

CLCS4007. ATHENS VS. ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

LECTURE 27 WORKSHOP I: THEATRE (COMPARE A GREEK AND ROMAN PLAY): SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS* AND SENECA'S *OEDIPUS*

Before the Workshop, please read the following extracts below from Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Seneca's *Oedipus*. It would also be useful if you can read the full version of both plays (although this is not strictly necessary). Please consider the following questions and note down your thoughts:

- 1/ Compare and contrast the extracts below. What are the main differences and similarities between Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Seneca's *Oedipus*?
- 2/ Compare and contrast the portrayal of the following characters in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Seneca's *Oedipus*: a/ Creon; b/ Oedipus and c/Teiresias.
- 3/ Compare and contrast the portrayal of oracles and divination in the extract below. What are the key differences and similarities?

Please bring this Workshop sheet and your notes (on the questions below) to the Workshop on Monday 23rd April (1.15pm).

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1-151

Sophocles. *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles*. Edited with introduction and notes by Sir Richard Jebb. Sir Richard Jebb. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1887.

Before the palace of Oedipus in [Thebes](#). Suppliants of all ages are seated on the steps of the altars. Oedipus enters, in the robes of a king: for a moment he gazes silently on the groups at the altars, then speaks.

Oedipus

My children, latest-born wards of old Cadmus, why do you sit before me like this with wreathed branches of suppliants, while the city reeks with incense, [5] rings with prayers for health and cries of woe? I thought it unbecoming, my children, to hear these things from the mouths of others, and have come here myself, I, Oedipus renowned by all. Tell me, then, venerable old man—since it is proper that you [10] speak for these—in what mood you sit here, one of fear or of desire? Be sure that I will gladly give you all my help. I would be hard-hearted indeed if I did not pity such suppliants as these.

Priest of Zeus

Oedipus, ruler of my land, you see the age of those who sit [15] on your altars—some, nestlings still too tender for flight, others, bowed with age, priests, like me of Zeus, and some, these here, the chosen youth. The rest of the folk sit [20] with wreathed branches in the market-place, and before the shrines of Pallas, and where Ismenus gives answer by fire. For the city, as you yourself see, is now sorely vexed, and can no longer lift her head from beneath the angry waves of death. [25] A blight has fallen on the fruitful blossoms of the land, the herds among the pastures, the barren pangs of women. And the flaming god, the malign plague, has swooped upon us, and ravages the town: he lays waste to the house of Cadmus, but enriches Hades with [30] groans and tears. It is not because we rank you with the gods that I and these children are suppliants at your hearth, but because we deem you the first among men in life's common fortunes and in dealings with the divinities: [35] when you came to the city of the Cadmeans, you freed us from the tax that

we rendered to the hard songstress, and that when you knew no more than anyone else, nor had you been taught, but rather by the assistance of a god, as the story goes, you uplifted our life. [40] Now, Oedipus, king glorious in our eyes, we, your suppliants, beseech you to find some defence for us, whether you hear it from some divine omen, or learn of it from some mortal. For I see that the outcome of the councils of experienced men [45] most often have effect. On, best of mortals, uplift our state! On, guard your fame, since now this land calls you savior on account of your former zeal. Let us not remember of your reign that [50] we were first restored and then cast down: lift this state so that it falls no more! With good omen you provided us that past happiness: show yourself the same now too, since if you are to rule this land just as you do now, it is better to be lord of men than of a wasteland. [55] Neither walled town nor ship is anything, if it is empty and no men dwell within.

Oedipus

My piteous children, I know quite well the desires with which you have come: I know well that [60] you all are sick, and though you are sick I know well that there is not one of you who is as sick as I. Your pain comes on each of you for himself alone, and for no other, but my soul is in pain at once for the city, for myself, and for you. [65] Thus you are not awakening me from sleep: no, be sure that I have wept many tears, wandered far and wide in my thought. I have made use of the only remedy which I could find after close consideration: I sent my relative [70] Creon, Menoeceus' son, to Apollo's Pythian residence to learn what we might do or say to protect this city. And now, when the lapse of days is reckoned, I am troubled about what he is doing, for he has been away an unreasonably long time [75] beyond what is fitting. But when he arrives, I would be no true man if I did not perform all that the god reveals.

Priest

You have spoken opportunely, since at this time these people here indicate that Creon is drawing near.

Oedipus

[80] Lord Apollo, may he come to us in the brightness of saving fortune, even as his face is bright!

Priest

He seems to bring comfort, since otherwise he would not be coming crowned so thickly with berry-laden bay.

Oedipus

We will soon know: he is within hearing-range.

To Creon.

[85] Prince, my kinsman, child of Menoeceus, what news have you brought us from the god?

Creon

Good news. I tell you that even troubles hard to bear will end in perfect peace if they find the right issue.

Oedipus

But what is the oracle? So far, your words [90] neither encourage nor frighten me.

Creon

If you want to hear in the presence of these people, I am ready to speak: otherwise we can go inside.

Oedipus

Speak to all. The sorrow that I bear for these is more than for my own life.

Creon

I will tell you what I heard from the god. [95] Phoebus our lord clearly commands us to drive out the defilement which he said was harbored in this land, and not to nourish it so that it cannot be healed.

Oedipus

With what sort of purification? What is the manner of the misfortune?

Creon

[100] By banishing the man, or by paying back bloodshed with bloodshed, since it is this blood which brings the tempest on our city.

Oedipus

And who is the man whose fate he thus reveals?

Creon

Laius, my lord, was the leader of our land before you assumed control of this state.

Oedipus

[105] I know it well—by hearsay, for I never saw him.

Creon

He was slain, and the god now bids us to take vengeance on his murderers, whoever they are.

Oedipus

Where on earth are they? Where shall the dim track of this old crime be found?

Creon

[110] In this land, the god said. What is sought for can be caught; only that which is not watched escapes.

Oedipus

Was it in the house, or in the field, or on foreign soil that Laius met his bloody end?

Creon

He left our land, as he said, on a mission to [Delphi](#). [115] And once he had set forth, he never again returned.

Oedipus

And was there none to tell? Was there no travelling companion who saw the deed, from whom tidings might have been gained, and used?

Creon

All perished, save one who fled in fear, and he could tell with assurance only one thing of all that he saw.

Oedipus

[120] And what was that? One thing might hold the clue to many, if we could only get a small beginning for hope.

Creon

He said that robbers fell upon them, not one man alone, but with a great force.

Oedipus

How then, unless some intrigue had been worked with bribes [125] from here in [Thebes](#), would the robbers have been so bold?

Creon

Such things were surmised. But once Laius was slain no avenger arose in the midst of our troubles.

Oedipus

But when royalty had fallen in this way, what trouble prevented a full search?

Creon

[130] The riddling Sphinx had forced us to let things that were obscure go, and to investigate the pressing trouble.

Oedipus

I will start afresh, and once more make dark things plain. Worthily has Phoebus Apollo—and worthily have you—bestowed this care on behalf of the dead. And so, as is fitting, you will find me allied with you [135] in seeking vengeance for this land, and for the god as well. I will dispel this taint not on behalf of far-off friends, but for my own benefit. For whoever killed Laius [140] might wish to take vengeance on me also with a hand as fierce. Avenging Laius, therefore, I serve myself. Come, my children, as quickly as possible rise from the altar-steps, and lift these suppliant boughs. Let someone summon here Cadmus' people, warning them that I will leave nothing untried. [145] For with the god's help our good fortune—or our ruin—will be made certain.

Priest

My children, let us rise. What we came to seek, this man promises of his own accord. And may Phoebus, who sent these oracles, [150] come to us as savior and deliverer from the pestilence.

Scene Two: Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* 300-462

Teiresias enters, led by a boy.

Oedipus

[300] Teiresias, whose soul grasps all things, both that which may be told and that which is unspeakable, the Olympian secrets and the affairs of the earth, you feel, though you cannot see, what a huge plague haunts our state. From which, great prophet, we find you to be our protector and only savior. [305] Now, Phoebus—if indeed you have not already heard the news—sent answer to our question that the only way to rid ourselves of this pest that afflicts us is to discover the slayers of Laius, and then to slay them or banish them from our land. [310] So do not begrudge us the voice of the birds or any other path of prophecy, but save yourself and your state, save me, save all that is defiled by the dead. We are in your hands, and man's noblest task is to help others [315] to the best of his means and powers.

Teiresias

Alas, how terrible it is to have wisdom when it does not benefit those who have it. I knew this well, but let it slip from my mind: otherwise I would not have come here.

Oedipus

What now? How disheartened you have come!

Teiresias

[320] Let me go home. For you will bear your own burden to the end, and I will bear mine, if you consent.

Oedipus

Your words are strange and unkind to the state which nurtured you, since you withhold this response.

Teiresias

I see that you, for your part, speak inappropriately. [325] Therefore do not speak, so I will not suffer the same.

Oedipus

For the love of the gods, do not turn away, if you have knowledge: all we suppliants implore you on our knees.

Teiresias

For all of you are without knowledge. But never will I reveal my troubles—not to call them yours.

Oedipus

[330] What are you saying? Do you know the secret and refuse to tell it? Will you betray and destroy the state?

Teiresias

I will grieve neither myself nor you. Why do you ask these things in vain? You will not learn the answers from me.

Oedipus

Will you not, basest of the base— [335] you would anger a stone—speak out? can nothing touch you? Will you never make an end?

Teiresias

You blame my anger, but do not perceive your own: no, you blame me.

Oedipus

Who would not be angry hearing such words, [340] with which you now are slighting the city?

Teiresias

The future will come of itself, though I shroud it in silence.

Oedipus

Since it must come anyway, it is right that you tell it to me.

Teiresias

I will speak no further: rage, if you wish, with the fiercest wrath your heart knows.

Oedipus

[345] In my anger I will not spare to speak all my thoughts. Know that you seem to me to have helped in plotting the deed, and to have done it, short of performing the actual murder with your own hands: if you had eyesight, I would have said that you had done even this by yourself.

Teiresias

[350] In truth? I order you to abide by you own decree, and from this day forth not to speak to these men or to me: you are the accursed defiler of this land.

Oedipus

So brazen with your blustering taunt? [355] Where do you think to escape to?

Teiresias

I have escaped. There is strength in my truth.

Oedipus

Who taught you this? Not your skill, at any rate.

Teiresias

You yourself. For you spurred me on to speak against my will.

Oedipus

What did you say? Speak again, so I may learn it better.

Teiresias

[360] Did you not understand before, or are you talking to test me?

Oedipus

I cannot say I understood fully. Tell me again.

Teiresias

I say that you are the killer of the man whose slayer you seek.

Oedipus

Now you will regret that you have said such dire words twice.

Teiresias

[365] Should I tell you more, that you might get more angry?

Oedipus

Say as much as you want: it will be said in vain.

Teiresias

I say that you have been living in unguessed shame with your closest kin, and do not see into what woe you have fallen.

Oedipus

Do you think that you will always be able to speak like this without smarting for it?

Teiresias

Yes, if indeed there is any strength in truth.

Oedipus

[370] But there is, except not for you. You do not have that strength, since you are maimed in your ears, in your wit, and in your eyes.

Teiresias

And you are a poor wretch to utter taunts that every man here will soon hurl at you.

Oedipus

Night, endless night has you in her keeping, so that you can never hurt me, [375] or any man that sees the light of the sun.

Teiresias

No, it is not your fate to fall at my hands, since Apollo, to whom this matter is a concern, is sufficient.

Oedipus

Are these Creon's devices, or your own?

Teiresias

Creon is no trouble for you: you are your own.

Oedipus

[380] O wealth, and empire, and skill surpassing skill in life's keen rivalries, how great is the envy in your keeping, if for the sake of this office which the city has entrusted to me, a gift unsought, [385] Creon the trustworthy, Creon, my old friend, has crept upon me by stealth, yearning to overthrow me, and has suborned such a scheming juggler as this, a tricky quack, who has eyes only for profit, but is blind in his art! [390]

Come, tell me, where have you proved yourself a seer? Why, when the watchful dog who wove dark song was here, did you say nothing to free the people? Yet the riddle, at least, was not for the first comer to read: there was need of a seer's help, [395] and you were discovered not to have this art, either from birds, or known from some god. But rather I, Oedipus the ignorant, stopped her, having attained the answer through my wit alone, untaught by birds. It is I whom you are trying to oust, assuming that [400] you will have great influence in Creon's court. But I think that you and the one who plotted these things will rue your zeal to purge the land: if you did not seem to be an old man, you would have learned to your cost how haughty you are.

Chorus

To our way of thinking, these words, both his and yours, Oedipus, [405] have been said in anger. We have no need of this, but rather we must seek how we shall best discharge the mandates of the god.

Teiresias

Though you are king, the right of reply must be considered the same for both: over that I have control. [410] For I do not live as your slave, but as Loxias'. I will not stand enrolled as Creon's client. And I tell you, since you have taunted my blindness, that though you have sight, you do not see what a state of misery you are in, or where you dwell, or with whom. [415] Do you know who your parents are? You have been an unwitting enemy to your own kin, both in the Underworld and on the earth above, and the double lash of your mother's and your father's curse will one day drive you from this land in dreadful haste, with darkness upon those eyes of yours which now can see. [420] What place will be harbor to your cries, what part of all Cithaeron will not ring with them soon, when you have learned the meaning of the nuptials in which, within that house, you found a fatal haven, after a voyage so fair? And you have not guessed at a throng of other ills [425] which will bring you level with your true self and with your own children. Therefore heap your scorn upon Creon and upon my message: for no man will ever be crushed more miserably than you.

Oedipus

Are these taunts to be endured from him? [430] Be gone, to your ruin; be gone this instant! Will you not turn your back and leave this house?

Teiresias

I would not have come if you had not called me.

Oedipus

I did not know you would speak foolishly, for otherwise it would have been a long time before I summoned you to my home.

Teiresias

[435] I was born like this—as you think, a fool, but in the opinion of the parents who bore you, quite sane.

Oedipus

What parents? Wait. What man is my father?

Teiresias

This day will reveal your birth and bring your ruin.

Oedipus

What riddles, what dark words you always say.

Teiresias

[440] Are you not the best at unravelling mysteries?

Oedipus

Reproach me in what you will find me to be great.

Teiresias

Yet it was just that fortune that undid you.

Oedipus

But if it saved this city I care not.

Teiresias

I will take my leave. You, boy, lead me.

Oedipus

[445] Yes, let him take you: while here, you are a hindrance, a source of trouble. When you have gone, you will vex me no more.

Teiresias

I will go when I have performed the errand for which I came, fearless of your frown: you can never destroy me. I tell you: the man whom you have been seeking this long while, [450] uttering threats and proclaiming a search into the murder of Laius, is here, ostensibly an alien sojourner, but soon to be found a native of [Thebes](#); nor will he enjoy his fortune. A blind man, though now he sees, [455] a beggar, though now rich, he will make his way to a foreign land, feeling the ground before him with his staff. And he will be discovered to be at once brother and father of the children with whom he consorts; son and husband of the woman who bore him; [460] heir to his father's bed, shedder of his father's blood. So go in and evaluate this, and if you find that I am wrong, say then that I have no wit in prophecy.

Seneca's *Oedipus Act Two*, lines 202-402

Seneca. *Oedipus*. *Seneca: Six Tragedies*, trs. Emily Wilson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Chorus

Who is this hurrying towards the palace?
Is Creon, noble and heroic, here,

Or does my sick soul take falsehood for truth?
No, it is Creon, the answer to all our prayers.

OEDIPUS. I shudder, fearful where the fates may turn,
My trembling heart is toppling with two fears;
Where happiness is doubtful, mixed with pain,
The mind feels fear although it longs to know.

CREON The answer lies under a doubtful fate.

OED. Giving uncertain help to the wretched is giving none.

CREON. The custom is for the oracle at Delphi
To hide its secrets in enigmas.

OED. Tell the puzzle!
I, Oedipus, am the expert at solving tricky riddles

CREON the god tells us to banish the killer of the king,
And to avenge the death of murdered Laius.
Only then will day run brightly through the sky,
Giving pure, fresh, healthy gusts of air.

OED. And who is the killer of the famous king?
Tell us who Phoebus named, so we may punish him.

CREON. Things horrible to hear and see – may I speak safely!
My body is besieged by numbness, blood runs cold,
I entered the holy precinct of Apollo, like a pilgrim,
And praying to the god, reverently raised my hands.
The double peak of snowy Mount Parnassus roared;
The laurel tree of Phoebus quivered, moved its leaves,
And all at once, the holy Castalian spring stood still.
Then the priestess began to shake her bristling hair:
She let Phoebus take her. As she moved to the cave,
An inhuman sound burst from her with a crash:

‘Gentle stars will come again to Thebes,
If you, the Stranger, Exile, Guest, depart,
Polluted with a royal murder. Apollo knew you as a baby
You will have short enjoyment of your wicked murder:
You will bring war with you and leave it to your sons.
You have returned – disgusting! – to your mother’s womb.

OED. I will now prepare to do, on heaven’s orders,
What ought to have been done to honour the dead king’s ashes,
To ward off treachery against the holy throne.
Kings are the ones who need to care for kings.
Nobody protects a dead man whose life commanded fear.

CREON. Our care for the dead was set aside by a greater fear.

OED. Can any fear prevent a man from duty?

CREON Yes! The Sphinx, and the threats of her terrible riddles.

OED. Well now, at heaven's command, we must make amends –
 Whichever god looks down on our kingdom and smiles:
 You, who regulate the revolutions of the sky,
 And you, O greatest glory of the unclouded sky,
 Ruling the Zodiac in your changing chariot's course,
 Whose speedy wheel rolls round the dawdling years,
 And you, his sister, always ready to meet your brother,
 Diana, wanderer of the night; and you, lord of the winds,
 Driving your dark-blue horses over the depths of the sea;
 And you who make new homes in darkness, without light;
 Come here! May the man who murdered old King Laius
 Find no quiet home, no household gods' protection;
 May he be exiled and find no sanctuary.
 May his marriage shame him and his children shock him.
 May he even kill his father by his own hand,
 And do – what could be worse? – the dreadful thing
 I ran from. There will be no pardon. I swear it,
 By this kingdom that welcomed me Guest-King;
 And by the land I left and by the household gods,
 And by you, Father Neptune, whose soft waves,
 Wash against the Isthmus of my native land;
 And you come now as witness to my words,
 Apollo, inspiration to the truthful oracle;
 So may my father live to comfortable old age,
 Ending his days by natural means on his high throne;
 And may Merope know no bed but that of Polybus;
 So, I swear, the guilty one will not escape my hands.
 But tell me, where was the awful crime committed?
 Was it in public on the battlefield? Or was he ambushed?

CREON. He was going to the leafy groves of holy Castalia.
 The road he trod was overgrown with thorns,
 Till he came to a three-fork crossroad, branching to the plain.
 One path cuts through Phocis, country loved by Bacchus,
 Where Mount Parnassus rises high, abandoning the fields
 To seek the sky, in a gentle slope up to twin peaks.
 Another path leads off to Sisyphus' double seas;
 The third, a curving road, winds round to the Olenian fields,
 Touching the wandering waters till it crosses
 The icy waters of the river Elis,
 As he approached, believing himself safe,
 A band of robbers pounced with swords, in secret.
 But right on time, here comes Tiresias,
 Roused up by Phoebus' oracle. He staggers on his slow legs,
 And Manto comes with him, leading the blind man.

OED. Holy man, the nearest human to Apollo,

Explain the oracle! Tell us what fate wants.

- TIRESIAS. Great-hearted Oedipus, you should not wonder
That my tongue hesitates to speak, wants to delay.
Much of the truth lies hidden to the blind.
But I will follow where my country calls, and god.
Let us dig out the fates; if my old blood
Were fresh and hot, I would let the god possess me.
Instead, cut open a snow-white bull on the altars,
And a heifer whose neck has never borne a yoke.
Daughter, guide your blind and lightless father,
Tell me what the prophetic rite reveals.
- MANTO A perfect victim stands at the holy altars.
- TIR. Call upon the gods with reverent voices,
Heap the altars with incense, gift of the East.
- MANTO Now I have heaped up incense on the holy hearth of the gods.
- TIR. What about the flame? Is it feasting yet?
- MANTO It suddenly flashed with light but then died down.
- TIR. Was the flame bright and shiny, did it stand
Raising itself clear and pure up tall to the sky,
Unfolding its very tip up into the air?
Or did it creep out sideways, unsure where to go,
And sink down in confusion, drowned in smoke?
- MANTO The flame kept changing, it was not just one way.
As when Iris brings the rain and twines
Multiple colours into herself: she curves right over
The arch to the sky and her colourful bow foretells the storm.
So you could hardly tell the colour of the flame:
It hovered, mixing dark blue with yellow spots,
Then turned blood-red again, and finally to black.
But look, the fire fights back, divides in two,
The embers of the holy rite are arguing and split.
Father, I shudder as I look at it! The gift
Of wine we poured there changes now to blood,
And thick smoke circles round the head of the king.
Even denser fog descends upon his face;
The light is dirty, hidden in thick cloud.
Tell us, father, what does it mean?
- TIR. What can I say? My mind is so astounded, in an uproar.
What can I say? These are mysterious horrors;
Usually the gods reveal their anger plainly.
What is it that they want to have revealed,
But also do not want to show? Why do they hide their rage?
The gods themselves are somehow feeling shame. Quick, here,

Scatter the salted meal on the cattle's necks. Do they submit to it with calm expressions?

MANTO The bull tossed his head, and shuddering,
He was terrified to face the rising dawn:
Trembling he shrank away from the rays of the sun.

TIR. Did they fall down to the earth at a single blow?

MANTO. The heifer threw herself upon the knife,
And died with just one blow. But the bull, struck twice,
Lumbered this way and that, dazed and confused,
Until he was worn out, had no resistance left.

TIR. Did the blood spurt out quickly from a narrow cut, or was it slower, gushing from deep wounds?

MANTO The heifer's blood flowed out through the pathway in her breast,
Like a river. But the bull, though badly wounded,
Was stained with little blood. It flowed perversely,
Out in a rush through his mouth and through his eyes.

TIR. Such unlucky signs should make us fear.
But tell me now the sure-fire marks of the entrails.

MANTO father, what is this? The entrails do not quiver
Just gently, as they usually do; no, my whole hand
Is shaken when I touch them. New blood jumps from the veins.
The heart is weak and sick and lies deep down,
The veins are dark. A large part of the entrails is not here,
The rotten liver oozes with black gall,
And – always a bad omen for a monarch –
Look, there are two heads, equally bulbous.
Only a delicate membrane covers both these heads,
There is no hiding-place for these dark secrets.
The bad side rises up, sturdy and strong, with seven veins; but a sideways
Path cuts through,
Stopping any of these veins from turning back.
Anatomy is altered, nothing is in its place,
Everything is wrong; on the right, the lungs
Can hold no air, for they are clogged with blood.
The left side has no heart; the stomach does not stretch
Its soft folds out over the winding bowels.
Nature is perverted. The womb does not follow the rules.
Let us dissect and see why the entrails seem so stiff.
What horror is this? A virgin heifer pregnant!
But the foetus is in the wrong place, filling its mother somewhere
It ought not to be. It moans and twitches,
Shaking its spindly body in stiff spasms.
Dark blood stains the innards of the beast.
The hollow body rises up and lowers its horns
To threaten the priests. My hands cannot hold the spleen.
You hear that rumbling sound? It is not from the cattle.

No frightened animal is lowing here.
The altar fires are lowing, the hearth is terrified.

OED. What do all these awful portents mean? Reveal it!
I am not afraid to drink the truth.
The worst disasters make people feel calm.

TIR. You will look back with envy at your present troubles.

OED. Just tell me what the gods want me to know: whose hands are tainted by the old king's murder?

TIR. Neither the birds who plunge in the depths of the sky
On their light wings, nor the entrails torn from living bellies
Can tell their name. We must try another method.
We must call up the king himself from Erebus, the land of eternal night,
To point out his own killer.
Earth must be unlocked, we must implore the pitiless power of Dis, we must
Drag out the people of infernal Styx. Who will you send
To go on this quest? As king, you must not see the ghosts.

OED. Creon, as my second-in-command, this task is yours.

TIR. While we unloose the latches of deep Hell,
Let people sing their hymns in praise of Bacchus.