

The attitude and activity of Oedipus are images of the critical spirit and the great intellectual achievements of a generation of sophists, scientists, and philosophers. Sophocles' hero "investigates, examines, questions, infers...knows, finds, reveals, makes clear, demonstrates, learns, teaches, liberates, and saves." His intelligence, mind, and thought permeate the play. Such words sum up the spirit and serve the purposes of the new scientific attitude and activity.

The Athens of the fifth century B. C. was the high point in the development of Greek rational, critical, and theoretical thinking. The beginnings of such thinking may have grown out of an innate spirit unifying a people composed of diverse ~~ethnic~~ <sup>ethnic</sup> strains.

In their search for unity and order, the Greeks turned to pure science rather than to natural science. They had no laboratories or experimental stations, but they began to deduce concepts from observations and analysis. Even before this contact with foreign science, they had speculated not on how the earth works, but on how it began.

When the Greeks <sup>subjected</sup> ~~suspected~~ the myths dealing with the real and visible world, the myths of creation, to theoretical and <sup>causal</sup> ~~casual~~ inquiry, they originated scientific thought. Hesiod, perhaps the earliest of Greek philosophers, tried about 800 B.C. to unify the myths in a <sup>cosmic</sup> ~~cosmic~~ system and to speculate on the origins of the universe. By the sixth century B.C. more than one philosopher was questioning the nature of the gods. Thales, the father of Greek science, introduced Egyptian measure and laid the groundwork for geometry. He and other philosophers speculated about the basis of matter and the structure of the universe.

Questions about the earth's origins led to more questions about the gods themselves. Xenophanes, perhaps the first Greek philosopher-theologian, found a single pantheistic deity. Pythagoras in his experiments discovered in numbers the essence of all, especially music, astronomy, and mathematics. Parmenides separated philosophy from physics and discovered the possibility of logical proof. In medicine new ideas began to conflict with ecclesiastical practices of the priests. Alcmaeon, (c. 500), the father of Greek medicine, located the optic nerve and Eustachian tubes; he dissected animals, discussed sleep, defined health, and isolated the brain as the center of thought.

Thus, by the fifth century, although science and philosophy were still one, great unknown fields, advances were made. A people naturally curious and speculative were ready for the great questions which concern man and god. At Salamis and Mycale the Greeks watched the triumph of spirit over matter, of freedom over despotism, and were inspired with self-confidence and energy. The city-state, Athens, became the center of the cultural economic world of the Mediterranean. The war's upheavals and mass evacuations had broken traditions; a sense of personal achievement and responsibility prevailed. The legislative and administrative branches of the government were controlled by the citizens. The citizen assembly represented the final and decisive will of the people. Democracy was at work, and citizens

took pride in their public duty - in such a society men were truly free - free to ask themselves the most probing questions about themselves as individuals. Scientists and philosophers, poets and priests, sculptors and statesmen, all imbued with the sense of power stimulated by victory....all versed in the privileges and responsibilities of the post-war democracy... all inheritors of a long tradition of speculation and inquiries....all *asked* ~~ask~~ fundamental questions about men and gods. They provided courageous answers and in turn stirred up even more provoking questions about man's place in the universe. More than one philosopher suggested the doctrines of survival of the fittest and evolution of man from lower forms. An atomic theory of matter was proposed. Medicine departed from religion and philosophy.

Even more significant than the questions was the reactions to those questions. In their attempt to discover the permanent realities behind human perception, the rationalists had stimulated independent thought and spread a sense of individual achievement; but they also had upset old, established traditions and beliefs. The ordinary Athenian could not be immune to the conflict engendered by the enlightenment. Aspasia, Anaxagoras, \* and Protagoras, are the more familiar names in a long list of victims to the reaction of the Athenian masses. For such an age the traditional idea of self-control preached by Apollo had become a mockery. The greatest, most disciplined, and most imaginative minds of ~~the~~ Athens could not avoid the conflict between established ~~order~~ <sup>order</sup> and rampant individualism. In philosophy, in art, in poetry, in drama, they came to grips with the problems raised by an age of questions. The clarity, moderation, and wisdom with which they resolved the conflict have remained over the centuries an inspiration to the western world.

#### THE DELPHIC ORACLE

Delphi originally called Pytho, and located on the southwestern part of Mount Parnassus in a valley of Phocis, was the center of prophecy as early as 1500 B.C. Writers from ~~home~~ <sup>Homer</sup> to the Hellenistic authors are unanimous in their declaration of Delphi as a place of inviolate sanctity. Here, beneath the southwest corner of the temple was the Holy of Holies, the source of the prophecy. Here was the stone marking the center of the earth, for what the Acropolis was to Athens, Delphi was to the Mediterranean world.

A single priestess was <sup>e</sup>delegated to interpret the messages of the god Apollo - priests in turn reinterpreted the ravings of the priestess Pythia, for the petitioner, in words, sometimes metrical in form, sometimes in writing - usually ambiguous enough to seem infallible. The priests appeared to be well-informed and to have shown an unusual grasp of current events and psychology. They answered personal questions of ~~morality~~ <sup>morality</sup> and ~~expiration~~ <sup>expiration</sup> expectation as well as state problems of strategy in war and peace. These priests accumulated a fame and prestige that enabled the shrine to endure to 390 A.D., when it was abolished by the Christian emperor Theodosius.

The one great epic in which the Delphic oracle played a prominent part from the earliest times was the story of Thebes. The variations on the theme

\* All 3 were tried for treason against the society because of what they taught.

of the prophecy about <sup>Laius</sup> ~~heirs~~ are infinite but the oracle, most frequently quoted appears in Jocasta's exposition at the beginning of Euripides Phoenissai:

"The god replied, 'Beware of thou who rulest,  
The martial Thebans, strive not to obtain  
A progeny against the will of heaven:  
If thou beget a son, that son shall stay thee,  
And all thy household shall be plunged in, blood..."

Almost 30 years before the performance of Euripides' play, Sophocles had added the prophecy of ~~incest~~<sup>incest</sup> to that of patricide. Yet the essential nature of the oracle remains the same; it could not initiate action alone, for Greek prophecy requires human ~~action~~<sup>action</sup>. In the Oedipus Tyrannus Sophocles has chosen to present the terrible actions of Oedipus not as determined but only as predicted, and he has made no reference to the relation between the predicted destiny and the divine will. The divine will is represented in the play by the prophecy and the prophecy alone.

### The Play

Sophocles wrote and produced Oedipus the King sometime between 430 and 411 B.C. as part of the celebration of the Greater Dionysia in Athens. This spring festival, common throughout Greece, and established in Athens in 534 had developed from the ritual of song and dance in honor of the god of fertility and life. Of the six days devoted to this festival, three consisted of song and religious procession, three consisted of the performance of original plays. Each day a tragic poet presented his tetralogy, made up of three tragedies (related or unrelated in theme) and one satire play; each afternoon a poet competed with one play. The playwright was director, coach, and often actor as well.

Oedipus the King, evaluated by popularly elected judges won second prize in the competition.

The Theater. Greek theaters were outdoors, on hillsides to permit seeing and hearing. The actors performed in front of a stage building and upon a specially raised terrace. Between the actors and the audience was the religious nature of the plays symbolized by the dancing circle or "orchestres" in the center of which the altar to Dionysius stood.

Performances began at sunrise and were attended by free Athenians, state, and religious officials. The performance was a political and religious ceremony. The archone or chief magistrate was in charge of the festival; the choregia, an appointive or voluntary group of wealthy citizens financed the festival and selected the non-professional chorus. The chorus formed a link between the actors and the audience. An actor was first introduced by Thespis; second by Aeschylus; the third actor by Sophocles.

Plot: The story, usually legendary, rarely contemporary, was familiar to the audience; but the interest did not lie in exciting events or striking characters. It lay in the meaning of the action as exemplifying the

~~relation of these gods to his destiny. Here the religious purpose~~

relation of these gods to his "destiny.." Here the religious purpose of the festival prevails. Nevertheless, the interest of both playwright and audience in the characters as human beings grew until in the late fifth century, the emphasis had shifted, especially in the plays Euripides, to the relationship to man to man.

Acting: Male actors played all parts and sang certain lyric passages. The tragic robe, a decorated chiton, with narrow, close fitting sleeves, may have been derived from the robe of Dionysus himself. The mask, made of linen, cord, and wood, was a hallowed convention, which idealized rather than individualized character. With a distant mountain or the horizon serving as background for this outdoor theatre, and with the play serving a state and religious function, such enlargement was physically and aesthetically necessary.

The origins and functions of the Chorus.

At one point in Oedipus the King the chorus sings

"When such deeds as this are honoured and rewarded,  
Why should we join the sacred dance and worship?"

The line is a vivid reminder of one of the main differences between our modern drama and the drama of Sophocles. The Greek chorus and audience together were active participants in the ritual celebration of a god----- the god Dionysus, at whose festival the dramas were presented.

In the dim past, Dionysus had been a vegetation god, associated with the vine and with rude and vigorous rites for fertility and for relief from care. In time he had become the god who lives and dies again, as the vine dies in the cold of the winter and is re-born in the spring; he was the giver of inspiration, the force through which men transcend themselves and are empowered to understand, and see, as gods. The chorus sang and danced in annual celebration of Dionysus long before a leader emerged to begin antiphonal dialogue and the drama as we know it.

In Sophocles' plays, the chorus, now highly trained and stylized, still chants its poetic lines and accompanies its chant with movements, heightened beyond ordinary gesture, to add the force of motion to sound in affecting the spectators. It reminds the audience that the play has a meaning not only as a tragedy, but as a religious celebration.

The chorus has a dramatic function as well. In "Oedipus the King," it represents the citizens of Thebes. From the beginning of the play, we know that they are involved in the action. It is their city which the plague ravages; it is their ruler who may have brought misery upon them. It is even largely for their benefit that Oedipus undertakes the investigation which is the play's dramatic substance. But at the same time the chorus is also outside the action. It stands apart from the actors. With its poetry, its movement, and its songs it describes, comments, states issues, and passes judgements, as Oedipus moves relentlessly to his doom.

In the chorus' role of commenting spectator we see its third main function - a symbolic function. For the chorus represents not only the citizens of Thebes, but the people in the audience as well. The fears and hopes expressed by the chorus are thus shared by the onlooking crowd. Through their identification with the chorus, the Greek audience joined in the action of the play, and became involved in the ~~earthly~~ <sup>cathartic</sup> ritual and struggle which the masked figures were enacting.

To those accustomed only to the theatre of reality, (most modern films are subject to the appeal for realism and are predominately enacting realistic themes) the chorus may at first seem artificial and alien. We can trace the evolution of this choral expression in the familiar games children have played all over the world and for generations beyond memory. As very small children we take hands in a circle and play ring-around-the-rosy. Later we play more complicated games, form a circle of all the children, one child steps forward to play a selected role, meanwhile the circling chorus sings the ~~story~~ <sup>story</sup> whilst the leading participants act out their roles. The chorus, here, both observes and describes the action, reacting appropriately in words and gestures.

It seems to us as children quite natural to tell a story in this manner; and we are all part of it, sharing in its reality and reliving its emotions (Surely there is something of an explanation here for the origins of mass demonstrations such as the cheerleaders directing the response of a cheer.)

There is a connection between the children's dancing circle and the chorus moving on the circular stage. As we were once part of the circle, so do we now feel ourselves members of the chorus. We ourselves no longer speak, but that we feel in response to the play's events does not go unspoken. The chorus speaks for us. Through the form of the drama we are engaged in Sophocles' concern with the collision of ~~man~~ <sup>man and God</sup>. The chorus provides the intimate link between the action and the watcher.