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## Abandonment of Mythos for Logos in Oedipus Rex

The Greek rationalists' search for the meaning of life through rational thought instead of the traditional legends marked the first radical shift from *mythos* to *logos*. While there was no clean break with either traditional religion or belief in the supernatural, Greek thought as a whole during the 7th- through 5th-centuries increasingly trended towards a trust in *logos* and the individual as means towards the ultimate end. Within *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles reacts against the rationalists' abandonment of *mythos*. Oedipus seeks to fulfill his duty as king by using *logos* to search for the cause of the plague, yet the reactions and warnings of the characters around him serve as a caution against this complete insistence on *logos*. The element of tragedy within the story works to show that the tradition of *mythos* is in this case the wiser choice because the deities and Fates provide clear boundaries for human knowledge and behavior. Oedipus, on the other hand, shows that without a comparable regulator, *logos* will push on even to the point of self-ruin. The guidance provided by Tiresias and Jocasta uses *mythos* to demonstrate that the knowledge brought by the pursuit of *logos* is not always beneficial.

Tiresias, the blind prophet of Apollo, knows the truth about the manifestation of Oedipus' fate, yet is reluctant to tell Oedipus because he believes *mythos* has already revealed all that is necessary. Oedipus declares that in order to rid Thebes from the plague that has befallen it, he must "know it all," and relentlessly questions Tiresias in order to help him achieve that goal (1170-1171). Tiresias explains to Oedipus that "what will come will come, even if I should shroud it all in silence" (388-389). Tiresias objects to foresight as intrinsically beneficial; the simple act of obtaining knowledge is not helpful in itself. Even if Tiresias tells Oedipus everything he knows about the other man's fate, there is no guarantee that Oedipus would be satisfied or even happy. Tiresias implies the truth that knowledge does not necessarily guarantee that an individual will have any power to change anything, where Oedipus believes that with sufficient *logos*, one can avert what fate has declared. In addition, the dialogue between Tiresias and Oedipus provide a clear contrast between *mythos* and *logos* and their respective approaches to proprietary knowledge. For example, Oedipus taunts the blind prophet, saying, "You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light" (427). He believes that he is infallible because he has *logos*; however, Tiresias dismisses him, "It is not your fate to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough" (428-430). Although he recognizes that *logos* allows Oedipus some power, he maintains that *mythos* is superior because it occurs regardless of whether every detail is made known. Knowledge is only useful when it is known; therefore, those who rely completely on *logos* are continually on a quest for more of it. In revealing the truth through prophecies instead of continuous lines of questioning, *mythos* presents an inherent boundary for human knowledge which is approved by the gods and the Fates.

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Jocasta is initially skeptical of *mythos*, choosing to utilize *logos* in its place until she realizes that *logos* is the very thing that brought tragedy upon them. Jocasta details the lengths she and king Laius went through to prevent the prophesied fate from occurring, including pinning their baby's ankles together and sending a servant to abandon it in the wild (784-800). If Jocasta and king Laius had not taken steps to try to prevent the prophecy from coming true, their lives would not have played out in the same tragic way. Jocasta believes that the gods are divine, but is skeptical of prophets and prophecies because she holds that "nothing human can penetrate the future" (782); she believes that "whatever [Apollo] needs and seeks he'll bring to light himself" instead of speaking through prophets (799-800). However, after realizing that the mythic prophecies had already come about, Jocasta has a revelation and consequently tries to keep Oedipus from finding out the truth to save him pain. Her change of heart affirms that certain kinds of knowledge are painful and better left unknown (1163-1165). Nevertheless, Oedipus insists that he must find the answer he is seeking, even as Jocasta rushes out of the room to commit suicide, driven by her shame. Although Jocasta is skeptical of *mythos* for most of the play, her sudden realization of the truth brings her to recognize that sometimes it is better not to know everything.

Sophocles' choice of protagonist is a direct response to the philosophers of his day. As Oedipus tried to avoid his prophesied fate only to tragically discover the prophecy had already been fulfilled, Sophocles would have seen the rationalists' quest to understand the universe through *logos* alone as a similar walk into tragedy. Mythic limitations are put into place to save humanity from searching endlessly for knowledge that may or may not be beneficial. Not all knowledge must be known to everyone. In fact, not knowing is occasionally more admirable. Regardless of Sophocles' view of the abandonment of *mythos* and its beneficial limitations, Greek thought, and to a larger extent all of Western thought, increasingly relied on *logos* to supply its knowledge.

#### Works Cited:

Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Literature, 1984. Print.

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