Avoidance Of Prophecy In Oedipus Rex Essay, Research Paper

Oedipus Rex illustrates the Greek concept that trying to circumvent prophets? predictions is futile. The play includes three main prophecies: the one made to Laius concerning his death by the hands of his son, a similar one directed to Oedipus, and one made by Tiresias foretelling Oedipus? discovery of the murderer?s identity. Both recipients of these oracles attempt to avoid their destinies, but both wind up following the paths which the Fates have prescribed.

Laius had received a prophesy which declares ?that doom would strike him at the hands of [his] son….? Jocasta, in an attempt to ease Oedipus? worries, endeavors to defame prophesy in general by describing Laius? apparent circumvention of the augury. When Laius? son wasn?t yet three days old, the king had the infant?s ankles fastened together, and then gave the boy to a henchman to be flung onto ?a barren, trackless mountain?; Jocasta believes her son dead. Laius had believed that by killing his only son, he would be able to avoid the oracle?s prediction. However, the shepherd entrusted with the terrible task of infanticide pitied the baby and gave him to another shepherd, who, in turn, donated the child to the King and Queen of Corinth. The boy, Oedipus, was raised as the son of King Polybus and Queen Merope, and still believes himself to be their issue even as Jocasta relates the ironic story of his own previous ?death.? Oedipus, of course, finds out that it was indeed his own, true father, Laius, that he has killed at the crossroads at Phocis. Laius? attempt at foiling fate didn?t work; Oedipus killed him because of a slight insult. Because Laius felt to shameful to kill the infant himself, he took a risk in hoping that his loyal shepherd would murder the child for him. That risk allowed Oedipus to live and, therefore, to kill his own father without knowing his true identity. Had Laius not attempted to have his newborn

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killed, the boy still would have caused his father?s death somehow, because the oracles are never wrong, and most Greeks realize there?s no way to escape fate.

Oedipus also tries to avoid his fate, which he had received from Apollo?s oracle at Delphi. While Oedipus lived as Prince of Corinth, a drunken courtier shouted out that the prince was ?not his father?s son.? Oedipus, doubt gnawing at his mind, traveled to Delphi to discover whose son he truly was. Apollo, however, did not answer his questions, but rather showed the youth ?a future great with pain, terror, disaster….? The oracle foretold that Oedipus would kill his father and couple with his own mother. Oedipus sought to escape the prophecy by fleeing Corinth, since he still believed that Polybus and Merope were his parents. However, during his flight, he killed his true father, Laius, in an act of rage, thus quickly fulfilling half of the prophecy. After saving Thebes from the menace of the Sphinx, Oedipus married the Queen of Thebes, Jocasta. Oedipus still believes that his parents are living in Corinth, unaffected and invulnerable to any of his actions. However, by marrying Jocasta, his real mother, he has fulfilled the other half of the oracle?s prediction. Oedipus spends much of the play believing that he is still in danger of somehow killing his father. When a messenger comes from Corinth to give Oedipus the news that King Polybus has died, the King of Thebes at first thinks that the oracle?s prophecy meant that his father would die of longing for his son. However, Oedipus now believes himself free of the more frightening part of his supposed destiny. He even deems the oracle?s words to be ?nothing, worthless.? Upon further consideration, however, Oedipus raises his fears of the incestuous part of the prophecy. Jocasta seeks to console him by stating that ?chance rules all our lives.? It is the messenger from Corinth, however, that confirms Oedipus? deepest doubts by telling the King that

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he isn?t Merope?s biological son. Oedipus? attempt at avoiding the oracle?s prophecy actually fulfills the prediction. Oedipus might as well have accepted his fate, because there was no way that he could have circumvented it.

The prophet Tiresias? prediction concerning Oedipus? discovery of the murder’s identity and the Theban King?s subsequent reactions is also unavoidable. After Oedipus continues to press the reluctant prophet, at times threatening him for the murderer?s identity, Tiresias declares that Oedipus is his own ruin, his own disgrace. The prophet of Apollo continues, predicting both Oedipus? flight from Thebes and his blindness. Tiresias predicts that ?no man will ever be rooted from the earth as brutally? as Oedipus. The furious King of Thebes mocks the prophet, calling his prophecies nothing but ?riddles, murk, and darkness.? Oedipus simply discounts Tiresias? foretelling, but he does, of course, fulfill them. After the he learns the truth about his parents and his tragic past, Oedipus runs through his palace in anguish. At first he seeks a sword with which to kill himself, but he sees Jocasta?s body ?hanging by the neck,? he rips off her brooches and repeatedly stabs his own eyes. Oedipus is not considering Tiresias? prophecy, but is rather acting through a haze of anguish, shame, and guilt. Oedipus easily convinces Creon to banish him, thus completing the rest of Tiresias? prediction; the former king is now blind and in exile. Oedipus discounts Tiresias? prophecies, but, predictably enough, ends up fulfilling them himself.

Ancient Greeks watching a performance of Oedipus Rex would realize that the characters? attempts to circumvent their destinies as related by oracles were futile. Both Laius and Oedipus

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seek to avoid fate, but instead act in ways which only prove the prophets correct. The irony generated by the characters seeking to avoid their destinies, however, adds to the play?s tragic suspense and conclusion.

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