

Tiresias' Monologue

My name is Tiresias. I am very old and I am blind. Because I am blind I see what other men cannot see: I see the future.

The people of Thebes believe this to be miraculous. So it is. But perhaps not quite so miraculous as they think. I live now by the mumbo jumbo of prophesy. There are many stories about me, ridiculous and scandalous.* Pornographic myths. I invented some of them myself. They are more amusing than the truth and I have long since learned that men prefer poetic fantasy to dull fact.

For King Oedipus, the future is not hard to foresee. The end of his story is near. He has sent for the Old Shepherd and means to question him further concerning the death of Laius. Why does Oedipus pursue this thing as if he was intent on his own ruin?

I have known the shepherd over forty years, since he was a youngster in the service of Laius. He is a kindly man, cowardly perhaps but gentle. His lies are transparent and he has committed no crime – unless you call it a crime to do as he and I both have done: to keep silent in matters where disclosure would cause pain to others.

To see the past, the present and the future all in one is as much a curse as it is a blessing. If you wish to believe that it is supernatural, a gift from Zeus, that is your privilege. Personally, I prefer another explanation. When a man is robbed of one of his senses, the others become more acute. When I could no longer see, I had to learn to hear. To listen. When I could no longer watch the outward display, I learned to hear in the voices of men and women the things that were unspoken. The hidden things.

Oedipus is King of Thebes and a proud man. To the people of the city he speaks a strong voice, as he must if he is to be their ruler and their protector. Is it only I who can hear in him that other voice, the sound of his desperation and his terror?

Since I cannot see her now, I imagine her still as the girl I knew twenty, twenty-five years ago. But, from what they tell me, she has not changed. She is still very beautiful and might be taken for a young woman. As a girl of fifteen or sixteen, when Laius chose her for his Queen, she was a great beauty. That too can be a curse. King Laius was much older than she and was jealous of the attention paid to her by other men. I have been wondering: is it possible that she was suspicious that the child born to him was not his own? Is that why it had to be killed?

* According to some reports, Tiresias was a transsexual. Born as a woman, he became a man. The myth is that the gods, Zeus and his wife Hera, had an argument, debating whether it was a man or a woman who derived greater pleasure from the sex act. They appealed to Tiresias to arbitrate. Tiresias said it was a woman. This so exasperated Hera that she struck him blind. In compensation, Zeus gave him the gift of second sight.

At the time, of course, other reasons were given. They said it was because of a prophesy. When Laius came back from consultation with the oracle at Delphi there was secrecy, but the rumour was of a dreadful prediction. The priests, they say, had told him that if the child was male, and if it lived, it would be fated to kill its own father. The King's counsellors accepted this as a warning from the gods. I did not. I do not say this publicly because it is both sacrilege and treason, but it is my private belief that the priests know well that every questioner brings with him the answer that he wishes to be told.

They took the child from Jocasta. They gave it to the nurses and did not tell her what Laius intended.

In fairness, I should explain that, barbaric as it may seem to you, it is not an uncommon practice among our people. It has a long history. There are too many births, too many mouths to feed. So when an infant is born that is sickly, deformed or in some other way accursed and unwanted, it is taken out of the city, carried up to the high slopes of the mountain and left there. It is not killed, since that is an offence to the Gods, but it is left to die. It is not uncommon, as I have said – but I have never seen it done with a child of the royal household before.

Though it was done discreetly, it is not a pleasant thing. If the child is still old enough to crawl, its feet will be bound, the ankles pierced and tied with a thong so that it cannot move and its death will come soon. I am told that, on occasion, the man to whom this task is given may, in defiance of the Gods, take pity on the infant and kill it to shorten its suffering.

The man they chose was the shepherd I have spoken of. When he came back, he reported that he had done as Laius ordered and fulfilled the will of the Gods. The King's counsellors took this to mean that the infant was dead. For some reason, I was not sure. I knew the shepherd.

Oedipus. A nickname. It means "lame-footed." A strange name for a young man strong and vigorous, a warrior. The citizens brought him to the city as their hero and their saviour. He had challenged our enemy, the monstrous Sphinx, and had destroyed it. I was there among the great crowd when they brought Oedipus in triumph to the Palace. I heard the cheering. Since my sight left me, I have to depend on the boy who leads me everywhere and describes for me the scenes that others witness. As he told me of the appearance of the stranger I saw an earlier image, the young Laius. The boy is very observant, as I have trained him to be. When the name puzzled me, I asked him about the feet of the stranger and he saw what others may not have noticed – the faint mark of a very old wound. It is not so miraculous, you see. At this moment, I knew who that stranger was.

I said nothing. But I knew that there must be one other citizen who shared my knowledge.

He had remained in the service of the King's household and was promoted to be one of King Laius' bodyguards. This same man brought us the news of Laius' death. He and three others accompanied the King when he travelled from the city and he was the only one who came back to Thebes to report the King's murder, by a band of robbers, he said.

No one doubted his story. Least of all myself. Yet there were inconsistencies. I took these to be only the result of his panic, his anxiety that the people would hold him responsible because he had failed to protect the King. But it was the old man's reaction to the arrival of Oedipus which set me thinking. I heard of it only from others who told me that he has been to Jocasta, begging her to be allowed to leave the city and retire to the country as a simple shepherd. He did not come to see me before he left. That also gave me cause to wonder. Because they believe that I have what they call "second sight," men who have something to hide avoid me. So I wondered if he had seen what I had seen and knew what I knew.

There are occasional travellers from Corinth who come from Thebes and from them I have learned more of Oedipus. Polybus, his father, and Merope, his mother, were by all accounts much distressed when their son left Corinth, left suddenly and without explanation. From one informant, however, I heard the story of the boy's reaction to the insult by a drunken dinner guest who called him a bastard.

So it is that I put together all the pieces of this man's life. One thing is still a mystery: how is it that the man himself does not know the truth? Why is it that he who has eyesight is blind while I, who have none, can see it all complete? The beginning, the middle and the end.

The answer is simple enough. If every man could know the future, his life would be impossible, unliveable. The ordinary man sees only the present, the word "now" which divides the mind. The past is only partially remembered since the gift of forgetfulness eases the pain and to remember everything would drive us into madness. Above all, the future must be veiled from his sight, insecure and uncertain, since each man must believe that he is free to determine his own fate.

But this is not so. As the past makes the present, so the present makes the future, and the Infant, the Youth and the Old Man are one. Strange that Oedipus himself knows this. It was the answer he gave to the Sphinx's riddle.

I wonder why also the father fears the child, why the son must destroy the father and must forever see in all women the image of her who loved him first? If at some future time there comes a new priest to answer these riddles, then I hope he will remember this sad and desperate man so that his name will not be forgotten. Oedipus, the lame foot.