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Exploring the Applicability of Aristotle's "Tragic Flaw" to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to explore the Aristotelian concept of "tragic flaw" in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, one of the most renowned tragedies in ancient Greece. Aristotle's famous definition of tragic characters appears in his *Poetics* in response to Plato's allegations against poetry and his claim that poets attribute human flaws and weaknesses to gods and hence represent them as imperfect and frivolous. Aristotle argues that the tragic hero's downfall is not because of unjustifiable external forces, but because of his own transgression and frailties. The present study argues that while Aristotle's "tragic flaw" has been hailed as a polemic and convincing defence against Plato's allegations concerning the mis-presentation of Greek gods and hence the immorality of poetry, in many plays, including *Oedipus Rex*, it fails to offer a firm defensive ground.

Key Words: tragedy, tragic flaw, irony, oracle, fate, the injustice of gods

1. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's *Poetics*, which he composed almost a century after Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, is universally hailed as one of the most influential texts ever penned in the field of literary criticism. Aristotle, Plato's most renowned pupil, wrote the book mainly as a response to Platonic dilemma, which radically rebutted poetry, and art in general, and which demanded only a genius of equal caliber to lift. Due to the limitation of the scope of the present paper, only one of Aristotle's defences against Plato's allegations and its applicability to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is taken into account, namely, Plato's insistence on the immoral and corruptive nature of works of art and literature (here tragedies in particular). Plato reiterated, over and over again, that tragedians, past and present, unjustifiably offered only a hideous and repulsive image of Greek gods, likened them to frail and imperfect human beings, attributed earthly qualities and human vice and depravity to them, and blamed them for all human miseries and sufferings. This deplorable attitude, in Plato's eyes, led to nothing but chaos and confusion and was a serious threat to the solidarity and welfare of his contemporary society. In the concluding section of Book 2 and the beginning of Book 3 of his *Republic*, Plato stresses that gods are all just and righteous simply because they cannot be otherwise; they neither change nor whimsically impose tragic fate on mortals. He argues that the poet

must say that what god did was right and just, and that those who suffered were the better for being punished ... it is most expressly to be denied that god, being good, can be the cause of evil to anyone – this may neither be said nor sung, in either prose or verse, by any person either young or old, if our commonwealth is to be properly governed. (in Dutton, 1984, 16)

In defence, while enumerating the qualities of the heroes of tragedies and comedies, Aristotle speaks of the notion of "tragic flaw" or "hamartia," which turns around the assumption that the roots of the tragic heroes' affliction are not to be sought in gods' injustice, but in a blatant imperfection or flaw in their own personality. A tragic hero, Aristotle asserts, is a "man who is not eminently good and just, yet his misfortune is brought about ... by some error or frailty" (in Farahbakhsh, 2006, 27). In other words, what drives the tragic hero to his affliction by the end of the play is his waywardness or his own error of judgment since he is free in committing or not committing what he is warned against by gods. Elaborating on the issue, Goldhill writes that in Aristotle's view the tragic hero should not be presented as a perfect or ideal character because a mixture of grandeur and baseness imparts a deeper effect on

spectators than absolute innocence and practically is more realistic. It is the hero's transgression that causes all the suffering (Goldhill, 1986, 133-34).

Aristotle's defence does in fact apply to many tragedies of antiquity, including Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound* since, as Klark has contended, their tragic heroes willfully and deliberately defy gods' ordinance and make themselves liable to their wrath and curse and end up as pitiable and pathetic individuals (Klark, 1965, 16). In such plays, spectators never doubt the righteousness and justice of gods as the perpetrator of a crime simply gets what s/he deserves. The present research reviews a number of pivotal concepts in Aristotle's *Poetics* such as character and characterisation, tragic flaw ("hamartia"), and pride ("hubris") and then endeavours to observe to what extent Aristotle's defence is applicable to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The hypothesis is that Aristotle's formula is not a polemic one and does not actually work in the play, most importantly because of the deterministic nature of its hero's life and the unjustifiability of his suffering, both of which effectively undermine Aristotelian tragic flaw.

2. DISCUSSION

The tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*, often dubbed as the most complete of ancient Greek tragedies (Farahbakhsh, 2009, 14), opens with an oracle concerning the life of its hero. It is needless to say that an oracle implies predestination and its unavoidable materialisation alone testifies to the fact that the tragic hero inadvertently finds himself in a vicious circle he cannot possibly escape from. Brockett explains that the plot of the tragedy was a mythical story and existed in the Greek culture years before Sophocles wrote the play. It means that Oedipus' fate was sealed even before his birth and he was nothing but a plaything in the destiny gods had already decided for him (Brockett, 1967, 73). In a similar irony, all his parents' attempts to eschew the ominous prophecy prove futile. In an article titled "Oedipus and Fate," Arbor expounds that misery was ordained both in the life of Oedipus and his parents, Laius and Jocasta. The god of the temple of Delphi had dictated that the son should slay the father and marry the mother (in Woodward, 2007, 47). In his article, "Oedipus Rex," Driver contends that the workings of fate are interwoven into the fabric of the tragedy. This is the fate which starts off the plot and takes it to its finale; Sophocles' gods dominate all aspects of life, closely monitoring its order and continuation. All elements of the tragedy are arrayed in such a way that gods' indisputable power in turning chaos into order and safeguarding harmony is underscored (in Cirrigan, 1990, 47). In the same vein, in a prefatory discussion in Sophocles' *Three Plays*, Saiidi asserts that Sophocles was manifestly a fatalist. He saw human beings as puppets in the hands of gods; all of his tragedies are tinged with this conviction (in Sophocles, 2005, x). Similarly, underlining the element of fate in *Oedipus Rex*, McLeish explains that the scar on Oedipus' ankle, which has given him his name, symbolically means that fate has marked and claimed him his own. Also, his bound feet in his infancy, when he was abandoned in a desert, foreshadow his helplessness after the revelation of Apollo's oracle on Laius (in Kerényi, 1980, 14).

Upon hearing the horrifying oracle, and in order not to slay Polybus, whom he thought was his biological father, Oedipus flees from Corinth at once, not knowing, ironically, that fate was pushing him exactly to the same spot that connected the fates of the son and the father. Later in the play, Oedipus tells Jocasta that "I let the stars show me the way" (Sophocles, 1972, 32). That is how half of the prophecy – the double sins of regicide and patricide, both unspeakable in myths and archetypes – is materialised at the cursed crossroad. After "anagnorisis" (discovering truth), Oedipus does not only experience self-realisation; he also discovers that all along he was simply a plaything in a trap fate had set for him and comes to perceive, with a heavy heart, the deterministic nature of his existence. In his article, "The Tragic Hero in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*," Gray discusses that on the one hand the spectators already know that the oracle is final and irreversible, and on the other, they cannot help feeling that Oedipus' punishment is blatantly unjustified. The most important piece of evidence which refutes the Aristotelian notion of "the tragic hero" is Oedipus' aversion from sin. He neither challenges nor accepts the oracle; he simply frantically tries to avoid it (in Edmunds, 96). This implies that he violated the all-important taboo of the sanctity of the blood (killing the father and marrying the mother) in total ignorance and in sheer disgust (this is emphatically captured, among other notable works, in the movie version of the play by Pasolini produced in 1967). Needless to say, both ignorance and abhorrence in transgression go against Aristotelian "tragic flaw."

In his book titled *The Tragic Drama of the Greeks*, Haigh claims that the carefully arranged chains of events that come to pass in Oedipus' life all take him one step closer to his catastrophe and whatever he does ultimately makes him sink even lower in his wretchedness. Even those who sincerely want to save him, only add to his misery (1996, 190). In his article, "The Painful Lives of Greek Heroes," Barnes argues that in many of the ancient Greek tragedies, one notices an opposition between the will of the hero and the will of gods. This ill-matched conflict invariably ends in tragedy and the annihilation of the hero. The tragic quality of the ancient Greek plays denotes that man's struggle in defining or changing his fate is always doomed to failure (in Woodward, 2007, 125). Pindar, the celebrated ancient Greek sonneteer, has this to say on the matter: "What is each and every creature? And what is it not? Man is nothing but the dream of a shadow" (in Campbell, 2001, 204).

Surprisingly, Oedipus' life is replete with choices and decisions: he decides to believe the oracle of Apollo's temple and escape from Corinth; he decides to kill Laius (whom he did not know was his real father) at the crossroad; he decides to risk his life and face the Sphinx; he decides to marry Jocasta (whom he did not know was his own mother) as the reward for killing the Sphinx and saving the city of Thebes (his homeland); he decides, ironically, to punish Laius' murderer; he decides to ignore the warnings of his advisers; he decides to discover his identity; he decides to blind himself; and he decides to leave his beloved Thebes on self-exile rather than commit suicide. Nevertheless, it seems that all the while and in all these decisions he was simply acting out the role ordained for him by his bizarre destiny. Drekvo has commented that ascribing Oedipus' misfortune to his tragic flaw is not congruous with the notion of destiny in Greek mythology. If his destiny dictates that he must murder his father and marry his mother, does it really matter whether or not he has a tragic flaw? (in Bulfinch, 2003, 182). In yet another irony, by cracking the Sphinx's riddle, Oedipus virtually cracks the riddle of his own life: the creature, mighty at the beginning and pathetic in the end, is he himself. These are Oedipus' first words upon his first appearance on the stage: "Here I am ... You all know me ... The whole world knows me. I am Oedipus" (Sophocles, 1971, 2). But at the end of the play, his parting words, addressed to Creon, are: "May Thebes ... never be condemned to suffer the burden of my presence as long as I am alive" (42).

In his influential book titled *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Fry thus challenges Aristotle's "hamartia": "Aristotle's hamartia or "flaw," therefore, is not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness: it may be simply a matter of being a strong character in an exposed position, like Cordelia" (1973, 32). He goes on saying that "Aristotle's hamartia, then, is a condition of being, not a cause of becoming" (172). This entails that Aristotle's "tragic flaw" is not a cause in itself, but an effect, and that is why it does not necessarily trigger an action or a transformation. In his classification of characters like Cordelia (in *King Lear*), Heteron Prinne (in *The Scarlet Letter*), Billy Budd (in *Billy Budd*), and Tess (in *Tess of D'Urbervilles*), he uses the term "tragic irony" instead of "tragic flaw" and calls these characters "pharmakos" or "scapegoats," on which he observes:

The pharmakos is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. (35)

In his analysis of Aristotelian "hamartia" in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Hegel, too, expresses doubt over the plausibility of Aristotle's rhetoric. In many of his works, including *Aesthetics*, *Phenomenology of the Mind*, and *The Philosophy of Right*, and in many dialectic discussions on ethics, personal rights, and moral life, he frequently refers to, and praises, Greek tragedies, *Antigone* in particular. For instance, in his *Aesthetics*, he describes *Antigone* as "one of the best and most sublime works of all times" (1975, 420). In Hegel's view, nothing justifies Antigone's reverse of fortune (in Aristotle's terminology, "peripeteia") at the end of the tragedy: she is not blinded by pride ("hubris") and she never provokes gods' anger. It appears that her only sin is fulfilling her sisterly duty toward the body of her brother (ironically, to please gods). On the other hand, Creon, too, is beset by a similar dilemma as he has to choose between his duty toward the state and his duties toward gods. Hegel replaced Aristotle's "tragic flaw" – which he found deficient – with what he called "moral conflict." This conflict, that he regards as the backbone of the modern tragedy, is a pull and push between two opposite forces that are equally valid and mandatory. In Hegelian interpretation, as expounded in his *Phenomenology of the Mind*, the tragic conflict is not between vice and virtue, but between two duties which are both virtuous and obligatory, like the duty toward the family and the society, or the duty toward man's laws and divine laws (Hegel, 1977, 280).

Confirming Hegel's view in his article, "Moral Consciousness in the Spirit of Tragedy: Hegel's Reading of *Antigone*," Khatab Rhonda observes that the central conflict in *Antigone* is between two rational aspects of the moral life. In such a conflict, both Antigone and Creon revolt against what was to be devotedly revered and both willingly pay the ultimate price (in Story and Allan, 135). In Hegel's opinion, as both sides of the conflict defend an ethical or human value, what precipitates their downfall is not their "tragic flaw," but their moral obligation or their sense of responsibility. Here we observe an obvious difference between Oedipus and Antigone: Oedipus is a doomed character in his predetermined life, his only choice being futilely escaping from his inescapable end, while Antigone decisively and resolutely takes the course of her life in her own hands. In other words, while Oedipus desperately runs away from his fate, Antigone deliberately runs into it. This explains why Hegel found Antigone's personality and her conscious and intentional resistance so appealing as he believed that moral conflict should necessarily stem from free will and deliberation.

Another notable scholar who has approached Oedipus' "tragic flaw" with suspicion is the contemporary critic Jonathan Culler. Criticising Freud's insistence on Oedipus' oedipal complex and his desire to kill his father, Culler has claimed that

The only witness has publically told a story that is incompatible with Oedipus' guilt. This possibility of innocence is never eliminated, for when the witness arrives, Oedipus is interested in his relation to Laius and asks only about his birth, not about the murderer ... I am not, of course, suggesting that Oedipus was really innocent and has been falsely accused for 2400 years. I am interested in the significance of the fact that the possibility of innocence is never dispelled ... once we are well into the play, we know that Oedipus must be found guilty, other wise the play will not work at all ... The convergence of discursive forces makes it essential that he become the murderer of Laius, and he yields to this force of meaning ... It is obvious that much of play's power depends on the narratological assumption that Oedipus's guilt or innocence has already been determined by a past event that has not yet been revealed or reported. (2002, 173-75)

In line with Culler's outlook, it can be added that if Oedipus did suffer from the Freudian desire of killing the father, he would murder Polybus, whom he thought, for so many years, was his real father and would not flee from Corinth at once to avoid committing the unthinkable sin.

One of the most fundamental elements to be taken into account in approaching ancient Greek plays, and in a wider scope in understating ancient Greek culture and civilisation, is gods' central role in all aspects of ancient Greek people (Prinsent, 2008, 87). Commenting on the significance of gods in ancient Greece, Dowden argues that the Greeks believed that gods' dominance over natural and social phenomena was absolute and therefore they worshipped them to find favour in their eyes. They held that gods had unchallengeable and undeniable authority in all ways of life including social life, agriculture, civil tasks, family relations, and war. They thought that if they properly worshiped and respected gods and ingratiated themselves with them, they would guide and protect them. This implies that for the Greeks, worshiping and paying homage to gods was not simply a part of life; it was life itself (1992, 54). Even in their judgments on natural phenomena, cultural differences, and traditions, the Greeks did not hesitate to resort to their myths. As Heath has contended, the Greeks took it for granted that the Trojan War in Homer's *The Iliad* was actually factual, not fictional. For them, Homer meant "education" and his poems meant "the book of instruction" (1997, 37). In their book titled *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, Story and Allen highlight Greek gods' critical role and argue that in ancient Greece, gods were puppeteers who assumed and exercised absolute authority. For the Greeks, therefore, free-will was only a fiction (2005, 108).

Kebric asserts that like other Greeks, Sophocles, too, believed that man's fate was decided by gods. As observable in the life-story of king Oedipus, gods know everything about everyone's future simply because it is already determined by them (1997, 170). That is why one of the most recurrent motifs in Sophocles' tragedies, and virtually in all ancient Greek tragedies, is the relation between man and gods. Oedipus knows, only too well, that he has been treated unjustly by gods and he repeatedly expresses his frustration: "Oh Zeus! Zeus! What will you do to me next?" (1972, 21), "This was Apollo, my friends, Apollo who brought all this misery upon me" (39), or "Gods hate me" (43). Apollo's name and symbols and places associated with him (Delphi, prophecy, Tiresias, light, truth, and blindness) keep recurring throughout the play. In ancient Greece, Delphi, Apollo's temple, was one of the most important temples for communication with gods and seeking divine guidance. Situated on the mountain of Parnassus near Corinth, it was held to be the centre of the earth (Guirand, 2002, 94). Needless to say, the temple of Delphi reappears time and time again in *Oedipus Rex* and plays a significant role in all of the major events of the tragedy: the prophecy concerning the murder of Laius at the hands of his son, Oedipus' doubt over his identity, Laius' helplessness in saving the city from the monstrous Sphinx, and Oedipus' efforts in repelling the plague.

Like Delphi and Apollo, the word "destiny" recurs over and over again in the play; some of the examples are: "Jocasta ... I shall tell you everything. Who else should hear my destiny?" (1972, 22), "I am the son of destiny" (32), "How can I assume that man's destiny is favourable after having learned about yours?" (36), "a slight twist in destiny, and no one can consider himself more wretched than you" (Ibid.), "what disgusting destiny? What horrible destiny! Cursed destiny! Cursed destiny! O cursed destiny, what dark abyss you have flung me into?" (39), "Destiny has decided that I must die a painful death in foreign lands" (42), and "Do not call any mortal happy as long as he is alive and still trapped in his ominous destiny" (44).

In *Oedipus Rex*, the motif of killing/deposing the father, too, is deeply rooted in Greek mythology. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, one of the earliest texts about the genealogy of Greek gods and creation, we read that Cronus, the son of Gaea (meaning earth) and Uranus (meaning sky), who was their youngest and most vicious child, castrates his father and replaces him as the sovereign god. His fate was no better than his father's; as he feared that one his children would do the same to him, he devoured them immediately after they were born. This eventually frustrates Rhea, his wife, who after giving birth to Zeus, wraps a piece of rock in a cloth and gives it to Cronus to eat. Later, as Cronus had predicted, Zeus defeats him in a battle and dethrones him. To avoid losing his throne to a son, Zeus swallows his first wife, Metis, once he learns that she is pregnant. The child is Athena, the goddess of the arts, wisdom, and war, who years later springs, full-grown and armoured, from his father's forehead. Nevertheless, unlike

his father and grandfather, Zeus was never toppled by his offspring as he was meant to be the last sovereign god in Greek mythology.

In the other two plays of *The Oedipus Trilogy*, namely *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, destiny and oracles are similarly significant. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, for instance, gods make three prophecies about Oedipus' future. First, it is prophesied that the land in which Oedipus is buried, will be sacred for ever. Later, it is predicted that when a war breaks out, the country wherein Oedipus is buried will be victorious. And finally, it is foretold that Oedipus' sons, Polynices and Eteocles, will be both killed in a war. All of these prophecies are materialised and as always the will of gods prevails. In *Antigone*, as said, the central and tragic conflict is between duties toward family and gods on the one hand and duties toward the king and social laws on the other (in Creon's case, it is between duties toward gods and duties toward the state). Antigone, Oedipus' daughter and Creon's niece and would-be daughter in law, feels obliged to bury the body of her brother, Polynices. Creon, who had replaced Oedipus as king, had rightly announced Polynices a traitor, and as required by traditional laws, had forbidden the burial. Antigone infuriates the king by resisting his edict and is consequently sentenced to life imprisonment. Tiresias, the prophet of the temple of Apollo, warns Creon against gods' wrath as they had demanded that the body of the dead was to be buried and treated respectfully, especially if the deceased person was a close relative. Remembering Oedipus' anger with Tiresias and its outcome, Creon decides to bury the body and emancipate Antigone. To his horrors, he realises that Antigone, like Jocasta, her mother, had hanged herself, and his son, Haemon who was to marry Antigone, had committed suicide. He returns to his castle, only to discover that Eurydice, his wife, had killed herself, too. All this was because he had temporarily defied gods' will, even though he was only doing what he was supposed to do as a king. It seems, therefore, that both Antigone and Creon suffer for no good reason as it is not really clear what their "tragic flaw" is.

In *Oedipus Trilogy*, another person who seems to suffer unjustifiably is Jocasta whose destiny is effectively no better than Oedipus', Laius', Creon's, and her children's, even though throughout *Oedipus Rex*, she always speaks and acts as a kind and caring wife: "I will do anything to make you happy, Oedipus" (23). Nevertheless, she was doomed to lose his first-born son (Oedipus) and then her husband (Laius) and later to marry her son and finally to kill herself out of shame and despair.

Similarly, the life of Tiresias is tightly tangled in oracles and prophecies. In Ovid's *Metamorphosis* we read that having undergone two sex changes, he was asked by Zeus and his wife, Hera, to say which sex experienced more pleasure in love. Displeased with his reply, Hera in anger blinded him, but Zeus granted him the gift of prophecy (1964, 214). In *Oedipus Rex*, he is an important, venerable, and authoritative character; everyone knows that he is a Delphi prophet and is protected by Apollo and Zeus. Yet, it appears that like Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, he sees himself merely as a puppet in the hands of gods and has come to the conclusion that happiness is to be sought only in total submission to gods and to destiny. It is worth noting that there are quite a few similarities between Oedipus and Tiresias: sexual relation plays a key role in their lives, Apollo is a major god in their destinies, both are punished by one of the gods but are subsequently forgiven, both are blind (or blinded) and are later enlightened, and both are consecrated at old age.

So it seems that all of the major characters in *Oedipus Trilogy* are doomed to suffer inexplicably and feel ensnared in an adverse fate. Sophocles has clearly given gods pivotal and unchallengeable roles in the plays and has paid them due respect, but it can be claimed that because of the absence of a convincing "tragic flaw" in his major characters, he was not concerned as much with the justice of gods' providence. Probably, like Oedipus (in *Oedipus at Colonus*) and Tiresias, he did not comprehend why man should suffer and felt that happiness is feasible only through contentment and endurance.

3. CONCLUSION

Aristotle's defence against Plato's scathing censure on poets for attributing base and human characteristics to gods and unfairly blaming them for man's sufferings works only when the tragic hero exhibits an overt "tragic flaw," so that it becomes apparent that the liability is no one but tragic hero himself. It is posited that Oedipus' "tragic flaw" is his "hubris" (pride), manifested in the way he treats his father and, on a smaller scale, Tiresias, but in view of the absolute authority of gods and the unavoidability of their oracles, innocence or guilt or arrogance or humility are, in effect, irrelevant. The play proceeds in such a way that it becomes obvious that Oedipus should, sooner or later, murder his father, simply because gods had decreed it. Naturally, any other alternative would undermine the supremacy of gods and would be interpreted only as blasphemy. In addition, Oedipus committed regicide, patricide, and incest in ignorance and compulsion rather than in deliberation, which is the defining element of Aristotelian "tragic flaw."

From what has been said so far, it follows that Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero is not a polemic and inclusive one and that the notion of "tragic flaw" is inapplicable to many ancient Greek tragedies, including *Oedipus Rex*. Also, his postulation is incompatible with a large number of tragedies written in subsequent centuries like Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and especially with modern tragedies like Ibsen's, Chekhov's, O'Neill's, Pinter's, or Miller's. From the 19th century onward, Aristotle's "tragic flaw" – which in Classical and Neoclassical periods was regarded as an integral element in the plot of a didactic and "well-made" play – gradually lost ground to growing philosophical pessimism, Naturalistic attitudes, fatalism, nihilism, and the Hegelian conception of "moral conflict." If a tragic hero (like Oedipus or the hero of modern tragedies) is overwhelmed and crushed by deterministic social, existential, or naturalistic forces over which he has no control, ascribing his downfall to his "tragic flaw" does not seem quite compelling, and that is why Aristotle's postulation in rebutting Plato's allegations is untenable and "flawed."

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