

BOOK REVIEW

Searching for Oedipus: How I Found Meaning in an Ancient Masterpiece. By KENNETH GLAZER. Lanham, MD: The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2018. Pp. 267. Paperback, \$19.99. ISBN: 978-0-7618-7045-6.

It is difficult to overstate the role Oedipus has played in Western culture, and the book under review is the result of the author's lifelong fascination with *Oedipus Tyrannos*. He is not a classical scholar but a lawyer with a background in history and philosophy. As he states in his introduction:

[Oedipus's] story has become personal with me. By "personal", I don't mean there's anything special or idiosyncratic about me. This is not a confessional; I didn't learn late in life that I was adopted or that I had unknowingly slain a family member. You're not going to hear anything scandalous about my relationship with my mother. My fascination with *Oedipus Rex* is based on nothing peculiar to me... At the same time, my pursuit of Oedipus has involved a kind of self-analysis. I have felt deeply moved by the play and have asked myself *why*—why is it so meaningful to me? This book tells the story of how I have come to answer that question. (11-12).

Glazer takes each episode of the play in sequence and provides his reflections on it. He offers the general reader (who does not need to be a classicist) a good overview of the plot, noteworthy scholarship about the play and theories about the myth of Oedipus. The issues are complicated. Even the title is uncertain: Should we Latinize the Greek *Oidipous Tyrannos* as *Oedipus Rex* (if we define Rex as a hereditary monarch) or *Oedipus Tyrannus*, defining the latter as "a ruler who acquired power through his own actions, possibly but not necessarily through the use of violence" (145)?

In the course of his discussion, Glazer considers various overarching themes: the possibility and limitations of self-knowledge, the importance of the past to one's present life, the definition of heroism, the nature of tragedy and other big questions. He also surveys the many controversies surrounding the play, and offers his own conclusions. Glazer helpfully summarizes the issues that have occasioned scholarly debate, with charts of both sides of the arguments, at the end of the book.

He also looks at some psychological theories that Oedipus's myth has generated, particularly those of Freud and his followers. Glazer has little use for Freudian symbolism that sees vaginas and penises everywhere (63), or other doctrines that focus too much on only one aspect of Oedipus's myth. He finds some of these ideas absurd, most notably the analysis of the Hungarian-French psychoanalyst George Devereux, who posited that both Laius and Oedipus were homosexuals (67). Classicists also have had wildly different interpretations; one has argued that Oedipus was aware of his guilt all along (Philip Vellacott, *Sophocles and Oedipus*, 1971); and another has asserted that he was framed by Creon and Tiresias (Frederick Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction*, 1991). Glazer takes an Occam's razor approach, discarding the more extreme theories in favor of those he finds persuasive. At times he himself seems like Oedipus confronting Tiresias: "See how I, an outsider, solved the riddle that you, with your supposedly superior knowledge, could not."

The academic specialist will probably find that many of Glazer's observations have been made elsewhere. The article on *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Vayos Liapis in *A Companion to Sophocles* (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World, 2012, pp. 84-96), for example, discusses much more concisely the play's structure and themes: the significance of the Tiresias scene; the role of the two shepherds; the One and the Many; human rationality vs. divine knowledge; dramatic irony; the responsibility for Oedipus's downfall.

One feature that makes this book unique, however, is the large number of references to other plays, films, books and miscellaneous aspects of popular culture. This is particularly true when Glazer discusses the theme that occupies the first part of the play and the first chapter of his book: "the circular detective," in which a search leads back to the searcher. He sees this trope appearing in *The Martian*

Chronicles, The Sixth Sense, The Moonstone, Shutter Island, The Scarlet Letter, Falling Angel, The Erasers and other (otherwise disparate) works. An extended discussion of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and its relation to *Oedipus Tyrannos* is a noteworthy feature of a later chapter, titled "Borne Back Ceaselessly."

Towards the end of the book, Glazer admits his views on the play are continually in flux: "It's more than possible that my views will continue to evolve and that the dimensions of the play that loom large in my life now will fade into the background and vice versa, and this will affect how I see *Oedipus Rex*" (197). Meanwhile, authors continue to re-imagine Oedipus as a North London punk (*Greek*), an internet tycoon (*Ed King*), a Los Angeles gang leader (*Oedipus el Rey*), a well-digger in Turkey (*The Red Haired Woman*), and other characters both male and female. Nor have psychoanalysts abandoned him; he continues to draw attention as an abused child and an adopted child. Sophocles likewise returned to Oedipus's story and its conclusion in his last play, so it would be interesting to see Glazer's thoughts in a sequel.

MARIANTHE COLAKIS

Townsend Harris High School, MColakis@schools.nyc.gov