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Life in Victory

Professor Bowers' article "Death in Victory" (BULLETIN, March 1965), comparing Greek tragedy with certain tragedies based upon the Christian ethos, provokes some reflections in defense of Greek tragedy. Though Professor Bowers' remarks are sweeping, it is possible to isolate several key assumptions upon which the argument is based. These assumptions are:

1. That all Greek tragedy may be referred to as though it were one. It is taken for granted that the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides produce on the audience a common effect, whereas even among the tragedies of a single playwright the effect varies widely. Thus, Euripides' dramas range from tragedy, to melodrama, to farce, although in the comprehensive category of ancient times all were called tragedies.

2. That a fate motif pervades Greek tragedy.

3. That Aristotle's descriptive remarks about the tragic genre are universally applicable, though they apply but little to Euripides and even less to Aeschylus.

In his discussion Professor Bowers is interested primarily in a comparison of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* with *Hamlet*. He writes, "If, with Aristotle, we take *Oedipus the King* as one of the most perfect of Greek dramas, we see the tragedy of a fate-driven man who is not basically responsible for his actions."

By confining these remarks to the Oedipus legend as it was inherited by the Greek tragedians, it will be possible to illustrate the fallacy of the three assumptions. Let us compare the tragedies of two dramatists writing on the same theme, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Both are interested in the evil outcome of the house of Thebes, yet how different is their treatment of that legend.

Aeschylus, writing a trilogy, called his first play *Laius*. In that play he must have mentioned the curse on the royal house as a result of the carrying off of Chrysippus, the beautiful young son of Pelops of Thebes. The curse was reinforced by the warning of Apollo that if Laius begat a son that son would ruin the city. This warning Laius ignored; he begat Oedipus. Oedipus eventually slew his father and married his mother. The second play of

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the trilogy, *Oedipus,* told of the parricide and incest. Yet even in the first two plays of the trilogy, as W. C. Greene observes in his book *Moira,* the action is not a mere tracing of an inexorable fate working through the curse. Laius need not have carried off Chrysippus and he need not have disregarded the warning of Apollo. By his actions he allowed the curse to operate.

In the third play, *Seven Against Thebes,* the only extant play of the trilogy, the curse of Laius and also the curse of Oedipus on his son Eteocles assume a preponderant role. Yet even in this play the character of the protagonist, Eteocles, is highly significant in determining the outcome. Of Eteocles Greene writes, "Eteocles himself is the earliest clearly drawn tragic hero in Greek drama, one whose character, on the whole good yet vitiated by the *hamartia* of fierceness and vengefulness and concentrated will to power, conforms to Aristotle's demands." Aeschylus, though primarily interested in the power of the gods, has begun to focus his attention upon the actions of men.

In Sophocles' study of Oedipus one may observe the further emphasis on the part played by the tragic protagonist in effecting his destruction. In Sophocles' play the curse precedes the action of the tragedy, and here it must be mentioned that Aristotle admired drama in which "improbabilities" were placed outside the action. Once Sophocles' play begins, the action follows from decisions made by the character himself. Oedipus must find the blood-polluter of the land, the man who has killed Laius. In this play Sophocles is concerned with the ancient taboo, the fact that a murder has been committed and the murderer is therefore guilty.

Of the situation in *Oedipus the King* Professor Bowers remarks, "The tragic fact, hence, is the pollution of Thebes by a man for whom disaster has been prophesied and therefore one who is in the grip of a destiny that allows him no personal choice." Yet is not Oedipus making choices, determining the action of the play, by his refusal to believe Teiresias, by his rejection of Creon, by his decision to inquire of the herdsman in spite of Jocasta's entreaties to desist? And why should he recognize himself as the polluter? Oedipus has been an admirable king, acting with honorable intent. The character of the protagonist is not that of a man who might have done such deeds.

Yet, comparing the Greek play to Christian tragedy, Professor Bowers affirms, "The distinction is that Oedipus, in the grip of his fate, is not personally responsible for his actions in the Christian sense, because he has no free-will." Though the Greeks did not conceive of freedom of the will in the Christian sense, is it not Oedipus who by his freedom of choice determines the outcome of the tragedy? Is it not the will of Oedipus alone which forces the action to its ultimate conclusion —to the discovery of himself as the guilty polluter? Here it must be emphasized that the steps which Oedipus takes of his own "free-will" to deal with the plague caused by the unavenged murder of Laius lead to the discovery of himself as the one guilty of murder and incest, though "fate" has provided the terms of action in which the character operates. And here it might be asked whether in art as in life all men are not in some sense "fated." Are not the terms of action in *Hamlet* —the times which are "out of joint" —in some sense comparable to the oracular prophecy? Sophocles accepts the fate motif and adapts it to his purpose, as Shakespeare accepts the revenge motif in *Hamlet.*

Again, in defense of Christian tragedy, Professor Bowers asserts, "Since death is the ultimate fact of Greek tragedy, justice can be only retributive because no means is provided mankind for resurrection from sin." Repentance for the Christian protagonist brings death in victory, according to Professor Bowers. But did not death in victory come to the pagan Oedipus in the play written at the close of Sophocles' long career? In *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles considers the motives for the murder and introduces extenuating circumstances. Oedipus in death is equated with the gods. At Colonus "He passed away—an end most marvellous," his will in harmony with that of the divine. One is inclined to feel that Oedipus received justice at last.

Professor Bowers objects that Aristotle, in his judgment of Greek tragedy, neglects the role of justice in producing the tragic experience. Aristotle's high praise of *Oedipus the King,* in which the protagonist neither dies nor receives justice, leads one to believe that Aristotle favored "injustice." Not Sophocles but Aeschylus illustrates in his tragedies the operation of various forms of justice. Aristotle neglects the plays of Aeschylus. It is largely because Aeschylus is interested in the role of justice meted out to man at the hands of the gods?

Thus, in Aeschylus' *Persians, hybris* is justly punished. In the *Oresteia* the crime of the innocent Orestes is justified and forgiven. If the *Persians* illustrates the retributive justice Professor Bowers finds objectionable, because delivered by the hands of a vengeful god, certainly in the *Oresteia* there can be no reason for protest because justice comes not at the hands of a vengeful deity but at the hands of an ethically evolving god who at the close of the last play of the trilogy embodies not only justice but mercy. Aristotle considers inferior those tragedies in which the good are rewarded and the bad punished according to their deserts.

"Injustice," on the other hand, the ironic discrepancy between what a man deserves and what he gets, is a view inherent in much of Greek life. This view is found so frequently in Sophoclean tragedy that it has understandably been called tragic or Sophoclean irony. It is implicit in Aristotle's salient principles of reversal and recognition. Ironic reversal of fortune in *Oedipus the King* is followed by recognition on the part of the protagonist. Yet Professor Bowers insists that "with Oedipus self-knowledge and understanding do not come: tragic blindness persists, and the protagonist ironically brings about his own downfall." Is it not contradictory to insist on the dominance of fate and then to assert that the protagonist brings about his own downfall? Oedipus acknowledges the part Apollo played in his misfortune, but in maintaining that the hand that struck out his eyes is his own, he acknowledges also his own responsibility. In remorse for his deeds, done wittingly and unwittingly, he blinds himself. Oedipus knows now his own limitations and the power of the gods. He knows not only that he is the legitimate heir to the throne —that he is king by birth—but also that he is king over himself. The blind man sees. For Oedipus the King, in that recognition, in that tragic insight, lies his victory over himself.

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