

**CAN OEDIPUS BE ADEQUATELY CHARACTERISED AS AN INNOCENT  
SCAPEGOAT, IF SO, WHY, IF NOT, WHY NOT?**

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**ABSTRACT**

Oedipus has been proved to be one of the timeless and greatest plays which was written by Sophocles. However, Oedipus becomes a controversial role in it. He kills his father and sleeps with his mother, becomes the ruler of the kingdom, fulfils the foretell. However, he should be seen as a scapegoat as his life is predetermined by the God. Though he tries to escape from his fate, he finally fails to escape from God`s will.

**Key Words:** Oedipus, fate, free will, scapegoat.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

*Oedipus Rex* explores the beginnings of human life, the individual`s balance between “one” and “many” identities, the individual`s identification of their true self, and the attempt to discover the fundamental mystery of individual selfhood.<sup>1</sup> It dramatizes the lonely journey of self-discovery, as Oedipus divides his true self from a false self-definition provided by an oracle, as a result of the exterior status of his power, and retraces his journey from king to isolated wanderer, excluded by his father and mother, city, home, and even his name.<sup>2</sup> The drama explores how people understand their lives, how their world obscures the final truth from them, the mysterious aloofness of the gods, and the slipperiness of language. Also, the drama poses a further question: if people knew what “truth” was, could they find the final pattern governing the progression of their lives; would it give people any hope or comfort, or would it turn out to be a type of harsh joke.<sup>3</sup> Oedipus is simultaneously both free and governed. He is capable of deciding, and yet helpless in the face of the choices he made before and the conditions, such as those of his origin, which he was not able to choose.<sup>4</sup> This raises the question about whether he is innocent and a tragic hero, or not.

**Oracles Of His Fate**

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Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford<sup>1</sup> University Press, 2001), 4.

Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford<sup>2</sup> University Press, 2001), 4-5.

Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford<sup>3</sup> University Press, 2001), 4.

Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford<sup>4</sup> University Press, 2001), 53.

Although the gods had warned Laius that his son would murder him if he married Jocasta. He overlooked the words from the gods and still married Jocasta. Then, they had their first son, Oedipus.<sup>5</sup> In other words, before Oedipus was born, the gods had foretold his future.<sup>6</sup> Teiresias first expounds the fate of Oedipus – that he will kill his father and marry his mother – to his parents. Oedipus is a baby.<sup>7</sup> His parents decided to abandon him as a result of the gods' words. As a result, he would not become the prince of Thebes, and he would never know the identities of his parents.<sup>8</sup> Their fear of the oracle contributes to the plan to kill their son. It seems ludicrous for modern audiences that the prophecy which reveals what will happen in the future is an essential determinant of Laius and Jocasta's decision to kill Oedipus.<sup>9</sup> Their dread exposes their compliance when they face the oracles of gods, and they have no courage to challenge the gods' power to prove the accuracy of the prophecy. Laius and Jocasta do not even ask if their son has been killed after they abandon him. Otherwise, the tragic fate of Oedipus and his parents could have been avoided.<sup>10</sup> Oedipus is ignorant about everything that happened to him at the time. The hero is entirely alone from birth, and he lives in an area with secrets and dishonesties which leaves him in solitude, even when he grows up.<sup>11</sup>

### Oedipus's Escape

After Oedipus grows up, he appears to have choices but remains ignorant about his fate and his birth parents. A drunk stranger tells him that he is not the natural son of his father and mother at a feast.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, he foresees that something terrifying about his birth is bound to be discovered, possibly something disgraceful. Something has already become erroneous or unsafe about him. As a result, Oedipus starts to find out the prophecy.<sup>13</sup> Apollo then tells him that he will kill his father and marry his mother but refuses to tell of his origin. Still believing the King

P. H. Vellacott, "The Guilt of Oedipus." *Greece and Rome* v.11, no. 2 (October 1964),<sup>5</sup>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383500014145>>

Thomas Gould, "The Innocence of Oedipus and the Nature of Tragedy." *The Massachusetts Review*<sup>6</sup>  
v.10, no. 2 (Spring 1969),  
<[www.jstor.org/stable/25087856](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25087856)>

Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>7</sup>  
<<http://www.cscanada.org/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720060202.009/259>>

Thomas Gould, "The Innocence of Oedipus and the Nature of Tragedy." *The Massachusetts Review*<sup>8</sup>  
v.10, no. 2 (Spring 1969),  
<[www.jstor.org/stable/25087856](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25087856)>

Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>9</sup>  
<<http://www.cscanada.org/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720060202.009/259>>

Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>10</sup>  
<<http://www.cscanada.org/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720060202.009/259>>

Melvin R Lansky, "Knowing and Not Knowing: Lost Innocence in *Oedipus Tyrannos*," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* v.35, no.2 (January 2015),  
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Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>12</sup>  
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Melvin R Lansky, "Knowing and Not Knowing: Lost Innocence in *Oedipus Tyrannos*," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* v.35, no.2 (January 2015),<sup>13</sup>  
< <https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690.2014.957134>>

and queen of Corinth to be his birth parents, he flees, terrified. After Oedipus leaves his hometown, he meets his real birth father Laius without realising his true identity. Oedipus kills Laius and his servants because they attack him at the crossroad, which unconsciously achieves the first part of the prophecy.<sup>14</sup> Soon afterwards, the whole prophecy is realised unconsciously because Oedipus solves the riddle of Sphinx and marries the widow Jocasta.<sup>15</sup>

### God`s Will

Although Apollo chooses not to force Oedipus to fulfil his fate, he chooses not to try to save him from that too. For example, he does not answer his question directly about his origin. It may be impossible for the gods to show themselves to people without destroying them, which relates to the primary difference between people`s power and the gods` power. This is the reason why Apollo chooses not to force Oedipus and not to give him a clear answer.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the scars on Oedipus` feet, which always confuse himself, and the truth reveals by the drunk stranger which may be known by many people, and which is not entirely denied Polybus and Merope. These signs seem to expose that no one tells the truth to Oedipus before. The hero, who is skilled in understanding clues, notices these clues and believes that it is an impairment of his intelligence cannot identify his natural parents. As a result, he starts his journey from Corinth to Thebes, and these clues reappear over and over during his process of finding out who murdered the former king.<sup>17</sup>

### The Accident

Oedipus` killing of his father is an innocent act as he does not know his true identity. If Oedipus had recognised Laius as his natural father, or if Laius had recognised Oedipus as his son, or he had passed the crossroad without hurting Oedipus, Oedipus would not have fulfilled the prophecy to kill his father and marry his mother, in ignorance.<sup>18</sup> Sophocles confirms the prophecy with an unpleasant literalness: Oedipus has two fathers, Laius and Polybus. He murders the person who begot him. The person is also the man chosen not to nurture Oedipus as a result of his prophecy.<sup>19</sup> The drama expresses an element of tragedy which links to time: everything has already happened in a tragic universe. Someone has scheduled everything

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Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>14</sup>  
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Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>15</sup>

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R. DREW GRIFFITH, "Asserting Eternal Providence: Theodicy in Sophocles' "Oedipus the King"."<sup>16</sup>  
*Illinois Classical Studies* v.17, no. 2 (Fall 1992),

<[www.jstor.org/stable/23064321](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23064321)>

R. DREW GRIFFITH, "Asserting Eternal Providence: Theodicy in Sophocles' "Oedipus the King"."<sup>17</sup>  
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Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.<sup>18</sup>

Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.<sup>19</sup>

already. Prophecies are a way to reveal them, but the central action has already occurred. It is impossible to have additional action unless all characters discover what will ensue and find out the truth.<sup>20</sup>

### The Plague

The plague causes people start to believe a prophecy: somebody causes the disaster in Thebes, and the plague will be disappear if this person leaves Thebes.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Oedipus starts to focus on finding out the truth about who murdered Laius. He promises to his people a reward if they tell him the truth, and that the murderer, even if he or she is a member of his family, will suffer cruel treatment and banishment.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the blind Teiresias suddenly appears in Oedipus` head, because he may be the person who can tell him the identity of the murderer. Until Oedipus decides to meet the prophet, he still ignorant about the truth, the links between his past and his present, and the inevitable disaster which he brings about himself.<sup>23</sup>

### Oedipus` s Freewill

For Oedipus himself, the good faith exists in his mind. When Jocasta tells him all the incidents that happened before, his faith makes him desire to find the murderer immediately in response.<sup>24</sup> He is willing to believe that he killed those strangers, which matches the information provides by his wife, the words of Tiresias, the words of the messenger from his hometown, and the shepherd. Their information proves what the prophecy has already foretold.<sup>25</sup> Besides, the regicide causes plague in Thebes. However, the prophecy had not foretold any incest or parricide, just the regicide itself. As a result, the people in Thebes, including Oedipus, know nothing about the truth. The general power of the drama is based on this.<sup>26</sup> Oedipus and his

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- Claire, Cornillon and Soline de Dorlodot, *Oedipus the King by Sophocles (Book Analysis): Detailed Summary, Analysis and Reading Guide* (France: BrightSummaries.com, 2016), <<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.serlib0.essex.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e870sww&AN=1379964&site=eds-live>> (accessed January 18, 2020).
- Peter T Koper, "Myth and Investigation in Oedipus Rex." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* no.12-13 (2005), <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.0.0001>>
- Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),
- Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.cscanada.org/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720060202.009/259>>
- Peter T Koper, "Myth and Investigation in Oedipus Rex." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* no.12-13 (2005), <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.0.0001>>
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people are only concentrating on discovering the mysterious parricide, which is responsible for the outside threat, the plague. The ensuing investigation reveals the king's previous consultation, that the regicide is not the only unconscious and inciting crime he committed; he committed incestuous parricide too.<sup>27</sup>

### The Character Teiresias

Teiresias is not chiefly a decent character. He may know all the truth, but he intends to hide the truth in the beginning. He reveals the truth that he changes his mind, to tell the truth, because of his anger. He is genuinely representing the world of gods. He stays in the farthest circle in the pattern of knowledge.<sup>28</sup> The prophet admits that he knows the truth at first, but then refuses to tell it to the king. Therefore, Oedipus forces Teiresias to reveal the truth, and the latter answers him beyond endurance that Oedipus is the killer of Laius and must be responsible for the plague.<sup>29</sup> Oedipus' temper and how he treats Teiresias after the prophet reveals the truth, is often used as evidence to prove Oedipus' hamartia. However, because Oedipus sees himself as a paternalistic king, which makes him see the people as his children, he is genuinely anxious for them. As a result, his temper and his treatment to the prophet are reasonable. On the other hand, Teiresias refuses to help Thebes during its severest crisis. He betrays the people who are treated as the king's children.<sup>30</sup> On the supernatural level, the reason for Teiresias to refuse to reveal who is the murderer is the same as Apollo's: it is unnecessary for them to conjecture. On the political level, he refuses, to tell the truth, exposes that he prefers to protect the current situation, instead of protecting the truth and the dying Thebes. It is evident for Teiresias that save the royal family is more necessary than save Thebe's people.<sup>31</sup> Oedipus' response to Teiresias is reasonable because he is ignorant about the truth of oracle's accusation. For Oedipus, Teiresias is guilty of ruining his reputation instead of giving urgently needed help when he desires to get his help. As a result, Oedipus starts to believe that Teiresias threatens his most crucial investigation.<sup>32</sup>

### THE CHARACTER JOCASTA

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- Philip Vellacott, *Sophocles and Oedipus: a study of "Oedipus Tyrannus" with a new translation* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 158.<sup>28</sup>
- Robert Hull, "Hamartia and Heroic Nobility in Oedipus Rex." *Philosophy and Literature* v.17, no. 2 (October 1993),<sup>29</sup>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1993.0047>>
- Robert Hull, "Hamartia and Heroic Nobility in Oedipus Rex." *Philosophy and Literature* v.17, no. 2 (October 1993),<sup>30</sup>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1993.0047>>
- Philip Vellacott, *Sophocles and Oedipus: a study of "Oedipus Tyrannus" with a new translation* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 157-158.<sup>31</sup>
- Robert Hull, "Hamartia and Heroic Nobility in Oedipus Rex." *Philosophy and Literature* v.17, no. 2 (October 1993),<sup>32</sup>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1993.0047>>

As an interlocutor and double to Oedipus, Jocasta acts as the second tragic character in the drama. She performs in the same way as Oedipus, from present to past, from untruths to facts.<sup>33</sup> When Jocasta recounts everything that happened before to her husband, she does not realise that the truth has been exposed through her mouth.<sup>34</sup> Oedipus is extremely anxious about the current crisis in his city and all the incidents happened before appearing in his mind, not only those happened in Thebes, but also those happened in where he comes from, at Delphi, and on the crossroad as a result of the influence of her revelation.<sup>35</sup> In other words, although reveal the truth is not her intention, and she tries to make Oedipus stop worrying about the man he murdered, the truth has been revealed through her mouth which brings them the catastrophe.<sup>36</sup> Jocasta reveals the proof of the truth and leads the number of murderers who killed Laius to become a significant problem. As a result, it is natural for them to wait for the messenger's answer.<sup>37</sup>

### Expose The Death Of Oedipus's Father

When the messenger arrives in Thebes and exposes that Oedipus' father is dead, it reminds the king of the prophecy, which leads him to leave Corinth. Then the man tells Oedipus that Polybus was not his natural father because he gave Oedipus to Polybus.<sup>38</sup> Jocasta understands what the messenger means while her husband is confused about the prophecy. However, she chooses not to tell the truth that Oedipus married his natural mother and fulfilled the prophecy. By contrast, Jocasta requests her husband not to continue to seek the truth. If the king accepts her idea and stops seeking the truth, he can escape from his tragic life.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, the king keeps asking questions until he reaches the truth. On the other hand, he is incapable of confronting the truth of his origin. As a result, he feels his destiny is still under control. However, the dominant

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Claire, Cornillon and Soline de Dorlodot, *Oedipus the King by Sophocles (Book Analysis): Detailed Summary, Analysis and Reading Guide* (France: BrightSummaries.com, 2016), <<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.serlib0.essex.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e870sww&AN=1379964&site=eds-live>> (accessed January 18, 2020).

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Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89.

Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006), <<http://www.cscanada.org/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720060202.009/259>>

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will of the gods makes his feeling becomes impractical and feeble. Because the gods had foretold his fate when he was born.<sup>40</sup>

### Gods Hide The Truth

It seems possible that these results above are due to the gods like Apollo choosing to hide the truth, such as Oedipus' origin, and refusing to tell the truth to Oedipus throughout the whole drama. Therefore, because of the significant impact of the god's choice, the hero commits unpardonable faults that torment him for the rest of his life.<sup>41</sup> Their words are transmitted through the prophecy, even though the gods do not appear throughout the whole drama. These mysterious prophecies incite the characters' tragic destinies and prevent them escaping from their destinies. There has no response to the question about Oedipus' identity from the prophecy, all the information it gives make Oedipus confused which prevents him escaping from his tragic fate.<sup>42</sup> Everything provides by the prophecy is both unnecessary and unrelated. It foretells Oedipus will kill Laius and marry Jocasta. However, it does not foretell that, for Laius, Oedipus will kill him if he does not kill Oedipus. Also, it does not foretell that if Oedipus leaves his hometown, he is capable of escape from his tragic fate. None forecasts and declarations are based on any action. As a result, neither Oedipus nor Laius will have suitable action for them when they confront their prophecy.<sup>43</sup>

### Oedipus's Character

Although Oedipus is intelligent, two parts of his character make him bound to make mistakes. He is reluctant to test whether his explanation of the facts is correct or not because he is too confident in himself and his judgment. Furthermore, he desires to control everything under any conditions as a result of his proud nature. His complicated personality exists in his truth-seeking and guides his truth-seeking process.<sup>44</sup>

### Oedipus Knows Part Of The Prophecy

Oedipus knows part of the prophecy when he stays in Corinth but is no prepared for it, which makes him seem not innocent. This reflects in the drama that the god has told Oedipus that his

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Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>40</sup>  
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Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>41</sup>  
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Claire, Cornillon and Soline de Dorlodot, *Oedipus the King by Sophocles (Book Analysis): Detailed Summary, Analysis and Reading Guide* (France: BrightSummaries.com, 2016),  
<[http://0-](http://0-search.ebscohost.com.serlib0.essex.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e870sww&AN=1379964&site=eds-live)

search.ebscohost.com.serlib0.essex.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e870sww&AN=1379964&site=eds-live> (accessed January 18, 2020).

Lyle B. Steadman and Craig T. Palmer, "Myths as Instructions from Ancestors: The Example of Oedipus." *Zygon@*, v.32, no.3 (September 1997),  
<<https://doi.org/10.1111/0591-2385.00095>>

Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>44</sup>  
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birth contains a mystery, and the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother.<sup>45</sup> As a result, he should have two ideas permanently in his mind when he desires to escape from his tragic life: do not murder an older man at any time, and do not marry a widow who is older than him. However, when Oedipus leaves from his hometown and meets the king Laius. He forgets what the god has already told him and kills his natural father. It is the first time that Oedipus overlooks the warning from the gods. Although it is an almost impossible coincidence that Laius is his father, Oedipus becomes guilty as he takes the risk.<sup>46</sup> In fact, when Oedipus meets Laius on the crossroad, Laius only aim to force Oedipus to leave the crossroad instead of killing him. In Plato's opinion, Oedipus kills his father, even it is self-defence, is the only crime that should not be pardoned.<sup>47</sup>

### The Way For Oedipus To Understand The Prophecy

The only way for Oedipus to understand Tiresias' words is to attack, even though Tiresias has told all the truths that he desires to discover. Because only those truths that proves everything Oedipus has believed are the target which he is willing to find out. He concentrates on his cognition instead of the truth when he is much closer to revealing it.<sup>48</sup> Also, Oedipus ignores the prophet's portentous comments about his origin. By contrast, he is concentrating on a political theory. His action seems to be a conspiracy. He is hurried to censure, concludes that the death of Laius is a part of conspiracy directly caused by Thebes, as no robber would be brave enough to attack a king alone. Oedipus always rapidly blames other people. These people thus become his scapegoats.<sup>49</sup>

### Oedipus Hides The Truth

When Jocasta exposes that Laius was murdered on the crossroad by robbers. Her words match the incident happened on Oedipus' journey to Thebes: he killed an older man and his servants too.<sup>50</sup> The hero becomes anxious and starts to doubt the truth he believed. However, instead of

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P. H. Vellacott, "The Guilt of Oedipus." *Greece and Rome* v.11, no. 2 (October 1964),<sup>45</sup>  
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P. H. Vellacott, "The Guilt of Oedipus." *Greece and Rome* v.11, no. 2 (October 1964),<sup>46</sup>  
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R. DREW GRIFFITH, "Asserting Eternal Providence: Theodicy in Sophocles' "Oedipus the King"."<sup>47</sup>  
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Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>48</sup>

<<http://www.cscanada.org/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720060202.009/259>>

Peter T Koper, "Myth and Investigation in Oedipus Rex." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* no.12-13 (2005),<sup>49</sup>

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Guo Yuehua, "Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will," *Canadian Social Science* v. 2, no. 2 (June 2006),<sup>50</sup>

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revealing the truth and admitting he is the murderer, Oedipus chooses to keep the truth a secret from his people. As a result, his people will not know it, and he can keep his throne.<sup>51</sup>

## 2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear that the worst desolation tortures Oedipus, even though he has no intention to cause it. The prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother causes all the sufferings he confronts. Laius chooses to kill his son because of the prophecy, as it may help him escape from his grim future. The prophecy leads Oedipus to journey to Thebes, as he believes it may stop him from fulfilling the prophecy. The investigation of the murderer of Laius and Oedipus' origin causes Jocasta's suicide. Finally, Oedipus chooses to be blind and exiled from Thebes, which is caused by the investigation too. Oedipus is much closer to his past when he has more clues about the murderer. He is also closer to his ruin while he is closer to the truth and salvation that he imagined. Oedipus tries to escape from his fate through a fighting against the will of the gods and discovering the truth about himself and the world. In the end, he fails to flee his destiny, even though he tries hard. *Oedipus Rex* portrays a character who is strong and sturdy, and tries to control his destiny, but the will of the gods still ruins his life. In summary, Oedipus should be characterised as an innocent scapegoat, even though he murdered his father and married his mother because he is powerless in front of the gods, since they determined his fate when he was born.

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