

# Great Heroes and Their Little Domestic Drama's: A study of Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Hamlet



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**Front page:** *Hamlet and his mother*, by Francesco Bartolozzi, etching with stipple, printed in brown ink, 1786, British Museum, London

## Introduction

One of the most notable events concerning the tragic hero is his downfall. In this thesis I will argue that family dynamics, identity and isolation are motivators for the tragic hero's descent from a 'high' position (a royal status) to a 'low' position (e.g. a beggar). This will be demonstrated through two case studies, namely a consideration of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

The choice of Oedipus and Hamlet is not a strange one, because both have been compared before, namely in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory on the 'Oedipus complex'.<sup>1</sup> I will not deal with Freud's theories in this thesis, but I will focus on these individuals' complex character traits and how the relationship with their family and their state of mind causes their downfall from a high position.

First I will discuss in this introduction why I have chosen these particular characters and will give an overview of Classical reception in Shakespeare in general.

## Why Oedipus and Hamlet?

I emphasize that this thesis is not meant to claim that there is a direct link between Sophocles and Shakespeare (i.e. that Shakespeare had *Oedipus Tyrannus* specifically in mind when he wrote *Hamlet*). The purpose of this thesis is to point out a specific pattern or way of behaving in these particular circumstances (being a person falling from a high position into a low position, motivated by family dynamics and state of mind), as well as to point out that Shakespeare must have been influenced by Greek tragedy in some way.

What I want to do in my thesis is to make a study of the tragic hero, especially as defined by, but not linked to, Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero. Oedipus and Hamlet are both tragic characters who are in a very powerful political position. They both have an exceptional relationship with their family and they are isolated and experience a downfall.

Now, you could say that any tragic character could be picked for a description of a tragic fall, but in this case I specially chose Oedipus and Hamlet because they are, in my opinion, a very good example for this comparison and analysis. These two characters offer the best opportunity for assessing Aristotle's tragic hero and his emergence from Greek tragedy, since both these heroes are notable for their high position, state of mind and the way that they treat their predicaments within the themes of family dynamics and isolation. This comparison will therefore be a fine example to study the downfall of the tragic hero through these themes.

## Reception of Greek tragedy in Shakespeare

Ben Jonson once accused Shakespeare, in his poem *To the memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare* (1623), of knowing "Small Latin and lesse Greek". This quotation is now seen as inaccurate, for at Elizabethan grammar schools, boys probably learnt Latin to a higher standard than most graduated classicists today, as T.W. Baldwin argued in his book *William Shakespeare's Small Latin and Lesse Greek*. However, Baldwin also argues that Shakespeare did not come into contact with much Greek.<sup>2</sup>

Many scholars argue that although Shakespeare could not read any Greek, he was still influenced by Greek literature, as will become clear in this introduction. In the seventeenth century Latin was the most important language in education. Latin grammar was

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<sup>1</sup> See Jones, *Oedipus and Hamlet* (1949) for more information on this theory.

<sup>2</sup> Nutthall (2004): 210

studied by boys at school and the literary canon included Aesop's *Fables* and Plautus' *Menaechmi*.<sup>3</sup> Later, when they became more familiar with the language, they would read literary works like Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>4</sup> We do not know much about Shakespeare's life and his education, but he most likely attended King's New School in Stratford and read Latin there.<sup>5</sup> It is clear, therefore, that Shakespeare would at least have learnt some Latin. Jones and Altman argue that Shakespeare read a lot of Latin and that his central thoughts and habits derived from Latinate rhetorical training, which is evident in the debates that occur in his plays, like the one between Brutus and Cassius in act 4.3 of *Julius Caesar*.<sup>6</sup> This research has led to a general consensus among scholars that Shakespeare's classical education had an influence upon his later work.<sup>7</sup> Barkan argues that: "The classical predecessors, as we have seen, are launched in the very earliest texts promulgating Shakespeare, while in later times they contribute to philosophical and theoretical approaches to the plays."<sup>8</sup>

This does not mean that this classical influence has to be that obvious or direct. Burrow<sup>9</sup> argues that there were practical and theoretical failings in the humanistic method of teaching classics. He argues that "mishearing" of classical tongues is as much reception as imitating it carefully and accurately. He also argues that the approach of the Grammar school in Stratford would have been to remember what the old poets wrote and that this memory could turn the classical text into something new so that the ancient text seems secondary to the new material. Humanist education encouraged a pragmatic use of classics, so its influence need not be directly visible in Shakespeare's work.

What of Shakespeare's Greek? As discussed above, Shakespeare's knowledge of the ancient Greek tongue was probably non-existent, suggesting that any influence exerted by ancient Greek texts over Shakespeare's works came via secondary sources. Nuthall<sup>10</sup> gives us an explanation by arguing that some links can be drawn between Shakespeare and Greek literature. He argues, for instance, that *The Tempest*, which is usually linked to Virgil's *Aeneid*, has some connections to the *Odyssey*. The meeting between Ferdinand and Miranda is more similar to the encounter of Odysseus and Nausicaa, than that of Aeneas with his goddess mother. Both involve a meeting between two mortal persons, where the male pretends that the female is divine and the setting is in both cases on a magical island. Chapman's translation of Homer was also likely to have been highly influential on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*<sup>11</sup>. Nuthall argues that the first encounter between Troilus and Cressida in the play can be compared with a *teichoskopia*. In the *Illiad*, Helen observes several Greek heroes pass before the wall. In *Troilus and Cressida* Cressida also sees several heroes pass by before she encounters Troilus. There is no parallel passage for this in Virgil and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (on which this play is most likely based<sup>12</sup>) does not have one either.

Between Greek tragedy and Shakespeare's works there are also some similarities. Silk<sup>13</sup> argues that Shakespeare does not have a direct connection with Greek tragedy, but that there are some elements found in Shakespeare that are also found in Greek tragedy, most notably in Shakespeare's portrayal of the Aristotelian tragic hero, who must be a person of high rank and someone around whom the plot revolves. Silk argues that the expectation of a tragic hero is often still derived from

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<sup>3</sup>Wells and Taylor (2005): xvi

<sup>4</sup> Martindale and Taylor (2004): 1

<sup>5</sup> Honigmann (2001): 2

<sup>6</sup> Jones (1977); Altman (1978) in: Burrow (2004): 10

<sup>7</sup> Burrow (2004): 10

<sup>8</sup> Barkan (2001): 32-33

<sup>9</sup> Burrow (2004): 9-24

<sup>10</sup> Nuthall (2004): 209-222

<sup>11</sup> Barkan (2001): 42

<sup>12</sup> Adamson (1987): 71-74

<sup>13</sup> Silk: (2004): 241-257

Greek tragedy, with *Oedipus Tyrannus* being the most influential, as this Oedipus is mentioned in Aristotle's *Poetics*. He argues that Shakespeare's exceptional use of the power of imagery caused an awareness of similar aspects in Greek tragedy.

The tragic suffering is in both Greek and Shakespearean tragedy of the highest type. Silk argues that there are 3 elements within this suffering: compulsion, excess and identity. These elements can in linguistic terms respectively be expressed as *must*, *too* and *name*. These elements become prominent in critical situations in the play. Tragedy is about choice and also about compulsion. This is the *must*. There is also no proportion, sufficiency or restraint, this is the excess and can be expressed with *too*. These two elements provide the character with a specific identity that the character must live up to.<sup>14</sup>

The summary of the comparison between Greek and Shakespearean tragedy that Silk gives is: "Shared dramatic presuppositions of concentrated action and cumulative logic; and more or less elevated and intensified language, with the elevation correlative to the high (heroic or royal) status of significant players, and in turn to the vastness of tragedy's concerns."<sup>15</sup> With this he means, in my opinion, that Greek and Shakespearean tragedy both share a tragic hero, who is in a specific dramatic situation of action and logic and who is in a high position. There is elevated speech, which points both to this high position and to the dramatic situation.

Thus, although we cannot prove the direct influence of Ancient Greek on Shakespeare, there are enough parallels between Shakespeare and the classics in this introduction to justify the choice of Oedipus and Hamlet as subjects for a case-study on how we should think about the behaviour of tragic heroes.

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<sup>14</sup> For a more elaborate explanation of this argument see chapter 4.

<sup>15</sup> Silk (2004): 248

## Chapter 1: What is a tragic hero?

Before we can focus on Oedipus and Hamlet as tragic heroes, we first need an explanation of the concept of the tragic hero. What exactly is the definition of a tragic hero and what are its characteristics in Greek and Shakespearean tragedy? Are there similarities?

Of course, an explicit answer to these questions can never be given, because there is not *one* tragic hero. In this chapter I will attempt to give an introduction to what are the characteristics of Greek (especially Sophoclean) and Shakespearean tragic heroes.

### 1.1 The Greek tragic hero

#### Aristotle

If we would like an explicit definition to the Greek tragic hero from antiquity, it would be best to look at Aristotle's *Poetics*, for here he gives an explanation about how a main protagonist in a tragedy should act. According to him, a tragic hero is not tragic if he is not able to evoke pity and fear. But to evoke pity and fear the character must experience events in a certain way:

πρῶτον μὲν δῆλον ὅτι οὔτε τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρας δεῖ μεταβάλλοντας φαίνεσθαι ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν, οὐ γὰρ φοβερὸν οὐδὲ ἔλεινόν τοῦτο ἀλλὰ μιαιρόν ἐστιν· οὔτε τοὺς μοχθηροὺς ἐξ ἀτυχίας εἰς εὐτυχίαν, ἀτραγυδοτάτον γὰρ τοῦτ' ἐστὶ πάντων, οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔχει ὧν δεῖ, οὔτε γὰρ φιλόανθρωπον οὔτε ἔλεινόν οὔτε φοβερὸν ἐστίν· οὐδ' αὖ τὸν σφόδρα πονηρὸν ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μεταπίπτειν· τὸ μὲν γὰρ φιλόανθρωπον ἔχει ἂν ἢ τοιαύτη σύστασις ἀλλ' οὔτε ἔλεον οὔτε φόβον, ὁ μὲν γὰρ περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιόν ἐστιν δυστυχοῦντα, ὁ δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον (ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον, φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον), ὥστε οὔτε ἔλεινόν οὔτε φοβερὸν ἔσται τὸ συμβαῖνον. ὁ μεταξὺ ἄρα τούτων λοιπός ἐστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλον εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά," (1452b.34-1453a.9)<sup>16</sup>

*Eerst is het duidelijk dat geen fatsoenlijke mannen moeten worden getoond, veranderend van geluk naar ongeluk, want dit is niet beangstigend, noch is dit meelijwekkend maar weerzinwekkend; Noch dat ellendelingen van ongeluk naar geluk veranderen, want dit is het meest ontragisch van allen, want deze heeft niets van de dingen die nodig zijn, het is namelijk noch menslievend, noch meelijwekkend, noch beangstigend; En niet dat een erg slecht persoon van geluk in ongeluk valt; want een dergelijke ontmoeting zou menslievend kunnen zijn, maar niet meelijwekkend noch beangstigend, want de ene is ongelukkig met betrekking tot de minderwaardige, de ander met betrekking tot de gelijkende (medelijden met betrekking tot de onwaardige, angst met betrekking tot de gelijkende), zodat de uitkomst noch meelijwekkend noch beangstigend zal zijn. Het overige is hetgeen tussen die dingen in. Een zodanig iemand is niet uitdragend in deugd en rechtvaardigheid en niet door kwaad en slechtheid vallend in ongeluk, maar door een of andere fout,<sup>17</sup>*

As Aristotle points out in this section, pity (ἔλεος) will only arise if a person falls into misery when he does not deserve it and fear will arise when the audience realises that they could be the one in the character's position. A hero is someone who is not supposed to be superior or inferior, but rather the same as a normal human being. He must not meet misfortune because of great vice, but because of error (ἁμαρτία). According to Aristotle the best form of error is when the hero is on the point of unwittingly committing a mistake and realises his error when it is too late to correct it.

<sup>16</sup> The edition used for this (and all other) quotation(s) from Aristotle is S.Halliwell (c.1995) Loeb Classical Library

<sup>17</sup> All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

Thus, as Golden<sup>18</sup> points out in his article, a hero is someone who experiences a fall from happiness into misery, someone with moral integrity and nobility, but not perfect in justice or virtue. In this way the hero will evoke pity (by the undeserved misfortune that is coming down upon him) and fear (by the respect of the audience for the moral stature of the hero and the realisation that they could suffer the same fate).<sup>19</sup> What Aristotle wants is a real-life experience for the audience, so that they can identify themselves with the characters, which will lead to proper tragic pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Kirby points out that the concepts of pity and fear in a tragedy must, according to Aristotle, eventually lead to *ἀμαρτία* (possibly a form of purification for the audience). The hero, as a result of his *ἀμαρτία*, experiences *περιπέτεια* (a reversal of fortune). The ultimate trait of a character is that he or she must be *σπουδαῖος* (noble).<sup>21</sup>

Halliwell points out that Aristotle does not define a character by uniqueness but by what moral virtues or ethical vices he possesses. He argues that with this Aristotle states four principles of characterisation<sup>22</sup>:

Περὶ δὲ τὰ ἦθη τέτταρά ἐστιν ὧν δεῖ στοχάζεσθαι, ἓν μὲν καὶ πρῶτον, ὅπως χρηστὰ ἦ. ἕξει δὲ ἦθος μὲν ἐὰν ὡσπερ ἐλέχθη ποιῆ φανερόν ὁ λόγος ἢ ἡ πράξις προαίρεσιν τινα ἢ τις ἂν ἦ, χρηστὸν δὲ ἐὰν χρηστὴν(....) δευτέρον δὲ τὸ ἀρμόττοντα: ἔστιν γὰρ ἀνδρείαν μὲν τὸ ἦθος, ἀλλ' οὐχ ἀρμόττον γυναικὶ οὕτως ἀνδρείαν ἢ δεινὴν εἶναι. τρίτον δὲ τὸ ὅμοιον. τοῦτο γὰρ ἕτερον τοῦ χρηστὸν τὸ ἦθος καὶ ἀρμόττον ποιῆσαι ὡς προείρηται. τέταρτον δὲ τὸ ὁμαλόν. κἂν γὰρ ἀνώμαλός τις ἦ ὁ τὴν μίμησιν παρέχων καὶ τοιοῦτον ἦθος ὑποτεθῆ, ὅμως ὁμαλῶς ἀνώμαλον δεῖ εἶναι. (1454a 16-27)

*Met betrekking tot het karakter zijn er vier dingen waarop moet worden gericht, in de eerste plaats, dat hij goed is. Er zal karakter zijn, wanneer, zoals eerder gezegd is, woord of daad of iemand een of andere keuze duidelijk maakt, en het goede (zal er zijn), wanneer er goedheid is. (...) Het tweede is passendheid; Want een karakter is dapper, maar het is niet passend voor een vrouw om zo dapper of gevaarlijk te zijn. Het derde is gelijkend. Dit is dus anders dan het karakter goed en passend maken, zoals tevoren is verteld. Het vierde is gelijkmatigheid. Want als iemand ongelijk zou zijn, die nabootsing verschaft en een dergelijk karakter wordt opgelegd, moet hij toch gelijkmatig ongelijk zijn.*

In short, the four criteria that characters should meet are: (1) *χρηστὰ*, meaning “useful”, “good of its kind”, “serviceable”<sup>23</sup>, (2) *τὸ ἀρμόττοντα*, meaning “fit together”, “to join”<sup>24</sup>, (3) *τὸ ὅμοιον*, meaning “like”, “resembling”<sup>25</sup> and (4) *τὸ ὁμαλόν*, meaning “even”, “level”.<sup>26</sup>

Halliwell gives an explanation of what Aristotle means with these criteria. He argues that Aristotle named goodness because of his wish to make tragedy a serious action, wherefore it is necessary that the main character should aim at something that is ethically plausible. The second one, Appropriateness, means that the character should belong to a certain class in society. Likeness is somewhat harder to define. Possibly it is the criterion that a character should be “like us”. Consistency means that the character is probable and necessary in the situation of the play.<sup>27</sup>

However, many Greek heroes do not confirm to this pattern that Aristotle describes. Only a

<sup>18</sup> Golden, *Toward a Definition of Tragedy*, 1976

<sup>19</sup> Golden (1976 ): 25-27

<sup>20</sup> Finkelberg (2006): 64

<sup>21</sup> Kirby: (2012): 418-419

<sup>22</sup> Halliwell (1987): 139-140

<sup>23</sup> LSJ (1968): 2007

<sup>24</sup> LSJ (1968): 234

<sup>25</sup> LSJ (1968): 1224

<sup>26</sup> LSJ (1968): 1220

<sup>27</sup> Halliwell (1978):.140-142

few, like Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Shakespeare's *Othello*<sup>28</sup> are 'ideal' tragic heroes such as Aristotle describes. He mentions Oedipus, because he is seen as a mythological character who has acted nobly in the past.<sup>29</sup> Other Greek tragic heroes do not fit in this picture, as Aristotle himself notes:

ἔστιν δὲ παράδειγμα πονηρίας μὲν ἦθους μὴ ἀναγκαΐας οἷον ὁ Μενέλαος ὁ ἐν τῷ Ὀρέστη, τοῦ δὲ ἀπρεποῦς καὶ μὴ ἀρμόττοντος ὃ τε θρῆνος Ὀδυσσεύς ἐν τῇ Σκύλλῃ καὶ ἡ τῆς Μελανίππης ῥῆσις, τοῦ δὲ ἀνωμάλου ἢ ἐν Αὐλίδι Ἰφιγένεια: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔοικεν ἢ ἰκετεύουσα τῇ ὑστέρᾳ. (1454a27-33)

*Een dergelijk voorbeeld van een niet noodzakelijk slecht karakter is Menelaos in Orestes, van een ongepast en niet betamend karakter, het klaaglied van Odysseus bij Skylla en de speech van Melanippus, en van een ongelijk karakter is Iphigeneia in Aulis een voorbeeld: want zij, die een smekeling is, is niets gelijkend aan haar latere zelf.*

Thus we can conclude that, according to Aristotle, in most tragedies it is normal that the tragic hero evokes only a minor fraction of pity, fear is almost always absent and he or she has only a minor degree of nobility. He most often commits a large amount of intellectual or moral errors. Based on this text, we can conclude that the tragic hero Aristotle is looking for is a noble person (σπουδαῖος), who is "like us", with an appropriate social class and someone around whom the plot revolves. He falls into some kind of undeserved misery because of unwittingly causing a mistake (ἀμαρτία). This will cause pity and fear with the audience and will eventually lead to catharsis.

### **The influence of the Homeric hero**

When studying the tragic hero in Sophocles' plays, we first need to take a look at the Homeric hero, because this concept of a hero foreshadows and has a major influence on the kind of tragic hero Sophocles uses in his tragedies.

In the *Iliad* the term ἦρως (meaning "hero", "heroes as object of worship")<sup>30</sup> is principally used for warriors, but in the *Odyssey* the term was also more often used for elder nobles.<sup>31</sup> You could say that Homeric heroism can be divided in two different types, the wise and clever hero (e.g. Odysseus) and the strong and violent hero (e.g. Achilles). The former finds fame through clever tricks, the latter wins battles through defeating others in combat. Of course the distinction is not as simple as this, for the margins are not that strict. Achilles, for instance, does show some intelligence as well (as can be seen through his language; Martin argues: "Achilles can be seen uttering a conventional rhetorical strategy, in order to foreground his own answer to the question 'Why fight?'"<sup>32</sup>), just as Odysseus also shows physical strength, for example surviving the attack of Charybdis and his performance at the games on Phaeacia. But they can still be defined as heroes by virtue of possessing those heroic traits.

The characteristics of heroes are that they are capable of deeds that common people cannot do, they have abnormal strength and endurance, but they also tend to cross boundaries (e.g.: Achilles' wrath causes the Greek to almost lose the Trojan War).<sup>33</sup> Rutherford agrees on this: "Moreover, though all heroes value honour and respond to challenges, different heroes excel in different fields:

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<sup>28</sup> Golden (1976): 130

<sup>29</sup> Haliwell (1987): 140

<sup>30</sup> LSJ (1968): 778

<sup>31</sup> Jones (2010): 4

<sup>32</sup> Martin (1989): 205

<sup>33</sup> Langerwerf and Ryan (2010): 7-8



thus Odysseus is superior at stratagem and counsel<sup>34</sup>, Achilles in combat.”<sup>35</sup>

Homeric heroes value honour (τιμή) and fame (κλέος) most of all. This honour can be achieved in battle as a leader and fighter. A hero will receive fame when his name will live on and make the hero immortal in a manner of speaking. Other characteristics are: loyalty, hospitality, gentleness and of course piety.<sup>36</sup> Heroes were mainly warriors from heroic times, who did not necessarily have to be the offspring of gods, but they were exalted beings nonetheless.<sup>37</sup>

## The Sophoclean hero

As our focus in a part of this thesis will be on the character of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is appropriate to also focus on the Sophoclean hero in broad terms and how he relates to his Homeric forbears.

According to Segal<sup>38</sup>, *Ajax* is the best example of the grandeur of Sophocles' tragic hero. This type of hero stands very close to the Homeric concept of a hero. The protagonist is often compared with the Homeric Achilles. This definition of a hero is that he is a great warrior, has a fierce pride, strong passions and an enormous obsession with honour. This obsession with honour is also his weakness, because it does not agree with his image of himself in society. Sophocles presents his heroes, despite Ajax' clarity, as ambiguous and contradictory. Despite the fact that Ajax' actions in real life agree with the image of the hero as represented in Homer (like Achilles), his death is disgraceful and he will not receive the 'imperishable fame' (*Kleos*), which is normal for epic heroes.<sup>39</sup> Rose, in his 2012 article on 'Sophocles and Class', also quotes Knox<sup>40</sup> who argues that Sophoclean protagonists adhere to a specific "heroic" pattern." This means that he is obsessed with honour and with a glorious reputation. Also, the laughter of enemies is the highest form of disgrace and the ultimate goal is seeking glory. A later (post-Homeric) added feature is a concern for justice.<sup>41</sup> Sophocles starts with picturing his heroes as 'Homeric', and he ends with it as well. Van Nortwick points out that in *Oedipus Colonus* Sophocles reaches back to his 'Homeric' concept of the tragic hero.<sup>42</sup>

Kirby argues that Aristotle also compares Sophoclean characters to Homer. Aristotle tells us that Sophocles is like Homer, because they both represent good people, but he is also like Aristophanes, who represents men in action. Kirby argues: "The inclusion of Aristophanes is important for underscoring the fact that Sophocles is not a diegetic artist, like Homer, but rather a dramatist, whose art consists in putting actors on the stage where they can represent the characters in the drama."<sup>43</sup> Which means that Sophocles' heroes are closer to Aristophanes than Homer in how they are represented on stage.

Now that we have a definition of how the Greek tragic hero is shaped, we have to look at how Shakespeare treats this concept of the tragic hero.

## 1.2 The Shakespearian tragic hero

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<sup>34</sup> Note that these characteristics, although they apply to a hero, do not necessarily have to be positive. It is not always an advantage to just excel in cleverness and tricks.

<sup>35</sup> Rutherford (1996): 41

<sup>36</sup> Rutherford (1996): 40

<sup>37</sup> Jones (2010): 12

<sup>38</sup> Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic world* (1995)

<sup>39</sup> Segal (1995): 5-7

<sup>40</sup> Knox (1964) (In: Rose (2012): 256)

<sup>41</sup> Rose (2012): 256-257

<sup>42</sup> Nortwick (2012): 141

<sup>43</sup> Kirby (2012): 418-419

In his own time, people already praised Shakespeare for his plays and life-like characters. But it was not until the eighteenth century that critics concentrated on the study of character features that resemble people in real life. Bradley says in his influential book *Shakespearean tragedies*, 1904: “The centre of the tragedy...may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action: action is the centre of the story, but this action is essentially the expression of character.”<sup>44</sup>

Hunter argues that 1599-1602 was a period in which Shakespeare searched for the nature of heroism. Hunter argues: “It is my argument that this search can be seen as proceeding through the repertory of traditional kinds of heroism, seeking human values that will endure”. With this he means that Shakespeare thought it important that his characters possessed traits that would be appreciated so he could reuse them in other plays.

Bowra describes the epic hero thus<sup>45</sup>: “He gives dignity to the human race by showing of what feats it is capable; he extends the bounds of experience for others and enhances their appreciation of life by example of his abundant vitality.”

Hunter argues that the tragic hero would be a special case for this kind of heroism. The tragic hero encounters dramatic situations that are larger than ordinary life. The tragic hero is in a way similar to us and because of this we are able to better understand the course of (often violent) action. But he is also in a way above us, so that we do not get the feeling we could have done better. In this way we become aware that some situations human power cannot resolve and that fate cannot be resisted.<sup>46</sup>

The role of the Shakespearean hero is to be a leader of men. They have the ability to perform fine deeds and have a great eloquence. The plays which contain a tragic protagonist focus mainly on two things, the devotion of the hero to a role in society and the eloquence with which he performs this role. Shakespeare shows us how a character deals with his role, how he responds to fortune and misfortune. The appeal to these great characters does not only lie in their goodness, but also in the mistakes they make.<sup>47</sup>

Hunter offers us three principal traditions of heroism: (1) the power to command and control human affairs (e.g. a king), (2) goodness (e.g. a saint), (3) force of personality (e.g. a soldier). For example, Shakespeare was inspired by Plutarch in the creation of some of his characters in the play *Julius Caesar*. Plutarch focuses more on the inner greatness of the hero. In *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare tried to create two sides to the character of Julius Caesar. On the one hand he is the sublime Caesar, the power of the *imperium*, on the other hand he is the weak body of Julius. He could be compared with the kind of heroism known from Greek tragedy, the powerful king. Brutus in this play lacks any quality of bodily heroism, but can compensate with an enormous sense of duty. He can be compared with the second tradition: the good saint. Antony is the one to be compared with the soldier, who is powerful and passionate but morally unstable. In this play there is a strict line between ethical heroism (Brutus, who is determined that his action will not be murder but a justified sacrifice<sup>48</sup>) and political heroism (Caesar).<sup>49</sup>

The heroism Shakespeare portrays in *Troilus and Cressida* resembles most the heroism from the *Iliad*, as is already mentioned in the introduction that this play was probably partly based on it.<sup>50</sup> In this play we find integrity (Hector), a passion for battle-prowess (Achilles) and rational control

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<sup>44</sup> Knights (1979): 203-205

<sup>45</sup> Bowra (1952): 4

<sup>46</sup> Hunter (1978): 230-232

<sup>47</sup> Ure (1974): 22-23

<sup>48</sup> Danson (2000): 127

<sup>49</sup> Hunter (1978): 230-34

<sup>50</sup> Nuthall (2004): 215-17; Barkan (2001): 42

(Ulysses). Shakespeare added Troilus to this as the inexperienced lover-hero.

In the case of *Hamlet*, which will be discussed in chapter 3, the heroism forms two polarities between attraction and repulsion (from the audience). Hamlet possesses more heroic attitudes within one mind, and he possesses what Caesar and Troilus are missing, this central focus and the self-conscious. Through this self-conscious Shakespeare is able to compare different modes of heroism. Shakespeare uses the same norms of heroism in *Hamlet* as he does in his other plays, such as integrity and passion. Only in *Hamlet* their appearance depends on the relationship they form within Hamlet's mind: in essence, then, the play is focused on his mind.<sup>51</sup>

Peter Ure talks about the different characteristics or motivations, that a hero possesses, that defines or changes his inward self. Deep down everyone has a 'real self', one that the other characters in a play will not get to see, they only get to see the outer self. We, as an audience, are privileged to get a glimpse of the inner self. The author concerns himself with the consequences of an action, taken by someone, about which he either has hesitated for a long time or acts without even thinking.

The devotion of the tragic hero to a role in society, such as the position of kingship, is an important theme in tragedies. Just like relationships, such as fatherhood or an occupation like soldiering. The fact that the characters are aware that they play a certain part and that they do that whether in pain or with joy, make them come alive in our imagination. An example is the moment when Henry V stops being a king on the eve of Agincourt and starts seeing himself as a man who bears the burden of kingship. Something similar happens to Hamlet: when his role of prince is stolen from him by Claudius, he takes up the role of avenger, and then again, the failure to fulfil this role is seen as a key concept to the play.

Normally with Shakespeare, according to Ure, when we meet the protagonist he is at the 'high point' of his life (i.e. the point before his fall). Othello appears to be an exception, for his 'journey' is not one of self-discovery, but rather self-delusion, as he becomes increasingly fixed on Iago's deceptions and although his life takes a turn for the worse, he does not seem to change his inner self. This is in contrary to some other characters, such as, therefore, Lear in *King Lear*, who does alter his inner self when tragedy occurs.

Ure's conclusion is that the human character is the substance of Shakespeare's play.<sup>52</sup> Thus, we need to be aware that Shakespeare has different types of tragedy, but the focus in this thesis will be on that type of tragic hero that fits Aristotle's model and that can be tied to the 'ideal' Greek tragic hero.

### 1.3 Comparison and conclusion

To conclude, the Greek and Shakespearean tragic heroes correspond in that they are people very similar to normal human beings, but just a little bit above them. They have good aspects, for example, they are often noble and intelligent. Strong in combat is also a recurring theme (The Homeric hero and the Shakespearean soldier). But tragic heroes also have flaws, for instance arrogance.

Another significant similarity between Greek tragic heroes and Shakespearean heroes there is a strong division between being either very strong or very wise. The tragic hero in Greek tragedy and Shakespeare is a leading figure who is, in a way, like us but also possesses traits that can be defined as 'above' normal people. They experience a certain dramatic event, which will (most times)<sup>53</sup> lead to a change in their character, as we will see in this thesis.

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<sup>51</sup> Hunter (1978): 230-250

<sup>52</sup> Ure (1974): 2-21

<sup>53</sup> Except e.g. Othello, as we have seen above

## **Chapter 2: Case-study of Sophocles' Oedipus**

Oedipus is a well known figure in mythology, famous for solving the riddle of the sphinx. Sophocles starts his play *Oedipus Tyrannus* after this victory and focuses on Oedipus as a hero on the decent, by which I mean the route Oedipus takes towards his downfall, which is the actual moment that he realises his mistakes. This involves the discovery that he married his mother, had children with her and

murdered his father.

In this case-study I will focus on two areas: Family dynamics and the fall of the hero. The focus will be on Oedipus, as he is our tragic hero.

## 2.1 Family dynamics

Key members of the inner circle of his family influence Oedipus in the way he acts. Whilst Oedipus is a very powerful hero of high political standing in the play, his dysfunctional family ties foreshadow his eventual downfall. Thus Sophocles' tragedy represents a domestic drama played out in a political sphere. This domestic drama will be a major motivation for Oedipus' eventual isolation and downfall.

### Creon

Creon, his uncle and brother-in-law, is the first person whom Oedipus accuses of murdering Laios, after he has heard the report of Tiresias. He suspects Creon of wanting to take over power in Thebes and thinks that Creon is jealous of him. Oedipus also suspects that Creon wants to accuse him through Tiresias, and that he wants to rule in his stead. This is why Oedipus wants Creon dead. He does not back away from killing a family member when it comes to power and, in Oedipus' belief, justice (over the murder of Laios).

At the beginning of this scene Oedipus is still very much in control of his emotions against Creon and his suspicion is not entirely unreasonable, because Creon is the most likely successor of the throne. It was also Creon's initiative to consult Tiresias:

ἔπεμψα γὰρ Κρέοντος εἰπόντος διπλοῦς πομπούς (OT.288): *want op woord van Kreon zond ik twee mannen om hem te brengen*, whom he knew much longer than Oedipus did.<sup>54</sup>

Vellacott argues that the chorus and Creon allude to the unbalancing effects of anger, of which they accuse the king. The consequence is that the king bursts out in anger. According to Vellacott, Oedipus makes the mistake in this scene to lose his self-control (his *akrateia*):

ἀλλ' ἦλθε μὲν δὴ τοῦτο τοῦνειδος, τάχ' ἂν δ'  
ὀργῇ βιασθὲν μᾶλλον ἢ γνώμῃ φρενῶν. (OT.523-24)<sup>55</sup>

*Maar deze smaad kwam dus, snel beperkt door woede, liever dan door het verstand van zijn hart.*

He certainly shows his anger towards Creon in the following scene. He even threatens Creon with a death sentence: ἥκιστα: θνήσκειν, οὐ φυγεῖν σε βούλομαι. (OT.623) *Allerminst; ik wil je doden, niet verbannen*. Accusing Creon of betrayal is meant to come as a shock for the audience, with the consequence that the audience will figure out Oedipus' guilt at this point in the play.<sup>56</sup>

Ramfos<sup>57</sup> argues that Sophocles throws extra suspicion onto Creon, by making him very ambitious and giving him a very good reason to be a conspirator, despite his denial. This makes Oedipus' suspicion plausible.

οὗτος σύ, πῶς δεῦρ' ἦλθες; ἦ τοσόνδ' ἔχεις  
τόλμης πρόσωπον ὥστε τὰς ἐμὰς στέγας

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<sup>54</sup> Segal (2001): 84

<sup>55</sup> The edition used for this (and all other) quotation(s) from Sophocles is H.Lloyd-Jones (c.1994) Loeb Classical Library

<sup>56</sup> Vellacott (1971): 175-176

<sup>57</sup> Ramfos, *Fate and Ambiguity in Oedipus King*, (2006)

ἴκου, φονεὺς ὧν τοῦδε τάνδρὸς ἐμφανῶς  
ληστής τ' ἐναργῆς τῆς ἐμῆς τυραννίδος; (OT.532-35)

*Jij daar, hoe ben jij hierheen gekomen? Heb jij een dergelijk gezicht van vrijmoedigheid dat je naar mijn huis bent gekomen, terwijl je duidelijk de moordenaar bent van die man en duidelijk een dief van mijn koninkrijk.*

After first suspecting Tiresias of conspiracy and then Creon, Oedipus is slowly starting to isolate himself from his family. Here he shows arrogance by distancing himself from the others. His own authority “blinds” him to the truth. Because of his confidence in his own innocence he cannot see (so he is metaphorically blind, which foreshadows his physical blindness in the end) the facts that are in front of his nose (Tiresias’ prediction).<sup>58</sup>

### **Jocasta**

After losing support from Tiresias and Creon, Oedipus confides in his wife Jocasta. Jocasta plays a crucial role in the play, in revealing the truth of Oedipus’ past. Without her knowledge of the past and her presence on stage, Oedipus would perhaps never have known his true identity. The initial ignorance of them both enhances the dramatic irony.<sup>59</sup>

Ramfos defines Jocasta as the “good angel”<sup>60</sup>, the one whom Oedipus can trust and to whom he can tell everything. This argument connects well with the fact that Jocasta is, unbeknownst to him, also his mother. In this scene, for example, Jocasta is giving him advise not to believe the prophecy:

σύ νυν ἀφείς σεαυτὸν ὧν λέγεις πέρι  
ἐμοῦ 'πάκουσον, καὶ μάθ' οὔνεκ' ἐστὶ σοὶ  
βρότειον οὐδὲν μαντικῆς ἔχον τέχνης. (OT.707-09)

*Went jij jezelf nu af van de dingen waarover je spreekt en luister naar mij, en leer dat geen enkele sterveling, welke ook maar bij je komt, de kunst van het voorspellen bezit.*

Besides supporting him in finding out what is going on, she also “mothers” him, for instance by telling him not to investigate further when Oedipus comes to a point where he almost finds out the miserable truth about himself:

μὴ πρὸς θεῶν, εἴπερ τι τοῦ σαυτοῦ βίου  
κῆδει, ματεύσης τοῦθ': ἄλις νοσοῦσ' ἐγώ.(OT.1060-61)

*Bij de goden, onderzoek dit niet verder, als iets van jouw leven je verontrust; Ik lijd al genoeg.*

Oedipus is softer and more open with her than he is to Creon. When she demands that he tells her what is going on, he immediately tells her the truth. Newton<sup>61</sup> argues that Jocasta acts as a mother in the play. When she does not know of the full horror of their shared past, Jocasta treats her husband as a mother would treat her son. She does not want him to shame the family in front of the public. In this passage, she is begging Oedipus not to proceed with his investigation and attempts to tell him what is ‘best for him’:

καὶ μὴν φρονοῦσά γ' εἶ τὰ λῶστά σοὶ λέγω.(OT.1066), *En het goed menend vertel ik jou de beste*

<sup>58</sup> Ramfos (2006): 72-74

<sup>59</sup> Mclure (2012): 375-376

<sup>60</sup> Ramfos (2006); 88

<sup>61</sup> Newton, *Oedipus' Wife and Mother*, (1991)

*dingen (om te doen)*. Sophocles thus creates tension, by portraying a woman who is addressed as wife but simultaneously acts like a mother.<sup>62</sup>

From his side, Oedipus continues to be open with Jocasta, while he finds out more about Laios' murder. This openness could also indicate a subconscious draw towards his mother. He is at loss what to do so he asks his "wife" for help, as if she were his mother, which is meant foreshadowing, because the fact that Oedipus will later discover he has in fact married his mother is a key feature to Oedipus' fall.

When Oedipus is almost at the moment of finding out the truth, Jocasta tries to sooth him and tell him that he should not investigate any further. Jocasta actually finds out the truth before Oedipus does (ὦ δύσποτμ', εἶθε μήποτε γνοίης ὅς εἰ (OT. 1068), *O ongelukkige, moge jij nooit weten wie je bent.*)

When Jocasta commits suicide, Oedipus is mad with rage and sadness. He storms into her room and demands for the "woman". He has stopped defining her as wife (or even by inference as a mother)<sup>63</sup>:

φοιτᾷ γὰρ ἡμᾶς ἔγχος ἔξαιτῶν πορεῖν,  
γυναῖκά τ' οὐ γυναῖκα, μητρώαν δ' ὄπου  
κίχοι διπλῆν ἄρουραν οὐ̃ τε καὶ τέκνων.(OT.1255-57)

*Want hij liep heen en weer, ons vragend hem een zwaard te geven, en de echtgenote die geen echtgenote meer was, maar een moederlijk ploeg die twee keer had geoogst, hem en zijn kinderen.*

All the love for his wife and mother seems to have vanished. He is disgusted by the idea that he committed incest. Jocasta is strongly connected to the matters of incest and patricide in the play. This theme of incest is linguistically strongly connected to the metaphor of sowing of a field. This sowing of a field was in ancient Greece connected with fertility and dysfunctional sexuality (which strongly affect Oedipus' state of mind). There are lots of references to it throughout the play (e.g. this last citation: μητρώαν δ' ὄπου κίχοι διπλῆν ἄρουραν" (OT.1257): *maar een moeder die met een dubbele ploeg baarde*).<sup>64</sup>

Jocasta's involvement causes Oedipus to switch from confidence, power and control to uncertainty and fear. Her arrival also marks the start of Oedipus' search for his own identity.<sup>65</sup>

### **The children**

Oedipus only briefly mentions his children at the end of the play, but he does indicate that he cares about them, for he begs to see his daughters for one last time. With this deed Oedipus attempts to restore the social structure within his family.<sup>66</sup> According to Segal, this is also the moment that Oedipus' tone becomes gentler and more personal when Creon brings his daughters on stage:<sup>67</sup>

παίδων δὲ τῶν μὲν ἀρσένων μὴ μοι, Κρέον,  
προσθῆ μέρμιναν: ἄνδρες εἰσίν, ὥστε μὴ  
σπάνιν ποτὲ σχεῖν, ἔνθ' ἂν ὄσι, τοῦ βίου:  
ταῖν δ' ἀθλίαν οἰκτραῖν τε παρθένοιν ἐμαῖν,  
αἶν οὐποθ' ἴήμη† χωρὶς ἐστάθη βορᾶς

<sup>62</sup> Newton (1991): 41-44

<sup>63</sup> Ramfos (2006): 157

<sup>64</sup> Mclure (2012): 375-379

<sup>65</sup> Segal (2001): 88

<sup>66</sup> Ramfos (2006): 169-170

<sup>67</sup> Segal (2001): 52

τράπεζ' ἄνευ τοῦδ' ἀνδρός, ἀλλ' ὅσων ἐγὼ  
 ψάουμι, πάντων τῶδ' ἀεὶ μετειχέτην:  
 ταῖν μοι μέλεσθαι: καὶ μάλιστα μὲν χεροῖν  
 ψαῦσαί μ' ἔασον κάποκλαύσασθαι κακά.  
 ἴθ' ὦναξ,  
 ἴθ' ὦ γονῆ γενναῖε: χερσὶ τᾶν θιγῶν  
 δοκοῖμ' ἔχειν σφᾶς, ὥσπερ ἠνίκ' ἔβλεπον. (OT.1459-1470)

*Van mijn kinderen, Kreon, neem geen zorg over mijn zoons; Zij zijn mannen, dat zij maar nooit gebrek hebben in hun leven, waar ze ook zijn: Mijn twee ongelukkige en meelijwekkende dochters, bij wie de tafel nooit apart van eten stond zonder die man, maar van alle grote dingen, die ik aanraakte, kregen zij altijd een deel: Zorg, voor mij, voor hen: en laat mij hen op z'n minst met mijn handen aanraken en de slechte dingen beklagen. Vergeef dit, heer, vergeef dit, edele heer: Ik zou verwachten hen met mijn handen vast te kunnen houden, zoals ik ze ooit zag.*

Vellacott argues that the purpose of bringing his daughters on stage was to give Oedipus the opportunity to confess his crimes. Jocasta was already dead, so their daughters are on stage in her stead to receive the confession. A second reason he argues is that the children will make the judgment less harsh. A third purpose is to lead the audience in a calmer atmosphere, away from the tragic environment.<sup>68</sup>

Oedipus is calmer when his daughters are on stage and he seems to be more in control of himself, and hence much more reasonable. It seems that the only thing that can give him any comfort in this tragic moment is the sight of his daughters, which proves the importance of family dynamics and the influence that Oedipus' family can have on his character.

## 2.2 Plot outcome and the fall of the hero

We have now seen how Oedipus' relationship with his family strongly affects his downfall through his character and state of mind and how it increases his isolation. After this, we can look at other aspects that also affect his downfall and lead to an increased isolation. This fall shows some clear similarities with Hamlet's fall, as we will see in chapters 3 and 4. One person who is no family member but still plays an important role in Oedipus' fall is Tiresias.

### Tiresias

Tiresias is the catalyst for Oedipus' eventual physical and metaphorical isolation. In the beginning Oedipus praises Tiresias and forces him to tell the prophecy, but eventually he is mad and reacts violently when Tiresias tells him the truth about the situation. The Tiresias scene shows an Oedipus who is less in control. The two men speak past each other when they are talking.<sup>69</sup> Oedipus suspects Tiresias of conspiring against him, working together with Creon:

ὄν δὴ σὺ πειρᾶς ἐκβαλεῖν, δοκῶν θρόνοις  
 παραστατήσῃν τοῖς Κρεοντείοις πέλας.(OT. 399-400)

*Hem (Oedipus) probeer jij eruit te gooien, menend dat je dichtbij de troon van Kreon zult staan.*

Oedipus does not believe Tiresias' predictions because of his suspicions. There is a certain paradox in the confrontation between Oedipus and Tiresias. Oedipus can see, but he is blind to the truth. Tiresias

<sup>68</sup> Vellacott (1971): 244-245

<sup>69</sup> Segal (2001): 78-80



on the other hand, cannot physically see, but he can see the truth with blind eyes. Ironically, it is only when Oedipus is physically blind at the end of the play that he can finally see the truth about his identity. This is important, because it indicates how Oedipus will eventually suffer his downfall through the discovery of his real identity. Because he is blind to the truth he will eventually fall into misery.<sup>70</sup> There has been much discussion about why Oedipus did not believe Tiresias' prediction. Some scholars (e.g. Knox; 1980) suggested that he walked off stage while Tiresias was still speaking. Others (e.g. Kirkwood; 1958) believe that he was too blinded by rage to hear Tiresias speak. This last argument seems the better option in my opinion (why would Tiresias still be speaking a prophecy if there was no one to listen to it?), but it could also be because he just did not want to believe it or found it too absurd to believe. As Liapis also argues: “ ‘The infernal machine’ that will ultimately lead to Oedipus’ catastrophe is set in motion precisely at the moment when Oedipus chooses angrily to disregard Tiresias’ warnings –warnings that, as we shall see now, are all too easy to disregard, because they have been deliberately made to sound absurd.”<sup>71</sup>

Usually, at the end of a scene, an important character will give a final speech before they leave the stage. But Oedipus does not do this at the end of the scene with Tiresias. This is meant to keep the attention of the audience on the words of Tiresias, which are important and reveal to us the actual plot outcome:

φανήσεται δὲ παισὶ τοῖς αὐτοῦ ζυγῶν  
 ἀδελφὸς αὐτὸς καὶ πατήρ, καὶ ἧς ἔφυ  
 γυναικὸς υἱὸς καὶ πόσις, καὶ τοῦ πατρὸς  
 ὁμόσπορος τε καὶ φονεὺς. καὶ ταῦτ' ἰὼν  
 εἴσω λογιζοῦ: κἂν λάβῃς ἐνευσμένον,  
 φάσκειν ἔμ' ἤδη μαντικῇ μηδὲν φρονεῖν. (OT.457-62)

*Hij zal worden getoond aan zijn kinderen, bij wie hijzelf broer en vader is, en zij, van welke vrouw hij zoon en echtgenoot is, en van zijn vader een deler van echtgenote en moordenaar. En bedenk deze dingen, terwijl je naar binnen gaat: en (als) je meent dat ik lieg, zeg dan dat ik geen enkel verstand van de kunst van het voorspellen.*

Sophocles would have done this because it would be far too difficult to hide such plot details, when the audience probably already knew the Oedipus-myth and also to surprise the audience when they would least expect it. Besides that it is necessary for the audience to have foreknowledge of the situation to feel pity for the ignorance and fate of the tragic hero.<sup>72</sup>

## The fall

Throughout the entire play Oedipus gradually finds out more about Laios' murder. This starts when Jocasta mentions the three-forked road. This stirs a memory, because on his journey to Thebes, Oedipus killed a man on a three-forked road. In this passage Oedipus articulates his worry about the words that she just said to him:

οἷόν μ' ἀκούσαντ' ἀρτίως ἔχει, γύναι,  
 ψυχῆς πλάνημα κἀνακίνησις φρενῶν.(OT. 726-27)

<sup>70</sup> Rabinowitz, (2008): 169; Segal, (1995): 163

<sup>71</sup> Liapis (2012): 87-88

<sup>72</sup> Liapis (2012): 86; 92

*Wat een dwaling van de ziel en wat een onrust van het verstand kwam op mij, vrouw, toen ik u zojuist hoorde.*

At the end of the fourth epeisodion, Oedipus finally realizes what is happening and the fall of the hero begins. According to Ramfos in the verses 1047-1087 Oedipus is near his solution. From this point on the plague and murder are put to one side and Oedipus gives his full attention to his identity. In rapid stichomythia between Oedipus and the Shepherd (verses 1119-1181) the truth is finally, completely, revealed. When Oedipus hears this, he is utterly devastated and cries out:

ἰοὺ ἰοῦ: τὰ πάντ' ἄν ἐξήκοι σαφῆ.  
ὦ φῶς, τελευταῖόν σε προσβλέψαιμι νῦν,  
ὅστις πέφασμαι φύς τ' ἀφ' ὧν οὐ χρῆν, ξὺν οἷς τ'  
οὐ χρῆν ὀμιλῶν, οὐς τέ μ' οὐκ ἔδει κτανῶν.(OT.1182-85)

*Ach, ach!: Alles komt nu tot duidelijkheid. O licht, moge ik je nu voor het laatst aanschouwen, ik die ben getoond als voortgekomen vanuit de verkeerden, met de verkeerden verbonden, en gedood die ik niet had moeten doden.*

After everyone is gone Oedipus stands alone. He is completely isolated from the rest of the world because of his crimes. After finally discovering his real lineage he cries out and runs into the palace. After she finds out the truth, Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus is mad with rage and misery. He stabs his own eyes out with her jewellery.

Oedipus' revelation is the dramatic climax. This is the moment when he is no longer the confident king, he was at the very beginning of the play, who had his emotions in control and spoke clearly and reasonably. Now, he is the blind suffering man, who cannot control his emotions and cries incoherent exclamations.<sup>73</sup>

Ramfos offer the following thoughts on this blinding: "Oedipus bore it out to the end because of an overwhelming inner power. For the ancient Greeks shame and disgrace could provide such power."<sup>74</sup> With this he means that shame and disgrace created a great power within him, so that he would be able to perform the repeated action of stabbing his own eyes.

When tragic heroes are disconnected from a social group, shame and violence subsequently arises. This message about Jocasta's death and Oedipus' blinding is brought to us in rapid succession, which gives the audience the feeling of the frenzy the king is going through at this moment. Eventually Oedipus comes out of the house in front of the people and demands his exile and is denied this exile. Oedipus expresses his wish to be banished:

ῥῖψόν με γῆς ἐκ τῆσδ' ὅσον τάχισθ', ὅπου  
θνητῶν φανοῦμαι μηδενὸς προσήγορος.(OT.1436-37)

*Gooi mij zo snel mogelijk uit dit land, waar ik voor geen enkele van de stervelingen aanspreekbaar zal zijn.*

But Creon tells him it is for the gods to decide this:

ἔδρασ' ἄν εἴ τοῦτ' ἴσθ' ἄν, εἰ μὴ τοῦ θεοῦ  
πρώτιστ' ἔχρηζον ἐκμαθεῖν τί πρακτέαν. (OT.1438-39)

<sup>73</sup> Segal (2001): 111

<sup>74</sup> Ramfos (2006): 164

*Ik zou dit zeker hebben gedaan, als ik niet eerst van de god wilde weten wat ik moet doen.*

There has been much discussion about why the play ends in this way. First Ramfos tells us that killing himself would not have been an option for Oedipus, because this would have evoked fear but no pity in the audience and so *catharsis* would not have been possible.<sup>75</sup> So Oedipus begs for exile as he has to live with his deeds.

Peter Burian wrote an interesting article about this in *Sophocles and the Greek Tragic Tradition* by Goldhill and Hall:<sup>76</sup> Oedipus was a well-known myth before Sophocles wrote the play and he observes that many versions were known before his. Sophocles' ending is different to that of any of his predecessors. In Aeschylus' *Oedipus* for example, Oedipus grows old, curses his sons and presumably dies at the end.<sup>77</sup>

The lack of an explicit banishment at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus* has caused much disagreement among scholars. Burian explains the theory of Jean-Paul Vernant, who argues that Oedipus can be compared to the *Pharmakoi* (Scapegoats). This was the opening rite of the annual first-fruits festival in Athens (the *Thargelia*). Two men were draped in figs and driven from the city. This was intended to purify the city after a disaster, such as the plague. There is a parallel in these two, for they are both responsible for the public health and both are to be exiled. However, Oedipus is not facing exile at the end of the play. Thus the non-fulfilment of the exile must still mean something important. In my opinion George Gellie offers a convincing argument, claiming that the exile was not the most important part of Oedipus' tragic fall. The central tragic event which caused the fall was Oedipus' discovery of his decent and deeds, rather than his begging for exile (thus reiterating the importance of 'family' to the play's tragic outcome).

Burian himself argues that Oedipus is not exiled, which for him would be a relief, because he has to face the horror of his past in his own home. This is a continuation of the symmetry of everything going from good to bad. Oedipus starts as a king, happily married and powerful in his deeds. He ends as a beggar, who is an invalid and stripped of all his power and fortune, including his marriage. Burian argues that this rejection of a *Pharmakos*-ending is a rejection of a *polis*-centred closure. The last scenes are not about any politics, they are completely about family. The plague is not even mentioned anymore after the confrontation with Tiresias. Instead Sophocles focuses on Jocasta's burial and Oedipus' farewell to his daughters. Also, Creon describes this is a family matter:

ἀλλ' ὡς τάχιστ' ἐς οἶκον ἐσκομίζετε:  
τοῖς ἐν γένει γὰρ τὰγγενῆ μάλισθ' ὄρᾶν  
μόνοις τ' ἀκούειν εὐσεβῶς ἔχει κακά.(*OT*. 1429-1431)

*Maar breng hem zo snel mogelijk naar binnen: Want het is vroom dat familieleden in een geslacht als enigen de slechte dingen zien en horen.*

Burian concludes that by not ending with the *Pharmakos*-solution, it gives us uncertainty about the future and signals the story is not over yet. Rabinowitz also point out this theory about the *Pharmakos*-rite and adds that Sophocles could have used Thebes to sort out problems that occurred or could occur in Athens. Thebes was foreign and far away, so this was safer to use as a place to portray these things.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ramfos (2006): 159-164

<sup>76</sup> Goldhill and Hall (2009): 99-118

<sup>77</sup> Goldhill and Hall (2009): 101

<sup>78</sup> Rabinowitz (2008): 174

## 2.3 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, it is important to note that Oedipus has a *Dichotmos* or “double identities”. He is both Father and brother to his children (ἀδελφός αὐτός καὶ πατήρ, *OT.457*) and he is both husband and son to his wife (υἱός καὶ πόσις, *OT.459*). He is also similar to his father in that they are both husband to Jocasta and father to her children (ὁμόσπορος τε καὶ φονεύς, *OT.460*). This creates a massive paradox within the play, because Oedipus is searching for his one true identity, but he will eventually find out that he has many.<sup>79</sup> McLure argues this as well: “Thus, the crime of incest...resulted in a terrible multiplication of identities.”<sup>80</sup> This case of the double identity is important, because Oedipus’ search for his identity was encouraged by his family (Creon, who brought him to Tiresias, and Jocasta). The discovery of this double identity subsequently caused Oedipus to fall into misery. This double identity also connects Oedipus to Hamlet, who, as we will see in the next chapter, also has some mental issues.

Thus, in conclusion, Oedipus starts out, at the beginning of the play, as a confident king, who is in control of his emotions. The relationship with his family influences his state of mind and will cause him to lose this control bit by bit. This will lead him into isolation and will be a major influence on his downfall, as will some other aspects like Tiresias’ prediction and his eventual banishment.

## Chapter 3: Case-study of Hamlet

### Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: the Fall of the Hero

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a tragedy about a man, the Prince of Denmark, who attempts to avenge his murdered father, but slowly seems to drive himself into madness. This chapter will serve as a case-

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<sup>79</sup> Liapis (2012): 90

<sup>80</sup> McLure (2012): 386

study, for what constitutes “the tragic hero” and in which there will be a focus on family-dynamics and the fall of the hero, as in the last chapter.

### 3.1 Family dynamics

Family dynamics are very important in this play, because Hamlet’s relationship with his family is the cause of his actions and influences his fall into madness. First, these relationships will be described and after that it will be explained how these relationships impact on Hamlet’s fall.

#### Ghost-father

In act 1.5 Hamlet speaks to a ghost, who is in the guise of his father. The Ghost itself is a disputable character in *Hamlet*, because he is argued by scholars to be an evil spirit. Kitto argues that Hamlet might not act because he fears this Ghost might be from the devil.<sup>81</sup> Haverkamp also argues that this Ghost is a false devilish phantom, who wants to deceive Hamlet. The Ghost is quite dubious, because on the one hand people in Shakespeare’s time did not tend to believe in ghosts, but on the other hand, the fact that the story which the ghost tells to Hamlet happens to be true, might confirm the ghost’s existence.<sup>82</sup> I agree with this statement in general, but would like to add that it could also be considered that Hamlet, unconsciously, already knew Claudius was the killer and made this ghost up in his mind.

Hamlet talks to his Ghost-father, who tells him that Claudius was the one who killed him. The ghost demands revenge for the regicide (and ‘incest’) and he is expecting that Hamlet wants to take revenge:

*Hamlet:*           *Speak; I am bound to hear.*

*Ghost:* *So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear. (1.5.7-8)*

(...)

*Ghost:* *revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. (1.5.25)*<sup>83</sup>

Hamlet obeys his ghost-father’s demand, mostly out of anger towards Claudius, as is shown above, and out of love towards his father or perhaps mother: *As mediation or thoughts of love, may sweep to my revenge. (1.5.30)*

Hamlet is very determined to take revenge on Claudius and is very thorough in his task, because he hires some actors to replay the murder in front of Claudius. This way Hamlet will know for sure that Claudius is the murderer. This action indicates two things. One is that Hamlet is thorough in his investigation and gives his father’s murder his full attention: *And thy commandment all alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain (1.5.102-103)*. Secondly, however, the fact that Hamlet needs actors to confirm his ghost-father’s claim indicates that Hamlet does not completely trust his father’s appearance and that he wants to see some kind of confirmation with his own eyes.

#### Claudius

At the start of the play, Hamlet does not, arguably, know that his uncle Claudius is the murderer of his father, but he still does not agree with the marriage between Claudius and his mother. Hamlet’s anger is shown when Claudius refers to Hamlet first as his *cousin* but later also as his *son*, which Hamlet does not seem to receive very well:

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<sup>81</sup> Kitto (1960): 287-288

<sup>82</sup> Haverkamp (2006): 177

<sup>83</sup> All quotations derived from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, edited by: Stanley and Wells, 2005

King: (...) *But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son-*  
Hamlet: *A little more than kin, and less than kind.* (1.2.64-65)

After the play set up by Hamlet, he is certain of Claudius' guilt. Hamlet observes Claudius while he is praying and is tempted to kill him, but eventually retreats. This might look like a merciful act, but Hamlet believes that if here were to kill Claudius now, Claudius would still go to heaven, because he is praying. Hamlet does not grant him that. For him that would not be vengeance:

Hamlet: *Now might I do it pat, now he is praying.  
And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;  
And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:  
A villain kills my father, and for that,  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven.  
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.* (3.3.73-79)

Critics have responded much to this scene, for example Samuel Johnson: "This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered". (*The Plays of Williams Shakespeare*, London 1765).<sup>84</sup> A modern interpretation about Hamlet's inaction is that he is more in favour with evil and feels himself obliged to act out of evil.<sup>85</sup>

In my opinion Hamlet does not want to kill Claudius at this instant because he fears his father will not be revenged enough if he sends Claudius to heaven and that there may also be a bit of doubt in Hamlet, because throughout the play Hamlet seems reluctant to act. This scene is important because it shows Hamlet in doubt over killing his uncle, while earlier in the play he was still very determined to avenge his father.

## Gertrude

Hamlet has a very close relationship with his mother, so it is not odd that he is very upset when she married Claudius so fast after the old King's death. In act 3.4 Hamlet has a conversation with his mother about her marriage to Claudius. They both accuse each other of offending Hamlet's 'father' (Although Gertrude means Claudius and Hamlet means his biological father):

Queen: *Hamlet thou hast thy father much offended*  
Hamlet: *Mother, you have my father much offended* (3.4.9-10)

Later Hamlet says, after the Queen calls the slaying of Polonius a bloody deed,: *A bloody deed -Almost as bad , good-mother, As kill a king and marry with his brother.*(3.4.27-28). Furthermore, Hamlet begs the queen not to go to bed with Claudius again. (*Not this, by no means, that I bid you do: Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed* (3.4.165-166). Hamlet is constantly referring to the marriage between his mother and Claudius, emphasizing their *physical* relationship, for instance: *In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty-* (3.4.83-85), With *enseamed* having the meaning of a filthy bed.<sup>86</sup>

Levin argues that Hamlet idealised his parents' relationship, because of the protective concern of his father towards his mother. Therefore Hamlet wants to convince his mother that Claudius is evil.

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<sup>84</sup> Gottschalk (1973): 155

<sup>85</sup> Gottschalk (1973): 162

<sup>86</sup> Williams (1997): 115

Gertrude, on several occasions, emphasizes her role of mother towards Hamlet, being concerned about his wellbeing and defending him in the case about his madness. In this scene where Hamlet talks to Gertrude, he also kills Polonius, who is eavesdropping. This deed could be seen as the point at which the king is definitely opposing Hamlet and is deciding to take action against him. It is, according to Knights, notable that, although Hamlet is angry about Claudius' deed for killing his father, yet he does not show any remorse for killing Polonius, almost in cold blood, who is also a father.<sup>88</sup>

Hamlet is clearly gentler when he is in the presence of his mother and let her "mother" him, perhaps losing some of his own confidence. The same as Oedipus lets his wife do to him.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.2 Hamlet's Fall

Hamlet's relationship with his family is, therefore, influential in his fall. The way in which Hamlet acts during his fall, in addition to family dynamics, shows strong parallels with Oedipus. There are also other aspects that influence Hamlet's mental state and his fall, which will be discussed below.

#### Incest

One aspect that affects Hamlet's state of mind is the strong emphasis on incest that Hamlet invents between Gertrude and Claudius, who immediately married after Gertrude's husband (Hamlet's father) died. It is, however, necessary to point out that there is actually no real incest, since Claudius and Gertrude are not blood-related. But the implication of incest immediately makes us recall the family dynamics of Oedipus' household.

Hamlet is very angry towards Claudius because he disapproves of him marrying his mother so soon after her husband died: *But two months dead – nay, not so much, not two-* (1.2.138). There are several occasions on which Hamlet calls Claudius incestuous: *With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!* (1.2.157); *Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,* (3.3.90).

This matter of incest is reinforced by Hamlet's encounter with his ghost-father because his ghost-father also refers to Claudius as being 'incestuous' when he tells Hamlet about the murder: *Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,* (1.5.42). Here, the murdered king connects what he thinks is unnatural sex with regicide.<sup>90</sup> This means that Hamlet's ghost-father makes the incest political by turning it into regicide. The 'incest' is something which seems to agitate Hamlet very strongly throughout the play and he is constantly referring back to it. Whilst there is, as stated above, no real incest taking place, Hamlet uses such imagery to present the marriage as illegitimate to the point where he appears to believe it is real, which affects his state of mind and will be part of the reason he falls into madness. Besides that, it is one of the main motifs for Hamlet to take revenge.

#### Revenge

Another aspect that leads Hamlet towards his downfall is revenge. Critics wondered about the theme of revenge for centuries and why it appealed so much to Elizabethan theatre. The main consensus for quite a while has been that the theatre was influenced by Seneca's plays. T.S. Eliot<sup>91</sup> commented on this

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<sup>87</sup> Levin (2008): 308

<sup>88</sup> Knights (1979): 52

<sup>89</sup> See chapter 2

<sup>90</sup> Williams (1997): 169

<sup>91</sup> Eliot (1927) (in: Rozett (1979): 240)

that this is true on a rhetorical basis, but not on an ethical one. Baker<sup>92</sup> argues that there is Virgilian influence.

It is not clear how Hamlet's revenge can be justified. It could be a moral issue, which the play can resolve itself or it could depend on the audience's knowledge of medieval or renaissance ghostlore attitudes towards duelling and contemporary murders. In one way the avenger is a criminal, because he will most likely commit a crime to take revenge, but on the other hand he is also a victim of another crime. Therefore, the avenger is never the 'villain' of the play. There will always be someone who causes his want for revenge.<sup>93</sup>

There is a risk that we have a different interpretation of revenge than an Elizabethan audience and that we might make it into something that is not Shakespeare's Hamlet. Revenge is and always has been ambiguous, which is exactly what makes it so attractive. It gives the theatrical audience sequences of intrigue and suspense.<sup>94</sup>

Hamlet's revenge is also a major influence on his eventual downfall. The obsession Hamlet creates for this revenge on Claudius influences his state of mind in a powerful way. For instance, he is so obsessed with his revenge that he kills Polonius behind the curtain, thinking it was Claudius.

### **Relationship with Ophelia**

Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia is also an indicator for Hamlet's fall into madness, because of his abnormal behaviour towards her. Throughout the play it is indicated that Hamlet shows certain affection towards Ophelia. There is a sexual reference between Hamlet and Ophelia at the beginning of *The Mousetrap*.<sup>95</sup>

Hamlet: *Lady, shall I lie in your lap?*

Ophelia: *No, my lord*

Hamlet: *I mean, my head upon your lap?*

Ophelia: *Ay, my lord* (3.2.107-110)

Lying in her lap was going too far, because this would indicate Hamlet would focus on her vagina, which Ophelia will not permit, so instead he ask to lie his *head* on her lap.<sup>96</sup> Another sexual reference is: *It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge.* (3.2.237). Here *groaning* refers to losing virginity and *take off* would suggest sexual taking.<sup>97</sup>

The scene where Hamlet shows the greatest affection towards Ophelia is when she has drowned herself and is lying in her grave. That is when he jumps in her grave and exclaims:

*What is he whose grief*

*Bears such emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow*

*Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand*

*Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,*

*Hamlet the Dane.* (5.1.250-254)

When he jumps into the grave, he is even prepared to fight over her with Laertes. However, Hamlet's feelings for Ophelia would appear to be contradictory, because he also tells her to go to a nunnery:

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<sup>92</sup> Baker (1939) (in: Rozett (1979): 241)

<sup>93</sup> Rozett (1979): 239-42

<sup>94</sup> Rozett (1979): 241-42

<sup>95</sup> The play within a play, which Hamlet sets up to catch Claudius.

<sup>96</sup> Williams (1997): 182

<sup>97</sup> Williams (1997): 109



Hamlet: *I loved you not.*

Ophelia: *I was the more deceived*

Hamlet: *Get thee to a nunnery.* (3.1.121-123)

It is not entirely clear if Hamlet was aware in this scene of Claudius and Polonius eavesdropping. That is why it is uncertain if Hamlet genuinely rejected Ophelia's love. Wilson argues that this is indeed the case (that Hamlet knew about the plot of Polonius and Claudius). He argues that Hamlet entered the stage earlier than is announced.<sup>98</sup> I would agree with this, because it is the only time Hamlet confesses that he does not love her, which is different from what was implied on every other occasion when they meet. Hamlet is depicted as an intelligent individual, aware of his surroundings, and so it seems implausible that he would not have known about their presence. Furthermore, I agree with this because of the way Hamlet acts just after Polonius discussed his idea that Hamlet would want to take Ophelia as his lover with the King and Queen. Hamlet comes in and tells Polonius: *You're a fishmonger* (2.2.176). Fishmonger can have the meaning of being a *Bawd*.<sup>99</sup> This could mean that Hamlet thinks that Polonius is attempting to pair Hamlet with Ophelia.

Another indication further on: *O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hast thou!* (2.2.404-405). Jephthah is a Biblical figure who sacrificed his own daughter. Besides that, Kitto adds that nunnery has a meaning of an escape from evil, something Hamlet desperately wants.<sup>100</sup> That could be seen as an act of love to offer this to Ophelia. The affection Hamlet shows towards Ophelia is also an aspect of Hamlet's state of mind. It causes suspicion with Polonius and Claudius and is also a motivator for Hamlet to act irrational (For example, when he threatens Laertes in Ophelia's grave: *Why, I will fight with him upon this theme; Until my eyelids will no longer wag* (5.1.263-264)).

### Hamlet's madness

All these events cause Hamlet to fall into some kind of madness. Hamlet's odd behaviour seems like madness in the eyes of the King, Polonius and later the Queen as well. Polonius thinks that this madness comes from Hamlet's attraction to Ophelia, and he later convinces Claudius about this: *This is the very ecstasy of love, whose violent property fordoes itself* (2.1.103-104); *Still on my daughter* (2.2.410). Gertrude does, in the beginning, believe that Hamlet behaves this way because he is grieving for the loss of his father and because he is angry that she has remarried. Later she definitely thinks that he is mad, when Hamlet sees the Ghost in his mother's closet: *Alas, how is't with you, That you bend your eye on vacancy, And with th'incorporal air do hold discourse?* (3.4.107-109); *This is the very coinage of your brain. This bodily creation ecstasy Is very cunning in.* (3.4.127-129).

Kitto argues that Hamlet's madness is sometimes just some foolery talk, because he cannot talk in a rational way. This "madness" is more a protection and disguise. Hamlet is paralysed in his actions by some sort of overwhelming sense of evil.<sup>101</sup> Knights agrees with this mostly, but also criticizes it at some points. He argues that Hamlet deviating from goodness into evil will not be right, but there should be more emphasis on Hamlet's attitude towards the world and its evil.<sup>102</sup>

Bell argues that it is not clear what purpose it serves that Hamlet is pretending to be mad, because in an act of revenge it would normally be wise to avoid suspicion. Hamlet is in this case creating suspicion with his madness.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Kitto (1960): 275

<sup>99</sup> Williams (1997): 126

<sup>100</sup> Kitto (1960): 275

<sup>101</sup> Kitto (1960): 290

<sup>102</sup> Knights (1979): 23-24

<sup>103</sup> Bell (1998): 314

In my opinion, Hamlet's eventual downfall occurs when his deception (pretending to be mad) goes so far that he really does fall into madness. This stops him from executing his revenge-act properly and gives others the chance to strike against him. This citation from a lecture from C.S. Lewis might fit well in this interpretation: "The world of *Hamlet* is a world where one has lost one's way. The Prince has no doubt lost his..."<sup>104</sup>

### The Fall

In act 4.7 Claudius and Laertes start a conspiracy against Hamlet. However, Claudius has two reasons why he would not *directly* take action against Hamlet, The queen and the people's love for Hamlet. So that is why he wants it to look like an accident: *To an exploit now ripe in my device, under which he shall not choose but fall; And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe; But even his mother shall uncharged the practice, and call it accident.*(4.7.64-67)

Laertes responds to Claudius' question of what he would do: *To cut his throat i'the church* (4.7.99), Claudius responds with: *Revenge should have no bounds* (4.7.101), which is quite in contrast with Hamlet, who did not want to kill Claudius when he was praying, in the sense that Laertes is prepared to kill in church (and to apparently allow his victim to go to heaven) and Hamlet is *not* prepared to kill in church (i.e. to not allow his victim to go to heaven). Because of this contrast, Laertes is argued to be Hamlet's counterpart. Laertes also has a father to be avenged, but Laertes acts completely the opposite way.<sup>105</sup> Laertes is more determined about his revenge and wants to kill in any situation.

Hamlet challenged Laertes in the graveyard and in act 5.2 they have their encounter in the castle. Claudius' plan is to poison Hamlet with a cup of wine. This however goes wrong, because not Hamlet but Gertrude drinks from the cup and dies. Hamlet is horrified by his mother's death and after realising the sword is poisoned too, Hamlet stabs Claudius with it. Hamlet is wounded by Laertes, but later asks for the poisoned cup, so in a way he commits suicide. These actions are all consequences of plotted attempts of revenge: Hamlet against Claudius and Claudius against Hamlet. Hamlet's eventual suicide is not without reason. He contemplates beforehand about death and suicide: *O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!* Knights argues that: "An over-strong terror of death is often one expression of the fear of living".<sup>106</sup> Hamlet's attitude towards death is negative, but he also has a fascination with it, as is evident with his brooding over the skull in the graveyard.<sup>107</sup> This contemplation about death might also be found in his famous (or infamous) "to be or not to be" speech. In this speech Hamlet speaks about acting against the king, suicide and life after death.

According to Knights this speech gives the explanation that this phrase might be an expression of a thought and is therefore hard to define.<sup>108</sup> Bell argues 'to be or not to be' might mean 'to live or to die'. This could be a reference to Hamlet's suicide wish.<sup>109</sup> This suicide wish is something that might be caused by the events that have happened (his father's murder and mother's remarriage) and the influence his family had on him to make him act in the way he did (plotting a revenge and killing Polonius).

### 3.3 Conclusion

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<sup>104</sup> Lewis, *Hamlet, the Prince or the Poem?* (1942) (in Knights (1979): 24)

<sup>105</sup> Kitto (1960): 267

<sup>106</sup> Knights (1960): 153

<sup>107</sup> Knights (1960): 152-154

<sup>108</sup> Knights (1979): 23-24

<sup>109</sup> Bell (1998): 319-322

Hamlet's character is dubious and complex. There cannot be one fixed interpretation of the motifs behind his actions and state of mind, but what has become clear in this chapter is that there are certain elements that have a clear influence on his character and hence tragic fall. These elements include his relationship with his family, especially with his mother. His behaviour towards her indicates she is a major motivator for him to take revenge. Besides this his aversion to the 'incest' of Claudius and Gertrude which he refers to again and again throughout the play, his madness and inward struggles to find his own identity and Ophelia's influence who makes him more a noble tragic hero.

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion: Comparison between Oedipus and Hamlet**

### **4.1 Oedipus and Aristotle**

As Aristotle already mentions in his *Poetics*,<sup>110</sup> Sophocles' Oedipus fits in with his opinion of how a tragic hero should act.<sup>111</sup>

Oedipus unwittingly commits a crime (*ἀμαρτία*) and will suffer some undeserved misery for it, because his intentions were to cure the city from a plague, which could be called a noble deed, but this ends in Oedipus discovering his origins and with that his crimes. This determination to find Laios' murderer and to cure the city from the plague indicate that he could be called good and noble. He evokes both pity and fear in the audience. Ramfos argues that fear is caused by the Messenger's narrative, because he tells us a fearful tale about Jocasta killing herself and Oedipus blinding himself.<sup>112</sup>

Pity is caused because the situation is not really Oedipus' fault. He was not aware that Laios was his father and that he has now married his mother. Also, when Oedipus comes on stage after he has blinded himself, this will cause pity because of his misery. The pity that is caused by the appearance of Oedipus on stage after the fear that was caused by the story of the messenger, will eventually lead to *catharsis*.

Oedipus is from an appropriate social class, he is king of Thebes. He is very clearly involved in the plot, for the plot is about the discovery of his incest and murder. If he also possesses likeness (if he is in a way 'like us') is debatable because he is also a mythical figure. In my opinion this is only partly the case, because at the start of the play Oedipus is quite like us, in that he takes morally correct decisions to try to stop the plague and to go to Tiresias for help of finding the murderer, but as the play progresses, Oedipus becomes more and more the tragic hero that is discussed in this thesis.

#### 4.2 Hamlet and Aristotle

How, then, does Hamlet fit into this picture? Does Hamlet have any similarities to an Aristotelian tragic hero?

He falls into undeserved misery, but not by his own mistakes. The undeserved misery is that his father is killed and Claudius is married to his mother. Alexander: "Hamlet all unconsciously is drawing our attention to the tragic flaw in his own character, the fault that the situation he is to find himself in will discover us, the cause of the catastrophe."<sup>113</sup>

Hamlet causes fear because of his state of mind, which becomes clear in his soliloquies, and in the way he treats Ophelia. He also kills Polonius in cold blood, after discovering him eavesdropping behind a curtain.

Pity might come when the audience witnesses Claudius and Polonius secretly conspiring against Hamlet, and later Claudius and Laertes who discuss poisoning Hamlet. Shakespeare uses pity and fear (from the audience) in Hamlet more than in any other play. Rozett argues that: "For the revenger is utterly isolated, lacking even an ideal in the name of which to act, left only with a terrible moral imperative and his own sense of loss".<sup>114</sup> With this he means that revenge goes hand in hand with isolation, something returning in both Oedipus and Hamlet. Hamlet is also a noble character, because of his anger towards Claudius for marrying his mother, causing 'incest', the love he shows towards his mother and because of his determination to avenge his dead father. His interaction with Ophelia also indicates he cares for her.

Hamlet has an appropriate social class and he is the son of a king and heir to the throne. The plot revolves around him, because it is about Hamlet's contemplation on killing his father and

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<sup>110</sup> Aristotle, *Poet.*1453b3-6 and *Poet.*1454b8-6

<sup>111</sup> For an elaborate explanation of the Aristotelian tragic hero, see chapter 1

<sup>112</sup> Ramfos (2006): 162

<sup>113</sup> Alexander (1953): 41

<sup>114</sup> Rozett (1979): 260

eventually falling into madness. Whether or not he can be viewed as being like 'us' is, as it was with Oedipus, debatable. At the start of the play Hamlet seems like a son of a king mourning for his recently murdered father, but as the play progresses he seems to fall into some kind of madness.

#### **4.3 Similarities in character and events**

So what similarities can we find in the characters and events? This is, as I mentioned before, not the aim of this thesis, but this section will sketch an image of where these stories run parallel to each other, so that it will be easier to focus on the major themes that I have discussed in this thesis: namely in drawing a comparison between these two, we can better explain the tragic hero and his portrayal. The first notable similarity between Oedipus and Hamlet is that they are both very determined to find their fathers' murderer and would go very far to achieve this. Although there is some strong dramatic irony here, for Oedipus did not know it was his father. This is something that occupies both characters, but in contrast to Oedipus, who remains blind to the truth through (almost) the entire play, Hamlet gets to see the evidence with his own eyes, from the beginning (the Ghost) and then presents this evidence to Claudius in the form of the play, which is in itself an excessive example of showing the evidence in front of an audience.

They both take upon themselves the role as investigator or detective. There is a strong sense of dramatic irony in both plays. In both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Hamlet* the culprit is known very early in the play and the audience has to watch the heroes struggle to solve the mystery and eventually fall into doom.

They both have an extraordinary relationship with their mother, something which could even be argued as unnatural. This is in combination with the matter of incest, which plays a very important role in both plays (although this does not mean that incest is really present in both plays). In *Oedipus Tyrannus* this is between Oedipus and Jocasta and in *Hamlet* it is mentioned between Gertrude and Claudius and it is also implied between Hamlet and Gertrude.

Furthermore, both plays take place in the 'safety' of another location. *Oedipus Tyrannus* was performed in Athens, but the play is situated in Thebes. *Hamlet* was performed in London, but situated in Denmark. In my opinion there is a similarity between the suicides of Jocasta and Ophelia. These two suicides both happen at a crucial point in the play. Jocasta commits suicide when Oedipus is on the verge of discovering his true identity and is almost at his fall. It is almost as if this suicide is the last little push to make him fall into misery completely. Ophelia also commits suicide at an important point in the play, because Hamlet has already fallen into his madness and only recently ended his speech on the plains of Denmark about his revenge towards Claudius (act 4.4). This again feels like the last little push to set Hamlet and Laertes up against each other and declare a combat.

Both plays have references to exile. Oedipus goes into exile, which will keep him out of the way for Creon to seize power and Hamlet is also sent to England by Claudius to get him out of the way. Oedipus and Hamlet are both victims of circumstances before the start of the play. When the play actually begins, both characters become responsible for their actions. If Oedipus had not investigated further, Jocasta would probably still be alive. Hamlet commits crimes, like killing Polonius, and he will suffer for it as well in the end.

#### **Double identity**

A very important theme in both plays is the matter of the double identity as was mentioned before. In the case of Oedipus this is his double identity of being father and brother to his children and husband and son to his wife.

In the case of Hamlet this is a bit more complicated. Claudius has a double identity in this play by being husband and brother-in-law to Gertrude and uncle and (step)father to Hamlet. Hamlet himself

also has a double identity, as becomes clear in his soliloquies, where he contemplates if he should kill Claudius or not. His double identity consists of on one hand the noble hero who wants to take revenge on Claudius and loves the female characters Gertrude and Ophelia and on the other hand he is a coldblooded murderer who kills Polonius before checking who he is actually killing.

### **Isolation of the hero**

Both characters fall into isolation. They gradually lose the people around them, because they cannot understand the hero's behaviour or are killed directly or indirectly because of the hero's actions. They also voluntarily isolate themselves from their family to mull over their situation. At the end they stand entirely alone and solely have to face their problems.

### **4.4 Motivation of the tragic hero**

As was mentioned before, Silk argues that there are 3 elements within this suffering: compulsion, excess and identity in linguistic terms respectively *must*, *too* and *identity*.<sup>115</sup> If we apply this argument on *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Hamlet*, you will see that they fit in perfectly well:

Oedipus is forced to investigate the murder of his father, otherwise Thebes will eventually be destroyed because of the plague. He *must* investigate, which will eventually lead to the revelation of his identity. Hamlet, in a way, is also forced to revenge his father. His ghost-father orders him to do this. He *must* take revenge on Claudius, which will eventually lead to his fall.

Oedipus goes *too* far in the investigating the murder of Laios, because this way he finds out his own identity. Would he have stopped, as Jocasta pleaded him to do, he might never have found out about his identity and had lived in peace. Hamlet also goes *too* far in his actions, because he seems very agitated when he is speaking to his mother, and goes as far as killing Polonius, presuming he was the king. These actions cause both Oedipus and Hamlet to have their *name* or *identity* that is so very specific for them.

I argue that the elements that motivate Oedipus and Hamlet to overcompensate in their actions are their relationship with their family and their specific state of mind.

To conclude, Oedipus and Hamlet both, at the start of the play, show a character that is in control of his emotions and his deeds. After encountering family members and experiencing traumatic events (i.e. the plague and murder), they lose this control over their emotions and turn to deeds they would perhaps not have performed before these events (i.e. blinding and murder). Through an encounter with their mother they discover new aspects of their own identity which will also motivate towards these deeds. This also causes their movements towards isolation and significantly changes their state of mind. Thus, it could be argued that family dynamics play a major role in tragedy and the way in which the tragic hero takes his 'journey' towards downfall.

### **Abbreviations and Bibliography**

LSJ: Liddell and Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*

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<sup>115</sup> Silk (2004): 241-257

**Image front page:**

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=3229487&partId=1&searchText=hamlet&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3229487&partId=1&searchText=hamlet&page=1) (consulted on: 02/12/14)

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