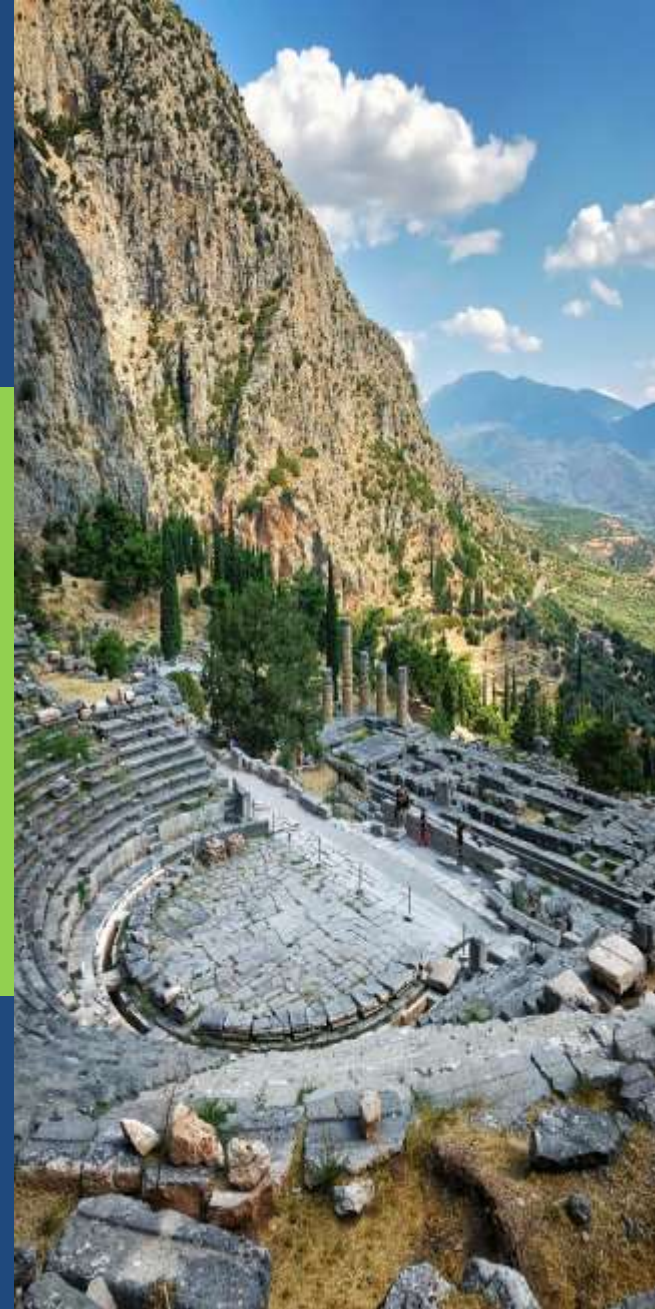


The case of *Oedipus*:

# Excellence vs Integrity in Research

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# Prologue to set the stage

In an Editorial in *Nature* on the need for a kinder research culture reference was made to a blog post from Wellcome Institute's director Jeremy Farrar:

“The emphasis on excellence in the research system is stifling diverse thinking and positive behaviours. The relentless drive for research excellence has created a culture in modern science that cares exclusively about what is achieved and not about how it is achieved”.

(A kinder research culture is possible. Editorial. *Nature*, October 1, 2019).



# First observation:

The quote highlights two crucial things about the life in academia:

1. there is a constant focus – too much, indeed - on excellence; i.e. on the *doing* and *gaining* of researchers. The legacy relates to «*What she did*».
2. there is little focus – far too little – on the *being* of researchers, i.e. on what it entails to *be* a good researcher. The legacy relates to «*How he was*».

# To be or not to be!

So to quote from  
Shakespeare's play  
*Hamlet*:

«**To be or not to be**»,

Perhaps this should be the  
main focus in academia?



# Second observation:

The constant focus on excellence does contribute to a lot of epistemological gains;

- new patents,
- publications,
- funding opportunities,
- and, career advancements,

But the constant focus on excellence also contributes to

- “destructive hyper-competition,
- toxic power dynamics, and
- poor leadership behavior.”



# Third observation:

*Critique* is a core epistemological virtue in research:

- That is the reason researchers write their papers in the way they do, so that other researchers can critically assess the plausibility of scientific or scholarly interpretations and findings.

But the virtue of critique in research needs to be paired with the ethical virtues of *care* and *kindness*. If not, *Hell is loose!*

# Excellence versus integrity:

Three reasons why the case of Oedipus matters:

- This year's World Congress on research integrity takes place where Western philosophy and theatre was born,
- Sophocles' two plays, *Oedipus the king* and *Oedipus at Colonus* could be used to dramatize the rise, fall and rehabilitation of an eminent researcher,
- Research is at the same time a comic and a tragic enterprise.

# The Sphinx: The Problem

At the gates of Thebes, the Sphinx asked a riddle of each person seeking to enter the city.

*“What walks on four legs in the morning, two at mid-day, and three in the evening?”*

Those who failed to answer the riddle were eaten by the Sphinx.





# Oedipus (the researcher's)' 8 roles:

- Role 1 - the problem solver,
- Role 2 - the praised and self-praising grant holder,
- Role 3 - the rescuer and savior,
- Role 4 - the relentless investigator,
- Role 5 - the eminent researcher,
- Role 6 - the over-confident researcher and comic figure,
- Role 7 - the responsible researcher and tragic hero,
- Role 8 - the fallen and rehabilitated researcher.

# *Role 1* - the Sphinx' victor, **problem solver**:

Then Oedipus, the homeless wanderer who had fled Corinth to avoid the prophecy of parricide, of killing his father, came by.

He saved the city by resolving the riddle:

*“The answer is ‘man’”*.



*Oedipus and the Sphinx*; the Gregorian Etruscan Museum, the Vatican Museums, Rome.

## *Role 2* - the praised and self-praising grant holder:

- “... *I came by, Oedipus the ignorant, I stopped the Sphinx. With no help from the birds, **the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark***”.
- Oedipus was praised for his imaginative brilliance and honored with the most prestigious prize; the throne of Thebes and the widowed queen as his wife.
- Oedipus the king – he was the ERC advanced grant holder of ancient Thebes.



## *Role 3* - the rescuer and savior:

In the play, *Oedipus the King*, many years have passed since Oedipus ascended the throne of Thebes. A plague has struck the city and a priest, on behalf of the Thebans, pleads to Oedipus:

*“You freed us from the Sphinx....., we bend to you, your power – we implore you, all of us on our knees: find us strength, rescue!... Your country calls you savior now for your zeal, your action years ago”.*



## *Role 4 - the relentless investigator:*

When Oedipus receives the message from Apollo, the god, that the plague will last until the murderer of Laius, the previous king, has been found and expelled from Thebes, he volunteers himself to be the investigator:

*“I’ll start again – I’ll bring it all to light myself.”*

## *Role 5* - the eminent researcher, 1:

As an investigator and researcher Oedipus is:

- action-oriented,
- courageous,
- rational,
- caring and dedicated to the interests and needs of the city,
- *but he is also a brilliant bully obsessed with searching for the truth, whatever its costs.*

## *Role 5* - the eminent researcher, 2:

It is also worth mentioning here that in this play Oedipus is presented with reference to two of the greatest scientific achievements of the age – mathematics and medicine;

- *Oedipus the calculating genius*, and
- *Oedipus the healing physician*.

# Tragedy versus comedy:

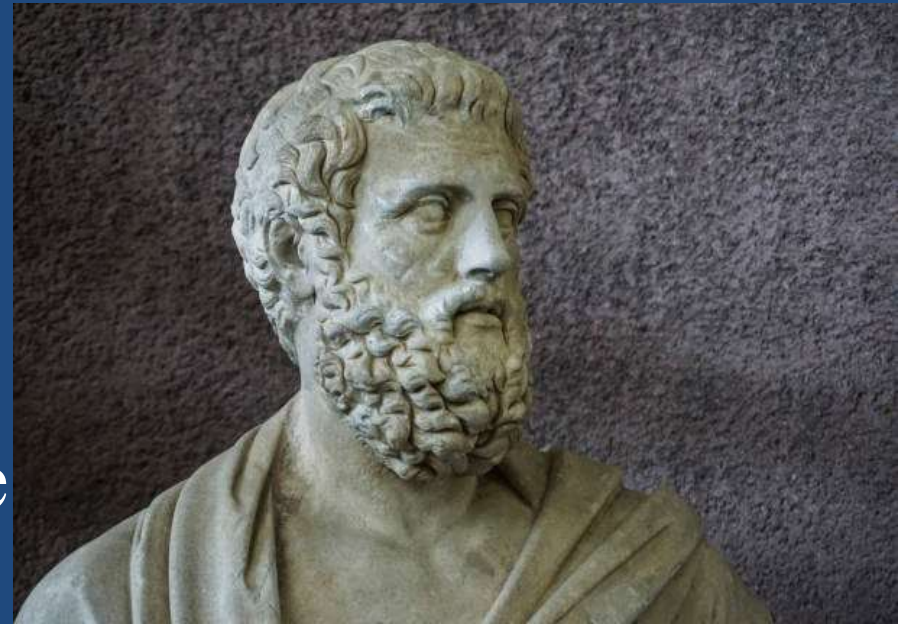


In order to really understand Oedipus' behavior in the two plays here used, some reflections about the difference between ancient Greek tragedy and comedy and between a tragic hero and a comic figure is warranted.



# First characteristic of tragedy:

Tragedy deals with *conflicts* of a seemingly *irresolvable* nature, i.e. conflicts where the possibilities of resolution in terms of ‘compromise’ or ‘mediation’ between the parties involved seem to represent non-existing options (Burian, 1997, p. 181).



Sophocles  
IPR-free photos from Unsplash.com.

# Second characteristic of tragedy:

Whatever choice is made,  
it will by necessity lead  
to an *extreme* degree of  
misery and suffering (Burian,  
1997, p. 181; Solbakk,2004, p. 106).



Tragic mask on the façade of the Royal Dramatic Theatre  
in Stockholm, Sweden.

# Third characteristic of tragedy:

- an inexplicable *disproportion* of error or guilt (*hamartia*) and **misery** (Kuhn, 1941, p. 12, Solbakk, 2004, p. 106).



## Fourth characteristic of tragedy:

In situations of tragic conflict ‘choice’ is under a *double constraint*: The absence of a “guilt-free course” amidst the necessity to choose. In other words, the possibility of abstaining from making a choice is non-existing, as is the possibility of making a choice not contaminated with some sort of error or guilt – *hamartia* (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 34; Solbakk, 2004, p. 106).

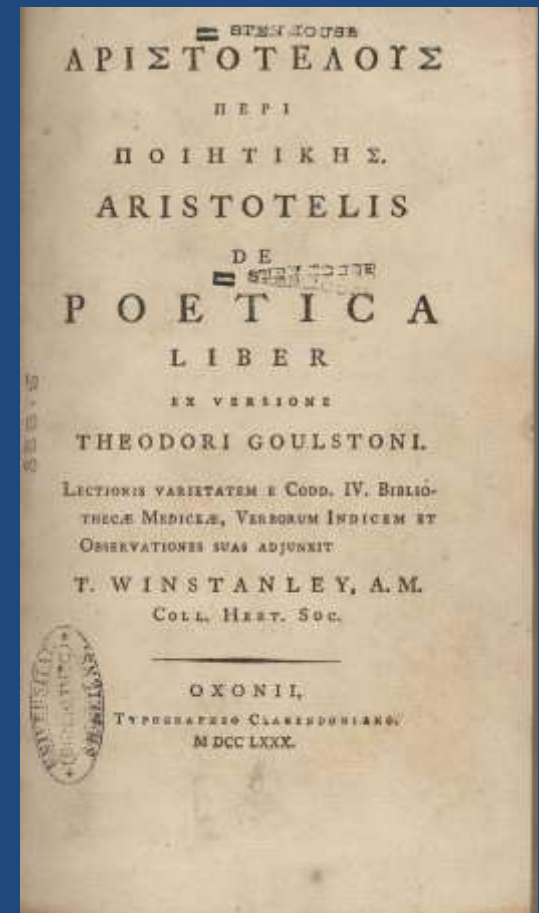
# Fifth characteristic of tragedy:

A tragic play is a dramatic representation of a moral conflict evoking the emotions of pity (ἔλεος) and fear (φόβος) in the spectators watching the play (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 49b23-31).



# Sixth characteristic of tragedy:

Finally, Aristotle, in his tiny book on the Greek theatre, the *Poetics*, alludes to a certain kind of *catharsis* – i.e. some sort of purification - that the watching of a tragic play may generate (Aristotle, *Poetics* 49b23-31).



# Ancient Greek comedy:

”... Comedy aims at representing men as [morally] worse, tragedy as [morally] better than in actual life” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, part II, last line).



Aristophanes,  
IPR-free photos from Unsplash.com.

# Second characteristic of comedy:

While the tragic hero is displayed as morally situated slightly above the ordinary citizen – someone to look up to - the opposite is the case with comic figurers; something which is also evidenced by the (emotional) effect the fate of a comic figure has on its audience.



Comedy masks, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



# Third characteristic of comedy:

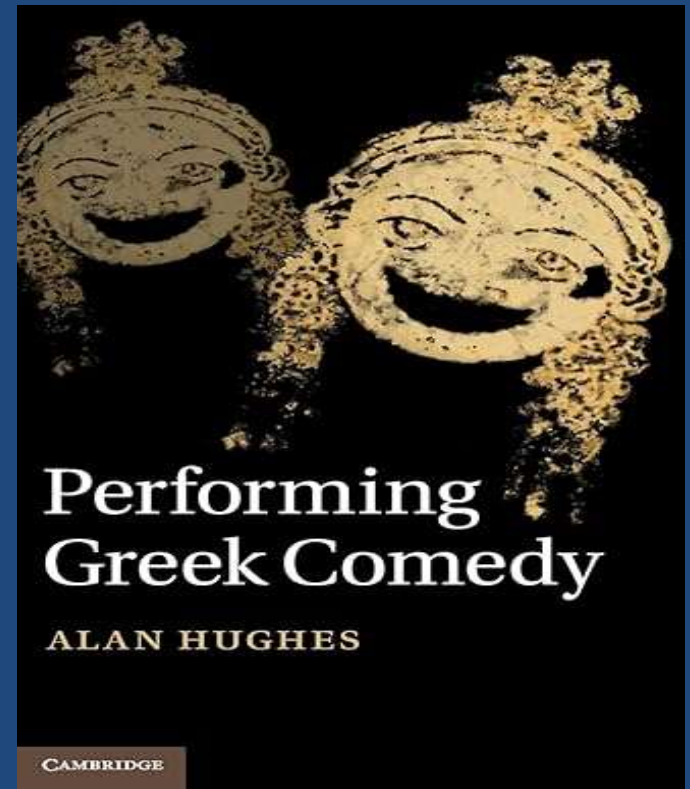
It is not a reaction embodying the painful feelings of pity (ἔλεος) and fear (φόβος); rather it points in a different emotional direction - towards *indignation, laughter* and *ridicule* and towards situating the comic 'hero' in a moral sphere below the spectator herself (Solbakk, 2021, p. 175).



Comedy mask, National Archeology Museum, Athens.

# Fourth characteristic of comedy:

Comedy displays different forms of actual or perceived impairment of moral agency.



# Fifth characteristic of comedy:

Also, the comic 'hero' can play the function of a moral paradigm, but in a different way from that of the tragic hero, in the sense that it gives the spectator the possibility of viewing herself in a *positive* moral mirror; i.e. as somebody with a morality of a slightly better kind than that of the comic figure.



Comedy mask,  
Stoá of Attalus Museum,  
Athens.

## Sixth characteristic of comedy:

The therapeutic effect of both forms of mirroring is some sort of *catharsis*: purification in relation to the emotions evoked, be it pity and fear (the pure tragedy) or indignation, laughter and ridicule (the pure comedy), or some other sort of combination of these conflicting emotions (plays containing both comic and tragic elements) (Solbakk, 2021, p. 175).



Bathing Scene, Codris Painter, c. 430 BCE.  
Attica, Greece, British Museum.

# Seventh characteristic of comedy:

Comedies deal with the *taboos* in life, **those things we dare not speak about in the open:**

- adultery,
- envy,
- frigidity,
- greed,
- impotence,
- incest,
- ugliness, and other
- shameful things.



*Role 6* - the over-confident researcher  
and comic figure, 1:

Against the advice and appeals of others - his wife, Jocasta; Oedipus' brother in law, Creon; Tiresias, the blind prophet; and a shepherd - Oedipus pushes on relentlessly in his search for the murderer of the former king.

***Role 6*** - the over-confident researcher  
and comic figure, 2:

He rejects the justifiability of forbidden  
knowledge:

SHEPHERD:

*«Oh no,*

*I'm right at the edge, the horrible truth –*

*I've got to say it».*

OEDIPUS:

*«And I'm at the edge of the hearing horrors,*

*yes, but I must hear!».*

## *Role 6* - the over-confident researcher and comic figure, 3:

- Out of *hubris* and excessive pride Oedipus insists on pursuing the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.
- And by unpacking the ultimate taboo in the kingdom, of unveiling the unspeakable things in life, his behavior likens that of a comic figure.



## *Role 7* - the responsible researcher and tragic hero, 1:

- Faced with the horrible truth hidden in the taboo, that he himself is the murderer of king Laius – his own father, Oedipus the comic figure, is transformed into a tragic hero.
- While insisting he had done everything to avoid killing his father and mating his mother, he at the same time insists: *I am innocent and at the same time I am responsible.*

## *Role 7* - the responsible researcher and tragic hero, 2:

This is a paradigmatic example of what integrity should entail; acceptance, even, of *inevitable* forms of failure and misconduct, i.e. forms of error or mistake where self-blame, but not blame from others, is warranted.



The bloody mask of Oedipus the King;  
Gerald R. Lucas.

# The concept of error or failure (*hamartia*) in ancient Greek tragedy, 1:

The meaning of *hamartia* has been subject of extensive controversy since Aristotle addressed the topic in the *Poetics*.

A variety of interpretations have been suggested, ranging from the purely *epistemological* “mistake of fact”, “ignorance of fact”, “error of judgement”, “error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances” and “tragic error”

to *moralized* forms of interpretation, such as “moral error”, “moral defect”, “moral flaw”, “moral mistake”, “moral weakness”, “defect of character”, “moral Achilles’ heel”, “tragic flaw” and “tragic guilt” (Solbakk, 2006, p. 147).

# The concept of error or failure (*hamartia*) in ancient Greek tragedy, 2:

- The existence of such a variety of interpretations, I believe, indicates that Aristotle himself imbued *hamartia* with a very broad meaning and applicability, so as to make his conception of tragedy capable of covering the variety of individual plots and plays he had at his disposal (Solbakk, 2006, p. 147).
- Support for such a view may be adduced from the phrase in *Poetics* 13 just preceding the *hamartia* clause (53a10), where it is explicitly stated that what Aristotle has in mind is not one specific kind of *hamartia* but “some sort of *hamartia*” (*hamartian tina*) (Solbakk, 2006, p. 147).

## *Hamartia* versus ‘scientific misconduct’, 1:

- At the beginning of my talk I criticized the over-emphasis on the *doing* of researchers at the cost of their *being*.
- This over-emphasis is also traceable in current conceptions of scientific misconduct.

## *Hamartia* versus ‘scientific misconduct’, 2:

- I think there is a need for a more integrity-sensitive conception of scientific misconduct.
- *Hamartia* with its variety of meanings ranging from purely epistemological forms of error to moralized forms of misconduct has the potential to bridge the gap between the *doing* and the *being* of researchers, and, thereby, satisfy this need, i.e. the need for a more integrity-sensitive conception of scientific misconduct.

## Examples of epistemological forms of *hamartia*:

- Sloppy review of previous research,
- Methodological errors,
- Selection biases,
- Distorted representation of the results of other researchers,
- Inadequate interpretations.

## Examples of moral forms of *hamartia*:

- Fabrication and/or falsification of research results,
- Plagiarism of the results of entire articles of other researchers,
- Wrongful or inappropriate attribution of authorship,
- Covert duplicate publication and other exaggeration of the personal publication list,
- *Intellectual harrassment*,
- Sexual harrassment.



## *Role 8* - the fallen and rehabilitated researcher, 1:

Sophocles' second play about Oedipus dramatizes the fate of the old and frail refugee from Corinth and Thebes who in his death becomes the protector of Athens; a vaccine against foreign invasions.



*Oedipus at Colonus;*  
Cleveland Museum of Art.

## *Role 8* – the fallen and rehabilitated researcher, 2:

OEDIPUS:

*“it’s little I ask,  
and get still less, but quite  
enough for me.*

*Acceptance – that is the  
great lesson suffering  
teaches,*

*suffering and the long years,  
my close companions” (4-7).*



## Πάθει μάθος - *pathei mathos*, 1:

The expression '*pathei mathos*' originates from the play *Agamemnon* by Sophocles' older colleague, Aischylos, and means 'living with and through suffering' or 'learning through suffering'.

## Πάθει μάθος - pathei mathos, 2:

That is exactly what is expressed in the words of Oedipus just quoted; «*Acceptance – that is the great lesson suffering teaches*”.

And it is this kind of learning that transforms the abdicated king into a savior of Athens, and which, in the same way, might turn the fall of a researcher into a potential for moral growth and wisdom.

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