



Guilt and Shame in *Oedipus the King*

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Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* introduces important questions about the nature of justice and calls into discussion what warrants guilt and shame. These questions are timeless; they certainly maintain salience in modernity. My primary focus is the extent to which Oedipus is guilty in the original context of the play, ancient Greece, and therefore whether or not any attendant shame is warranted. That said, there are elements of this analysis that look beyond the mores of ancient Greece in the evaluation of Oedipus's actions, and thus, analyzing this play is helpful in navigating complex questions of justice in our time. Certain elements of his behavior should be considered in a manner that supersedes any one culture. Investigation of these dynamics suggest that the most imperative facet in determining Oedipus's guilt is determined by the extent to which he was conscious and deliberate in his vanity, the murder of his father, and marrying his mother.

The core questions that emerge from my analysis of the play include whether Oedipus's moral (and arguably honorable) intentions nullify the immorality of his acts, and whether knowledge of the immorality is a precondition for culpability. The nuances of the analysis give rise to other questions: How are guilt and shame distinguished within the context of this tragedy? And can guilt and shame exist without the conscience? Per the *Oxford English Dictionary*, guilt is defined as "the fact of having committed a specified or implied offence or crime, it is essentially a feeling of having committed wrong or failed in an obligation."¹ Shame is defined as "a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour. A person, action, or situation that brings a loss of respect or honour. A regrettable or unfortunate situation or action."² On the basis of these definitions, which are born of Christianity, after Sophocles's time, Oedipus is guilty and demonstrates immense shame for his actions.

Oedipus's downfall is a product of different moments, each bringing him one step closer to fulfilling the prophecy he so desperately wants to evade. Oedipus learns of the fate bestowed upon him: that he would murder his father and sleep with his mother. In an attempt to escape this prophecy, Oedipus decides to leave his home in Corinth, defying the fate bestowed upon him. His decision is the first and most reprehensible sin committed by Oedipus. By electing to defy the gods and evade their prophecy, Oedipus commits the sin of hubris. Based on the Oxford's definition, Oedipus is guilty per the fact that he challenged the gods. Another level of guilt is added to Oedipus's crime being that he made his decision purposefully, with the intention of denouncing his own fate. The gods did not dictate that he stay in Corinth, therefore leaving was not a sinful act. On the other hand, defying the gods was, for the Greeks, a shameful act. Because of this, Oedipus's belief that he had prevented himself and his family from fulfilling the prophecy is his offense.

Hubris, which is defined as "excessive pride toward or defiance of the gods, leading to nemesis," was the ultimate sin in ancient Greece.³ The Chorus speaks, "If a man walks with haughtiness of hand or word and gives no heed to Justice and the shrines of Gods despises—may evil doom smite him for his ill-starred pride of heart!"⁴ The Chorus, which often serve as the moral pillars of Greek plays, condemn both Oedipus's pride and arrogance, not just as an offense against their gods, but as a sin that permits the gods to be merciless in their justice.

Oedipus's chain of sin continues on his journey out of Corinth, where Oedipus encounters a crossroads. At the crossroads, other travelers nearly cut Oedipus off the road. A fight between the men breaks out, resulting in the death of one of the men. Later in the play, it is revealed that the man Oedipus murdered was in fact Laius, the former King of Thebes, his biological father. Guilt in this situation can be broken down into two parts: being guilty of murder and being guilty of patricide. Within the context of ancient Greece, Oedipus's act of murder is not the moral misdeed; betraying his father is. Based on the Oxford definition, Oedipus is guilty of patricide as he did in fact kill his own father. Oedipus is certainly conscious of his act of murder, but he is blind to his own patricide. Oedipus knowingly took the life of another human, which did not warrant nearly the same repercussions as dishonoring one's family in ancient Greece.⁵ Because of this, Oedipus does not feel shame for murdering

his father because he was not aware of their relation. Oedipus was conscious of having killed a man, which had very few, if any, consequences at the time, but he was blind to recognize that the man was his own father. Near the beginning of the play, Teiresias tells Oedipus, "I say that with those you love best, you live in foulest shame unconsciously and do not see where you are in calamity."⁶ Oedipus is ignorant to the deep dishonor he has done. Had Oedipus taken a moment to consider that there was any possibility that the man he was arguing with was his father, maybe he wouldn't have killed him. Immediately following the murder, Oedipus could have felt shame for killing someone, but he could not have felt the specific shame for killing his own father.

From the vantage of the present day United States, it is hard to consider Oedipus's actions without applying values aligning with Judeo-Christian judgement. In Christianity, which is reflected in modern Western law, murder is an offense that warrants punishment. In ancient Greece, murder was not so much a crime, let alone an act that would cause one to harbor the guilty conscience of shame. Patricide, however, was viewed as an act of significant dishonor and, therefore, if Oedipus had known immediately after the fact that he had killed Laius, he would have taken on the burden of shame.

Speaking to the Chorus, Oedipus asserts, "I account myself a child of Fortune, beneficent Fortune, and I shall not be dishonoured."⁷ Oedipus, believing that he has gone his whole life thus far outsmarting the gods, regards himself as being a man of great fortune and honor. Because Oedipus thinks he has not dishonored his family by killing his father and wedding his mother, he holds himself to a higher level of fortune, which is actually just a product of his own vanity. Teiresias even says to Oedipus, "It is this very luck that has destroyed you."⁸ Not only is Oedipus blind to his sins, but he values himself as being a man of exceptional luck and morality.

The guilt for the murder of Laius pre-exists Oedipus's shame. Guilt sits with regard to action—in the case of Oedipus, the action of killing his father and marrying his mother. The gods serve punishment for Oedipus's guilt by inflicting a plague on Thebes. The key word in the definition of shame is "consciousness." Initially, Oedipus feels no shame for his guilt of patricide because he is not conscious of the fact. Similarly, neither Oedipus or Jocasta feel shame for their marriage. It isn't until Oedipus and Jocasta become consciously aware of their actions that the shame is born.

The public's shame for Oedipus isn't even born until they become aware of what he has done. In the beginning of the play, the Priest refers to Oedipus as being "greatest in all men's eyes."⁹ Even though Oedipus's internal shame is with regard to patricide and incest, the cultural shame and opprobrium bestowed upon him by the gods is born out of hubris. The lesson of this play is not so much a focus on the elements that are most repugnant to contemporary readers, which is to say to killing your father and marrying your mother, although those misdeeds are not condoned. Instead, Sophocles condemns Oedipus for his greatest sin of hubris, an act for which he is and has been, from the very beginning, guilty, as he performed as such with a clear and intentional conscience. That said, Oedipus was making decisions with limited information. He did not choose to commit patricide. The role of the audience or reader of the play is not to make moral judgements. Rather, it is to understand the complexity of Oedipus's situation. The play asked its original viewers, who were well-versed in the concept of shame, to consider intentionality and purpose. In understanding and engaging in debate over intentionality with regard to Oedipus's actions, an audience frees themselves from the burden of deciding Oedipus's guilt.

In today's world, Oedipus's actions would understandably be condemned differently. His patricide would be viewed in the context of the underlying murder itself. Yet changes in law and in mores do not diminish the overriding moral thread of the text. While murdering his father was not a crime per se, Oedipus did something shameful in the cultural context of the ethos of his day. For Oedipus, what was relevant was that he tempted fate, and killed his father. His shame was a function of this specific distasteful activity. In evaluating his character, we have to understand the framework in which his society judged actions such as his. The challenge then is how one takes stock of Oedipus's actions as if he were a twenty-first century citizen. Our obligations to the text are not to come to any verdict concerning Oedipus, rather to continue a timeless yet evolving conversation.

1. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "guilt (n.)."	5. (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 884-888.	9. Sophocles, <i>Oedipus the King</i> , 1080-1082.
2. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "shame (n.)."	6. Michael Gagarin, "Athenian Homicide Law: Case Studies," <i>Demos</i> ,	10. Sophocles, <i>Oedipus the King</i> , 442.
3. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "hubris (n.)."	7. The Stoa Consortium, March 23, 2003.	11. Sophocles, <i>Oedipus the King</i> , 40.
4. Sophocles, <i>Oedipus the King</i> , translated from the ancient Greek by David Grene	8. Sophocles, <i>Oedipus the King</i> , 367-369.	