony than any other drama because of the double character of the protagonist. He is a son who has killed his father and married his own mother, and he is unaware of this hidden relation. The spectators, however, are fully aware of the situation. Their suspense becomes acute when Oedipus utters words which he applies in his sense but which apply equally well to the true reality. When Oedipus hears from Creon that the Sphinx prevented investigation of the murder of Laius, he cries: 'I myself shall again from the beginning reveal what is hidden'. The scholiast says, 'The hearer knows that in Oedipus all shall be revealed,' and when, a few lines later, Oedipus, beginning already to suspect a plot, cries, 'The killer of Laius would wish with the same hand to attack me', the scholiast calls it a 'thriller'. There is the acme of the tragic. Sohrab and Rustum, unknown father and unknown son, went forth in triumph to slay what neither would in reality desire to slay, and Oedipus lifts his own hand unwittingly against himself.

This mental suicide, arising from the double personality of Oedipus, is naturally more vivid and affecting in the earlier scenes. The royal proclamation after the entrance of the chorus has thrilling instances. Oedipus in his generous and universal impulsiveness states that there would have been common ties of common children, had not the offspring of Laius met with bad fortune. He means the closest ties, but the words may signify the tie of wife-mother. It is the same universal kindness which makes him say, 'I am fighting as if for my own father and I shall go to all extremes'. He then invokes a curse on himself when he includes his own house-

hold, should he there find any abettor of the murder of Laius.

The study of these tragic lines of double import is a source of interest, and it will be found that Sophocles displays art in their use. The tragic lines are well motivated, and sometimes the contrast is stressed by the triumphant way in which they are uttered, as in 572, with the great 'because,' Oedipus says that unless Creon and Teiresias had got together, there would have been no talk of any killing of Laius by Oedipus. Only too true!

FRANCIS P. DONNELLY, S.J.

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

### AN ASPECT OF CICERO'S PATRIOTISM (*Tusc. Disp.* I. 90)

Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations* (I. 90) holds that if we grant (as he does for the purpose of argument) that the soul is annihilated after death, we must realize that Camillus, who died after 390 B.C., now makes no more account of the recent Civil War between Caesar and Pompey than Cicero made of the capture of Rome in 390, since he then was not yet born.<sup>1</sup>

The danger of this analogy Cicero immediately perceived lay in this: that he might thereby be taking away the motive for patriotic activity, since a citizen might well cease being concerned (possibly like the Epicureans) about the future of the state, and stop his services on its behalf; for the condition of the state could not matter to him who after death did not at all exist. And so Cicero adds at the end of the chapter: *Cur igitur et Camillus doleret, si haec post trecentos et quinquaginta fere annos eventura putaret, et ego doleam, si ad decem milia annorum gentem aliquam urbe nostra potituram putem? Quia tanta caritas patriae est, ut eam non sensu nostro, sed salute ipsius metiamur.*

What interests us here is that Cicero, who believed in the immortality of the soul and closely associated that immortality with the patriot,<sup>2</sup> can find even for the non-believer a motive for patriotic activity (equally sufficient?) in the temporal felicity of the state (*salute ipsius*). A little later (chap. 91) he elaborates the sentiment: *Qua re licet etiam mortalem esse animum iudicantem aeterna moliri, non gloriae cupiditate, quam sensurus non sit, sed virtutis. . .*

Cicero's teleology might be impugned, but not his love of country.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> So, I judge, must we construe *quam ego illo vivo fecerim Romam captam*. The Loeb translation by J. E. King, 'than I should make now of the capture of Rome in his lifetime' spoils the analogy, since the comparison would involve a dead person and an existing person, whereas immediately preceding, Cicero had compared the Hippocentaur, who never existed, to Agamemnon. Furthermore, the Loeb translator would almost have to substitute *faciam* for *fecerim*. The *fecerim*, I suggest, must be rendered 'than I did' or 'than I would have done.' Lastly, the position of *illo vivo* seems to qualify *fecerim* rather than *Romam captam*.

<sup>2</sup> . . . *ominibus qui patriam conservaverint, adiuverint, auxerint, certum esse in caelo definitum locum, ubi beato aevo sempiterno fruuntur; nihil est enim illi principi deo qui omnem mundum regit, quod quidem in terris fiat, acceptius quam concilia coetusque hominum iure sociati, quae civitates appellantur; harum rectores et conservatores hinc profecti huc revertuntur (Somnium Scipionis, 5).*

Hanc [animam] tu exerce optimis in rebus! sunt autem optima curae *de salute patriae*, quibus agitatus et exercitatus animus velocius in hanc sedem et domum suam pervolabit (*Somnium Scipionis*, 2.).

LEO M. KAISER

ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY

#### REVIEWS

**The Murder of Herodes and Other Trials from the Athenian Law-Courts.** By KATHLEEN FREEMAN. vii, 239 pp. (Macdonald & Co., London, 1946.) 12/6

Although the word Philippic doubtless is at least partially understood by educated men and women of our time, and some who are not students of Greek literature may even have read in translation portions of Demosthenes' *Oration on the Crown*, it is safe to say that only a few have any knowledge of the speeches delivered in private causes in the courts of ancient Athens. It is the aim of Miss Freeman to amend that situation in some measure. She deprecates 'the sentimental idea that everybody in ancient Hellas was absorbed in the quest for Truth and Beauty.' By revealing the pettiness and chicanery and even viciousness of the lesser members of Athenian society, she believes, and no doubt rightly, that the achievement of its great poets, statesmen, and thinkers will thereby be enhanced.