

# The quest for truth in oedipus rex

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Frank Kermode writes in his book *The Genesis of Secrecy* “ We are most unwilling to accept mystery, what cannot be reduced to other and more intelligible forms. Yet that is what we find here: something irreducible, therefore perpetually to be interpreted; not secrets to be found out one by one, but Secrecy” (143). Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex* illustrates Kermode’s distinction between secrets and Secrecy by showing how the seeker of truth taints the discovery of any secret with his/her presuppositions and interpretation. Both Oedipus, the main character of the play, and the audience pursue the answers to Oedipus’ past but find a reflection of their own presumptions in place of the truth. Oedipus exhibits the natural fallacy of human reasoning when confronted with secrecy: to project one’s own conclusions and narrow-mindedness onto the answer. Through the play the audience learns that pursuing secrets one by one with the tools of human intellect leads to the frustration of Secrecy in general: there is no truth available to humans that was not in some part self-invented. Oedipus’ attempt to discover the secrets of his past blinds him to the truth and proves that humans do not have the capability to disclose any absolute answers. In the beginning of the play Oedipus learns of the murder of King Laius and vows to avenge his death, saying “ Upon the murderer I invoke this curse / . . . may he wear out his life / in misery to miserable doom!” (line 246). The irony of this passage in which Oedipus curses himself to a fate that he must suffer shows that he already has certain expectations concerning the mystery of the murder. Yet Oedipus’ reaction is sensible and natural to the reader and one can not find fault with his reasoning at this point of the play. Though it is reasonable to assume that human logic is a tool for solving

problems, Oedipus' rational thought process actually causes him to move further from the truth. In this sense our human intelligence prevents us from finding any answers that we have not tainted by our own inferences. While humans generally take each mystery as a separate problem to be solved there is in fact a more general sense of Secrecy that will always prevent us from finding truth in a pure form. Though Oedipus thinks he has discovered the truth about his past he is still frustrated and confused with the gods and the ultimate answers concerning his miserable life. Oedipus continually bemoans his fate to the gods, saying " Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable, / the most accursed, whom God too hates / above all men on earth!" (line 1344). Despite the many answers he finds to satisfy the immediate secrets surrounding him he feels further from enlightenment than before his quest for knowledge. He questions the gods and the purpose of his fate but never once considers whether he actually committed the crime. His presuppositions not only bring him further from uncovering the truth of his past but also prevent him from actually understanding his fate or the purpose of his life. Oedipus has such faith in the answers he compiles from a variety of dubious sources that he violently stabs his eyes upon discovering the story of his sins. One can partly attribute his irrational trust to the many conjectures and presumptions he makes in the evolution of the plot. The same intelligence that won Oedipus his royal position now causes his downfall and inevitably prevents him from discovering any pre-determined truth about his past. Sophocles not only demonstrates how human intellect and logic blinds Oedipus to the truth but how the same intellect used to interpret literature can prevent the reader from finding answers. Within the

story Sophocles subtly develops two plausible explanations for Oedipus' past. Small details from the play discount every witness and piece of evidence, allowing for the possibility that Oedipus was framed. For example, Teiresias the prophet accuses Oedipus of murder only after Oedipus angers him. In addition, the sole witness to the murder was unclear and could only remember that "the hands that did the murder / were many" (line 121). The play can be interpreted as a conspiracy against Oedipus or as a tragedy of Oedipus' unintentional sins, but both arguments have weak points. The reader is left to wonder why Sophocles confuses the plot with these otherwise trivial details. The interpreter will never know Sophocles' original intent despite attempts at retranslating the play or rethinking it in a new context because these attempts would only mirror the interpreter's own presumptions. Sophocles purposely allows for more than one interpretation of his work to exhibit to the audience their own natural weaknesses when confronted with a secret. In this sense the reader is in the same position as Oedipus, whose every effort to find answers leaves him with a reflection of himself. Interpretation becomes another form of disclosing secrets and is therefore perpetual as no original meaning, or Secret, exists to be found. However, in casually observing the play there seems to be no mystery or secrecy for the audience and only the characters within the story are the "outsiders" to the riddles that Sophocles has created. Because Oedipus is a common and well-known story most readers are familiar with the characters and either know the ending or can make obvious conjectures. The play has less suspense for the audience and instead contains many examples of tragic irony and double meanings because of their knowledgeable viewpoint.

Despite the central theme of secrecy in the play, Sophocles lets the audience feel like “ insiders” by giving them knowledge that Oedipus does not have. This allows for many instances of tragic irony, as when Oedipus says of the murderer in the opening scenes of the play, “ For when I drive pollution from the land / I will not serve a distant friend’s advantage, / but act in my own interest” (line 137). The seemingly well-informed audience can almost pity Oedipus, who creates a double meaning in this line by unintentionally renouncing himself. The many examples of irony allow the reader to feel like an omniscient insider to the secrets that frustrate Oedipus. But with this comfortable viewpoint the audience casually accepts Oedipus’ guilt by jumping to conclusions and disregarding the small clues that point to other possible discoveries. Because Sophocles contradicts himself and offers two different interpretations, the answers to the play’s secrets are misleading and the reader must also suffer from the mystery of the play. Though the audience enters the play with apparently more knowledge than Oedipus has, overlooking details and jumping to conclusions force audience members into Oedipus’ position of ignorance. The audience does not feel that they are along with Oedipus on his quest for answers but are instead sympathetic towards him because they have already figured out the riddle. This is the key distinction between individual secrets and all-encompassing Secrecy: though the audience feels superior in their knowledge of Oedipus’ secrets, they are truly just as disillusioned as Oedipus and just as far from holding any real truth. Even though the audience believes they are insiders with the answers to all the secrets, they unwittingly become outsiders by paralleling Oedipus’ quest for the truth and finding their own preconceived notions instead. In

searching for the truth behind individual secrets both the audience and Oedipus suffer confusion and frustration. Sophocles manipulates Oedipus by showing him his own foolishness when confronted with secrecy. The irony and double meanings in the play show the audience the faults in Oedipus' search for the truth and the impossibility for him to ever find answers to his past. However, Sophocles develops a much more subtle argument in the play to exhibit the hopelessness of humanity's desire for the truth. Because Oedipus Rex includes many easily overlooked details, the play evolves into something much more mysterious and complicated than is superficially obvious. By craftily allowing the audience to jump to conclusions about Oedipus' past, Sophocles shows us the absurdity of our demand for absolute answers. We realize only too late that we have been in Oedipus' position for the entire play and that we have mimicked the very characteristics that we pitied in Oedipus. But instead of taking the play as a lesson and leaving it with a sense of experience, we walk away with a feeling of hopeless ineptitude. For Oedipus Rex does not outline a way for humans to better solve secrets or even offer a preventable fault that we could overcome in order to disclose the full truth. Instead we realize with frustration that it is our nature to insert our own presuppositions and logic into an answer; no secret exists whose disclosure is not a mirror image of the discoverer, and in the end Secrecy is eternal and inescapable.