Leadership in the Time of COVID: Responding to Theater of War’s *The* *Oedipus Project*

 On May 7, 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic’s initial surge, Theater of War Productions held a dramatic reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus* entitled *The* *Oedipus Project*. The project used Sophocles’ play as the basis for an audience discussion on the psychological trauma caused by living through a pandemic. The project demonstrated that Greek tragedy can be used today to process trauma at a societal level, and offered substantive evidence that tragedy had the same power in Classical Athens. In addition, the event provided proof positive that while textual analysis is an important tool, it will never deliver a full understanding of an artwork that was intended to be performed.

 Theater of War used the virtual meeting platform Zoom to perform its *Oedipus Project*. The play was presented using speaker mode, so that only the person speaking was visible on screen. The cast included Oscar Isaac as Oedipus, Frances McDormand as Jocasta, John Turturro as Creon, and New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams as the Chorus. Around 15,000 people from over forty countries were virtually present.[[1]](#footnote-1) Bryan Doerries, Artistic Director of Theater of War Productions, directed the reading and provided his own translation.

 *The* *Oedipus Project* did experiment with some of the possibilities of Zoom as a performance medium, but for the most part it conformed to the conventions of dramatic readings. The cast remained seated and used the minimum of props, costume pieces, and makeup necessary to convey the events of the play. The text was abridged to remove references to silent characters who were excluded by the format, and most of the choral odes were cut to privilege narrative over contextualization. The reading ended shortly after Oedipus blinded himself, around line 1366 in Sophocles’ text.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 The company offered a second public reading of the play on June 24 as part of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation’s Summer Nostos Festival, but this review focuses on the first event. Bryan Doerries very kindly provided additional information about the production process and the company.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 According to Theater of War’s website, its mission is to hold readings of seminal plays that touch on communal challenges, followed by a town-hall-style discussion. “The guided discussions underscore how the plays resonate with contemporary audiences and invite audience members to share their perspectives and experiences, and, helping to break down stigmas, foster empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of complex issues.”[[4]](#footnote-4) According to Doerries, the post-reading discussions are the real substance of their projects, and the play readings are simply a way to focus the audience’s thoughts.[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Although the Zoom reading attracted an international audience, the project was originally designed to engage the inhabitants of New York City, Theater of War’s home base and the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time. After the production, the discussion began with the impressions of four panelists who spoke as representatives of New York City’s most impacted residents.

 This review will explore both the reading itself and the reactions expressed by the panelists and audience members afterward. The post-reading discussion is of particular interest to scholars of Greek drama because it provides a window into how an epidemic affects the viewing experience of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Thus, it introduces new possibilities for the audience’s reception of the play when it was first staged, during the Athenian plague of 430–426 BCE.[[6]](#footnote-6)

 The entire cast was stellar, but the *Oedipus Project*’s stand-out performance was Oscar Isaac’s Oedipus. Isaac has had a successful stage career, but at the time of writing he is best known for his work in films such as *Ex Machina* and the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy. Isaac was the most comfortable of the cast with the medium. He was adept at making Sophocles’ translated text sound like something a contemporary person might say over Zoom, and he used the camera expertly to enhance his characterization. His Oedipus was every inch the modern media-savvy politician.

 In early scenes, Oedipus was very aware that he was being broadcast to a live audience. Since the chorus was off-screen thanks to Zoom’s speaker mode, he delivered his first speech after the parados (216–254) directly to the camera, so that the watching audience became the people of Thebes. Like an experienced public speaker, he made eye-contact with the camera and kept himself centered in the shot. His tone was steady and his face grave as he told his constituents that he had a plan to mitigate the current crisis and listed the proactive measures that he had already taken to ensure their safety. It had the contrived intimacy of an FDR-style fireside chat.

 Later in the play, particularly in his emotional exchanges with Creon and Jocasta (513–706), Isaac conveyed Oedipus’s rising paranoia by seeming to forget that he was on camera. He lost his steady poise and started shifting in his seat, looking around the room, and leaning in too close so that his face filled the screen. At the end, after a series of audio-only cries (1308–11), Isaac’s Oedipus reappeared with his hair in disarray and his closed eyes smeared with dark make-up to approximate the gore of his self-mutilation. The choice was just right for Zoom. It did an excellent job of conveying the events of the narrative but was sufficiently stylized to sidestep the danger of camp.

 The Zoom format led a few members of the cast to diverge slightly from the usual conventions of dramatic readings and make a few interesting experiments with theatrical lighting. At the beginning of the play, Oedipus was well-lit by direct sunlight. As the play progressed, the sun slowly set until his only lighting came from a harsh artificial source off-screen right. The symbolism was striking. The more Oedipus learned, the darker his story grew, literarily and figuratively. The choice inadvertently took the sun symbolism in Plato’s *Republic* and interwove it with Sophocles’ pessimistic assessment of the price a person must pay for self-knowledge.

 The rest of the production was overall very strong. The narrative function of the messenger speech was perfect for the format and Glenn Davis delivered it with gusto. The most innovative readings were David Strathairn’s congenially helpful Messenger from Corinth and Jeffrey Wright’s world-weary Tiresias. Strathairn delivered his lines in a mild, cheerful tone that was endearing but often at odds with the content. He seemed to believe uncynically that he was delivering good news. His Messenger clearly had not put any thought into the ramifications of his message, nor could he read the room. The performance reiterated the play’s theme that acting in ignorance is dangerous, even with the best intentions.

 Wright’s reading of Tiresias managed to reconcile the character’s *auctoritas* of age and divine insight with his reluctance to speak. Many actors interpret Tiresias’ opening lines (316–329) as fearful, but Wright’s reading was a mixture of resignation and cynicism. This Tiresias had clearly been through all this before, and he knew that Oedipus’s passionate demands were just another waste of his time. The choice was particularly effective because Wright is black. The sight of a civic leader asking a black man how to solve a societal problem, then accusing him of causing the problem when his answer was unpalatable is painfully familiar in the United States. It more than justified Tiresias’ cynicism.

 The production made another excellent use of lighting to portray Tiresias’s blindness. Instead of wearing dark glasses, Wright positioned a lamp off-screen that was reflected in the lenses of his glasses, hiding his eyes. Tiresias’s knowledge was literally blinding.

 Zoom became a limiting factor during the more intense exchanges between Oedipus and his family members, Creon and Jocasta. Turturro’s line readings were excellent, but the stichomythia between Creon and Oedipus in the middle of the play (543–633) struggled to escalate to the explosive level that the text demands. Oedipus’s threats lacked force when he and Creon were separated by the length of the country. In addition, Zoom’s speaker mode prevented anyone, actors included, from seeing the non-speaking partner in the exchange. Consequently, the actors could not top each other’s lines and the audience became disoriented as the screen switched rapidly back and forth between the speakers. Instead of building tension, the exchange became a jumble of words and images. The production corrected the issue in its second reading by switching the screen to gallery mode for the scene, which also allowed the audience to see that the chorus was still present and to register all of the participants’ reactions.

 Likewise distanced from her scene partners and unable to interact physically with the other characters, Frances McDormand’s Jocasta registered more as Oedipus’ political mentor than as his caring wife. She enhanced the effect by reading her lines in a clipped, businesslike tone that betokened experience rather than wifely (or motherly) reassurance.

 McDormand’s reading accorded with the production’s mission to focus on the collective trauma of the plague. Her choice made the ickyness of the incest less all-consuming than it typically is in more traditional stagings. She eased the modern audience’s automatic revulsion at the violation of taboo, leaving more mental space to think about the ramifications of the play’s ending for the rest of Thebes, not just Oedipus. In other words, the audience could more easily see past the personal aspects to the fact that Oedipus’s suffering would bring an end to the plague.

 Before turning to the post-reading discussion, it is important to remember that the performance context of *The Oedipus Project* replicates the original Athenian performance context as closely as is ethically possible, even though the two productions were very different. In both the original production and *The Oedipus Project*, the plague was expected to speak directly to the audience’s immediate lived experience.

 On May 7, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was both acute and barely understood. The public’s fears about it were all-consuming. The United States had just surpassed 1.2 million confirmed cases.[[7]](#footnote-7) New York City itself had reported 180,216 positive case in total, with 1,865 new cases that day alone,[[8]](#footnote-8) and at least 18,879 deaths.[[9]](#footnote-9) The scale of the pandemic’s fatalities was so great that it had overwhelmed the city’s capacity to bury its dead. Bodies were stored by the thousands in makeshift tractor-trailer morgues, and there was even talk of creating temporary mass graves in public parks.[[10]](#footnote-10)

 The Athenians’ epidemic has been convincingly identified as typhoid fever, but the Athenians had no way of identifying the new illness.[[11]](#footnote-11) According to Thucydides, it killed as many as one third of Athens’ population in the space of four years, 430–26 BCE.[[12]](#footnote-12) Since there is no plague in any earlier versions of the Oedipus myth, Sophocles’ plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus* appears to have been an authorial innovation to make the play more relevant to his audience.[[13]](#footnote-13)

 Both audiences watched the play in the grip of a devastating new disease. Therefore, an analysis of the reception revealed in *The Oedipus Project*’s post-reading discussion can be cautiously applied to the Athenian audience. It is not a definitive reception of the play; there is no such thing. However, it does provide new data that can improve our understanding of the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

 Until this point, philological scholarship on Sophocles’ play has concluded that the plague’s visceral importance fades after the prologue. Jocasta shames her menfolk for forgetting about it in line 636, but that is the last overt reference to the play’s original plot problem. There are two schools of thought as to why Sophocles introduced this interesting innovation but neglected to resolve it explicitly. One interpretation simply accepts that the plot of the traditional Oedipus myth overwhelms the innovation, while the other argues that the plague transitions from a literal epidemic to a figurative miasma that Oedipus himself embodies.[[14]](#footnote-14) In both cases, the civic plot problem is replaced by the personal mysteries of Laius’s murder and Oedipus’s true identity.

 The post-reading discussion of *The Oedipus Project* offers a third alternative. The plague may have disappeared from the text, but it did not fade from the performance. It was so close to the Athenian audience’s lived experience that their awareness of it was overpowering. Sophocles did not need to connect Oedipus’s self-inflicted punishment to the lifting of the plague explicitly to resolve the plot. That is certainly true of *The Oedipus Project*. After the reading, the plague completely dominated the discussion. From their COVID-19 isolation, the audience could easily see themselves in the plague-ravaged Thebans. The context of the Athenian epidemic would have kept the play’s plague equally present in the audience’s minds.

 *The Oedipus Project*’s audience judged Oedipus’s leadership on whether his actions mitigated or aggravated the plague’s impact, not on the principles of democracy, justice, or kindness. As a result, they came to the surprising conclusion that *Oedipus Tyrannus* actually ends happily.

 The panelists began the discussion and set its tone. They included two frontline medical professionals, Dr. Rob Gore, an attending physician and clinical assistant professor at Kings County Hospital, and Anthony Almojera, an emergency medical services lieutenant and the Vice President of the EMS Officers Union. The other two panelists were Paulette Soltani, the Political Director at VOCAL-NY, a statewide grassroots membership organization that seeks to empower low-income people affected by HIV/AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration, and homelessness, and Jo-Ann Yoo, the executive director of the Asian American Federation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

 Once the panelists had shared their personal reactions, the discussion was opened to the audience. Seven audience members of the thousands watching were able to participate. Seven out of thousands is hardly representative, but scholars of classical literature are reconciled to working with small biased samples. Of those who commented, about half disclosed that they had studied classics and knew the play, while others expressed a surprise at the play’s contents that implied that they had little previous exposure to it.[[16]](#footnote-16) Bryan Doerries did give a brief preshow introduction that explained Oedipus’s encounter with the Sphinx.

 Regardless of their level of expertise, it was clear from the audience’s comments that the plague was viscerally present to them at all times. All other aspects of the production faded after the end of the reading. For example, Oedipus’ interactions with Creon and Jocasta and the play’s shocking familial revelations received no comment. His rejection of Tiresias’ information, on the other hand, was carefully analyzed. Both panelists and audience members compared Tiresias to healthcare professionals who had tried to keep the public and the government informed about the coronavirus but were ignored because of fears of economic or political fallout. The audience interpreted Oedipus’s treatment of Tiresias as a threat to public health, an interpretation that made it relevant to their experience as Oedipus’s relationship with his family was not.

 The panelists who began the discussion immediately introduced the topic of Oedipus’s leadership in the face of the plague. Yoo, the first panelist to speak, expressed appreciation that Oedipus acknowledged his responsibility for Thebes’ misfortunes. She wished that US leaders would do the same. The final panelist, Almojera, noted several parallels between the play and the COVID crisis, including, he said, “our own mad king,” a reference to the US president, Donald Trump. These comments and the subsequent conversation made it clear that the audience generally contextualized Oedipus’s leadership by comparing it to the US’s federal pandemic response.

 One audience member who knew the play previously connected it to the anti-lockdown protests that were occurring at the time. She pointed out that the protesters were pushing for an end to the lockdown because they felt that the people who were dying had no connection to them, just as Oedipus thought that his killing of the men at the crossroads did not matter because they were strangers. The audience member argued that, like Oedipus, the protestors would discover that they were connected to all people living in the US and that the deaths of others did matter. She saw the play as an allegory for the human condition and a warning against privileging the wants of the self over the needs of the community, another indictment of the US’s cultural failure that facilitated COVID-19’s rapid spread.

 Because the audience was identifying so closely with the plague-ravaged Thebans, they found the play’s ending hopeful. Almojera first expressed the idea. He interpreted Oedipus’s self-blinding as an expiatory act that would alleviate the plague in Thebes. Consequently, he saw the play as an uplifting parable that instructed the viewer to take solace in the possibility that the community, particularly civic leaders, could put aside their personal concerns and do whatever was necessary for the public good. In his eyes, Oedipus’s own suffering pales in comparison to the good that it brings.

 Almojera’s analysis is similar to the widely held scholarly belief that the superfluity of mourning at the end of Aeschylus’ *Persians* would have delighted the Athenian audience because it represented the Greeks’ victory in the second Persian War.[[17]](#footnote-17) This interpretation relies on the performance context to supply a meaning that is not textually explicit, and provides a precedent for the context-specific positive interpretation of *The Oedipus Project* audience. *The Oedipus Project*’s script cut the long, painful display of Oedipus’s suffering, but perhaps that, too, would have evoked joy in the audience by representing the plague’s end.

 The interpretation also partially aligns with the theory that Oedipus was a *pharmakos*, a scapegoat,[[18]](#footnote-18) based on the personal pollution that Oedipus has engendered through his two acts of impiety, patricide and incest.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, Oedipus’s transgressions carried little weight with the modern audience members. They focused instead on the fact that Oedipus is inadvertently the cause of the plague and on his expiatory self-punishment and exile. The commenters saw Oedipus as the ideal leader in a health crisis because he ultimately accepted responsibility for the epidemic, then willingly made the necessary sacrifices to end it and save his people. Rather than the blameless victim that a *pharmakos* would have been, they saw Oedipus as a Christ-like figure, a willing sacrifice for his community’s good. The audience members agreed that the end of the play was optimistic: not that they found it uplifting, but that the play ended with the best possible outcome. One audience member even suggested that the play was too optimistic. She called it a wish-fulfillment fantasy.

 The key to understanding the audience’s positive interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is once again contextual. The audience was comparing Oedipus with US leaders, particularly President Trump. In the months before Theater of War’s reading, the president had been holding daily press conferences, at which he had made several damaging suggestions for treating COVID-19. For example, he proposed that we (either US medical professionals or the general public) could try injecting bleach or using it as a nasal rinse to kill off coronavirus inside the body.[[20]](#footnote-20) Such statements led many members of the general public to feel an acute distrust in his leadership.

 Likewise, the failures in the federal US response to coronavirus had been widely blamed on the president’s poor leadership. Since Trump had taken office, his administration had been reducing federal investment in the Centers for Disease Control and other public health organizations. As a result, the administration could not move quickly to contain the pandemic when it first arrived in the US. Even after the disease began to spread exponentially, the executive branch made no move to implement a national response plan.[[21]](#footnote-21) Instead, managing the impact of coronavirus fell on local governments, who met the challenge with differing degrees of competence. Finally, the federal government refused to coordinate efforts to obtain medical supplies for hospitals, although it did stockpile such supplies for its own use.[[22]](#footnote-22) State and local governments had to compete for essential healthcare supplies with the federal government and each other, leading to costly bidding wars.[[23]](#footnote-23)

 The result was disastrous. Without a coordinated national response, the US infection rate and death toll surged past those of every other country.[[24]](#footnote-24) An anonymous editorial in *The Lancet* connected the failures in US public health directly to President Trump, ending with “The Trump administration's further erosion of the CDC will harm global cooperation in science and public health…. Americans must put a president in the White House come January, 2021, who will understand that public health should not be guided by partisan politics.”[[25]](#footnote-25) As of May 1, 2020, half of the country disapproved of the President’s coronavirus response, and in highly Democratic areas such as New York City, that disapproval rate rose to 85%.[[26]](#footnote-26) In sum, the US public widely saw the pandemic as a result of the president’s incompetent, partisan leadership.

 The audience members who spoke after Theater of War’s *Oedipus* clearly agreed. That is why the speakers interpreted the ending of the play as highly, even unrealistically optimistic. Oedipus’ early failings were outweighed by the fact that his final actions ended the epidemic at great personal cost. The audience saw Oedipus as the kind of leader they wanted, a competent, decisive man who was willing to sacrifice himself to save his people, the exact opposite of their own national leadership.

 It is worth noting that the Athenian audience would have shared this modern audience’s anxieties about their own leadership. If Knox’s date for *Oedipus Tyrannus’* initial staging is correct, Athens had just lost its own leader of fourteen years, Pericles, to the Athenian plague. Pericles did not always enjoy universal approval, but he had been the most powerful man in Athens since 443 BCE.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thucydides praised his excellent leadership in peace and in war and famously claimed that if he had not died, Athens would have won the Peloponnesian War.[[28]](#footnote-28)

 Thucydides was certainly biased, but Pericles’ long tenure as Athens’ dominant voice and his recent reappointment in the face of scandal indicate that Athens was dependent on Pericles. His death would have created a power vacuum.[[29]](#footnote-29) Athens’ new populist leader, Cleon, never established the same central power, and the partisan fighting and political indecision following Pericles’ death suggests a lack of confidence in Athens’ leading politicians similar to that felt by the audience of *The Oedipus Project*.[[30]](#footnote-30) In both cases, the play would invoke a better reality than either audience was currently facing.

 Perhaps the bitterness that some audience members expressed in the face of their optimistic interpretation of *The Oedipus Project* was shared by the Athenian judges, who awarded Sophocles one of his rare second-place finishes the year that he produced *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Robin Mitchell-Boyask has argued that the play’s (comparatively) poor reception stemmed from the fact that it aligned too closely with the lived experiences of its Athenian audience and induced a lesser version of the trauma that Phrynicus’s *Sack of Miletus* triggered a generation earlier.[[31]](#footnote-31) The modern audience’s response argues that Mitchell-Boyask should have taken his conclusion a step further. Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* evoked not just the Athenians’ actual experience of the plague, but a better alternative timeline in which a strong leader could have ended it. It is entirely possible that early drafts of *Oedipus Tyrannus* included an explicit reference to the end of the plague, cut during the rehearsal process when it proved too emotionally devastating.

 In order to invoke the plague-centric, optimistic audience response, the play has to lead the audience to identify as closely as possible with the plague-ridden Thebans, represented most closely by the chorus. The Athenians would certainly have felt a close connection to *Oedipus*’ Theban Elders, played by citizen youths who moved in social circles similar to those of many audience members.[[32]](#footnote-32) Sheila Murnaghan notes that Sophocles’ choruses all act as observers for the in-play community while also drawing attention to their real-life identities.[[33]](#footnote-33)

 *The Oedipus Project*’s chorus was as recognizable to the New York audience as the citizen choruses were to the Athenian audience. At the time of the reading, Jumaane Williams had recently finished his first year as New York City’s Public Advocate, an elected city ombudsman.[[34]](#footnote-34) Having previously worked with Theater of War Productions, Williams was actually the driving force behind *The Oedipus Project*, according to Doerries. He suggested that Theater of War organize a dramatic reading to ease the traumatic level of isolation that New Yorkers were experiencing while sheltering in place.

 As an Ohioan watching the production from Chicago, I felt no particular connection to Williams. Consequently, I found his chorus irrelevant to the action of the play. I do not mean to cast any aspersion on his performance; Williams’ compassionate chorus was a steadying influence that the rest of the cast desperately needed. However, had the role been cut entirely, the narrative still would have been perfectly intact.

 Some of the production choices enhanced my impression. In a stage production, or even an in-person dramatic reading, the chorus would have been physically present on stage. As mentioned above, Theater of War’s Zoom reading used Speaker mode, so that the chorus was often invisible.[[35]](#footnote-35) Therefore, it was easy for me, a viewer with no connection to the chorus, to forget that he was still “on stage.” His occasional appearances to react to the play’s events were jarring.

 The New Yorkers in the audience had exactly the opposite experience. Both panelists and audience members from the city praised Williams’ reading and commented on what a pleasure it was to see him on screen. They mentioned him by first name, demonstrating not only that they recognized him, but that they felt a personal connection to him. The shared experience of suffering from an epidemic disease was enough to align the larger audience’s perspective to that of the people of Thebes, but the New Yorkers watching felt especially represented by Williams’ chorus.

 Presumably, the New Yorkers’ reactions mimicked the feelings of the fifth-century Athenian audience. As the contrasting impressions of the modern audience members showed, a real connection based on recognition decidedly augments the association between chorus and audience. It intensified the experience of *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a play about the chorus’s salvation, not Oedipus’s downfall. Consequently, the New York audience members were the most likely to express bitterness in the discussion.

 It is impossible to recover the original performance context of Sophocles’ first staging of *Oedipus Tyrannus* fully. However, Theater of War’s *Oedipus Project* offered a unique window into how an audience may have received the play under epidemic conditions. The responses expressed by the panelists and audience members after the production argue that the play may have been interpreted as optimistic, perhaps even excessively so. The connection that the audience felt to a chorus played by a person they recognized enhanced that interpretation by leading the audience to focus their emotional response through the chorus’s point of view. Finally, the audience’s response to the *Oedipus Project* proved forcibly that studying a play’s text is limiting. It is a worthwhile endeavor that teases deep meaning out of the written word, and scholars should continue to do it, but to understand ancient drama fully, scholars also need to study ancient drama in action.

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1. Bryan Doerries, telephone conversation with author, June 15, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I do not have access to Doerries’s translation, so I will use R. D. Dawe’s edition from Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics to approximate the play’s line numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The interpretation of the production is entirely my own, as are any lingering errors about the reading or the discussion following. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “About Us: Overview,” n.d. Doerries has expanded on this mission statement in his book *The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today*. See Doerries 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bryan Doerries, telephone conversation with author, June 15, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is no definite evidence proving that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was first staged in 427/6, but Bernard Knox’s arguments for the date have been generally accepted. See Knox 1956 for the original argument, and Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 56–7; 64–65, for a more recent review of the evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Coronavirus Resource Center, n.d. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. New York State Office of the Governor, n.d. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lovelace Jr. Berkeley, May 11, 2020. One of the panelists, Anthony Almojera, provided a vivid description of the situation in New York City during the pandemic for the Washington Post’s series “Voices from the Pandemic.” See Almojera and Saslow 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Feuer and Stack, April 6, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Papagrigorakis et al. 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Thuc. 2.47–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sheehan 2012, 7; Lauriola 2017, 139–570. Bernard Knox first examined the similarity between the two epidemics in an attempt to date the play (Knox 1956, 135–37, [1957] 1985). Subsequent commentators have generally accepted his arguments (Sophocles and Dawe 2006, 90; Sheehan 2012, 7) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For the first arguments, see Dyson 1973, 212, and Taplin 1982, 172. For the second argument, see Foley 1993, 525–7; Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 62–3; and 2012, 320–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “The Oedipus Project Premiere Discussion,” n.d. Because the novel coronavirus had originated in China, Asians and Asian Americans were experiencing an increase in racist harassment in the US during the spring of 2020. See Mullis and Glenn 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The final audience participant did not disclose any experience studying classics, but she thanked all the participants for their *xenia* in inviting tens of thousands of viewers into their homes, which indicates specialized knowledge. Another audience participant, Professor Emeritus Thomas Van Northwick of Oberlin College, author of Late Sophocles: *The Hero's Evolution in Electra, Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Oedipus: The Meaning of a Masculine Life*, did not disclose his connection to classics, but is too well known a scholar to go unrecognized. His comments were both interesting and insightful, but I will exclude them from this analysis because they were influenced by his scholarship as much as by his response to this particular reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hall 1996, Harrison 2000, 55, 103–116. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. J. P. Vernant (1088, 125–138) first expressly proposed this reading based on the language in the prologue that matches the description of the *pharmakos* ritual, and it has been widely accepted. However, R. Drew Griffith and René Girard reject the notion because a scapegoat by definition must not actually be guilty of the transgressions it carries away, and Oedipus manifestly is guilty of murdering Laius and causing the plague (Griffith 1993; Girard 1986, 122–3). Helene Foley also points out that if Oedipus begins the *pharmakos* ritual in the play’s prologue, he fails to complete it at the end (1993). Even though he begs to be driven out of Thebes, Creon refuses to let him leave until after they have consulted an oracle (1432–1445). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Vernant 1988, 121–38; Foley 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. BBC News 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “Reviving the US CDC” 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Wallach and Myers 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Rose 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Maps and Trends: Cumulative Cases 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Reviving the US CDC,” 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Bycoffe, Groskopf and Mehta 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thuc. 2.65.4. Plutarch cites the exile of another Thucydides in 442 BCE as the beginning of Pericles’s complete dominance of Athenian politics. See Plut. *Vit. Per.* 14–15.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Thuc. 2.65.5–9 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Plut. *Vit. Per.* 35–37.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Thuc. 2.65.10–11, Plut. *Vit. Per.* 39.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Mitchell-Boyask 2008, 64–66. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. A. W. Schlegel, in a series of lectures that were later published (1846, 70), first proposed the idea that the chorus in Greek tragedy was a perfect expression of the audience’s emotional reactions—an idea refined in the years since. See Calame 1999 for a (comparatively) recent review of the chorus-as-audience approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Murnaghan 2012, 224–229 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Office of the New York City Public Advocate 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. As mentioned above, during the June 25 reading, the production occasionally used “Gallery Mode.” The change made the chorus’s role as the voice of reason more evident. It was particularly effective during the first stichomythia between the chorus and Oedipus. Oedipus continually interrupted the chorus’s suggestions with demands for information, and the chorus became increasingly hesitant to speak. This dynamic foreshadowed Oedipus’s habit of jumping to conclusions in his interactions with Tiresias and Creon and demonstrated his early failings as a leader. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)