

# Body language: injury and identity in the odyssey and oedipus the king

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



In describing the characters of Odysseus and Oedipus, Homer and Sophocles both avoid defining these men by typical physical characteristics such as stature or distinctive facial features. Instead, these authors focus on detailing specific bodily wounds that function as embodiments of each character's identity. Parallel plotlines in *The Odyssey* and *Oedipus the King* reveal the symbolic significance of Odysseus's scar as well as that of Oedipus's swollen foot and gouged-out eyes. In both works, the infliction of these injuries is essential to the characters' fates, with the specific degree of personal involvement in the creation of these wounds functioning as a reflection of the amount of control each man respectively has over his life. Furthermore, Odysseus's scar and Oedipus's swollen foot, as the signs and proofs of their origins, allow for others to recognize them. However, the true nature and significance of these injuries, while symbolically similar, differ: for Odysseus, his scar is a key to redemption, while for Oedipus, his swollen foot and damaged eyes are inescapable markers of his cursed fate, representative of his ultimate destruction.

Throughout *The Odyssey*, Odysseus, known for his wits and cleverness, hides his identity in hopes that he will be able to get back to his home in Ithaca and enact revenge on the boorish suitors plaguing his faithful wife and son. In the course of doing so, he employs many disguises both on his own and with the divine help of Athena; spinning tales to those that he meets on his journeys, he also uses his oratorical abilities to create new personas for himself. The scar on his upper thigh, however, remains a constant throughout these physical and verbal metamorphoses as a mark of his true

identity. When he enters the palace and is washed by his old nurse, Eurykleia, it is this scar that betrays his guise as a beggar:

“ Now Odysseus was sitting close to the fire, but suddenly turned to the dark side; for presently he thought in his heart that, as she handled him, she might be aware of his scar, and all his story might come out. She came up close and washed her lord, and at once she recognized that scar, which once the boar with his white tusk had inflicted on him” (19. 389-394).

Following this stunning moment of recognition, the nurse recalls the story of Odysseus’s name and how he received the scar through a hunting party. Etymologically, Odysseus means the “ son of pain,” and appropriately his scar functions as a reminder of his origins: begot in a moment of pain, Odysseus nevertheless maintains the mark as a sign of valor and true kingliness. Furthermore, because he is aware of the implications of his scar, Odysseus is able to use it to his advantage, by reclaiming his identity as rightful king so that he can regain his throne.

Unlike Odysseus, Oedipus, who is oblivious to the true significance and nature of his wounds, begins the play blinded to the reality of his circumstances. Ironically, although his name itself means “ swollen foot,” Oedipus chooses to regard his injury simply as an insignificant and annoying reminder of “ old pain,” and thus remains ignorant of his true identity as the child of Jocasta and Laius: OEDIPUS. What ailed me when you took me in your arms? MESSENGER. In that your ankles should be witnesses. OEDIPUS. Why do you speak of that old pain? MESSENGER. I loosed you; the tendons of

your feet were pierced and fettered – OEDIPUS. My swaddling clothes brought me a rare disgrace. MESSENGER. So that from this you're called your present name (1031-1036). In this exchange between Oedipus and the messenger, Sophocles indicates that Oedipus is more concerned with maintaining his status than with realizing the truth, even in the face of the most incriminating evidence of all: his own body. Given the opportunity for cathartic recognition like that experienced by Eurykleia, Oedipus instead strays further from the reality and straight into the trap of his inescapable fate.

The climax of Oedipus the King introduces a new twist in the discussion of injuries and identities. Having realized too late that he is himself the killer that he has been looking for and the perpetrator of incest, Oedipus gouges out his eyes. Whereas his swollen foot was an injury inflicted upon his body by his parents without his own knowledge and participation, Oedipus now punishes himself in an act of autonomy: “ But the hand that struck me was none but my own. Why should I see whose vision showed me nothing sweet to see?” (1331-1332). Through blinding himself, Oedipus is given the opportunity to finally regain some control over his life and shape his fate. This stark act of self-mutilation is his last outlet of expression in the play and his damaged, bloody eyes become a symbol of his new identity as a wretched exile, a fallen king.

In the worlds of The Odyssey and Oedipus the King, humans are defined by their mortality. Bound to fragile bodies, caught in a constant tension between life and death, the physical wounds that these humans have

become perfect embodiments of their identities, constant throughout despite the interference of magical transformations and sudden fluctuations of fate.