

# Term paper on tragedy

Technology, Development



This paper is a comparison review the three tragedies we have read; “Oedipus the king by Sophocles”, “the Bacchae by Euripides” and “Thyestes by Seneca”. This paper seeks to compare the three tragedies with the main intention of assessing the major developments or changes across the three tragedies and explaining what these changes or developments imply, tying the changes to situations that could justify their occurrence, for example the change in the perception of the authors on what tragedy should be based and the extent to which the characters should be exposed to tragedy. For, we may look at the nature of tragedy and the kind of tragedy in “Oedipus the King”, compare it to the kind of tragedy in “The Bacchae” and that in “Thyestes” and the kind of punishment the tragic characters are exposed to then make a judgment about the changing tendencies in tragedy across the three writers.

Starting with “Oedipus the king”, the play starts at a time when the kingdom of Thebes is faced with a serious problem and they are crying to their king, Oedipus to help them overcome the curse that has been raised upon them. Oedipus promises to do all he can, to find what the real cause of the problem of his people is. Doing this, the king does not know that he is the cause of the people’s problems since he murdered the old king, Laius who was his father, and because of his heroic character which enabled him slay the sphinx, he rose to the throne and inherited the king’s wife, his own mother unconsciously. This is the abomination which has raised a curse upon the people of Thebes and for example, the daughters the new king has sired with his very own mother cannot get married to anybody. The truth however unravels of how the oracle had predicted at the birth of Oedipus that he

would marry the mother and was given to the maid to go and kill him in the mountains. The maiden however abandoned him in stead of killing him and he was picked by the merchant who raised him to adulthood. He then comes to meet the father who is a merchant too, and fighting him over space on the route, he kills the father to inherit his own mother. This is the kind of tragedy Oedipus is faced with in this play when he comes to realize that yes; he is the cause of the curses the people of Thebes are suffering from (Sophocles, 237-289).

Moving on to “ the Bacchae by Euripides”, the tragedy again surrounds the royal house of Cadmus which is being punished by the deity the Dionysus for refusing to honor him. Zeus who is a divine deity in this play has a mortal wife Semele who suffers the tragedy of death through thunder for having down looked Zeus his husband his deity status. She is pregnant at the time of her death but the baby is rescued by Hermes and grows in the thighs of Zeus till birth. This is the baby Dionysus, whom the women of Thebes later come to refuse is not the son of Zeus the divine deity. The women of Thebes gang up in protest of Dionysus and this is why the entire play exposes these women to tragedy (Euripides, 27-79).

Comparing these two plays which are both in the Greek setting; we see a very serious change in the manner in which tragedy is looked at by the authors. In Oedipus the King by Sophocles”, it is the rulers who are punished by the Gods for their mistakes which they however commit out of ignorance. Oedipus is exposed to tragedy for marrying the mother after killing the father out of his hot tampered character unknowingly. This what leads to the

punishment? The tragedy is directed to Oedipus though the people of Thebes are also suffering. But these people are innocent because they did not commit the crime. Their suffering therefore is what leads to the realization of the actual mistake that was committed by the king who later comes to realize that he is the cause of the suffering of his people and dies (tragedy).

Therefore in these play, Sophocles tell us that it is the rulers who are to bear tragedy for the sins they have committed. Otherwise the subjects/ ruled who also happen to suffer from evils committed by the ruling class are innocent.

In “ the Bacchae by Euripides” however, the tragedy is shifted from the ruling class to the ruled. The ruling class is given some godly status, believed to be sons of the deities and those who go against their wishes or oppose them, are exposed to tragedy. This is unlike in the play “ Oedipus” where the rulers are the ones who bear the tragedy. In this play, the rulers are blameless and it is the ruled who commit sins of disobedience that lead to their tragedy (Sala & Pio-Clementino, 45-109)

In addition, there is gender variation with regards to who should bear the tragedy. In Oedipus, it is, the murderous king who suffers tragedy is a man, however, in The Bacchae, and it is women who bear the tragedy. Innocent children and infants in “ the Bacchae” are protected from Tragedy, for example the fetus of Dionysus, rescued when the mother is stricken by thunder as a punishment from the god.

Looking at the tragedy in the play “ Thyestes”, the tragedy is between human-human and not gods-human as in “ the Bacchae”. In the play “

Thyestes", murderous sons are sent away by the angry king after they murdered their half brother Chrysippus when they desired the kingdom of Olympia to a different kingdom (Mycenae) where they alternately rise to the new kingdom being in possession of the golden lamb.

Atreus later kills all the sons of Thyestes, cooks them and serves him with their meat or food except their hands and heads (

The tragedy in this play is between human beings in lust for Kingship and not between gods and human beings. The punishment between humans is out of the lustful human nature, e. g. the exile of Atreus and Thyestes is because of their lust for kingship, and Atreus kills the sons of Thyestes because of his adultery with Aerope.

From the three, plays, there is a shift in the perception of the writers about the nature of tragedy. In Oedipus, tragedy befalls the royal families out of weaknesses and is directed towards men. The argument by the Sophocles is that men are weak and must suffer tragedy. In "the Bacchae", it is the reverse-it is women who are disobedient (weakness) and must suffer the tragedy from the gods. In Thyestes, tragedy is not from gods like in the Bacchae, but direct from human fellows, and similar with the other two plays, is out of the sinful nature of humanity.

These changes are not accidental or cannot just be viewed as mere changes but are attributed to the generational change in the perception of the nature of tragedy. Who should it befall?, for what reason?, who should be the source of the tragedy?, what gender should be more exposed to tragedy?. These

are the issues the authors are trying to address in different views in the three plays of tragedy.

### **Works cited**

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