

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ECHOES OF GREEK TRAGEDY IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE: THE CASE OF OEDIPUS

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*That I say I am a poet [...] knowing my words
to be the acquainted prophecy of all men.*
—Gregory Corso, *Bomba*

In approaching this issue,¹ it will be helpful to use two analytically distinct methods, to wit, the diachronic, which allows us to speculate about how the myth reached the hands of Lydgate (Guerin 2005, 183–191); and the synchronic, to clarify the similarities and differences between the two authors. Thus, approaching the subject diachronically, the first pages of this paper will attempt to delineate the main milestones in the long tradition of the myth of Oedipus, beginning from the time of Ancient Rome; and, afterwards, a synchronic analysis will examine various motifs as they have survived, disappeared or been transformed in the medieval poem. The final part will explore the possible reasons for these changes.

Diachronic Outlines

It is well known that the Middle Ages entailed an almost complete forgetting of numerous literary works, as is the case of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. This was certainly due to a lack of interest in, and hence a lack of knowledge of, the Greek language (Mortimer 2005, 158). However, even as Western Europe neglected famous Greek works, the myths survived in their Latin versions.

Although it is sometimes supposed that the myth was transmitted through the well-preserved tragedies of Seneca, the story of Oedipus has also reached us through a host of badly preserved works, which

significantly complicates the search for a pristine source (Mortimer 2005, 158–161).

Among the researchers dedicated to the obscure and misleading issue of the medieval reception of the myth of Sophocles, Lowell Edmunds offers the safest outline of events. In his opinion, which remains the authority in the absence of new findings, there exist three possible routes, of which the first is perhaps of most interest for this paper. This route involves, directly or indirectly, the Latin poem *Thebaid*, by Statius (Edmunds 1976, 140). The second route combines a good number of traditional and ecclesiastical tales that took the structure and the main motifs of the *Tyrannus* in order to recreate biblical characters, such as Judas Iscariot or various saints (Edmunds 1976, 149–154; 2006, 74–78; Bettini-Guidorizzi 2008, 185; Frazer 1995, 33–34). Finally, the last possibility is based on a text that was well known during the Middle Ages, the *Planctus* of Oedipus, preserved in several manuscripts (Edmunds 1976, 148–149; 2006, 72–74).

As has been stated, the first route is the most fruitful one for explaining the Greek myth's presence in Medieval English literature, even though it is also complex. The twelve books of Statius' *Thebaid*, written in dactylic hexameters, deal with the Theban cycle, specifically with the confrontation of Eteocles and Polynices; Oedipus's role in it is brief, being a mere summary of the events leading up to his cursing of his own children. The plot, however, would be known in medieval Europe, as Edmunds correctly asserts, through an intermediary text, Lactantius Placidus's commentary to *Thebaid* I, 61, now lost.

Indeed, several details, such as the origin of King Polybus and that Lactantius mentions Phocis and not Corinth, also appear in subsequent works that include the Oedipus legend: *Roman de Thèbes* (1–518) and *Mytographus Vaticanus* 2.230 (Oedipus) (Constans 1888, 338–344), which reinforce Edmunds' hypothesis (Elliott-Elder 1947, 190–207). Furthermore, by comparing the two, Edmunds was also able to establish that the latter preceded the former in time (Edmunds 1976: 142–145).

To conclude, the surviving texts tell us with some certainty that the Oedipus story resided at the heart of European folklore, which Boccaccio echoed in his works *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*, *De mulieribus claris*, and our focus of interest, *De casibus virum illustrium* (Bettini-Guidorizzi 2008, 185). Regarding this step in the transmission of the Oedipus myth, the academic consensus is that Boccaccio's main sources were, on the one hand, the aforementioned Lactantius Placidus's commentary and, on the other, his own reading of Seneca's *Oedipus* (Edmunds 2006, 71).

Through Boccaccio, the classic tradition and with it the Oedipus story spreads rapidly across Europe (Graesse 1858, *s.v.* Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Ouvrages latins*), first, as may be expected, in Italy, and subsequently in France, where Laurent de Premierfait made the first translation into French of the Latin original in 1400, and added a second version in 1409 (Hernández 2002, 8–9). It is the success of these translations into a contemporary language that made many Greek myths accessible to readers in the last decades of the Middle Ages and at the dawn of the Renaissance (Graesse 1858, *s.v.* Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Traductions*; Hernández 2002, 9).

The case of the British Isles, however, shows some different features. As María Hernández has pointed out, the Latin works of Boccaccio did not exert much influence there, except in narrow English intellectual circles, and his works in Italian were even less influential, due to the low number of readers capable of reading them (Hernández 2002, 9–10). Curiously, only three manuscript copies of *De casibus virorum illustrium* have been found in England.

Still, it is in this context that John Lydgate undertakes the task of translating Boccaccio's text into English, albeit not from the Latin original but from the French prose of Premierfait's second version, entitled *Des Cas des nobles hommes et femmes* (*Des Cas*) (Mortimer 2005, 41). The resulting text, known as *Fall of Princes* (*Fall*) and completed in the 1430s, is well-preserved in a number of editions, five of them illustrated (Hernández 2002, 10). In its 36,365 lines, Lydgate makes accessible to a widespread number of Anglophone readers the varied panoply of Greek myths, introducing the story of the Labdacids in lines 3,158–3,843 (from Oedipus's arrival in Thebes to the death of his children) on which we will now focus (Edmunds 1976, 71).

Oedipus in its Context

Let me now return to the origin of the Oedipus myth in the hands of Sophocles and to its main themes. It is well known that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was performed for the first time in Athens, at a still unknown date around 429–425 BC (Esposito 2013, *s.v.* “Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus”).

In spite of our doubts about the date, some details regarding the performance are known. It should be emphasized that the *Tyrannus* was deemed worthy of only the second prize in the Dionysia, defeated on this occasion by a nephew of Aeschylus, Philocles, poet and author of around one hundred tragedies only fragmentarily preserved. We also know that

the play we are dealing with, originally entitled *Oidipous*, was one of a tetralogy of which the other three tragedies, possibly unconnected, are lost (Esposito 2013, s.v. “Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus”; Sommerstein 2010, 13–14).

The plot centres on the fall of the tragic hero Oedipus, who, through a search for his true origins, will eventually end up recognizing himself as the murderer of Laius and, consequently, being exiled from his own kingdom (Esposito 2013, s.v. “Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus”; Ruipérez 2006, 23–28).

The prologue (1–150) of the tragedy begins enigmatically, by seating a group of supplicants at the stairs of Apollo. One of them, a priest of Zeus, opens the scene at the request of Oedipus, who asks for help in putting an end to the plague that has been devastating Thebes. The winner against the Sphinx, however, seems incapable of finding a rational response to such a disaster, and for that reason he informs them that he has already sent Creon to consult the oracle of Delphi. With almost no delay, Creon enters the stage and relates Apollo’s answer, as follows: to make the plague disappear from the city, the killer of Laius must be killed or exiled.

Immediately afterwards, the chorus enters the stage (151–215), offering lyrical praise to the Olympic gods for protecting the polluted city.

The first episode (216–462) tells of Oedipus’ address to the Theban assembly, by which he, on the one hand, urges the citizens to help him to find Laius’s murderer and, on the other, instates severe punishment for those who do not help him, even cursing anyone who might refuse. Later, the blind prophet Tiresias opens a charged *agon* with the king (Ruipérez 2006, 87–88), who, misunderstanding Tiresias’s veiled insinuations for why it would be better not to look for the murderer, accuses the prophet of treason and even of trying to usurp the crown in a conspiracy with Creon—a confrontation between an empiric *sophia* and a prophetic one (Guerin 2005, 188; Jung 1966, 217; Lawrence 2013, 140; Buxton 2013, 176–177).

The chorus intervenes once again in the first stasimon (463–512), with a lyrical passage which imagines how Apollo and Erinyes come to Thebes to hunt down the murderer, whose foot should be quick at night.

The dramatic action progresses through the long second episode (513–862), divided into two parts—two successive audiences—as follows: first, with Creon, whom Oedipus accuses of conspiring to kill him and steal the throne; secondly, with Jocasta, who tries to calm Oedipus down by arguing the fallibility of divine oracles, using the death of Laius as an example: he was not killed by his son, as an oracle had predicted, but was

instead assassinated by five attackers at a crossroads on the way to Phocis (Lawrence 2013, 136–138).

This last detail only alarms Oedipus all the more, as he remembers that, right after leaving Corinth, he had killed a group of people at a crossroads. To resolve the contradiction, Oedipus and Jocasta send for witnesses.

In view of Jocasta's assertions regarding the fallibility of oracles, the chorus intones the second stasimon (863–910), reasoning sceptically that, if gods can fail, then visits to oracles, religious rituals, and even their dances may be meaningless.

The third episode (911–1085), mirroring the opening of the play, opens with Jocasta's prayer in front of the statue of Apollo, whom she begs not to let her husband's fears come true. She receives an answer to her prayers in the form of a messenger from Corinth, who confirms that the supposed father of Oedipus, Polybus, has died by chance, *tyche*, and not at the hands of his alleged son, Oedipus. This news reassures the royal couple of Thebes, but the good signs quickly disappear when it is revealed that Oedipus is not the biological son of Polybus, but was saved by chance—again, *tyche*—by a shepherd from Mount Kithairon and given to the kings of Corinth. Oedipus's maimed feet confirm this version. Jocasta puts two and two together and advises her son-husband to stop his inquiries. However, Oedipus takes Jocasta's reluctance to mean only that he may be descended from slaves, and feels compelled to continue searching for the truth and trying to locate the shepherd of Mount Kithairon.

The third stasimon (1086–1109) demonstrates how the chorus, despite participating actively in the play, is always a step behind the spectators and even behind the other characters. Thus, after receiving the news, the chorus sings the praises of Oedipus, calling him “a child of Fortune”, as they infer that, through his link to Mount Kithairon, their king may be the son of Pan, Hermes, or Dionysus, all rural divinities.

The final discovery comes at the fourth episode (1110–1185), when, after an intense interrogation, the shepherd confirms that Oedipus is the murderer of his biological father, Laïus, and also the son of his wife, Jocasta. Overwhelmed, the protagonist exits the stage, leaving us to ponder if he will commit suicide or kill his wife now that she knows the truth (Lawrence 2013, 147).

The exodus (1223–1530) relates what happened off stage, with the appearance of a messenger who announces that Jocasta has committed suicide and Oedipus has blinded himself with his wife-mother's brooch. This information is immediately confirmed by the final appearance of Oedipus, wearing a different mask, which no doubt is intended to

symbolize his blindness. In a long and intense speech, Oedipus reviews the chief events of his life and admits the supremacy of the Gods. The definitive solution to this tragic situation cannot be suicide, but exile with only the help of his daughter Antigone as his guide.

Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*

Several decisions in the English monk's version move the account away from the *Tyrannus*. The first one is not to recreate the story in a dramatic form, but in a narrative style through the use of the third person—although, as we will see below, he does not hesitate to break the narrative tension in order to offer his own opinions. However, like Sophocles and unlike Premierfait's *Des Cas*, Lydgate decides to write his entire work in verse. Finally, his third decision, which is crucial in my view, is not to follow blindly the French version with a word-by-word translation, but to use his own literary skill and knowledge to create a relatively “new” work, whose verses continually refer to his sources, such as Boccaccio (“Bocchas”), Seneca and Statius. It is in this context that his extensive quotations from Josephus' *De antiquitatibus* and *De Bello Judaico*, as well as from Ovid, Vergilius' *Aeneid*, and Petrarch, should be analysed (Mortimer 2005, 41–42).

Lydgate thus provides a good example of how a mediaeval work can recreate a Greek myth in a new way, seeing as the essential characteristics of Oedipus's story fit in with the main intention of *Fall of princes* as well as of Boccaccio's version. We agree with Edmunds that the Oedipus myth has a place in the monk's poem:

What the Theban episode as a whole provides is (...) a lesson for princes and princesses. It is that kingdoms divided by internecine struggle cannot endure. Also, rulers should cherish their subjects. The events of Oedipus' life also show fortune's vicissitudes (3277–97) and remind, through the riddle of the Sphinx, that death awaits all men (3424–65). In this way, royalty learns that it is only human (Edmunds 2006, 72).

Let us now focus on Lydgate's organization of sources in recreating the fall of King Oedipus. To begin with, the author departs from the structure established by Sophocles, no doubt with the intention of offering a temporally logical account of what happened in the Labdacids' palace; in this, he follows his closest predecessors. As a result, the intrigue that imbues the Greek original is lacking in the English version, but Lydgate, like Boccaccio, articulates his account linearly, through the best witness of

the king's fall, Jocasta, as follows: "Off hir vnhappis he doolfulli doth write, / Ymagynyng how he dede hir see / To hym appeere in gret aduersite".

The first verses ponder the Theban queen's suffering and relate the events preceding Oedipus's birth, to wit, her marriage with Laius (3158–3188). Lydgate then moves to the oracular destiny announced by Apollo: Laius must die by his own son's hands, which provokes Laius's decision to kill Oedipus immediately following his birth (3189–3214). Here again, the interest of the author is focussed on the feelings of Jocasta, who is impelled to accept her husband's order (3215–3227). Indeed, her reaction is described as follows: "The mooder, allas, fill almost in a rage, / Seyng hir child, so inli fair off face, / Shal thus be ded, and dede no trespace."

In spite of this, Laius, "Withoute mercy, respit or delay", gives orders for his son to be killed (3228–3234). Lydgate details all consecutive steps, not only because these will be the key to the argument of the *Fall*, but also because they will become the definitive cause of Oedipus' *anagnórisis*, as follows: "Took first a knyff, & dede his besi peyne / Thoruhout his feet to make holis tweyne. / Took a smal rod off a yong oseer, / Perced the feet, allas, it was pite! / Bond hym faste, and bi good leiseer / The yonge child he heng vpon a tre".

Just as in *Tyrannous*, Laius's attempt fails (3235–3249), as a foreign shepherd who is walking around finds the baby and, moved by his "routhe & pite", decides to take him down and bring him to his house, where he cures his wounds and gives him the name Oedipus (3250–3269). Some years later, when the child has fully recovered, the shepherd presents him to the kings of Corinth, who adopt him (3270–3276) because "she was bareyn off nature, / She and the kyng off oon affeccioun".

Here, Lydgate breaks for the first time from the third person and intervenes in the first: "Let men considre in ther discrecioun / Sodeyn chaung off euery maner thyng", to offer his opinion on the issue, as well as a moralistic summary of the causes behind the event (3277–3297). In Lydgate's view, everything that Oedipus suffers is caused by the capricious imperium of Fortune—"thoruh Fortune, ay double in hir werkyng"—whose counterpart and guarantee of the child's salvation is God: "God that can in myscheeff magnefie / And reconforte folk disconsolate". Lydgate will later return to this question.

After this intervention, the English poet continues with his account of Oedipus's misfortunes by describing how, already in his adulthood, the latter experiences growing doubts regarding his origins (3398–3317) and therefore travels to Apollo's temple in Cirra to seek answers (3318–3324). The divine response, beyond all doubt, exceeds Oedipus's expectations, as

it not only uncovers his origin, but also predicts that he will go to Phocis, kill his father, and marry his wife in ignorance (3325–3332): “Eek lik his fate the answeere was the same: / He sholde slen his owne fader deere, / And afftir that to Thebes drawe hym neere, / Wedde his mooder, off verray ignoraunce”. Ironically, despite Apollo’s revelation, Oedipus goes to Phocis, where a battle takes place in which the protagonist fights on the side opposing the party of Laius, whom Oedipus unwittingly kills (3333–3348). In addition, “eonknowe he cam onto the toun / Off myhti Thebes, where for his hih renoun”, where he is received with honours (3348–3353) due to having defeated the Sphinx. Lydgate, following a hysteron-proteron structure, tells this:

First, Lydgate details the events preceding the Sphinx’s appearance, namely, how it was sent anonymously, through magical spells, in order to bring the death to all at Phocis (3354–3357).

Secondly, the poet explains how the Sphinx kills its prey by asking a question which, if answered incorrectly, results in the death of the answerer (3358–3369).

Thirdly, Lydgate poses the question (see above) (3370–3390), after another interruption in the first person: “I will reherse it heer in my wrytyng / Compendiousli, that men may it reede”.

He returns again to point (2) (3391–3395), that is, to a description of how the Sphinx kills its victims.

The author then describes Oedipus as “in his herte with gret auisement”, and “ful prouyded that no woord escape, / At good leiser with hool mynde & memory” (3396–3406).

Finally, through a long monologue in direct speech, Lydgate makes Oedipus give the right answer to the Sphinx (3407–3430).

Following this, the author once again feels it necessary to give his view of the events, by highlighting their purported moral lessons (3435–3465). He begins with a gnomic assumption, “Al cam from erthe, and [al] to erthe shall”, and proceeds to introduce the relationship between the haughtiness of powerful and victorious people and the influence of Fortune. His argument starts with the assertion that “Who clymbeth hiest, his fal is lowest doun”. Furthermore, whoever does not heed the fact that humanity is “Vndir daunger off Fortune lik to fall”² (as is the biblical case of Solomon (3443)) and exhibits arrogant behaviour—“ay in pouert to sende hym pacience, / Sobre with his plente, in scarsete noon offence”—will suffer a fall, as he was not grateful to God—“Thanke God off all, and euer be glad off hert”. Lydgate closes his intervention, structured in *ringkomposition*, by reflecting on how death eventually subdues everyone, whether rich or poor.

The author now gives a brief overview of the main events of Oedipus' life (3466–3476), before going over the consequences of Oedipus's correct answer to the Sphinx. Lydgate observes that this was an ambiguous victory, since the hero had acted intelligently “Mor bi wisdam than armure maad off steel”.

As for the reasons for Oedipus's marriage with his mother-wife (3477–3500), Lydgate first refers the reader to the writings of Statius, but then proposes his own hypothesis. In his opinion, the primary cause has to do with divinity: “With this mariage the goddis were ful wrothe”; the second cause is astrological influence: “Off sum fals froward constellacioun, / Causid bi Saturne, or Mars the froward sterre”; and, finally, Lydgate explains that maybe the heavens were against Oedipus, “That sum aspect cam from heuene doun, Infortunat, froward and ful off rage, / Which ageyn kynde deynd this mariage”. All these hypotheses are, in a certain sense, directed allegedly towards excusing Oedipus's actions.

In spite of the misfortune, Lydgate writes, Oedipus brought a period of contentment to the city of Thebes and happiness to his mother-wife, with whom he had four children (3501–3516).

Indeed, it is the happiness enjoyed by the Labdacids prior to their shocking discovery that leads Lydgate to observe that our fortune is liable to change unexpectedly at any moment (3517–3544). In his view, Fortune³ and pride are partly to blame for changes in the circumstances of princes, although on this occasion he also reflects on ignorance: “Wher fals[e] wenyng in hertis is conceyued / Thoruh ignoraunce, which fele folk hath deceyued”; and on envy, in the following terms: “She [Fortune] can eclipse it with sum cloudy skie / Off vnwar sorwe, onli off envie”.

As a result of the unavoidable change in Oedipus' Fortune, Thebes is infected by a virulent plague (3545–3565), to which the wise hero cannot find a solution. After philosophers and the highest dignitaries offer no answers, there appears Tiresias, who not only explains the causes, but also states the only solution: Oedipus, who had acted impurely, must abandon Thebes (3566–3606).

The population of Thebes at first doubt the seer's words, but Jocasta understands everything due to the scars on Oedipus's feet (3607–3620). Sorrow spreads through the palace and beyond, as mother and son curse the hour Oedipus was born, until the latter gouges out his own eyes (3621–3634).

In the final verses, Lydgate recounts at some length the suffering of Oedipus (3634–3647), adding, as a conclusion to his life, lines in which the king curses his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, saying they will kill each

other in a confrontation as a punishment for stealing the Thebes crown from their father (3648–3654).

A Comparative Approach

Literary Issues

Tzvetan Todorov argued that every analysis of genre should begin with a description of its structures, given that a text's structural units in themselves already reveal any marks of Greek tragedy on a poem (1977, 43).

Let us therefore focus on the structural unities that survive in the poem of the English monk. At first glance, it is clear that Lydgate follows the main stages of the Oedipus myth. Still, notable differences emerge as Lydgate inserts information that deviates, for one reason or another, from the Greek original. For one, Lydgate stresses the good intentions of the shepherd for saving and rearing the infant, an aspect completely absent in the Greek tragedy.

It is also curious that the oracle reveals to Oedipus a multitude of details regarding his imminent fall, including its location, in Phocis and in the nearby city of Thebes. Logically, one would not expect Oedipus to proceed in the direction of these places, but in Lydgate's version, he does. To resolve the tension between the oracle and the logical demands of the story, the English poet seems forced to describe Oedipus as ignorant not only of his origin, but also of the fact that he kills his own father in Phocis and then enters Thebes.

Thirdly, there are some changes that appear to be due to differences in the cultural sensibilities of the two authors, such as the location of Laius's death at a crossroads. Sophocles, undoubtedly, located the event at a crossroads because of their reputation as marginal and enchanted places, where demons and ghosts swarm, as has already been mentioned. Lydgate, however, following his nearest predecessors, Premierfait and Boccaccio, attempts to confer a sense of proximity to his readers' own time, by locating Laius's death in the heat of battle.

Likewise, it is notable that the main line of the Greek tragedy, namely, the search for Laius's murderer, structured in the original through a sequence of Oedipus's encounters *in crescendo*—not only in the number of verses (150–250–350), but also conceptually—is lacking in the linear account of the *Fall*.

It is worth seeing how Sophocles creates this *in crescendo*, beginning with the encounters with Tiresias and Creon, the latter not showing strong opposition to the protagonist, due to his superior status as king of Thebes. The dramatist then modifies the apparent direction of the plot by the appearance of Jocasta, who, instead of reconciling Oedipus and her brother, raises doubt by mentioning the crossroads where Laius was murdered. From this point onward, the target of the search is no longer someone outside the family, but someone inside the palace. In other words, the tragedy is transformed from civil to domestic, from present to past, from public to private, from the city to the house, in such a way that what was supposed to be a movement towards clarity blows up instead in a revelation of family secrets (Esposito 2013, *s.v.* “Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus”; Benardete 1966, 107). This entire process, with all its different implications, is reduced to just under fifty verses (3566–3612) in the English version, and thereby most of the structural play is either absent or briefly summarized.

Conceptual Regards

Those deviations, consequently, are present on the conceptual as well as on the literary level. Crucially for the Greek drama, Sophocles suggests, through Oedipus’ search, observations on the human quest for knowledge, raising questions of epistemology, anthropology and theology, almost all in relation to the limits of human beings (Esposito 2013, *s.v.* “Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus”). Indeed, in the Sophoclean verses, Oedipus, in his own detective story, tries to find the murderer of Laius by using rational intelligence—*téchne* (Peláez 2006, 173–175; Moddelmog 1993, 82–83)—trying to find proofs that would allow him to solve the puzzle of his own life without the help of the gods, except when he feels stuck in an *aporía* (Lawrence 2013, 140–145). Jocasta, in her own way, also discredits the gods and, maybe because she fears the result, trusts only in chance (*tyche*) (Peláez 2006, 177–178; Muñoz Gallarte 2013); finally, the chorus and Tiresias take, through their interventions in the plot, the role of blind believers in the gods and in their inscrutable wisdom—*theos* and *sophía* (Peláez 2006, 176). In this epistemological dilemma, the last option will win over the others, though not without some doubt inspired by the drama. The gods are infallible and their predictions, although unfair, must come true.

Lydgate, in turn, allows us to surmise his conception of human development through personal interventions, with which he tries to offer

an answer to the riddle of Oedipus's fall. In this respect, even if the *Fall* is not a philosophical treatise, it nonetheless also touches on issues in epistemology, anthropology and theology.

In particular, Lydgate assumes that, during human life, the individual is subdued by two essential powers, as is clear in the case of Oedipus: Fortune and the pagan gods, whose signs are observable in oracles and in astrological phenomena. Both powers act in the stories of the *Fall* capriciously and even invidiously, using their superiority to accomplish certain principles, some inspired by the New Testament, as in Luke 18.14: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted", and others seemingly rooted in Greek ethics.

At a closer reading of the mentions to pagan divinities and God, one discerns a clear tendency to explain that every bad thing that happens to Oedipus by the influence of chance and the pagan gods, while those moments when the protagonist achieves salvation—as in the example of his exposure—Lydgate attributes exclusively to God's intervention. It would appear that Lydgate takes pains to relieve Oedipus of all guilt.

However, as convincingly argued by Mortimer, to see this only as an exploration of the conflict between human free will and divine determinism is to oversimplify the issue. Lydgate's Oedipus does commit several grave errors: for one, he is arrogant, even if only covertly; secondly, he is ignorant; and, thirdly, he gives a mistaken response to the Sphinx, not foreseeing the consequences of this act.

These three ideas seem to be strongly rooted in the *Tyrannus*, despite the temporal and contextual distance. To begin with, they are related to Delphic concepts with long traditions. *Gnóthi seautón*, "know thyself", urges the individual to recognize himself as only human and to admit the boundaries that his nature imposes. The human being should also accept that only gods are happy absolutely and eternally, while humans have to contend with equal shares of happiness and sorrow. If this balance is disrupted, the human being is in breach of a second Delphic teaching, *medén ágan*, "nothing in excess". This eventually produces, as in the case of our protagonist, a process by the name of *páthei máthos*, "wisdom through suffering", which allows us to probe into the various elements of the development of both Oedipuses (Guerin 2005, 190):

Hamartía, "a failure", a mistake which may be made consciously or unconsciously but which, in either case, moves the protagonist a step closer to disaster. In the *Tyrannous*, it is Oedipus' murder of Laius (Ahl 1991, 264), whereas Lydgate seems to afford greater importance to Oedipus correctly answering the Sphinx.

Kóros, “satiety”. Believing that he has avoided the first oracle, the protagonist of both works defeats the Sphinx and receives as his prize the right of marriage to Jocasta and the crown of Thebes (Lawrence 2013, 138). The result is a state of satiety, the highest form of happiness, but an unstable one, as Lydgate explicitly states.

Hybris, “arrogance”. The Sophoclean Oedipus goes through this phase in two different ways (Errandonea 1959, 19): by disbelieving the divine oracles, thinking he has managed to avoid them, and by thinking that he could arrive at the truth with his own human reasoning. Lydgate’s Oedipus, on the other hand, is more passive, apparently guilty only of ignorance as he is moved along by his destiny.

Áte, “blindness”. Oedipus turns a blind eye to the warnings of both Tiresias and Jocasta. He believes instead that there is a covert threat of rebellion orchestrated by the prophet, by Creon, and even by his own wife, and he demonstrates an absence of self-awareness. Lydgate, however, condenses all this into a mere fifteen verses, and his Oedipus seems to be blinder to where he is.

Némeis, “retribution”. Following the chaos in which both Oedipuses find themselves, the gods must restore the *status quo* and demonstrate their infallibility: the oracles will eventually prove true, and Oedipus will be forced to admit the limits of his human nature.

Anagnórisis, “recognition”. In the end, the Greek Oedipus, as well as his “English” counterpart, must recognise that he is the murderer of Laïus, that he married his own mother, and, of course, that the divine oracles cannot be avoided (Lawrence 2013, 153).

To sum up, both tales aim to offer a crucial moral lesson, which goes as follows: human beings should live in accordance with *sophrosyne*, “prudence”, in order to avoid committing a “failure”, *hamartia*, which could eventually cause their fall (Errandonea 1959, 16). This ethical view is indispensable to understanding Greek works, as well as most of the works inspired by these.

Conclusions

Arguing in terms of the concept of free will, it is, in my view, impossible to argue that Oedipus is consciously guilty and deserves the disproportionate consequences that his destiny has planned for him (Sommerstein 2010, 221). The Oedipus of both versions is unlike characters such as Ajax or Odysseus, who are described as stubborn and vile (López Férez 1988, 337–338), but also extremely intelligent and cunning. In the case of the Sophoclean Oedipus, we are faced with an ignorant and impulsive hero, who wishes to discover by deductive

reasoning that which is only available to the divine; he will end up unearthing his past and falling as a result (Lawrence 2013, 147; Buxton 2013, 144). Oedipus appears to act autonomously as long as he is able to do so, due to the perverse context in which he finds himself (Buxton 2013, 140), even if, in his own words, Apollo pushed him towards his fall: “It was Apollo, Apollo, my friends, who accomplished these cruel, cruel sufferings of mine!”

As for the protagonist of the *Fall*, his fault resides almost exclusively in his ignorance and, consequently, in his lack of caution, yet his demise is not due to his search for the truth, but to his achievement of the highest state of satisfaction from which Fortune, following natural laws, will make him fall.

Therefore, in Lydgate’s poem, despite the varied panoply of Greek concepts, the free will of the individual seems as if “suspended when chance intrudes into human affairs to determine the course of events” (Mortimer 2005, 178). It follows that, in the monk’s view, God is the first and unique cause of every human action. Nonetheless, he distinguishes necessary actions—those produced directly by superior beings—from contingent ones—those in which the individual is able to choose between alternatives without bringing about a change in the divine plan.

This conception of an “unchained free will” is characteristic of the Middle Ages, when the topic was hotly debated and Oedipus no doubt served as one of its brightest illustrations. Lydgate has a good knowledge of the Greek myth, almost certainly not only from the French prose of Premierfait, but also through his other reading, which allowed him to create a relatively new text, closer to Sophocles’ tragedy structurally than conceptually.

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Note

¹ This article has been written thanks to a stay in the Hardt Foundation of Geneva (Switzerland).

