

**Light & Darkness: a dramatic suspense  
In Oedipus Tyrannus**

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In view of first class articles on the subject of Light and Darkness imagery in Oedipus Tyrannus<sup>1</sup>, the appearance of yet another article on the subject seems to require some extensive justification. These studies reduce the image to the mere conflict between Oedipus and Teiresias without seeking it throughout the whole play. We may begin with the reasonable hypothesis that the image is functionally integrated into the drama; if we find that the evidence of the play bears this out we may conclude that this corresponds to the author's intention. In this way we will not only gain insight into Sophocles' dramatic technique, but we may hope also to derive a truer appreciation of the moral implication of the play. Hence Light and Darkness can be dealt with as the substance for the entire unitary action of Oedipus Tyrannus. Methodologically, this article seeks to apply to the image of Light and Darkness in Oedipus Tyrannus the dramatic suspense which is accomplished through the gradual revelation. I suppose that the language of the whole play is orchestrated in terms of a crescendo and diminuendo of light and darkness imagery. In fact, every noun, verb and adjective that construct the image of light and darkness in the play is significant in this respect, if we examine each word and judge it according to its occurrence in the play.

The imagery dealt with, here, occurs not so much as such, but rather those elements which Light and Darkness symbolize. Since knowledge is the state of having seen, recognition is associated with sight<sup>2</sup>, ignorance, presumably, is the state of darkness.

From the very beginning of the play, Light and Darkness imagery runs, mutually through the play up to the double recognition of both Jocasta and Oedipus. The play opens with a mysterious plague which is destroying its citizens and all the living things there. A group of suppliants, to whom the causes of the plague are obscure, communicate, through the priest to Oedipus, who formerly solved the sphinx's riddle with his intellectual power, to uncover the present obscurity<sup>3</sup>.

Oedipus, here appears as a man of vision, able to discern that which is obscure to others<sup>(4)</sup>. He is seen as the revealer of the darkness or, in other words, the causes of the pestilence.

Oedipus quest for the hidden reasons of the plague had already begun since he sent his brother-in law, Creon, to consult the oracle at Delphi. When Creon returns, Oedipus is eager for his news, which seem to be good. Oedipus eagerly addresses him even before he has a chance to speak. He welcomes the radiant looks **λαμπρός** <sup>(5)</sup> of Creon, and expects a radiant answer from the oracle: such an answer which evades the darkness: the state of ignorance. The oracle declares that the plague will come to an end when the murderer of Laius is detected and punished, and so the search begins. Of course there is, still, darkness in the long struggle to reach the light, in other words, to get knowledge.

Creon was not given, at Delphi, the whole knowledge which he went to seek. Though the oracle shed light on the causes of the plague, it overshadowed the defiler's identity. So, darkness is still there as long as the defiler is obscure. We, presumably, need not to dwell on the fact that the Oracle did not deceive Oedipus, merely it gave him the opportunity to make an error. Oedipus, resolved to take the initiative in getting the knowledge, tells Creon that he himself will bring dark things to the light **ἔγω φανῶ** <sup>(6)</sup>. Oedipus, the revealer of the darkness, having been faced here with a puzzle could not resist following a fact to its logical conclusion. Yet, a sense of tragic irony permeates the pursuit of knowing which is the powerful mode of the action. The priest's supplication to Oedipus to uncover the obscure causes of the plague is directed precisely at the man who is unwittingly the cause of the plague. Oedipus the revealer is the one who should be revealed.

The first appearance of the Chorus stands in relation with the state of darkness which, still, overwhelms the action. In the *parados*<sup>(7)</sup>, the chorus reacts to the tidings by expressing its bewilderment. However, the chorus, although thrown into some apprehension as to what may be the final outcome of this affair, is confident that the gods, who have protected Thebes before, will do so once again, showing themselves continually on the side of law and order. The chorus prays that the patron deities may bring light<sup>(8)</sup>. It is one of health: a light that puts an end to the plague or, one can say that uncover the darkness which enwraps the defiler.

Oedipus, who declared formerly to Creon that he himself will bring dark things to the light, assures for the chorus that he will continue his search successfully, if nothing that helps in the reveal is concealed. The chorus, who truthfully assures for Oedipus its complete ignorance of the defiler, can not help expressing the ambiguity of the Delphic answer<sup>(12)</sup>. So far, the darkness does not vanish. The chorus suggests a man who is capable to uncover such a darkness. It is Teiresias who could see **ὄρωντα**<sup>(13)</sup> and guide a searcher of this matter to the light<sup>(14)</sup>.

It worths noting that Oedipus' first words of welcome to Teiresias are: **ὦ Τειρεσίᾳ** who observe every thing **ὧ παντα ναιῶν Τειρεσίᾳ**<sup>(12)</sup>. Such a welcome seems to bear Oedipus' admittance of Teiresias power of knowledge, and may, besides, reflect Oedipus vehement zeal to uncover darkness. However, neither Oedipus' appeals<sup>(13)</sup>, nor his anger<sup>(14)</sup>, succeeds in convincing Teiresias to reveal the obscurity of the oracle<sup>(15)</sup>.

By this point in the play the tension begins to prevail the action of the play centered in the persons of Oedipus; the searcher of knowledge, and Teiresias who tries to keep things dark. The conflict is inflamed as soon as Oedipus, in reaction to Teiresias' concealment, assumes that he is the contriver of Laius' murder, and twits him, in a strong anger, with blindness<sup>(16)</sup>. Then, Teiresias, in reaction to Oedipus' accusation, declares that Oedipus is the criminal whom he himself seeks<sup>(17)</sup>, and, moreover, indicates, covertly, his incest<sup>(18)</sup>. Yet, Oedipus' reaction to the prophet's judgement is the denial of his power to bring things to light, since he, being blind, is the offspring of endless night **μιάς τρέφει πρὸς νύκτος**<sup>(19)</sup>. In addition to that, Oedipus is quick to accuse Teiresias and Creon of plotting against his royal person and station<sup>(20)</sup>.

More strikingly, Oedipus shows himself to be overconfident in his own abilities, especially in self-esteem for his knowledge and intelligence. Oedipus believes that he is granted with knowledge **γνώμη κυρησας**<sup>(21)</sup>, while the prophet is blind in his art **τὴν τέχνην δ' ἔφο τυφλός**. Oedipus, here, builds his judgement to Teiresias' ignorance on the fact that he himself was the only one who could solve the sphinx's riddle<sup>(22)</sup>. He has a confidence in his own intellectual powers and can not tolerate any one who question them<sup>(23)</sup>. However, Teiresias, properly, put the contrast between himself and Oedipus in ironic words: the literally blind (sees), or, knows, while the sighted is blind, or, is ignorant<sup>(24)</sup>. Yet, whenever the

truth is revealed, Oedipus' blindness, so says Teiresias sarcastically, will be actual one<sup>(31)</sup>. Teiresias' judgement seems to recall in the inner meaning of light and darkness imagery.

The occurrence of light and darkness imagery, here, has been abundantly interpreted. Light and darkness images are centered in the persons of Oedipus and Teiresias. The scene represents the clash of the images associated with each of them. In that scene, night has been set in opposition to light<sup>(32)</sup>. The imagery of the light and the darkness, the vision and blindness, is allied with the tension between the wit of Oedipus and the divine wisdom of Teiresias<sup>(33)</sup>. Eyesight and ignorance, blindness and insight- these important themes in Oedipus Tyrannus are first established firmly in the Teiresias scene<sup>(34)</sup>. The image of sightedness and blindness is clearly fundamental: the blind/seer Teiresias and the sighted Oedipus blind to the realities of the world about him constitute an opposition central to Sophocles' meaning<sup>(35)</sup>. In the Teiresias scene there is the contrast, so emphatically made, between the physical blindness of the prophet and the real blindness of the king<sup>(36)</sup>.

On the whole these views are, perhaps, indisputable, but they fall short of seeking the image throughout the whole play. This is particularly strange in the case of a play which is almost universally regarded as the most technically perfect work of a most technically proficient dramatist. Let us assume that Sophocles, steeping his imagination in the actions, and pondering its characters and their experiences as a dramatist inevitably does, embodies the imagery of light and darkness throughout the whole structure of the play. The construction of actions in the play is strained by the continual occurrence of the image, while the dramatic suspense is consistently maintained, along with the tragic irony, as the intended meaning moves on. The real function of Teiresias scene, perhaps, is to show how far from the truth Oedipus is, and to help in the process of the gradual reveal.

The gradual reveal moves on when Teiresias, who elaborates his judgement of Oedipus' ignorance, tells Oedipus, in a prophetic words, that "this day shall bring you forth and causes your destruction"**ἡ δὲ ἡμέρα φύσε**  
**σε καὶ διαφθερέῃ**<sup>(37)</sup> But Oedipus, who boasts with his knowledge, is unable to guess the meaning of Teiresias' words which seem to him obscure riddling words **αἰνιχτα κάσπη** |<sup>(38)</sup>. Teiresias is, indeed, speaking in riddles. Seers, like oracles, tend to express themselves in a rid-

ding way. But look at the man to whom this is said. He is a famous solver of riddles, a darkness revealer. The ironic contrast stands out the more dearly precisely because audience knows the truth: the old man, literally blind, sees more than the vigorous king who prides himself on his knowledge and intelligence, yet is metaphorically blind. It is clear that Oedipus, up till now, is unable to uncover the darkness easily. Sophocles, so far as I can see, does not want Oedipus to learn the truth in other way: it is essential to his conception of the action that Oedipus should find the truth out for himself.

However, before Teiresias leaves, he, explicitly, gives informations about the murderer's identity which, distinctly, apply to Oedipus<sup>(34)</sup>. Teiresias' final sentence is a defy to Oedipus. He agrees to be considered ignorant if he is to be proved wrong<sup>(35)</sup>. It worths noting that Oedipus' reaction to Teiresias' defy is just going out in silence.

Oedipus goes in silence because he can not yet make any sense of Teiresias' paradoxes. For if one can not see the solution to a riddle then it remains nonsense, and there is nothing to be said<sup>(36)</sup>. It is probable that Oedipus fails to comprehend Teiresias' words and suspects its truth because events have conspired to push him into accepting plausible but false premisses, from which only false deductions are possible. The statement which Oedipus had believed that in avoiding Corinth he was avoiding parricide and incest appears as an essential element in the make-believe world of Oedipus which was responsible of his lack of knowledge. The reveal is, still, suspended. Though the truth is revealed, it remains in the border line between light and darkness.

We should observe, too, the continuation of the conflict between light and darkness in the chorus' ode that follows the departure of both Teiresias and Oedipus<sup>(37)</sup>. The light, so the chorus says, flashed **ἐλαμψε**<sup>(38)</sup>. Yet, though the truth is revealed, it stands off neither in assent nor in denial<sup>(39)</sup>. Another evidence of the chorus' bewilderment is found in admitting, on the contrary of Oedipus, its blindness, **οὐχ ὁρώ**<sup>(40)</sup>. The truth, to the chorus, is, still, enwrapped in darkness. Sophocles, here, makes his chorus express incomprehension. That frank admission of incomprehension challenges the audience to ask itself whether it has understood the past or can predict the future of Oedipus. Whether it can or not it has surely understood more than the chorus. In such cases the chorus' ignorance is functional in relationship to

the 'audience' awareness: the less they know the more we know<sup>145</sup>. The representation of the chorus' ignorance in the terms of light and darkness imagery may be, perhaps, justified by Sophocles' preparation for a revelation of the truth in later scenes of the play.

A partial revelation steps up as Jocasta, in her desire to clear Oedipus of the murder of Laius, lets out part of the dire secret by her allusion to the "triple cross-roads"<sup>146</sup>. Then, Oedipus, anxiously, gets from Jocasta more details which happen to remind him of his encounter at that spot<sup>1</sup>. Oedipus, confusedly, is afraid lest the prophet is seeing too clearly

μη βλέπων δ μάντις τί.<sup>147</sup>

Oedipus, in a half recoil, seems, here, to admit the prophet's knowledge. Moreover, Oedipus' information about Laius' attendants, which corresponds with his encounter, gives him a second concrete intimation, after the mention of the cross-roads, of his rôle in Laius' death. Oedipus admits that this information throws out light: **τάδ' ἦδη διαφανή.**<sup>148</sup>

Although darkness seems to vanish, and truth stands out in light, Oedipus, still, suspects his rôle in Laius' death. The story of Laius' servant, who was the only one of Laius' party to escape alive, that they were attacked by several robbers, keeps the reveal off. Oedipus summons Laius' servant to make certain of his story<sup>149</sup>. The audience emotions might be hotly stirred, here, for the reason that Oedipus is not only ignorant who he is, but, he, also, is ignorant of what he is doing.

It worths noting that the chorus, in the ode that follows Oedipus' departure, acknowledges its faith in the oracle<sup>147</sup>. The two central stanzas of the ode begin with the statement: **ὑβρις φυτε-  
θεῖ τυράννον.**<sup>148</sup>. Such a statement calls for interpretation. It is interpreted that the chorus prays that Oedipus will not be guilty, for if he is he will be destroyed. Illogically, in the light of its apprehension that Teiresias may be right, but understandably in the light of its devotion to Oedipus and the fact that the evidence is not complete, the chorus hopes that somehow Oedipus and the gods may be able to continue their efforts together to save Thebes<sup>149</sup>. But Winnington-Ingram rightly claims that if there is any sense in which Oedipus is arrogant, his pride is Intellectual. He has too much pride in his keen intelligence: what he must learn- and teach- is that he has been too wrong again<sup>150</sup>. So far as I can see, the chorus, here, censures Oedipus, implicitly, for being over-confident in his knowledge.

The chorus, presumably, reacted thus after it had heard how closely the story of Oedipus corresponds to the circumstances of Laius' death. These details are enough to create for the chorus a very strong probability that Oedipus killed Laius, in which case Teiresias appears to be right after all. If this is true, it becomes necessary, then, to censure Oedipus' intellectual pride.

However, Sophocles, by a stroke of genius, keeps the reveal off in introducing the Corinthian messenger who declares the news of Oedipus' supposed father, Polybus<sup>110</sup>. Jocasta, on hearing that, exults in this apparent proof of the irrelevance of the chilling oracle. She goes on to urge her sceptical views on Oedipus<sup>111</sup>, who goes along with Jocasta<sup>112</sup>. But, the news of Polybus' death, although it eases Oedipus' mind of one half of the prophecy, in that he can no longer kill his father still leaves him in anxiety about the other half, the danger of incest with his mother<sup>113</sup>.

Another example of supreme Sophoclean artistry is seen in his handling of the Corinthian messenger, whose blithe assumption that he can allay any lingering fears in the mind of Oedipus by revealing that Polybus and Merope were not, in fact, his parents<sup>114</sup>, serve only to intensify Oedipus' ignorance. Oedipus begins, consequently, the quest for his own identity which is the dominant movement in the central part of the play, and the knowledge which Oedipus gains comes to be the end of the play.

Beside the darkness that happened to engulf the murderer of Laius, who is the cause of the plague, Oedipus, now, is confronted with another darkness that enwraps his own identity. Oedipus, who, ironically, is ignorant that both aspects of darkness are combined together, goes on to shed light on his birth<sup>115</sup>.

The tension increases as Oedipus gives no ear to Jocasta who, in a desperate attempt to prevent Oedipus from bringing the truth to light, begs him to stop asking questions<sup>116</sup>. Jocasta's attempt to restrain Oedipus from asking further questions has been abundantly interpreted. Jocasta, contrary to Oedipus, is an average person who wants to be secure and to avoid the threat, not like Oedipus to meet it<sup>117</sup>. Jocasta's desperate attempt emphasizes Oedipus' regard for the truth<sup>118</sup>. It accentuates his determination to know which is the driving power of the play<sup>119</sup>. She does not reveal the truth she just comes to understand<sup>120</sup>. Those opinions are most valuable in handling Jocasta's character. Yet, one may conjecture that the real function of Sophocles' depiction of Jocasta, here, is perhaps,

to create a complete isolation of Oedipus, and to precipitate the ultimate catastrophe. Oedipus happens to be the only one who faces darkness, for, now, the veil is torn for Jocasta. Since she is now aware of the truth, she, seeing that her effort is in vain does not wait until Laius' servant comes but rushes off into the palace to kill herself. The audience' emotions are stirred, again, for the reason that Oedipus is not only ignorant who he is, but he is also, is ignorant of what he is doing.

Now, the action unrolls against the background of the oracular prophecies of the gods, those cryptic, partial revelations of the divine knowledge which the human intellect can not accept or understand until they are fulfilled<sup>(62)</sup>. The chorus, in its illusion to Cithaeron, in the ode that follows Jocasta's departure<sup>(63)</sup>, is preparing for a very soon revelation of Oedipus' identity.

Laius' servant, whom Oedipus has sought for to reveal the murderer's identity, comes, very lately, to reveal Oedipus' identity<sup>(64)</sup>. Sophocles has, by a stroke of genius, combined various dramatic functions in one person and thus achieved an astonishingly concentrated action. Just as the Corinthian messenger is the same man who rescued the condemned child on Cithaeron, so the Theban shepherd who handed it over was the same who accompanied Laius on his way to Delphi. He witnessed the killing and fled to the country with his knowledge of the new king's secret. When he now appears by order of the king, he first refuses to speak, as Teiresias did, but again Oedipus forces him to tell the truth: he, the king, is the son of Laius who, alarmed by the prophecy that his son would kill him, had exposed his child on Cithaeron. Oedipus is an incestuous parricide. With this knowledge Oedipus is led into insight. Oedipus, here, as most critics rightly point out, serves as an example of the fragility of the human knowledge. Oedipus' now knowledge at the end of the play is a recognition of man's ignorance.

Now, the darkness vanishes, the ignorance is no longer there, and the light of the truth becomes so distinct that Oedipus, now wishes that he may not behold it for ever: **ὃ φῶς, τελευταῖόν σε προσβλέψαιμι  
πῶν,**<sup>(65)</sup>. Suddenly, Oedipus, ashamed of what he has wrought, jabs out his own eyes<sup>(67)</sup>. Oedipus' self blinding<sup>(68)</sup> has been variously interpreted. It is an act of madness<sup>(69)</sup>, it executes punishment<sup>(70)</sup>, and it accomplishes purity<sup>(71)</sup>. To other critics, Oedipus' mental blindness is paralleled in his

self-inflicted physical blindness<sup>(72)</sup>. If we do examine Oedipus' words at the end of the play, something of interest emerges. Oedipus says that Apollo was behind his blindness, but only his hands have brought it about<sup>(73)</sup>. He probably, indicates the prevail of the divine knowledge in contrast with the human knowledge. The light, in other word, the knowledge of the oracle that uncovered the darkness, has proved the ignorance, in other word, the blindness of Oedipus. Oedipus reassures the idea of his ignorance when he tells his daughters that, before now, he was blind and ignorant **οὐθ' ἄρῶν οὐθ' ἰστορῶν**<sup>(74)</sup>. So, Oedipus' blindness is organically related to the structure of knowledge as it unfolds itself for Oedipus. To effect dramatic suspense, Sophocles devotes the greater part of the play to the gradual discovery, in the terms of light and darkness imagery, and makes Oedipus himself the author of the revelation.

## Notes

- 1 - For a full bibliography, see the following:  
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- 2 - Bruno Snell, *The discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, p. 198.
- 3 - O.T., vv. 31-43.
- 4 - John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*, p. 212.
- 5 - O.T., v. 81.
- 6 - *Ibid.*, v. 132.
- 7 - *Ibid.*, vv. 151-215.
- 8 - *Ibid.*, vv. 202-215.
- 9 - *Ibid.*, vv. 276-279.
- 10- *Ibid.*, v. 284.
- 11 - *Ibid.*, vv. 285-286.
- 12- *Ibid.*, v. 300.
- 13- *Ibid.*, vv. 304-315, 326-327.
- 14- *Ibid.*, vv. 330-331, 334-336, 339-340, v. 342.
- 15- *Ibid.*, vv. 320-321, 324-325, 328-329, 332-333, 341-344.
- 16- *Ibid.*, vv. 346-348.
- 17- *Ibid.*, v. 362.
- 18- *Ibid.*, vv. 366-367.
- 19- *Ibid.*, v. 374.
- 20- *Ibid.*, v. 378, vv. 380-389.
- 21- *Ibid.*, v. 398.
- 22- *Ibid.*, v. 389.
- 23- *Ibid.*, vv. 390-397.
- 24- T.B.L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles*, p. 68.
- 25- O.T. vv. 412-413.
- 26- *Ibid.*, vv. 419-425.
- 27- E.F. Salmon, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.
- 28- Herbert Musurillo, *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

29. Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, p. 110.
30. John Gould, *On Making a sense of Greek Religion*, p. 30.
31. H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 178.
32. *O. T.*, v. 438.
33. *Ibid.*, 439.
34. *Ibid.*, vv. 449-460.
35. *Ibid.*, vv. 461-462.
36. Oliver Taplin, *Op. cit.*, p. 44.
37. *O. T.* vv. 463-511.
38. *Ibid.*, v. 473.
39. *Ibid.*, v. 484.
40. *Ibid.*, v. 530.
41. Brian Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy*, p. 14.
42. *O. T.* vv. 715-716.
43. *Ibid.*, vv. 626-745.
44. *Ibid.*, v. 747.
45. *Ibid.*, v. 754.
46. *Ibid.*, v. 765, vv. 836-847.
47. *Ibid.*, vv. 863-910.
48. *Ibid.*, v. 873.
49. A.S. Mac Devitt, *the Dramatic Integration of the chorus in Oedipus tyrannus*, *C&M*, XXX, 1969, p. 93.
50. R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *The Second Stasimon of the Oedipus' tyrannus*, *JHS*, XCII, 1971, p. 134.
51. *O. T.* vv. 941-944.
52. *Ibid.*, vv. 946-949, 952-953.
53. *Ibid.*, vv. 964-972.
54. *Ibid.*, vv. 987-998.
55. *Ibid.*, vv. 1015-1016.
56. *Ibid.*, vv. 1058-1059.
57. *Ibid.*, v. 1057.
58. Albin Lesky, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 115.
59. G.J. Weston, *Drama: An Introduction*, p. 26.
60. Oliver Taplin, *Op. cit.*, p. 45.
61. B.M.W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*, p. 12.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

- 63 O.T. vv. 1086-1009.
- 64 Ibid, vv. 1171-1181.
- 65 H.D.F. Kitto, *Op. cit.*, p. 181.  
 Bruno Snell, *Poetry and society. The Role of poetry in Ancient Greece*, p. 77.  
 B.M.W. Knox, *Op. cit.*, p. 147.  
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 Oliver Taplin, *Op. cit.*, p. 131.  
 M. Davies, *The end of Sophocles' O.T.*, *Hermes*, 110, 1982, pp. 276-277.
- 66 O.T. v. 1183.
- 67 Ibid, vv. 1270-1274.
- 68 Oedipus blindness was free for variation. In the fragmentary Oedipus of Euripides, the hero is over powered and blinded by the retainers when he has murdered Iocasta and is seeking to murder his children and himself. See:  
 Gilbert Murray, *The Literature of Ancient Greece*, p. 242.  
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- 69 G. Devereux, *The self-Blinding of Oidipous in Sophokles: Oidipous Tyrannos*, *JHS*, XcII, 1973, p. 39.
- 70 Brian Vickers, *Op. cit.*, p. 517.
- 71 T.A. Sinclair, *A History of Classical Greek Literature from Homer to Aristotle*, 2nd ed., p. 255.
- 72 John Jones, *Op. cit.*, p. 212.  
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- 73 O.T., vv. 1329-1332
- 74 Ibid, v. 1464.

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