

Athens, Oedipus and the Fifth Century in Greece

Athens in the fifth century was the most powerful city-state in Greece and most acknowledged leader in every area of cultural activity. It was a center for philosophy, literature, architecture, sculpture and painting at a level that rarely has been surpassed.

Why was there such an explosion of creativity at this time and place? Part of the answer lies in the development of a democratic constitution at the beginning of the century; the confidence gained from defeating Persian invaders and the building up of a powerful navy; the energy and initiative of the Athenian people, and the strong, gifted but controversial leadership of one man — Pericles. Among his achievements, Pericles sponsored the rebuilding of the Acropolis, the construction of massive temples to the gods Athena and Hephaestus, and the building of long walls to connect the city with the harbor. He was the patron of Pheidias, the greatest sculptor of the time, and Polygnotus, the greatest painter. In addition, he brought to Athens the most inquisitive minds of his time. Among his friends were Herodotus, the historian, and Anaxagorus, the philosopher-scientist who speculated that a substance called Mind (Nous) governed the world and that all life “could be explained by physical processes and the interactions of material substances.”¹

Athens supported the principle of free speech where diverse currents of thought could mingle and conflict. Its wealth and intellectualism attracted the Sophists (a group of thinkers led by Protagoras) who lectured about the power of reason to solve the mysteries of

existence and to challenge the authority of spiritual powers. There was a shift from mythical and symbolic thinking so prevalent in the works of Homer, Hesiod and Pindar, to more conceptual and abstract modes of thought. For example, “the gods might be regarded as psychological forces within man — or as allegorical expressions of the forces of nature.”²

Religion was deemed created by man; laws as creations of councils, not given by gods, and cities were seen as human institutions, not seats of divine power.

This new confidence in man’s power to understand and shape his world found expression in the arts. Pheidias and Polyclitus sculpted the male body in the Classical style and executed the frieze of the Parthenon, showing the citizens of Athens in a religious procession. Literary expression of this humanistic confidence is expressed in the first choral ode of Sophocles’ *Antigone* which begins “Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man.”³ Philosophers debated the deceptiveness of the senses and the concealment of reality beneath a false appearance. Historians Herodotus and Thucydides argued about the explanation of the oracles, the nature of the gods and the origin of religion.

But the old ways of thinking persisted alongside the new. Thus, the tragedies of Sophocles are a kind of dialogue between the older and newer ways of looking at the world. *Oedipus Rex*, for one, raises questions about the power of human reason against the mysterious forces of the archaic world.

Bernard Knox, in his book *Oedipus at Thebes*, writes “the character of Oedipus is the

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character of the Athenian people.⁷⁴ Both have magnificent vigor and faith in action and both engage in constant activity which provides a wealth of experience. Oedipus has great courage, as witnessed by his confrontation with the Sphinx, and Athenian courage was the admiration of all Greece.

Speed of decisionmaking and action was qualities of both the man and the city. But because of this speed and action, Oedipus, like the Athenians, was impatient with the slowness of others and the progression of events. However, swift action was tempered with careful reflection in Athens' case. As Pericles said: "We do not believe that discussion is an impediment to action."⁷⁵ But Oedipus did not reflect on the words of Tiresias, Creon and the messenger. Instead, he depended on his own intelligence and self-confidence — qualities typical of Athenians who had overcome opposition and obstacles. Oedipus' adaptability and versatility flourished in unfamiliar surroundings as did those of the Athenians. Pericles emphasized this when he said, "The individual citizen addresses himself to the most varied types of action as a self-sufficient personality with the utmost versatility...."⁷⁶

Unfortunately, all these admirable characteristics are marred by a sense of suspicion and outbursts of anger. Oedipus suspects Tiresias and Creon of conspiracy and tells them so in anger; Athenians, too, could turn on their leaders when displeased.

Therefore, Knox concludes, "The [Athenian] audience which watched *Oedipus* in the Theatre of Dionysus was watching itself."