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# Time in *Oedipus Rex* and *Macbeth*

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Time has the power to create and also to destroy and delude. "The vicissitudes of nature's cycle and of man's life are both made or marred by time."<sup>1</sup> In a figurative sense, time has two meanings; one is the linear or cyclical progression of time. The linear time is also the duration of impersonal clock time which creates order. The other sense is the subjective, unmeasurable time which encompasses a mythical, timeless world along with aspects of imagination and fancy. Both phases are interrelated as the embodiment of potential truth and the force of doom.

How do the protagonists in *Oedipus Rex* and *Macbeth* face and challenge these aspects of time? Both plays demonstrate the tragic destiny of the protagonists, whose noble kingships are threatened and finally lost through temptation and quest. They also reveal the juxtaposition between the mythical time of the prophets and the current time of the protagonists. Nevertheless, the prophet Teiresias in *Oedipus Rex* reveals the "fatal" force of time, while *Macbeth's* witches convey the "fantastical" force of time. Macbeth is attracted to the witches' prophecy, while Oedipus avoids that of Teiresias.

Macbeth and Oedipus portray archetypal heroic figures and reflect Shakespeare's and Sophocles' different views of time. On the other hand, Teiresias and the witches function as formulants and instruments of time. They appear in the earlier parts of the plays and foreshadow the protagonists' downfall and blindness. Teiresias and the witches live in supernatural mythical time, away from the

perpetually-altering flux of time. According to Cassirer, mythical time is a "truly cosmic potency" and "visible image of time," and has "a power binding man, demon and gods."<sup>2</sup> In mythical time, "past,<sup>3</sup> present and future merge and become the eternal instant," so that Teiresias and the witches have a sense of destiny, a knowledge of the future.

In *Oedipus Rex* the appearance of Teiresias dooms the ending of Oedipus' search into his own secret. Teiresias is a witness of human fate and embodies absolute truth: "the prophet in whom, of all men, lives the incarnate truth" (l. 298). Teiresias is able to perceive the pattern of time from the mythical eternal viewpoint. His power is supported by the gods' law; he discloses Oedipus' destiny as "that is in Apollo's hand, and he will do it" (l. 378). He represents the sacred eternal time of myth, "great time."<sup>4</sup> The chorus describes Teiresias' mythical power and his eternal world with reverence — "profound insight into the past, present to things which cannot be spoken" — and identifies him with gods: "what the Lord Teiresias sees, is most often what the Lord Apollo sees"<sup>5</sup> (l. 285).

The witches in *Macbeth* do not have this divine power to anticipate Macbeth's fate and future, but they tease Macbeth into ruining himself. The witches set the tone of "impending evil" and deceiving darkness, which suggests that Macbeth's world is bound with evil, "fog and filthy air" (I i 12). The witches' knowledge does not reflect the natural rhythm of bird-lore, as Teiresias' knowledge does, but is physical, unsubstantial and illusory. They disappear into the air, "as breath melted into the wind" (I iii 80). They are associated with supernatural evil animals such as toads and cats and natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning.

They reflect the mystery and abnormality of Macbeth's world. Thunder and lightening are also "signs of the voice of god." Teiresias and the witches become the projection which the protagonists conceive within themselves.

The protagonists' immediate attitude to the prophecy is contrasted in the two plays. At the opening of *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus, in the height of his prosperity, power and happiness, proclaims that he will bring the polluted city into order by finding the killer of Laius. This self-confidence of King Oedipus leads him to ignore Teiresias' disclosure of the whole secret.

Unlike Oedipus, Macbeth is attracted to the prophecy at the moment of his encounter with it. Macbeth echoes the witches' words—"Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I i ii)—in his first utterance: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I iii 39). The witches' world, invading Macbeth's inner world, produces and provokes his ambition. He finds his temporal motives in the witches' false supernatural world. Macbeth permits his own impulses to be aroused and to bind him within the fascination of the witches' world. Thus, the witches and Macbeth are "welded together." Yet he perceives in a moment that the witches' truth is double-edged; "This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good" (I iii 1445-5). He is tested and trapped by the witches' mythical time. The witches split Macbeth into an active ambitious self in the real world of passing time and an inner self of conscience in the world of mythical dream-time, and the witches cause the conflict between them in his soul.

... I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on the other —

(I vii 25-28)

Fergusson explains Macbeth's duality: "He is both a powerful and ambitious warrior, and suffering poet and seer."<sup>8</sup>

Each protagonist internalizes the prophecy's characteristics; as Macbeth becomes evil, so Oedipus blinds himself. Oedipus and Teiresias move in different channels of knowledge and power when they meet. However, Oedipus and Teiresias are interrelated, as shown in Teiresias's refusal to disclose Oedipus' secrets: "I refuse to utter/ The heavy secrets of my soul — and yours" (ll. 361-2). Oedipus reaches Teiresias' knowledge through revelation of mythical time and his blindness. The ironical contrast between the sighted blind man and the eyeless seer becomes unified in the end. Oedipus is a "resurrected"<sup>9</sup> Teiresias.

The duration of time and its order and meaning also suggest the different handling of time in Sophocles and Shakespeare. The progressive force of time changes the meaning of Oedipus' search from the quest for the murderer of his father to the identification of himself as murderer. As the play develops and the quest goes on, Oedipus reviews his past, which was previously dark to him. The past begins to intrude upon and disturb the present and controls his future; for Oedipus there is no future. Teiresias' prophecy looks at Oedipus' fate, the blackness of blindness. There is no new departure encompassed by this mythical time. Oedipus pursues the progression of time and finds out that he is enclosed within the past. This imprisonment in the past reveals a cyclical time.

On the other hand, for Macbeth, the future imprisons his present real world. Macbeth gradually traps himself into the witches' world, the created myth. Lady Macbeth's voice, which is identified with Macbeth's guilty ambition, says: "Thy letter has transported me beyond/ This ignorant present, and I feel now/ The future in the

instant" (I v 80-82). Contrasted with Oedipus' obsession with the past, Macbeth is bounded by the future; time becomes an anticipant for Macbeth towards the end of the play. "Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits" (IV i 164). Macbeth does "murder sleep" after his murder of the king: "they [hands] pluck out mine eyes" (II ii 78). Thus, Macbeth destroys the order of time, the rhythm of natural time, and creates his illusory time. He is "on this bank and shoal of time" and cannot "jump the life to come" (I vii 6-7). Illusory time is real to Macbeth. Macbeth tries to mock time: "Away, or mock the time with fairest show; / False face must hide the false heart doth know" (I vii 93). He cannot look at the present when he commits the crime; the present never becomes past in his soul and exists only to be connected with the future. In his desperate madness, which makes his senses dead, Macbeth hears of Lady Macbeth's death. Macbeth instantly feels a fancied future, cut off from the reality of past and present:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death... (V v 20)

For Macbeth, there is only tomorrow. In his world time becomes illusory and fantastical under the unseen spell of the witches. Macbeth wears the "borrowed robe,"<sup>10</sup> false cloth so that he lives in false time. Unlike *Oedipus Rex*'s "unity of time," the span of Macbeth is also uncertain and vague; the play may be one month or one year. This loose time-span reveals *Macbeth's* world of timelessness and blackness: "By the clock 'tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp. / Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame..." (II iv 5).

In *Macbeth's* world, time is mysterious and irrational, like an actualized nightmare. In *Oedipus's* world, time is personified, a witness who remains in the background and records every truth. Creon says: "Time will teach/ The truth of this; for time alone can prove/ The honest man" (ll. 622-4). Time hides reality from our eyes with the name of the past, and then gradually brings it to light as the potential truth. "Time sees all; and now/ He [time] has found you [Oedipus], when you least expected it" (ll. 1246-7). The chorus emphasizes time's power of fulfillment of ignorant human beings' doom: "None can be called happy until that day when he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace" (ll. 1529-30). With self-confidence in his intelligence and achievement, Oedipus calls himself the child of "fortune" (l. 1080). He believes that chance has been loyal to him, and does not know the gods' cruel power. However, urged by Oedipus' own ardent quest for self-identity, progressive time reveals the reversal. Time in *Oedipus Rex* is a witness to man's doom and becomes a doom itself in its altering and progressive execution of power.

The development of each play suggests the playwright's view of time. In *Oedipus Rex* an entrance of different reporters such as Teiresias, Jocasta, a messenger and a shepherd, who disclose Oedipus' personal history, supplies different meanings of his past. The entrance of these characters becomes destiny for Oedipus. All reporters alike push him over the edge into disaster, as *Macbeth's* accumulated ambition and horror, stimulated by the witches, push him to his destruction. These reporters also create a cyclical progression of time in each unit of the play and in the whole, beginning, middle and end. The progression moves from quest through suffering to another quest between each character's entrance and exit.

In *Macbeth*, each step of Macbeth's commitment to sin fortifies the inevitability of his struggle with the leadership and his action against it. His promotion to king follows the pattern of repetition: from his horror of life to his violence, and back to his horror and the whole action completes his ruin. Against Macbeth, there is a parallel in the rising of the other new power. Thus, in Macbeth's world a linear progression of time is created.

Time not only reveals man's destiny but affects his feelings. Both Oedipus and Macbeth live in apprehension, so a length of time seems to them long. Oedipus, moved by his ardent impatience, is always impelled to seek a resolution of his quest despite other characters' advice to stop the research. Likewise, Macbeth impatiently pursues his chance; he races with time: "time and the hour runs through the roughest day" (I iii 165). Macbeth is in tremendous conflict between hesitation and urgency.

The relation of time and law to the protagonists also shows the difference between the two dramas. In *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus suggests the law which rules the world. Human beings are mortal, dominated by the power of time, but gods are not subject to time. Therefore, the law of the gods which Teiresias represents exists forever and rules the mortal. The chorus cites: "Law which leaps the sky,/ Made of no mortal mould, undimmed, unsleeping/ Whose living godhead does not age or die" (II. 876-8). Oedipus' self-confidence and power are overshadowed by the voice of the chorus, telling the audience that human greatness is set against the law of the gods. At the end Oedipus knows the fulfillment of the oracle and the power of the gods. Time has become the cause of man's destiny in life according to gods' will.

In *Macbeth*, there is no divine law, but human conscience and the honor of kingship, "renown and grace," which torture Macbeth. He can resist human law; nothing binds him. He has the freedom to choose, unlike Oedipus; however, Macbeth's desire and crime ironically diminishes his freedom. After the murder of Banquo, he soliloquizes: "from this instant/ There's nothing serious in mortality;/ All is but toys; renown and grace is dead..." (II iii 102).

At the final scene, both protagonists reveal their delusions of reality. The fulfillment of time is the moment of the heroes' defeat. In Sophocles' world, time finally shows the truth and power of resurrection. When the secret of his birth is brought to light, Oedipus cries: "O Light" (I. 1190). He sought light to enlighten the dark secret of his birth. But now he cannot endure the glaring light of his own polluting reality, as Macbeth hesitates to see his own guilt: "Let not light see my black and deep desires" (I iv 59). Oedipus comes to understand the illusion of life, the frailty of man and his dependence on a destiny which the power of time affects. "All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing! / Show me the man whose happiness was anything more than illusion/ Followed by disillusion" (II. 1205-8). At the fulfillment of the witches' prophecy, Macbeth arrives at the same realization: "Out, out brief candle! / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player..." (V v 25-6).

Nevertheless, the last stage of each protagonist is contrary. At the moment of self-discovery Oedipus blinds himself. He himself chooses this action and it becomes his resurrection. After he has recognized that his fate and action are perfectly dominated by divine law and after he has suffered from it, Oedipus becomes master of his own fate. By his own hands he locks himself in a darkness with the memory of the past, away from the passage of clock time

in a transcendental eternity. This psychological state is the true meaning of mythical time. Here the opposition between Oedipus and Teiresias is unified by Oedipus' insight into the nature of reality and by Oedipus' blinding himself. Oedipus reaches Teiresias' mythical time, seen in *Oedipus at Colonus*, as a divine seer. Through a series of apparent descents into degradation, Oedipus exalts himself to a higher state, the spiritual awakening beyond the agony of his defeated kingship. Oedipus' confidence, which was based merely on his ignorant power, is now based on mature knowledge of Teiresias' insight: "To be wise is to suffer" (l. 317).

Unlike Oedipus, who exalts himself, Macbeth reduces himself to ruin after his identification with the witches' fantastical world. With each step of incessant commitment to deeper sinful violence, Macbeth descends into destruction and finally emerges fearless. "I have almost forgot the taste of fears./ The time has been, my senses would have cooled/ To hear a night-shriek..." (V v 9-11). However, he never gives up life but rather gnaws upon it. "I must fight the course," (V vii 2) isolated from other people. His only course is more violence. Macbeth tries in vain to rule his fate; only his illusory sense of time saves him from the bitter agony of dishonor in the end.

Both heroes believe they can arrest and rule or mock passing time, but in the fulfillment of time, both are controlled by time's progressive power. However, Oedipus, by reaching to Teiresias' state, goes beyond the grip of time, while Macbeth, deceived by illusory time, yields to the magical nightmare. Teiresias suggests Oedipus' resurrection; the witches, Macbeth's damnation. Time to Sophocles is absolute and almighty, but to Shakespeare time seems a mockery and an ambivalence, reflecting the hero's world.

Shakespeare and Sophocles expand and contract the limitation of time and endow their heroes' past, present and future with alternating meanings. According to the Greek view, time itself is a circle, "a cycle in which even the life of the human soul was involved."<sup>12</sup> The future is "to be only the past over again,"<sup>12</sup> as we see in *Oedipus'* closed world. On the contrary, Shakespeare's world of linear time is open to the future, which the character's evil destroys. This progression of linear time evokes the horror of the power of human evil.

*Oedipus Rex* is about the human conflict between man and time, which demonstrates the relation between the gods and man's destiny. *Macbeth* is about the conflict between the hero's split selves, the inner self in mythical time and the active self in clock time. Both teach us a lesson of time and reveal the struggles of protagonists.

#### Notes

- 1 Tom F. Driver, *The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 142.
- 2 Earnst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 112.
- 3 J.B. Priestley, *Man and Time* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc. 1964), p. 140.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Sophocles I*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1954).
- 6 Francis Fergusson, *Shakespeare: The Pattern in His Carpet* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1958), p. 245.
- 7 Frederick Turner, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Time* (Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 132.
- 8 Fergusson, p. 238.
- 9 James Schroeter, "The Four Fathers: Symbols in *Oedipus Rex*" in *Oedipus Rex*, ed. A. Cook (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company Inc, 1965), p. 123.

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10 Turner, p. 138.

11 Jacqueline de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 35.

12 Driver, p. 23.

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