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Reimagining Tragedy, Ethics, and the Polis: Communal Consciousness in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex

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ABSTRACT

This article advances a tripartite symbolic framework for reinterpreting Sophocles' Oedipus Rex as a performative negotiation of communal ethics in the ancient Greek polis. Integrating Roland Barthes' semiotics, René Girard's theory of sacrifice, and Émile Durkheim's sociology of ritual, it conceives tragedy as a hermeneutic process that encodes ethical crises, displaces collective guilt, and reintegrates social cohesion. The framework commences with myth as a semiotic encoder of taboos, wherein the prophecy of patricide and incest crystallizes ideological tensions surrounding power, lineage, and moral order to demarcate the crisis. It proceeds to sacrifice as an ethical displacement, framing Oedipus as a Girardian scapegoat whose self-blinding and exile externalize communal guilt, expunging miasma and mitigating societal pollution. Culminating in ritual—manifest in the chorus's participatory engagements and civic practices such as oracle consultations—it enables Durkheimian reintegration by transmuting individual trauma into collective ethical renewal and reinforcing polis boundaries. Tracing this sequence from mythic inception to sacrificial purgation and ritual restoration, the study contends that Oedipus Rex transcends depictions of anguish to actively regulate communal ethics, critiquing individualistic interpretations while illuminating tragedy's role in cultivating social consciousness. This model's modularity extends its applicability to diverse literary works and sociological contexts, forging innovative bridges between the humanities and social sciences in analyzing symbolic crisis resolution.

Keywords: Oedipus Rex; catharsis; miasma; scapegoat; semiotics