

Oedipus, Creature of a Day: Personal Identities in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*

The intellectual history of personal identity tends to overlook the role of Attic tragedy; a recent history of personal identity (Martin & Barresi, 2006) barely mentions pre-Platonic authors. Yet, a variety of plays and authors reveal a lively conversation centered on personal identity. My definition of personal identity follows that of Owens (479), in which one's "social classification...into a category of one" relies on "self-descriptions" and "self-ideas": broadly speaking, how an individual understands herself. At the concept's core are a set of interlocking questions: 'Who am I?' And more broadly, what criteria define an individual? How can identity persist through time, and what would constitute a loss of identity? (Olson, 2016; Gill, 2009). I will examine Sophocles' *OT* in light of these questions. Much scholarship has focused on the *character* of Oedipus (flaws, reasons for punishment) to the exclusion of personal identity (Dawe, 2006; Reinhardt, 1979). Yet, I argue that identity is clearly central. For while Oedipus solves the mystery of Laius' murder, he is all the while answering the question "Who is Oedipus?" (Vernant, 1988; cf. Reinhardt 1979, Beer 2012).

I trace changes in Oedipus' self-conception throughout *OT*, which serve to demonstrate the mutability of personal identity within the play. Vivid, physical terms describe identity's construction and destruction. Thus, I frame these changes by borrowing a term from Oedipus himself: *πλαστός*—fabricated—the taunt of a drunken dinner guest (774-785). Each successive self-conception is *πλαστός*, fabricated by the physical spaces and the people surrounding Oedipus.

Secondly, I discuss the contact between these 'fabrications' of identity on the one hand, and on the other, long-standing notions of human susceptibility to the forces of time and change. Oedipus, told "This day will make you and destroy you" (438), joins a tradition of *ephemeroi*,

creatures of a day (Fränkel). As far back as the *Iliad*, humans have been understood in part as those whose fortunes are changeable in a day or an instant of time, as I have argued elsewhere. But for Oedipus, it is not only that fortunes reverse in a single day. Instead, we see that Oedipus is never who he believes himself to be; throughout his life, as a child and at Thebes, he is molded by his surroundings into something that eludes self-understanding. These patterns of mutability—with Oedipus as the paradigm—are interpreted and re-presented in the final choral ode. The relationship between time and identity expressed there is informed by two aspects of the figure of Oedipus: his lifetime of fabricated identities, and his swift downfall on a single day. This changeability of identities contributes to a typically human relationship with time that makes us ‘nothing while we live’ (1187f.). It is this connection between identity and human mutability that, on my reading, forms one of the play’s central concerns.

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