

Nosos [νόσος]:
Plague, Disorder, Disease, and Sophocles'
Oedipus Tyrannus

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Abstract

The statement that the plague at Thebes depicted in *Oedipus Tyrannus* alludes to the plague at Athens is highly speculative, since the date of this play is uncertain. Admittedly, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, like most classical Greek tragedies, grafts the fifth-century scenario unto its heroic background; however, the plague scene in this play does not necessarily refer to any specific event. Based on the observation that the entire intellectual, cultural, and social situation of the fifth century B.C. may well be reflected in the tragedy, this paper attempts to explore the multiple senses of Sophocles' inventive portrayal of the plague, of the quest for the cause of disease and human suffering, and of the conflicting attitudes towards the religious medical treatment. In this light, the term anachronism revealed in *Oedipus Tyrannus* may integrate the following concepts: to impose the past onto the present, to reverse the order of time, to conduct a retrospective investigation, and to re-map a chronological etiological trajectory.

Keywords: plague, disease, anachronism, Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Introduction

The opening scene in *Oedipus Tyrannus*,¹ the plague rampant all over the city of Thebes, is generally seen as a Sophoclean invention,² owing to its apparently distinctive features differing from those in Homeric epics and in the Oedipus cycles.³ As Sophocles instills new ingredients into his work, the Homeric heroic atmosphere is somehow disrupted; in short, the elements of the fifth-century Athens⁴ slip unto the setting and heroic Theban milieu. *Oedipus Tyrannus* hinges not merely upon mythical material or moral criterion but also upon a substantial contemporary reference. Yet to what extent the plague depicted in *Oedipus Tyrannus* has to do with the plague of Athens that took place in 430 B.C. remains rather indefinite. But even though it is apparent that Sophocles' description contains certain non-traditional attributes, the connection between the dramatic plague of Thebes and the historical plague of Athens⁵ seems to be decidedly theoretic, since

1 The citations and the enumeration of lines from *Oedipus Tyrannus* hereinafter abbreviated as *OT*, are based on *Sophocles (The Loeb Classical Library)*.

2 Concerning the inventiveness of the plague in Sophocles' plays, see Griffith, 133-47.

3 Concerning the treatment of the Oedipus legends, see Edmunds 1985: 6-17.

4 The contemporary reference, the fifth century B.C., is termed as classical period or the fifth century B.C. The historical background or the story background falls sometime around the earlier legendary period pertaining to the Cadmus family. The place and time indicators given by Hugh Lloyd-Jones are "in front of the palace at Thebes" and "some two generations before the Trojan War" (Sophocles 1994a: 325). Since, it is estimated that Trojan War occurred about 400 years before Homer's time, presumably around 750 to 700 B.C. (Martin 44), the story time of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, some two generations before the Trojan War, could be about 1200 B.C., that is, roughly 800 years before Sophocles' contemporary age. Admittedly, Greek tragedies do reflect their current eventful geopolitical situations; and hence they tend to synthesize the past and the present, the old and the new, and the mythic and the contemporary into a coordinating plot.

5 Here the actual plague or the historical plague means the devastating epidemic that hit Athens during the second year of the Peloponnesian War (430 B.C.). And later the plague returned twice more, in 429 B.C. and in the winter of 427-426 B.C. The very phenomenon of contagion, according to *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, "described by Thucydides in his account of the great plague at Athens in 432 B.C. and hinted at in the first choral ode of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, was not examined in detail by the very doctors whom Thucydides tells us were the first to suffer" (*OCD* 83).

numerous divergences between the actual plague in history and the simulated plague in the tragedy are unsolved and the date of the debut of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is uncertain. *Oedipus Tyrannus* does not necessarily impart Sophocles' first-hand experience of the real epidemic; instead, it suggests a perceptible clue to track how the ideas of disease, plague, or epidemic were conceived of during the fifth century B.C..

The purpose of this paper is to determine the significance of the inventive portrayal of the plague in terms of certain changing concepts such as chronology, anachronism, and disease in Sophocles' contemporary days. First of all, the confirmation of this historical allusion requires the matching of the date of the actual event to that of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In other words, before trying to corroborate the belief that the plague of Thebes in Sophocles' tragedy mirrors the plague of Athens, the date of the presentation of this play must be sometime after the outbreak of the plague in Athens, i.e., after the summer of 430 B.C. Regrettably, the possibility that *Oedipus Tyrannus* might take place earlier than the actual Athenian plague cannot be completely eliminated. Although some scholars have used the plague of Thebes in the tragedy as tentative circumstantial evidence to approximate the date of the play, the assumption of its referring to the actual plague is yet unproved. In any case, to say that the plague in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* intimates the plague of Athens is not an iota than a valuable speculation. What is more, although the word plague appears frequently in English translations, its original Greek can mean disease, destruction, or plight. *Oedipus Tyrannus* aims more to question how a disease takes place than to answer if the plague scenario refers to any particular event.

Bernard Knox, contending that *Oedipus Tyrannus* like most Greek tragedies definitively reflects certain aspects of Sophocles' contemporary background, argues that the problem in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is about the geographic inconsistency rather than the historical divergence, or, a "metatopism" rather than an "anachronism" (1988: 62-63).⁶ Knox held the viewpoint that it is inadequate to regard the recurrent

⁶ Anachronism, in Knox's argument as well as in research papers in general, may refer to anything that involves incongruity in the aspect of time. One of the most apparent anachronistic elements which can be found in *Oedipus Tyrannus* lies at the very *polis* environment or the somehow relatively democratic ambiance for the play's background. The model of metatopism according to Knox consists of the replacement of Athens with

fifth-century Athenian scenes within the supposed heroic story-background of *Oedipus Tyrannus* as instances of anachronism, since the contemporary reference for most Greek tragedies is quite commonplace. However, Knox did not give a better account of the problematic anachronism in this case. The third section of this paper will, via tracing down the implications of the word anachronism, cast light on the correlation between time and disease. Basically, the affiliation of the epic times and the classical period does not amount to a cancellation of anachronism. Instead, the incorporation of these differing periods squarely conveys their respective eras and accordingly varying states of knowledge. With the paucity of chronological concepts, most ancient Greeks must have found it hard to put the sequences of events into the proper order of time and to perceive the temporal incompatibility in the dramatic performance. Tragedies, since with their setting in the mythical past, do not merely exemplify any everyday experience in a specific historical stage. Paradoxically, the juxtaposition of the contemporary outlook and the past framework hardly forms an instance of anachronism in Greek tragedies, but it is really anachronistic that *Oedipus Tyrannus* resonates a strong sense of investigating the murder case and boosts the desire to re-establish the exact order of the story. Besides, the belated retribution for murder or for incest comes to be another anachronistic ingredient in Sophocles' play. It should be noted that anachronism in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not an artistic failure, but a subtle ploy consisting of a retrospective investigation and a re-mapping of etiological trajectory.

The connection between the plague of Thebes in the play and the plague of Athens during the Peloponnesian War does exist, but not merely in the manner as Knox describes. Throughout the play, the case of the plague serves as an exemplary of the large-scale contemporary reference, that is, an extensive angle to the fifth-century intellectual background on which some ideas about diseases are fleshed out. In this light, the reasons why Sophocles so often registered heroic suffering in terms of physical diseases should convey much more than what is claimed in Penelope Biggs' thesis that "Sophoclean description of diseases is fully

Thebes. As the prefix "meta-" connotes multiple meanings such as change, after, behind, among, with, and so on, metatopism involves much more than a simplified idea of substituting one place with another. The current paper will focus on the problematic anachronism, which, in light of its Greek etymology—the prefix *ana*, "back," combined with the root *chronos*, "time," suggests the backward movement in the temporal axis rather than a mere fallacy in the chronological relation.

subordinated to their development as dramatic symbols” (223). Biggs’ viewpoint obviously fails to account for the interconnectedness between the medical concepts prevalent in the classical period and the semantic multiplicity of the disease in Sophocles’ plays. In a nutshell, what matters is how medicine was understood under the intellectual context of the fifth-century Greek. The fifth century B.C. was the time when certain medical concepts underwent fervent transformation and Sophocles’ stage came to be the place where such a transformation reveals itself in the most magnificent manner.

I. Plagues

Before ascertaining if the Plague of Athens had an impact on Sophocles’ invention of the plague scenario in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is necessary to certify that the play was composed before the outbreak of the actual epidemic. Nevertheless, to determine the precise date of composition has proven to be all but impossible.⁷ Many classicists have tried to pinpoint—or at least narrow down—the date of this play. An earlier study by William N. Bates mentions that “the date of the first presentation of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles, the most famous tragedy of antiquity, has not been handed down to modern times” (166). What is more, most circumstantial evidence such as stylistic analysis and intertextual information cannot but give an unconvincing result. The speculation that the plague in the opening scene suggests the great plague of 430 B.C. at Athens is hence hardly validated. It is cited by Bates in his attempt to fix a date for *Oedipus Tyrannus* that “Jebb, in the introduction to his edition, says there is not external evidence for the time at which the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was first acted. Internal evidence warrants the belief that it was composed after *Antigone* (442-441 B.C.) and before the *Oedipus Coloneus*. The probable limits thus indicated might be roughly given as about 439-412 B.C. More than this we cannot say” (166). Similarly, Robert Fagles acknowledged the impossibility of knowing “the precise dates for the production” of the three Theban

⁷ According to Philip Whaley Harsh, the date of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is “highly disputed” and “some scholars think the description of the plague in this play was suggested by the plague at Athens; others, recalling the unfortunate experience of Phynichus (who was fined for presenting a play which reminded the Athenians of the misfortunes of their allies, the Milesians), think this play must have been produced before the plague” (111-12).

plays, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* and, from the meager evidence, simply arrives at the conclusion that “*Antigone* came first, and *Oedipus Tyrannus* next (some time soon after 430 B.C.) and *Oedipus at Colonus* last (in fact was produced after Sophocles’ death)” (27). David Grene in his general introduction to “The Three Theban Plays” elucidated that the dating “is only approximate, for reliable evidence is lacking; but “*Antigone* was produced in 441 B.C.” and *Oedipus Tyrannus* “some fourteen or fifteen years later” (1). If Grene’s calculation is valid, then the plague of Athens did happen before the debut of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. However, no reliable evidence is offered to back up this assumption.

The uncertainty of the early Greek calendars⁸ complicates the issue. According to Thucydides, the plague of Athens took place during the summer of the year 430 B.C. and, it can be inferred from the abovementioned sources, the debut of *Oedipus Tyrannus* might be sometime soon after 430 B.C. Pierre Jean-Pierre Vernant’s inference that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a direct or indirect response to the Athenian plague is not necessarily unailing, since the date of the play is estimated to be anytime between 430 and 420 and so far can not be fixed and the real epidemic took place in the summer of the year 430 B.C.. And Vidal-Naquet estimated that *Antigone* was staged before “Sophocles’ election to the post of *stratēgos*,” that is, before 440 B.C.;⁹ *The Women of Trachis* and *Ajax* are generally “dated to 450-440;” *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Electra* “to around 430-420” (304). In this light, Vidal-Naquet did not completely cross out the possibility that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was first presented before the plague of Athens—even though the odds may be nominal.

By citing a parody of the famous scene in *Oedipus Tyrannus* quoted from *The*

⁸ The calendars and dating systems in Thucydides are relatively systematic; on the other hand, the various city-states in Ancient Greece usually had their own local calendar systems (Strassler 623-25). It is estimated that the early Greek calendar “was reformed at Delphi in the eighth century B.C.” and the calendars then were “lunisolar, based both on the sun and the moon” (Adkins 406). In the fifth-century Athens, the annual festivals of tragic dramas were scheduled over three days in the late spring. Therefore, if *Oedipus Tyrannus* was really performed in the year 430 B.C., the plague of Athens which first attacked the city during the summer the same year could not be the direct reference of Sophocles’ play.

⁹ Sophocles was the treasurer of Athens or one of the ten generals during 441/440 B.C. (Develin 89).

Acharnians,¹⁰ Bates concluded that “we shall be justified in believing that the great masterpiece of Sophocles was first acted before 425 B.C.” (168). It should be noted that Bates’ argument can never serve as a denial of the claim that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was staged sometime before the plague of Athens. Yet Bates used the textual allusion to the actual plague as a principle premise for deducing the date of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, not vice versa. In a like manner, Jody Rubin Pinault, grounded on an unconfirmed hypothesis that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was written “very probably between 428 and 425 B.C.,” claimed that in the opening scene of this play that alters throughout the city Thebes are burning with incense as a supplication to the gods to end the plague exemplifies “a purification ritual with both religious and medical benefits” (68). While Bates stressed the influence of a historical event on the tragic presentation, Pinault alerted us to the bigger picture in which not only the concepts of public health but also the prescriptions for the plague in Sophocles’ contemporary circumstance are highlighted.

It is worthwhile to reconsider the diversified concepts of plague, epidemic and disease which are discernible in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and those which are learned from the real Athenian plague.¹¹ While Pericles did not survive the plague of Athens, Oedipus blinds himself but largely remains unscathed in the plague.¹² It is observed that the most likely ground for the plague of Athens is the poor sanitary

10 *The Acharnians*, with a strong anti-war stance, is a satire against the politicians of the time.

11 Robin Mitchell-Boyask, convinced that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was completed under the context of the Plague of Athens, interpreted “the circulation of nosological discourse throughout the text” and thereby advanced an assumption that “Sophocles’ innovation of a plague at Thebes during the Athenian plague might have contributed to the second-place finish of the program that included *Oedipus Tyrannus*” (56).

12 As the plague of Thebes is generally associated with the Plague of Athens, Oedipus is compared to the tyrant Pericles: both men are such charismatic leaders to muster their citizens to take efficient measures to fight against the plague. Grace H. Macurdy, accepting the theory that the date for *OT* is 429 B.C., reads *OT* 863-910 as an illustrative allusion to the wrestling between two politicians, Thucydides and Pericles (307). However, as Macurdy points out that “Bruhn, who dates the play in 456/5 B.C., argues that the impiety denounced in this passage refers to an attempt of Athens in that year to draw Delphi into its sphere of influence by allowing it to fall into the hands of its allies, the Phocians” (308). These contradictory viewpoints on *OT* 863-910 can be ascribed chiefly to the varying options of the date of the play.

condition¹³ inside the Long Walls where Athenians from the countryside were jammed together. The plague under Sophocles' narration has a lot to do with the multiple senses of miasma [μίᾶσμα],¹⁴ with the alertness to public hygiene and with a sense of scourge allotted by the gods as well. Robert Sallares points out that "Pausanians ascribed the growth of the power of the Achaians to the fact that they had suffered less from disasters in wars and from the great epidemic of 430 B.C." (106). A fairly common medical theory believed by ancient doctors is that most diseases can be ascribed to an imbalanced state or the shortage of certain elements inside the body. However, in Thucydides we can find another theory that is the unknown element invading the body from the outside. Even though the contemporary milieu may take the place of the mythic background, it is doubtful if the plague that attacked Athens in the early years of the Peloponnesian War gave a historical context for Sophocles' description.¹⁵ Actually, the real identification of a very isolated epidemic in ancient Greek, which in Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* is called the "plague of Athens" (430-426 B.C.), so far remains unsolved: "around 30 different diseases have been suggested as the cause" (*OCD* 1188).

G. E. R. Lloyd casts valuable insights into this problem: Sophocles is significant for us to grasp the issues concerning ancient Greek plagues, less because *Oedipus Tyrannus* copes with the related themes of pestilence, pollution, and purification than because Sophocles himself "lived through the terrible plague at Athens, that first struck in 430-429 and that was to play such an important role in the Peloponnesian War" (2003: 84). In tragedies, the way human beings pit themselves against illnesses are taken into account—although from time to time the capacity to cure a widespread disease is believed to be limited. Sophocles' depiction of the plague retains certain marks of the process how traditional medical concepts have gradually developed into a new, natural pathology; yet it dwells on some features showing that such a medical evolution has not yet completed. Oedipus is

13 In decades just before the Peloponnesian War, although Athens invested efforts and money on the public construction, there were some serious problems about the general living environment such as insufficient water, piled garbage placed just in front of the house, and jammed residents inside the Long Walls (Martin 116-121).

14 The English equivalents to the word μίᾶσμα may be pollution, corruption, or contamination.

15 This link, according to James C. Hogan, "would make sense to the Athenian struck at once by war (Ares) and the pestilence" (31).

exceptionally compassionate upon witnessing that countless fellow Thebans are suffering from the epidemic or dying because of the plague; and the chorus, representative of the citizens and common people, bears a strong pessimistic attitude that the disease is always around and “thought can find no weapon to repel it” [οὐδ’ ἐνι φροντίδος ἔγχος ᾧ τις ἀλέξεται] (*OT* 168-71). The medical metaphor is synthesized with a military image in this expression, since thought [φροντίδος], hardly a good lance [ἔγχος] here, is expected to be the tool to ward off [ἀλέξεται] maladies. Such an expression assimilates two typical Homeric images—battles and plague; but the newfangled metaphor addresses a novel idea about battling the plague. In brief, plagues¹⁶ were once respected as one of the representative divine forces; but, now in Sophocles’ plays, men are learning to have a head-on confrontation with their foe, the plague. In spite of the fact that *Oedipus Tyrannus* adheres to the traditional outline of the myth, Sophocles pens the plague with a singular highlight on human’s potentiality to conquer diseases.

Not surprisingly, no concrete and cogent evidence is advanced to substantiate the contention that Sophocles’ description of the plague directly refers to or implicitly alludes to the plague of Athens. To associate the plague of Thebes with the plague of Athens and, at the same stroke, to compare Oedipus to Pericles, Knox places an emphasis on how Oedipus loses no whit of his confidence when confronted by this unforeseen adversity, how he braves the plague, and how he sets an example of the Athenian reaction to the sudden, unexpected, and unthinkable contagious disease. Plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is neither Apollo’s interference nor

¹⁶ Plague [λοιμὸς] is one of the familiar themes in ancient Greek literature. But while the epic tradition would stress the conception of plague as an appalling calamity, the idea of epidemic disease [ἐπίδημιᾶ] starts to emerge in Sophocles’ depiction. In brief, receptivity to the idea of plagues and epidemics can be discerned in Sophocles’ plays (Chang 123-40). While the term plague [λοιμὸς] was “confusingly employed by ancient historians to designate epidemics of infectious disease” (*OCD* 1188), the term epidemic may well convey different meanings in classical works. The term ἐπίδαμον appears in the passage in which Chorus, as the somehow experienced and sympathetic lookers-on, vents out the comments but then pretends to be objective by saying that “I should put the matter to the test and go against the public fame of Oedipus to aid the Labdacids in the matter of mysterious deaths” [ἐπὶ τὰν ἐπίδαμον/ φάτιν εἴμ’ Οἰδιπόδα Λαβδακίδαις/ ἐπίκουρος ἀδήλων θανάτων] (*OT* 495-97). ἐπίδαμον is the accusative form of ἐπίδημος, meaning popular or current and suggests a dynamic movement of bad reputation.

the working of fate (Knox 1988: 8-10). Instead, the plague is rendered by Sophocles as a personified figure of Ares: “the fire-bearing god, hateful Pestilence, has swooped upon the city and harries it, emptying the house of Cadmus” [ἐν δ’ ὁ πυρφόρος θεὸς/ σκήψας ἐλάυνει, λοιμὸς ἔχθιστος, πόλιν,/ ὑφ’ οὗ κενοῦται δῶμα Καδμεῖον] (OT 27-29). Different from the plague sent by Apollo in the first book of *Iliad*, the prevalent pestilence in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is itself a semi-divine creature stalking, invading, and firing the territories possessed by the Cadmus’ family. The city is “grievously tossed by storms, and still cannot lift its head from beneath the depths of the killing angry sea” [πόλις γάρ, ὡσπερ καὺτὸς εἰσορᾶς, ἄγαν ἦδη σαλεύει κἀνακουφίσει κἀρα βυθῶν ἔτ’ οὐχ οἶα τε φοινίου σάλου, φθίνουσα μὲν κάλυξιν ἐγκάρποις χθονός] (OT 22-25). This wrathful God, as a rule, prompts nothing but destruction to the city: “If in time past when destruction loomed over the city you drove the flames of ruin far away, come now also” [εἴ ποτε καὶ προτέρας ἄτας ὑπερόρνημένης πόλει ἠνύσατ’ ἐκτοπίαν φλόγα πῆματος, ἔλθετε καὶ νῦν] (OT 165-66). Ares, the plague itself, stands for the force in opposition to the civilization and is largely characterized as the wild violence (OT 190-95, 149-50, 162, 163, 205, 206, 27-28, 215); in this way, what is adumbrated in Sophocles’ play is really something analogous to natural disasters.

In many English translations, these three terms—plague, disease, and destruction—are interchangeable or interdependent. For example, the shepherd is accusing the messenger of not revealing the truth and claims the disastrous outcome of keeping silent, shouting: “A plague on you! Will you be silent” [οὐκ εἰς ὄλεθρον; οὐ σιωπήσας ἔση] (OT 1146). The term ὄλεθρον, translated into “plague” here, means any form of destruction. In fact, the word “plague” or “λοιμὸς” only appears once in the phrase the most “hateful Pestilence” [λοιμὸς ἔχθιστος] (OT 28). In this sense, the case of plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, far more than an allusion to any given historical event, may embroil its related equivalent concepts such as plight, destruction, disease and the like. In Lloyd’s words, “it is worth remarking that νόσος, νόσημα, and πάθος have a very wide application in Greek in the classical period and can be used in referring to any unwelcome condition or misfortune” (1989: 25n79). For these reasons, it is better to reframe the problem by enlarging the contemporary reference from a particular case to the contexts which contributed to the formation of the innovative ideas of plague and disease. That is, apart from considering the affinity between the plague of Athens

and the plague of Thebes, due attention should be directed to the question whether the Greeks from the earliest times onwards had a conceptual framework within which they could understand and construe the happening of a plague.

II. Temple Medicine and Rational Medicine

Sophocles' plays bear an eloquent testimony to the inaugurating statement in Lloyd's *In the Grip of Disease: Studies in the Greek Imagination*: "the ancient Greeks were plagued by plagues real and imaginary" (2003: 1). *Oedipus Tyrannus*, like the first book of the *Iliad*, recapitulates the theme of a plague striking a whole population at war, which had already been etched on the Greek imagination. The plague [λοιμὸς], especially as far as the mythic context is concerned, is imaginarily congruent with divine intervention; on the other hand, in *Oedipus Tyrannus* the open inquest into causes of this calamity on Thebes manifests an unquenchable concern over the realistic issue of public health and disease. Both the supernatural and the natural approaches to the plague are delicately kneaded in this play. Sophocles, although having seemingly followed the general value by arranging plots of consulting Apollo's oracle, placed into his play a series of investigations to hunt down the very root of the plague and did not unconditionally view the ritualistic purification as the only way to tackle the blight. Up to this point, the scenario of the plague, real or imaginary, leads us to reflect on how the concept of epidemic emerged as a medical concern and, in the meanwhile, on how rational medicine was pitting itself against the dominant temple medicine.

Longrigg accentuates the fact that rational medicine was introduced to the fifth-century Greek stage; however, what he categorizes as irrational medicine might have remained highly operative in Greek society.¹⁷ The dichotomy implies a stereotyped ideology that religion is always irrational, superstitious, and dogmatic. Yet the ancient Greeks did not necessarily explain off disease by claiming any unique rationale or reason as we do. In other words, it is never easy to clearly demarcate the line between what is rational and what is irrational. What is more, if the claim that irrational medicine was at that time really phasing out is itself highly

¹⁷ The typical example of the so-termed irrational medicine in Longrigg's discussion is the Babylonian concept of the nature and the treatment of this disease (7). However, Lloyd observed that "it is abundantly clear that the 'irrational' in one or other of its complex and diffuse forms is to be found at every period of Greek thought" (1979: 4).

arguable. At least, Sophocles' plays indicate that when diseases were spreading, the public usually resorted to the Healer or gods for help (*OT* 180-89). And the basic concept of ritual cleansing, similar to natural medical at that time, was to wash hands or to clean with water (*OT* 236-44). With little etiological knowledge, the Theban citizens turned to their rulers, priests, and prophets while the plague was encroaching upon their city. Although the supernatural ideology was rather prevalent in the fifth-century Greek world, the Hippocratic approaches to diseases and epidemic was in the meantime fermenting. In Sophocles's depiction, the religious or supernatural treatment on this unheard-of pestilence is much more favored than the naturalist scheme. But the subtle details imply that the emerging concept about the formation of infectious disease was taking shape under the context when traditional paradigms of treatment were somehow questioned. Oedipus, whose name etymologically indicates both the malady of the clubbed foot and the agent of knowledge, is quick at unknitting Sphinx's riddle but slow at grasping the enigma of his own life and of the disease (*OT* 71-72, 780-90).

It is stressed in Percy's argument¹⁸ that "ancient descriptions of disease mask moral or political reflection, religious doxology, or other ends" (600). When Oedipus is informed of the death of his adoptive father Polybus, he immediately limits the causes of mortality within two categories: "by treason or through sickness" [πότερα δόλοισιν ἢ νόσου ξυναλλαγῆ] (*OT* 960). How commonplace such an either-or dichotomy is. Nonetheless, this way of classification exactly substantiates the fact that Oedipus and the public have a lot in common, especially with regard to the concepts of life, disease, and death. In the fifth century B.C., unprecedented changes in culture, society, and medicine were taking place in most Greek cities, but in practice some aspects of their core life seemed to be unaltered. In this way, how the diseases were treated designates such a characteristic mix of innovation and continuity—that is, a clash between two remarkable concurrent medical trends: "on the one hand there is the move made by some Hippocratic authors to insist that all diseases have natural causes" and "on the other hand there is the growth of the cults of Asclepius and other healing gods and heroes"

18 According to Lee T. Percy, there are two different ways of understanding disease: ontologically or physiologically (595). The ontological concept, as what practiced in daily life, sounds natural but generally unexamined. Most everyday expressions such as "catch a cold," "fight the disease," or "have a stomachache" are based on the idea that disease should be something being, existing, or living in the world (Percy 596).

(Lloyd 2003: 40).

Both Sophocles and Thucydides did pose a challenge to their contemporary temple medicine. While Thucydides directly rebuked the falsity of the supernatural subterfuge to diseases, Sophocles circuitously showed his skeptic stance toward both occult medicine and Hippocratic treatments. Thucydides stated undeviatingly that both lay and religious healers at that time, when confronted by the plague, were unable to cope with the disease effectively; conversely, what can be perceived in Sophocles' plays is the conflicting interaction between these two trends. In fact, Asclepius medicine and the Hippocrates school did not represent two contrasting systems. It is assumed that Sophocles might have introduced the cult of Asclepius into Athens around 420 B.C. (Lloyd 2003: 85). But, even so, it can at best be inferred that Sophocles was indeed much concerned with the medical practice of his time.¹⁹ It is never confirmed that Sophocles was dissatisfied with purely naturalistic methods of healing. The demarcation between natural medicine and temple medicine is far from adequate to accommodate the complexity of the developing notions of diseases in the classical period.

Conflicts between Oedipus and Creon showcase how Sophocles dramatizes the ongoing clashes concerning the disease treatments. Oedipus is totally different from Creon in ways to face a wide-ranging affliction upon their city: the former is inclined to look for a rational solution while the latter somehow prefers to act according to certain unexamined regulations. Creon, like most of the fifth-century Athenian citizens, still conforms to the religious, ritual and conservative set practices and therefore tends to make it a rule to cover up any alleged source of pollution. Creon rebukes Oedipus by the following argument:

ἀλλ' εἰ τὰ θνητῶν μὴ καταισχύνεσθ' ἔτι
γένεθλα, τὴν γοῦν πάντα βόσκουσιν φλόγα
αἰδεῖσθ' ἄνακτος Ἡλίου, τοιόνδ' ἄγος
ἀκάλυπτον οὕτω δεικνύναι, τὸ μήτε γῆ
μήτ' ὄμβρος ἱερός μήτε φῶς προσδέξεται. (*OT* 1424-28)

But if you have no shame before the face of men, revere at least the

¹⁹ Mitchell-Boyask stressed that the high frequency of the term *nosos* in most of Sophocles' tragedies discloses that the playwright did care intensively about the medical discourses and related issues; for example, there are “fourteen instances of the noun *nosos*, its more abstract cognate *nosêma* and the verb *nosein*” (590).

fire of the Sun that feeds all things, and do not expose openly such a pollution, one which neither the earth nor the sacred rain nor the light shall welcome! (*OT* 1424-28)

Creon is featured by his propensity for making negative statements, especially by means of the adverbs μή and μήτε. First, the moral consciousness that Creon keeps is built upon the denial of shame. Second, the admonition of not disseminating the pollution validates his inability or reluctance to tackling the disease. Third, the ungrounded negation eventually leads to a relatively shallow understanding of the natural phenomena such as rain and sunshine, which are actually shared by all people, good or bad. In the ancient Greek world, the taken-for-granted avenue to reduce, contain or extinguish a sweeping affliction would be ritualistic purification; but Sophocles devised in his play a series of inspections so as to cast light on the etiology of the plague. That is why Oedipus is trying not to “acquire pollution through” the parents [μίασμα τῶν φυτευσάντων λάβης] (*OT* 1012). The term “parents” [φυτευσάντων], which derives from the verb “φυτεύω,” insinuates the image of planting the seed of pollution. In general, while such a disaster is regarded as a combination of the natural occurrence and the supernatural intervention, a deeper command of the pollution is becoming accessible.

The distinction of rational medicine and irrational medicine is practically blurred in the case of the plagues of Thebes. Sophocles was conspicuously civic-minded—such as being elected as the general and being appointed to a special committee set up in 411 B.C. to deal with the emergency. Sophocles in his works never straightforwardly denounced contemporaneous politicians as Aristophanes did in most of his comedies.²⁰ Instead of attacking a single person or criticizing a particular event, tragic drama formed a publicly supported stage for the mass audiences and explored serious ethical issues to the entire *polis*. It was believed that the gods would, as far as the case of homicide is concerned, punish the crime by casting a state of miasma not merely upon the murderers but also upon all those around them and even upon the entire community. Athens had “at least sixty days a year devoted to annual festivals” and, through festivals, Athens “might celebrate its own origins, its national identity and accomplishments,” and even “its military

20 A number of Aristophanes’ characters are contemporary Athenians. For instance, Aristophanes, basically against the Peloponnesian War, manifestly expresses his stance in *The Archarnians* and frankly reproaches the leader of Athens in *The Knights*.

victories" (*OCD* 593). Greek tragedies play a significant role in such multi-functional festivals. At the opening scene of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus is surrounded by "the sound of paeans and lamentations" [ὄμοῦ δὲ παιάνων τε καὶ στεναγμάτων] (*OT* 5). Here the hymns of paeans are not for victory, but for the imploration of the curing power from the physician, i.e., Apollo the healer. Sophocles did display how the public resorts to temple medicine: Apollo is highly respected (*OT* 21, 41, 151, 155, 203, 469) and the high frequency of the related terms such as Delphi, Delian Healer Pytho's temple, and the temple at Abae (*OT* 474, 72, 965, 254, 899) bespeaks of the trend of such a relatively ritualistic medical practice at that time.

However, the power of prophets, healing gods, or anything related to ritualistic practice is not embraced without reservation in Sophocles' play. The intent of the chorus' chant that "the power of the gods is perishing" [ἔρρει δὲ τὰ θεῖα] (*OT* 905-10) may foreshadow the belated divine punishment or insinuate general skepticism about the supernatural power.²¹ In the fifth century, most Greeks might have been skeptical of prophecy, since they already perceived that human agency delivering the divine messages was prone to blunder and venality.²² From time to time, Oedipus shows his mistrust on the prophecy or the spokespersons for the temples (*OT* 707-25, 846-57, 964-73). Making it a point that "there is no clear indication that these ancient physicians arrived at any rational conception of disease," Longrigg illustrates the transitional stage of the fifth-century medicine: on the one hand, diseases were considered by the ancient Greeks to "be manifestations of the displeasure of the gods or were held to be caused by the intrusion of some demon or other" while, on the other hand, "the function of the healer was to help them achieve this end by removing the cause of their illness" (6). This explains why

21 The word ἔρρει is to describe the manner how a lame man walks. Grace H. Macurdy cited Webster as saying, "Sophocles clearly states his own belief and as clearly criticizes the unbelief of his contemporaries" (qtd. in Macurdy 309).

22 The strophe (*OT* 883-96), according to Macurdy, can be an attack against "Pheidias for embezzlement" and demonstrates the anger of the priestly party, who opposed Pericles' building on the Acropolis on sites that encroached on old shrines" (309). In short, it is the charge of impiety [ἀσέπτων] (*OT* 890) or the misconduct of when one "wantonly lays hands on things inviolate" [τῶν ἀθίκτων θίξεται ματᾶζων] (*OT* 891). Suspicion of prophets and politicians as well and their dealing with public issues such as diseases and civic constructions ran deep among citizens.

the Thebans are required to make atonement for their sins and why angry gods will be placated if the evil plague or the pollution is dispelled. Nevertheless, Oedipus by contrast endeavors to cast light on the details pertaining to the problematic plague. In this aspect, *Oedipus Tyrannus* reveals that the public's ingrained notions concerning pollution are utterly irrational.

Without doubt, the conflicting mentalities between religious medicine and pragmatic medicine come to the fore in Sophocles' plays, which not only question the unexamined belief in those supernatural powers but also illuminate the limitation of all moral beings and their knowledge and technology. The common course in this play is to seek out ways to reach a community "free from pollution" [εὐαγῆ] (*OT* 921).²³ *Oedipus Tyrannus* exquisitely epitomizes how the multifarious concepts about catharsis and *polis* are interconnected. The totality of those images, metaphors, and vocabulary concerning diseases teeming in this play amounts to a problem for human beings to solve rather than a testing hardship out of divine interference. The keynote of this play hinges considerably on Oedipus' scrutiny and his dedication to expelling corruption out of the land; paradoxically, the deportation of Oedipus at the end of this play neither stops the plague nor guarantees the complete purification of Thebes. The oracle that Creon receives from Apollo says: "to drive out from the land a pollution, one that has been nourished in this country, and not to nourish it till it cannot be cured" [μίασμα χώρας, ὡς τεθραμμένον χθονί/ ἐν τῆδ', ἐλαύνειν μηδ' ἀνήκεστον τρέφειν] (*OT* 97-98). The revelation from Apollo intimates that the pollution or plague is man-made, since it is human beings who foster the disease in their lands until it eventually advances to the point of being untreatable. The most serious issue will be the very concept of the incurable [ἀνήκεστον], which is unknowingly cultivated in our mundane life. By and large, the symbolic action of cleaning is to purify the city, not the field. Instead of merely tracing any family root for defilement, Oedipus alternatively directs the audience to pay heed to more possible grounds for the plague.

The concept of widespread disease can be apprehended when Iocaste is blaming Oedipus and Creon for their untimely and personal bickers during a critical moment: "Wretches, why have you struck up this foolish battle of abuse? Are you

²³ εὐαγῆ also means moving well, free of curse, and "clear/ conspicuous resolution" (Hogan 58).

not ashamed to start up private troubles when the country is thus sick?" [τί τὴν ἄβουλον, ὦ ταλαίπωροι, στάσιν γλώσσης ἐπήρασθ' οὐδ' ἐπαισχύνεσθε γῆς οὕτω νοσοῦσης ἴδια κινουῦντες κακά;] (*OT* 634-36). On the one hand, banishment [ἀνδρηλατοῦντας] (*OT* 100) is generally regarded as the best measure to discard what is not desired in the land; on the other hand, it involves an inquiry into the grounds on which the pollution, disease or plague has been developed. Urgently hoping that Tiresias will rescue the city from the plague, Oedipus repeats that the prophet is supposed to be knowledgeable and understands "the nature of the sickness" [οἶα νόσῳ] (*OT* 303). Iocaste, after realizing that Oedipus is the son she once deserted, gives up the search for truth: "I beg you, do not search this out, if you care for your own life! My anguish is enough!" [μὴ πρὸς θεῶν, εἴπερ τι τοῦ σαυτοῦ βίου κήδει, ματεύσης τοῦθ'· ἄλις νοσοῦσ' ἐγώ] (*OT* 1060-61). Here the notions of *nosos* actually complicate the sense of guilt and that of physical unfitness. Eventually, the messenger, like the audiences, perceives that Oedipus ought to face the unbearable *nosos*—"for his sickness is too great for him to bear it" [τὸ γὰρ νόσημα μεῖζον ἢ φέρειν] (*OT* 1293).

In ancient Greek medical theory, diseases are supposed to have much to do with the *physis* of the individual. And Sophocles not only created distinctive protagonists by their featured diseases but also made visible the evolving medical notions by his works. Penelope Biggs argued that "it is nevertheless definitely a *nosos* and has as we shall see, certain physical overtones" and "the disease is a necessary outgrowth of the hero's character in his circumstances, bringing out the peculiar quality of each hero's suffering, his *oikeia pathē*" (223). However, *Oedipus Tyrannus* introduces a new type of spectacle not merely into the flexibility of the public space but also into the long-term and large-scale human agony. The disease theme in Sophocles' tragedies alerts us to review the paradoxes of the civilizing power. The point is reinforced by the choral stasimon in *Antigone*: "He meets nothing in the future without resource; only from Hades shall he apply no means of flight; and he has contrived escape from desperate maladies" [ἄπορος ἐπ' οὐδὲν ἔρχεται τὸ μέλλον· Ἄϊδα μόνον φεῦξις οὐκ ἐπάξεται· νόσων δ' ἀμηχάνων φυγὰς συμπέφρασται. (360-64). Although death is inevitable and diseases are unpredictable, human beings, at least since the fifth century B.C. or even earlier, have been inching towards a comprehensive knowledge of human suffering.

III. Anachronism

Notwithstanding the inconclusiveness of the date of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is indubitable that the play blends contemporary references with its heroic setting. Numerous instances of “the jarring inconsistency of speech and setting” occurring in the priest’s lines, for Knox, clearly display how the local and contemporary reference is mixed up in the mythic or heroic background of Oedipus’ stories (1988: 62). Knox therefore comes to a conclusion that the plague of Thebes in the play is considered reminiscent of the epidemic that ravages Athens at the onset of the Peloponnesian War; that is to say, the plague, especially depicted by the chorus in the opening stasimon, is related much more to the immediate present of the fifth-century Athens than to the remote past of the Theban family. Knox contends that the “contemporary reference in all Attic tragedy is so obvious and insistent that the term ‘anachronism,’ often applied to details of the tragic presentation of the mythical material,’ is completely misleading; in Attic tragedy of the fifth century anachronism is not the exception but the rule” (1988: 61). Undeniably, what Sophocles’ works denote and connote altogether may well give a larger prospect than the mythic context of the stories. To be more precise, classical Greek tragedies capitalize greatly on a new assessment of the mythic tradition from the contemporary and anthropocentric dimensions—or, in Vidal-Naquet’s terms, from a citizen’s point of view (305). In this light, the historical dimension and the mythological setting are connected in the Attic tragedies and the divine-dominated world is therein redefined by means of laying an emphasis on the human concern. However, these features of juxtaposing the past and the present dexterously negate and validate the concepts of anachronism at the same stroke.

Anachronism in modern usage suggests a chronological mistake; whereas it might mean something different in ancient Greek, particularly when the notion of chronology was then yet incomplete.²⁴ For this sake, to assume the plague of Thebes in *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a conspicuous occurrence of anachronism is inadequate, or in Knox’s term, misleading. The tricky anachronism in this play, decidedly differing from an artistic failing, embroils at least two dimensions: how

24 Thucydides did set an example of narrating history chronologically via basing his narration on “a natural” or “solar year” rather than on the comparatively arbitrary and irregular tables of eponymous archons (Gomme 5).

the idea of history was comprehended in the fifth-century and how the word anachronism was used or understood in the ancient Greek. In a sense, the subject matters of the Greek tragedies, generally drawn from the heroic myth and epic poetry, are to create the feel of familiarity since most fifth-century audiences were likely to have already acquainted themselves with these materials. Similarly, Greek tragedies “have a strongly contemporary application to the problems of Athenian *polis*” and hence “stories of Oedipus could be re-cast to lay stress on the tensions between family and city” (*OCD* 1541). Greek tragedies not only generate a form of public discourse but also intermingle the up-to-date locales and concerns to the dramatist perception of the heroic world. In Easterling’s terms, “there may be something to be gained from looking further into the techniques used by the dramatists for combining material from different periods” (1).

Paradoxically, the concept of anachronism questions the very contemporary reference in Sophocles’ works. First, to claim that the plague described by Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrannus* alludes to the plague of Athens is one thing, to determine if such an allusion involves anachronism is quite another. Today, the more scientific spirit of history has encouraged us to evaluate anachronism as a kind of mistake or offense; but this was not the case in Sophocles’ times. The way that most people today understand the notion “anachronism” is probably at odds with how it would have been understood by Sophocles’ audiences in the classical period. Herman L. Ebeling draws our attention to the meanings of the verb “ἀναχρονίζομαι” (to be an anachronism) accepted in ancient Greek such as “to be late in doing” or “exchange of the quantity of two syllables”; moreover, even in these examples “a single chronological sense had not been established” (120). Nonetheless, although the formation of the Greek notion of history is rather complex—one of the most dominant of the general tendencies of Greek thought was “anti-historical” (Collingwood 28), the fifth century somehow witnessed the birth of historical writing and the historical consciousness.²⁵ For the Greek intellectual tradition, what matters is the universal knowledge or *episteme* [ἐπιστήμη], and, therefore, any attempt to know what is transitory comes to be a kind of forlorn hope.

25 If the Greeks invented history-writing remains uncertain. The Jewish “succession narrative in the books of Samuel and Kings,” which “antedates every Greek claimant to be the first historian,” is driven by divine force (*OCD* 714); whereas in the fifth century, Greeks were gradually aware to the kind of historiography pertaining to human events, which might be actuated merely by contingent causal forces.

On the one side, the fifth century in Athens “was an age of intellectual revolution” and “saw the birth of historical spirit” (Fagles 140); and on the flip side, the seemingly glaring inconsistencies in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in any case, are neither accidental anachronisms nor temporal anomalies. For Knox, the Athenian tragedians wrote “not historical but contemporary drama” and the alleged anachronistic details in Sophocles’ plays are “not careless slips, nor are they necessarily evidence of the absence of a historical viewpoint”; he considers these anachronistic instances “incidental but natural results of a fully and deliberately contemporary presentation of mythical material” (1988: 62); but the notable differences between what is depicted in the play and what really happened are practically overlooked. Yet the perspective out of the contemporary reference does not necessarily annul the anachronistic features which Sophocles’ plays display.

The tragedians’ skill resides in its capacity to reinterpret myth or traditional stories in such a way to give them contemporary significance. The pure myth, a sort of “quasi-history,” is generally “not concerned with human action at all,” places stresses on “divine actions,” reduces “human element” and is “outside our time-reckonings” (Collingwood 15). But the Athenian tragedy elaborates the time structures by inserting the present into the past and the past into the present as well. It can be discerned that the temporal structure of tragedies took shape with emerging historical awareness. On the one hand, history suggests a structure akin to tragedy—which, according to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, consists in the reversal or change. To phrase it differently, history and tragedy have something in common, since “time shows change; and in that respect it is obvious that tragedy deals with time” (Jacqueline 5). When Oedipus is found indisputably to be the very person who murdered Laius and, by corollary, is the cause of plague, Creon, instead of announcing that Oedipus must be sentenced to the exile immediately, commands that they “take him (Oedipus) at once into the house” [ἀλλ’ ὡς τάχιστ’ ἐς οἶκον ἐσκομίζετε]. The term “at once” or “quickly” [τάχιστ’] is previously repeatedly adopted by Oedipus and now, with the inversed power structure between these two men, Creon picks up on what Oedipus previously said to him—but somehow within a differing context. Oedipus takes quick action to find out the source of the plagues but Creon speeds up to exercise the power he obtains. Nevertheless, both of them are attempting to demonstrate that “all things are good that are in season” [πάντα γὰρ καιρῷ καλὰ] (*OT* 1517) and unexpectedly complicate the threads of time. In addition, history is about human action, but tragedy defined in Aristotle’s *Poetics* is

“the imitation of action, and also having magnitude, complete in itself” (1449b25-27). While history is to account for any kind of human action, tragedy is to represent the heroic or ideal action—which is not limited to human action. In this light, tragedy should be deemed as something between myth and history; and the time structures of tragedy are manifold rather than linear or singular. Or the so-called quasi-temporal remote mythical time²⁶ and historical time are intertwined in the time-reckoning of tragedy.

In short, the distinctive anachronism in Sophocles' plays relies less on the inserted contemporary reference than the overlapping of time structures. The mythic past and the immediate present are subtly amalgamated in most outstanding Greek tragedies. In looking backward to what happened to Oedipus, the messenger demonstrates a way of time-reckoning:

κούδέν γε θαῦμα, δέσποτ'· ἀλλ' ἐγὼ σαφῶς
 ἀγνώτ' ἀναμνήσω νιν. εὔ γὰρ οἶδ' ὅτι
 κάτοιιδεν, ἦμος τῶ Κιθαιρῶνος τόπον,
 ὁ μὲν διπλοῖσι ποιμνίοις, ἐγὼ δ' ἐνί,
 ἐπλησίαζον τῶδε τάνδρῳ τρεῖς ὅλους
 ἐξ ἦρος εἰς ἀρκτοῦρον ἐκμήνους χρόνους·
 χειμῶνα δ' ἤδη τὰμά τ' εἰς ἔπαυλ' ἐγὼ
 ἦλαυνον οὗτός τ' εἰς τὰ Λαΐου σταθμά. (*OT* 1132-39)

No wonder, my lord! But though he does not know me, I will help him to remember clearly; because I know well that he is aware when <we were both staying in> the region round Cithaeron, he with two herds and I with one, I was in this man's company for three whole periods of six months each, from spring to the rising of Arcturus; and when winter came I would drive my flock back to their byres and he his to the steadings of Laius. (*OT* 1132-39)

First, the temporal parameter from the spring to “the rising of Arcturus” is apparently an instance of the conformity to mythic context.²⁷ Without precise time

²⁶ According to Collingwood, though far from historiography, Homer's epics come to be slippery ground for the historian. In the like manner, Greek tragedy may provide much more ingredients for historians to look into the classical period as well as the earlier times—that is, a formation of ancient Greek history. Concerning the recent treatment of the interrelationship between history and Greek tragedy, see Pelling 213-35.

²⁷ In Greek mythology, Arcturus is a star created by Zeus to protect the nearby

machines, the messenger, supposedly like most ancient Greeks, reckons time and date in light of what is told in myth or folklore. Secondly, the result in this counting “three whole periods of six months” [τρῆϊς ὅλους . . . ἐκμήνους χρόνους] is in the form of accusative case which is employed to indicate the length in time of an event. What is calculated as six months [ἐκμήνους] serves as a unit, which denotes they see the noon six times. Obviously, the common calendar that Oedipus, the messenger or the shepherd adopt to count time is basically the lunar calendar system²⁸ or, in all probability, the Attic calendar.²⁹ Thirdly, the investigation proceeds to this point where the two dimensions of remembering [ἀναμνήσω] and time [χρόνους] merge; in other words, the anachronism is taking place by synthesizing these two notions ἀνα- and -χρόνους. In short, anachronism in Sophocles’ plays is a process in which the idea that all answers will be found in time³⁰ is revealed step-by-step.

constellations, Arcas and Callisto. Arcturus was said to appear before the week of September 21 or 22.

28 Another example to see how the moon is used to indicate the date can be found in the fifth choral where the chorus claims to be a prophet and warns the Cithaeron that “you shall not fail to know that tomorrow’s full moon exalts you as the fellow-native and nurse and mother” [οὐκ ἔσει τὰν αὔριον πανσέληνον, μὴ οὐ σέ γε καὶ πατριώταν Οἰδίπουν καὶ τροφὸν καὶ ματέρ’ αὔξειν] (OT 1089-1091). Tomorrow’s full moon may allude to “the Athenian festival known as Pandia,” that is, an event immediately following the Great Dionysia (Hogan 63-64). The festivals as well as sacrifice were scheduled events based on the community civic calendar—maybe, for Panathens or for the entire Greek area.

29 Hermann Bengtson summarizes the four main ways to determine the date of historical events in antiquity: “(1) notices of celestial phenomena, especially solar and lunar eclipses, to the extent that once can successfully determine, with the help of modern astronomy, absolute dates; (2) synchronisms, that is, statements of the simultaneousness of events which took place at different places (3) lists of rulers and eponyms, and (4) eras” (28). Bengtson gives a very constructive example of employing the method of synchronisms: “For 436 Livy mentions the outbreak of a plague at Rome [Livy 4.21 and 4.25], which can refer only to the famous epidemic of 430 described by Thucydides. The conclusion, that this Livian date is about six years early, is compelling” (29).

30 A corresponding motif is embodied in the personified figure of time: “ἐφηῦρέ σ’ ἄκονθ’ ὁ πάνθ’ ὀρώων χρόνος, δικάζει τ’ ἄγαμον γάμον πάλαι τεκνούντα καὶ τεκνούμενον” (“Time the all-seeing has found you out against your will; long since has it condemned the monstrous marriage that produced offspring for you and offspring for

Oedipus Tyrannus unfolds the process from ignorance to knowledge via a series of inquiries by Oedipus. Oedipus, by thematic refrains of “I light up” [ἐγὼ φανῶ] (*OT* 133) makes visible his intellectual bent to conduct the investigation [ἱστορία]—the word which later is developed into the meaning of written history (Gomme 41). At first, Oedipus is resolute to contain the plague and to “dispel the pollution” [ἀποσκεδῶ μύσος] (*OT* 138). He is looking into the uncleanness [μύσος] via having retrospection into the past—both of his own life and of the entire Thebes. Accordingly, the history of the investigation fashions an integrative process to fix up the chronological order and to restore the ecological wholesome state. The retrospective contemplation of Oedipus’ own story runs parallel with a diagnosis of the disorder and an etiological survey. This is why Oedipus says to the Thebans: “sick as you are, none of you is as sick as I am” [καὶ νοσοῦντες, ὡς ἐγὼ οὐκ ἔστιν ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐξ ἴσου νοσεῖ] (*OT* 60-61). The ultimate problem for Oedipus consists of two issues: “with what means of purifying? What is the nature of trouble?” [ποίῳ καθαρμῶ; τίς ὁ τρόπος τῆς ξυμφορᾶς] (*OT* 99). The question involves two dimensions: one consisting of the catharsis [καθαρμῶ] has a lot to do with the medical metaphor and the other pertaining to troublesome event [ξυμφορᾶς] dwells on history. Altogether, Oedipus’ unremitting search for truth aims to figure out an etiological explanation: “Where shall the track of an ancient guilt, hard to make out, be found” [ποῦ τόδ’ εὐρεθήσεται ἴχνος παλαιᾶς δυστέκμαρτον αἰτίας] (*OT* 108-109)? It is the concept of αἰτίας—meaning guilt, responsibility, and the cause of disease—that triggers the motif of the play.

Oedipus actually endeavors to articulate a narrative of the disease³¹ and eventually improvises his own stylistic diagnosis of the common suffering that he and his people are encountering. Interestingly, the case of plague gives rise to a common ground for the history-writing, playwright, and medical writing. Lee Percy, maintaining the argument that “diagnosis instead consisted of establishing a narrative, the history of a particular patient” (597), reinterprets Thucydides 2.47-51

itself”) (*OT* 1213-15).

31 It should be noted that Oedipus concerns himself more with the disease [νόσος] than with the plague [λοιμὸς]—although in some conditions these two Greek words become interchangeable in English translation. For instance, the following sentence “Φοῖβος δ’ ὁ πέμψας τάσδε μαντείας ἅμα/ σωτήρ δ’ ἴκοιτο καὶ νόσου παυστήριος” is translated into English by Hugh Lloyd-Jones as “and may Phoebus, who sent these prophecies, come to preserve us and to put a stop to the **plague**” (*OT* 149-150).

as a notorious case in point, a detailed account, which “historian and philologists have found it hard to resist the temptation to give a modern name to the Athenian plague of 430/429 B.C.” (598).³² Similarly, Collingwood restated the argument from C. N. Cochrane, in his *Thucydides and the Science of History* that “the dominant influence on Thucydides is the influence of Hippocratic medicine” and thus wrapped up that Thucydides was “trying to justify himself for writing history at all by turning it into something that is not history” (29). In a strikingly like manner, Sophocles, particularly by certain thematic repetitions such as catharsis, “set right our life” [ὀρθῶσαι βίον] (*OT* 37-39, 828), and so forth, generated a way of diagnosing life and a style of historical panorama along with contemporary reference. What matters in Sophocles’ invention of the plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus* rests less on how much the historical plague is implied in the play than on to what extent the emergent intellectual movements or trends are shared in the dramatic performance. Yet the theme of *nosos*, which actually spells out the nuanced comprehension of plague, disorder, or disease, induces varying dimensions inviting illumination.

32 Attempts to account for the plague of Athens continue. “Physicians tend to put forward exotic diseases or combinations of diseases, while classicists prefer a verdict of ‘not proven’ or opt for the old favorites, smallpox, bubonic plague, measles or typhus. ‘Which of the diseases known to medicine at the end of the twentieth century, they ask, ‘has symptoms matching those of the plague described by Thucydides?’ Their question treats Thucydides’ account as though it were a clinical description which could lead to an ontological diagnosis, and behind their inquiry lies a characteristically modern confusion of narrative and fact” (Percy 598).

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瘟疫、疾病與索福克里斯的《伊底帕斯王》

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摘要

《伊底帕斯王》開場描繪底比斯城爆發大瘟疫，很容易使人聯想到西元前四三〇年的雅典瘟疫。然而，至今仍無法確定《伊底帕斯王》首次登臺時間，也無法完全排除此劇仍有可能在雅典瘟疫爆發前就已上演。本文先整理關於《伊底帕斯王》演出年代、相關論點的假設前提，說明《伊底帕斯王》中的瘟疫場景不一定直接指涉雅典瘟疫。然而索福克里斯的悲劇作品，就像大多數希臘悲劇，經常取材取景於史詩時代，並融合其當代歷史、社會、文化與政治現象；《伊底帕斯王》並非投射特定的事件或人物，而是反映整個西元前五世紀知識與思想承先啟後的蛻變過程。由此觀之，如 Knox 所言，索福克里斯筆下的瘟疫、疾病與災難等描繪，並非時代錯置 (anachronism) 的例子。此外，本文將進一步探討 anachronism 一詞所隱藏之意涵與歷史、疾病等關聯。

關鍵詞：瘟疫 疾病 時代錯置 索福克里斯 伊底帕斯王

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