Summary

Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* begins as a Priest of Apollo asks King Oedipus of Thebes to help end the plague that is ravaging the city. In response, Oedipus reveals that he has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to consult with the oracle of Apollo at Delphi on the matter. Creon returns with the message that in order for the plague to end, the murderer of Laius, the previous king of Thebes, must be brought to justice. According to the oracle, the murderer still resides within the city. Oedipus, who arrived in Thebes after Laius’s death, asks Creon for the details of the murder. Creon explains that Laius was killed by thieves while on his way to consult an oracle. Oedipus vows to exact revenge against the murderer and end the plague.

In order to find the murderer, Oedipus summons the blind prophet Teiresias. When Oedipus asks about the identity of the murderer, Teiresias is cryptic at first. He laments that there is little point in knowing the truth when the truth will bring nothing but misery. However, when Oedipus insults Teiresias and accuses him of the murder, Teiresias angrily reveals that Oedipus himself killed Laius. Oedipus assumes that Teiresias is working on behalf of Creon to dethrone him, and he angrily rebukes the prophet. He accuses Teiresias of being talentless and boasts that he was the one who saved Thebes. When Oedipus arrived, Thebes was held captive by a sphinx. In order to make her leave, Oedipus solved her riddle. After successfully freeing the city, Oedipus was made king. Teiresias angrily rebukes Oedipus for not trusting in his skills as a prophet, and he enigmatically reveals that Oedipus’s parents trusted his talents. As Teiresias departs, he delivers one final prophecy: Oedipus is both the father and brother of his children, implying that he has married his mother.

After Teiresias leaves, Oedipus angrily confronts Creon, whom he believes is conspiring against him. He tells Creon to either leave Thebes or die. Their argument is interrupted by the arrival of Jocasta, Oedipus’s wife and Creon’s sister. She scolds them for arguing when there are more important matters to attend to. Creon departs, leaving Jocasta and Oedipus to discuss the conflict. Jocasta chides Oedipus for baselessly accusing Creon of treason and advises him to distrust prophecies. As evidence, she cites Teiresias’s prophecy that her former husband, King Laius, would be killed by his own son. In response, Jocasta and Laius sent their child away to die on a mountain. Laius was later killed by thieves on his way to visit a prophet.

Jocasta’s recounting of Laius’s murder startles Oedipus. He recalls his journey to Thebes, in which he participated in an incident similar to the murder Jocasta describes. He begins to fear that he truly is the man who murdered Laius. He tells Jocasta to send for the only survivor from Laius’s traveling party. When Jocasta questions Oedipus further, he explains the circumstances that brought him to Thebes. Oedipus was raised in Corinth by King Polybus and Queen Merope. One day, he overheard someone say that Oedipus was not truly their son. To obtain answers, Oedipus visited the oracle of Delphi, who did not confirm his parentage but instead foretold that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother. In order to circumvent the prophecy, Oedipus fled Corinth. On his way to Thebes, in the same location where Laius was murdered, he encountered a traveling party who threatened to run him off the road. In retaliation, Oedipus killed them all,
save for one survivor, who got away. Oedipus is troubled by the connections between Laius’s murder and his own actions. Jocasta urges him to avoid assumptions until he has had the chance to talk to the survivor.

Soon after, a messenger arrives from Corinth to inform Oedipus that King Polybus is dead. Oedipus and Jocasta take this news as further proof that prophecies are inaccurate, because Oedipus was prophesied to be his father’s murderer. However, the messenger then reveals that Polybus was not Oedipus’s real father. Instead, the messenger, who was previously a shepherd, received the baby Oedipus from one of Laius’s herdsmen. Oedipus asks Jocasta if she could identify the herdsmen, but she begs Oedipus not to pursue this line of inquiry. Assuming that Jocasta is simply embarrassed to be married to someone of unroyal ancestry, Oedipus continues his inquiry and calls for the herdsmen to be brought before him. Jocasta then departs, promising to be “silent evermore.”

The herdsmen then arrives and confirms that he gave the infant Oedipus to the messenger. However, upon being questioned about the infant’s origins, he remains stubbornly silent. When Oedipus threatens to have him killed, the herdsmen reluctantly admits that the infant was Laius and Jocasta’s son. Laius and Jocasta told the herdsmen to kill the child, who was prophesied to murder his father and marry his mother. However, the herdsmen took pity on the infant Oedipus and instead gave him to the messenger, believing that the child could do no harm if he was raised in another city.

Oedipus, realizing that he has indeed murdered his father and married his mother, runs offstage in grief. A second messenger then enters the stage and reports on what has happened inside the palace. Jocasta, no longer able to deny the truth, hanged herself. Oedipus, upon finding her dead, used the pins of her dress to blind himself. An inconsolable Oedipus then re-enters the stage and bemoans the tragedy of his life. When Creon arrives, Oedipus asks to be exiled for his sins. He also asks Creon to look after his young daughters, Antigone and Ismene. As Oedipus is led away, the Chorus laments his fate. Oedipus’s story continues in Sophocles’s Oedipus at Colonus.

Themes

Ignorance as a Form of Blindness

Oedipus spends the majority of the play ignorant of his parentage and of the wrongs he has accidentally committed. Even as other characters attempt to convince him to cease his pursuit of knowledge, he continues forward undaunted. Most of the other characters know enough to be cautious, whereas Oedipus is, metaphorically, completely in the dark. His ignorance makes him bold, but it also makes him reckless. It leads him to unfairly lash out at other characters, like Teiresias, Creon, and the herdsmen, because he cannot understand that they are trying to help him. His ignorance figuratively blinds him to the emotions and motivations of other characters.

Other characters endeavor to keep Oedipus from the truth. Jocasta begins to suspect that Oedipus is her son after learning that a herdsmen of Laius gave the infant Oedipus to the Corinthian messenger. However, rather than facing up to the knowledge, she desperately pleads with Oedipus to stop his quest for knowledge. The herdsmen of Laius behaves the same way, refusing to reveal Oedipus’s parentage until he is threatened with death. Both of these characters attempt to preserve Oedipus’s ignorance in order to spare him from the knowledge of his own damnation. Even Polybus and Merope, Oedipus’s adoptive parents, refused to tell him that he was adopted.

The theme of ignorance as blindness is embodied most poignantly by Teiresias, the blind prophet. Teiresias is physically blind, but, as a prophet, he possesses endless knowledge. By contrast, Oedipus can physically see, but he is blind to the truth. When Oedipus first asks him about Laius’s murderer, Teiresias refuses to respond.
Much like Jocasta and the herdsman do later in the story, he laments that even though he has the answers, they only bring pain. Teiresias’s initial unwillingness to reveal the truth to Oedipus suggests that ignorance is perhaps its own form of bliss.

In spite of the other characters’ attempts to shield him, Oedipus eventually discovers the truth. His decision to physically blind himself represents his transition from ignorance to knowledge. Symbolically, Oedipus sacrifices his physical eyesight for the ability to see the truth. However, his decision to blind himself can also be read as a desperate attempt to recapture the blissful ignorance he forsook.

The Power of Prophecy

One of the most important questions surrounding Oedipus Rex’s tragic end is whether or not it could have been avoided. Teiresias, and indeed the plot of the play itself, suggests that it was preordained and therefore unavoidable. Indeed, all of the attempts to escape the prophecy only served to help it come true. Laius and Jocasta sent their infant son away, only for him to be adopted by the Corinthian king and queen. As an adult, Oedipus receives the same prophecy and flees from Corinth in the belief that Polybus and Merope truly are his parents. He ends up in Thebes, where he unknowingly kills his real father and marries his real mother. No matter what the characters do, their actions only spur the prophecy forward, even when those actions are intended to flee the prophecy.

The tragic flaw of hubris is exhibited by characters who challenge or subvert the will of the gods. Upon receiving the prophecy, Laius, Jocasta, and later Oedipus exhibit hubris in attempting to change their fates. Paradoxically, despite the gods having issued the damning prophecy, Oedipus would have been saved if he believed the will of the gods were absolute. For example, had Laius and Jocasta not attempted to defy Apollo’s prophecy, Oedipus would have been aware of his parentage. Armed with the truth, he may have avoided committing the sins that he fought so hard to avoid committing. By this interpretation, the prophecy was a test of piety that Laius and Jocasta failed.

However, read in a different light, the prophecy inspired its own fulfillment. Teiresias ultimately issued a self-fulfilling prophecy; Had Laius and Jocasta never been told about their son’s destined future, they likely would not have sent him away. Instead, Oedipus would have been raised with the full knowledge of his parentage. Whether this would have fully mitigated the prophecy or not is impossible to say. However, Oedipus would not have been able to fulfill it unknowingly, as he does in Oedipus Rex.

Characters

Oedipus

Oedipus is often considered the quintessential Aristotelian tragic hero. In Oedipus Rex, He begins the play at a high point as the benevolent and beloved King of Thebes. However, at the end of the play, he blinds himself and prepares to enter into a self-imposed exile. Oedipus is destroyed by the knowledge that he has killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus remains a compelling and tragic figure because he does not realize his mistakes until it is too late. The true tragedy of his fall is that he bears minimal fault but must carry all the blame. (Read extended character analysis of Oedipus.)
Jocasta

Jocasta is the Queen of the city of Thebes and Creon’s sister. She is also Oedipus’s mother and wife, though neither she nor Oedipus knows this until too late. Just as Oedipus suffers a tragic downfall, so does Jocasta. However, unlike Oedipus, Jocasta attempts to shroud herself in ignorance. She cautions Oedipus against trusting oracles and pursuing knowledge. She wholeheartedly believes that her and King Laius’s painful decision to send the baby Oedipus away circumvented the prophecy, making the fulfillment of the prophecy all the more tragic. (Read extended character analysis of Jocasta.)

Teiresias

Teiresias, also spelled "Tiresias" in some translations, is a blind prophet of Apollo, called to Thebes by Oedipus in the hopes that he will reveal who murdered King Laius. Teiresias refuses to reveal the murderer’s identity. This frustrates Oedipus, who then accuses Teiresias of treason and mock his blindness. In response, Teiresias tells Oedipus that Oedipus will regret pursuing this knowledge. He also predicts Oedipus’s blinding and exile. (Read extended character analysis of Teiresias.)

Creon

Creon features in each story of the Sophocles’s Oedipus Trilogy: Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, and Antigone. Creon is Jocasta’s brother and Oedipus’s brother-in-law. Oedipus sends him to consult the oracle at Delphi in the hopes of bringing an end to the plague. Upon returning to the city of Thebes, Creon reluctantly tells Oedipus that for the plague to end, King Laius’s murderer must be found and brought to justice. (Read extended character analysis of Creon.)

Characters: Chorus

Choruses are a fixture of Greek tragedies, offering contextual information about the setting and providing audiences with a model for how to react to different events in the play.

The chorus in Oedipus Rex is made up of Theban elders. They respect and revere Oedipus, their king, who saved their city from the Sphinx. After it is revealed that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, they are horrified but sympathetic. They bemoan Oedipus’s fate and remark on the tragedy of his fall from grace. Their response gives the audience license to pity Oedipus as well.

Characters: Herdsman

The herdsman, or shepherd, of Laius was responsible for saving Oedipus’s life after his parents sent him to the mountain to die. Unable to condemn the child to death, the herdsman unbound Oedipus’s ankles and gave him to the messenger. The messenger then delivered Oedipus to the Corinthian King and Queen.

After learning from the messenger that the Corinthian King Polybos is not his father, Oedipus commands the herdsman to tell his side of the story. After he is threatened with execution, the herdsman reluctantly confirms that Oedipus really is Laius’s son. His testimony proves that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother.
**Characters: Messenger**

The first messenger arrives from Corinth and informs Oedipus that King Polybos of Corinth is dead. Oedipus, who believes that Polybos is his father, is briefly relieved that the prophecy seems to have been averted.

However, the messenger reveals that one of Laius’s shepherds gave the infant Oedipus to him before he delivered Oedipus to Polybos. Oedipus, disturbed to learn that Polybos is not his real father, commands the messenger to find the shepherd and convince him to testify to the truth of the messenger’s claims.

**Characters: Second Messenger**

The second messenger reports Jocasta’s suicide and Oedipus’s subsequent decision to blind himself to the chorus. The second messenger also predicts future woe for Jocasta and Oedipus’s children and announces Oedipus’s return to the stage.

**Characters: Priest of Zeus**

The priest of Zeus arrives at Oedipus’s palace in order to describe the suffering of the plague-wracked Theban people. He beseeches Oedipus, who saved Thebes once before by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, to help end the plague.

**Characters: Oedipus**

*Extended Character Analysis*

Oedipus is often considered the quintessential Aristotelian tragic hero. In *Oedipus Rex*, He begins the play at a high point as the benevolent and beloved King of Thebes. However, at the end of the play, he blinds himself and prepares to enter into a self-imposed exile. Oedipus is destroyed by the knowledge that he has killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus remains a compelling and tragic figure because he does not realize his mistakes until it is too late. The true tragedy of his fall is that he bears minimal fault but must carry all the blame.

Oedipus is born the son of the Theban King Laius and Queen Jocasta. An oracle predicts that he will grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Hoping to avoid this fate, Laius sends the infant Oedipus to the mountains to be killed. However, a shepherd takes pity and instead delivers Oedipus to Corinth, where he is raised by Polybos and Merope, the King and Queen of Corinth. In a bout of irony, Oedipus learns of the prophecy and, believing that he is truly the son of the Corinthian King and Queen, flees to the city of Thebes. On his way to Thebes, he quarrels with and kills his real father, King Laius. After the death of the former king, Oedipus attempts to answer the riddle posed by the Sphinx who has taken up residence in Thebes. When Oedipus correctly solves the riddle, the Sphinx takes its own life. After he saved Thebes, the grateful Thebans name Oedipus their new king, and he weds Laius’s widow, Jocasta, who is Oedipus’s real mother.

Under Oedipus’s rule, Thebes prospers—until a deadly plague sweeps through the population. Oedipus, a wise and good king, sends his brother-in-law Creon to consult the Oracle of Delphi. The oracle reveals that in order for the plague to come to an end, Laius’s murderer must be found and exiled. Oedipus vows to avenge Laius’s murder “as though [Laius] were [Oedipus’s] sire,” not realizing that he is both Laius’s son and murderer. As Oedipus approaches the truth, those around him attempt to shield him, but his honor does not allow him to cease his pursuit of the murderer. Upon learning of his mistakes at the end of the play, Oedipus is overcome with grief, blinded by his own hand and committed to living in exile.
As an Aristotelian tragic hero, Oedipus’s fall is caused by his *hamartia*, or tragic flaw. Modern scholars have long debated the nature of Oedipus’s *hamartia*. Some believe that Oedipus’s own deficient character resulted in his downfall while others believe that ignorance led Oedipus to sin.

By reading Oedipus’s downfall as resulting from his own deficiencies, his most apparent tragic flaw is *hubris*. *Hubris* is often interpreted as referring to excessive pride. However, it more accurately describes someone who attempts to defy the will of the gods, specifically by circumventing fate. Oedipus’s *hubris* is seen when he flees from Corinth after hearing the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. By attempting to circumvent fate, he sets himself in opposition to the gods. His ill treatment of the blind prophet Teiresias further insults the God Apollo, who holds dominion over prophecy.

Oedipus’s personal failings also include excessive pride and a violent temper. These traits are exhibited most clearly in his treatment of Teiresias and Creon. Though neither man harms him, Oedipus lashes out verbally and physically, going so far as to threaten to kill Creon. Similarly, when Laius provoked Oedipus, Oedipus rashly killed him and all of his men. This showcases Oedipus’s violent temper and lack of humility, both of which ultimately contribute to his tragic fall.

These traits also extend to his treatment of his wife and mother, Jocasta. Oedipus and Jocasta both believe that they have free will over their lives throughout most of the play. However, Oedipus becomes increasingly obsessed with solving the crisis alone, and he fails to recognize Jocasta's concerns.

*Hamartia* does not necessarily refer to a specific character flaw. On a literal level, it means “to miss the mark” or “to err.” By this interpretation, Oedipus’s downfall is the result of a series of mistakes made in ignorance. Though his actions lead to his downfall, Oedipus is largely a victim of fate and circumstance. He strives to do the right thing by the Corinthian King and Queen who raised him by fleeing to Thebes. He also strives to do the right thing by the Theban people by marrying Jocasta and becoming king. Oedipus’s downfall is made all the more tragic by the fact that he sins blindly.

Oedipus’s decision to blind himself at the end of the play speaks to his regret over his actions and to the maturation of his character. Aristotle wrote in *Poetics* that in order for a character to be a tragic hero, they must confront and acknowledge their *hamartia*. By blinding himself, Oedipus acknowledges his transition from ignorance to knowledge and accepts the pain that accompanies it. Though on a straightforward level Oedipus’s blinding himself is a form of atonement, it also takes on a symbolic meaning. Earlier in the play, Oedipus mocks Teiresias for his blindness. He accuses the prophet of being “blind” both literally and metaphorically. In response, Teiresias tells Oedipus that though Oedipus “hast eyes,” he is the blind one. Upon learning of his own ignorance, Oedipus symbolically exchanges his ability to physically see for the ability to see the truth. He enters his exile an enlightened but tormented man. He returns in Sophocles's second story in the Oedipus Trilogy, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

**Characters: Jocasta**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Jocasta is the Queen of the city of Thebes and Creon’s sister. She is also Oedipus’s mother and wife, though neither she nor Oedipus knows this until too late. Just as Oedipus suffers a tragic downfall, so does Jocasta. However, unlike Oedipus, Jocasta attempts to shroud herself in ignorance. She cautions Oedipus against trusting oracles and pursuing knowledge. She wholeheartedly believes that her and King Laius’s painful decision to send the baby Oedipus away circumvented the prophecy, making the fulfillment of the prophecy all the more tragic.
Queen Jocasta is sensible and outspoken. She chides Oedipus and Creon for getting into petty arguments when the Theban people are dying of the plague. She is positioned as a mediator, someone who brings balance to Oedipus’s temper and pride, encouraging him to see Creon as an ally instead of an opponent. She also urges him to avoid trusting prophets too much, claiming that the gods will do as they will and that prophecies are not always true. As evidence, she cites the prophecy that her own child would kill his father and marry her, not realizing that it has come true despite her attempts to avoid it.

Jocasta does not know that Oedipus is her son. However, her attempts to shield him from the truth of his identity can be interpreted as a maternal desire to protect his innocence. She beseeches him to cease his quest for information, but to no avail. Combined with her role as a mediator between Creon and Oedipus, Jocasta’s chief goal seems to be to keep her family—and her country—together. However, once it becomes clear that Oedipus will not be deterred from pursuing information, Jocasta is forced to confront her guilt. Unable to handle the shame of having committed incest, she hangs herself, and Oedipus uses the brooches from her dress to blind himself.

Much like Oedipus, Jocasta is a tragic figure because her actions lead to her downfall. Whether she is a victim of fate or a victim of her own hubris is up to interpretation. Much like Oedipus, Jocasta is guilty of hubris, or attempting to defy the gods. Rather than accepting the delphic oracle’s—and by extension, Apollo’s—will, she and Laius attempt to change fate by leaving their infant son to die on the mountain. She further insults the gods by dismissing their prophets as unreliable.

However, Jocasta is ultimately as ignorant of her sins as her son, Oedipus. She tries to change fate in defiance of prophecy but ultimately fulfills the will of the gods without even realizing it. The overarching theme of Jocasta’s story seems to be the futility of struggling against fate. What distinguishes her from Oedipus is that she does not seem to accept accountability for her role in the tragedy. This denies the audiences true catharsis, or emotional release. For audiences to experience a culminating catharsis, the tragic figure must complete the cycle of tragedy, arriving at a renewed and humbled relationship with the gods. Oedipus’s story completes the cycle but Jocasta’s does not. Oedipus acknowledges his own folly and returns to the stage blind but enlightened. Jocasta dies offstage, unable to live with the guilt wrought by her sins.

**Characters: Teiresias**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Teiresias, also spelled "Tiresias" in some translations, is a blind prophet of Apollo, called to Thebes by Oedipus in the hopes that he will reveal who murdered King Laius. Teiresias refuses to reveal the murderer’s identity. This frustrates Oedipus, who then accuses Teiresias of treason and mock his blindness. In response, Teiresias tells Oedipus that Oedipus will regret pursuing this knowledge. He also predicts Oedipus’s blinding and exile.

Teiresias introduces the motif of sight and blindness that runs throughout the play. Though physically blind, Teiresias is able to see reality more clearly because of his prophetic powers. When Oedipus mocks Teiresias’s blindness, Teiresias accuses Oedipus of being blind to the truth. The implication is that physical sight is separate from insight into the world and into oneself. Though Teiresias is blind and Oedipus “hast eyes,” Teiresias is clear-sighted about reality while Oedipus is ignorant. This distinction foreshadows Oedipus’s decision to blind himself after learning the truth about his parentage. Oedipus sacrifices his physical sight in atonement for his ignorance.

Teiresias also offers insight into the play’s conflict between fate and free will. He is a prophet, privy to visions of the future and thus Teiresias believes that fate is set in stone, telling Oedipus that “it will come what will.”
Teiresias initially refuses to tell Oedipus because he understands that revealing his knowledge will make little difference. Teiresias knows that discovering the identity of the murderer will only bring pain to Oedipus. He attempts to spare Oedipus, only revealing the name of the murderer after Oedipus has angered him. However, Oedipus does not believe Teiresias and accuses him of being an accomplice to Creon.

If Teiresias’s dictum that “it will come what will” is to be believed, then Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus are doomed from the start. Fate decrees that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother, both of which come true. Ultimately, for all that he can see the future, even Teiresias cannot change fate. This calls into question the purpose of knowledge and prophecy when the outcome is out of mortal hands.

Characters: Creon

Extended Character Analysis

Creon features in each story of the Sophocles’s Oedipus Trilogy: Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, and Antigone. Creon is Jocasta’s brother and Oedipus’s brother-in-law. Oedipus sends him to consult the oracle at Delphi in the hopes of bringing an end to the plague. Upon returning to the city of Thebes, Creon reluctantly tells Oedipus that for the plague to end, King Laius’s murderer must be found and brought to justice.

As the play progresses, Oedipus grows increasingly wary of Creon, coming to believe that Creon is plotting against him in a bid to take the throne. After Teiresias tells Oedipus what he will learn about his true identity, Oedipus assumes he is working for Creon. Creon takes these accusations seriously and retorts by saying that he is as much a Theban as anyone. He proves himself an honorable man when he logically explains that he has no desire to be king of Thebes.

Creon’s level-headedness serves as a contrast to Oedipus’s fiery temper. Creon logically refutes his brother-in-law’s anger-fueled provocations. He is primarily concerned with defending his honor as a patriotic Theban after Oedipus accuses him of being a traitor. Creon believes that he is already powerful enough on account of being Jocasta’s brother. According to Creon, being king would be more trouble than it’s worth, an attitude that exemplifies his rational approach to life.

In the final scenes of the play, Creon proves to be a merciful man when he shows compassion to the blinded Oedipus, despite Oedipus’s ill-treatment of Creon earlier. Rather than killing or exiling Oedipus immediately, Creon allows him to see his children one last time. He also promises to care for them after Oedipus goes into exile. Creon highlights his pious nature by announcing that he will consult the gods again before he sends Oedipus into exile, wanting to be sure of their wills before acting. Though Oedipus desires exile, Creon refuses to rush into the decision. He instead offers his respect to the judgment of the gods and thereby demonstrates his lack of hubris.

Analysis

Oedipus as an Aristotelian Tragic Hero

In 335 BCE, Aristotle published Poetics, a tract in which he describes the ideal form and function of a Greek tragedy. In Aristotle’s eyes, a good tragic hero must begin the story at a high point and end it at a low one. The hero must be brought low by their own hamartia, or tragic flaw, rather than through the machinations of a villain. Finally, they must confront their tragic flaw in order for the audience to experience catharsis, a spiritual and emotional relief. Aristotle references Oedipus Rex throughout his treatise as a paragon of tragedy. Specifically, Sophocles’s depiction of Oedipus as a character fits nearly perfectly with Aristotle’s definition of the ideal tragic hero.
Oedipus begins the play at a high point: he is a highly respected king who is beloved by his people; he is happily married with several adoring children; and he is confident in himself and in his own abilities. However, he is brought low by his own tragic flaw. By the end of the play, he has lost his crown, his family, and his belief in himself. In Oedipus’s case, his tragic flaw proves to be hubris, or the belief in the ability of mortals to defy the will of the gods. Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus all suffer from this flaw by attempting to circumvent the prophecy that foretells Oedipus’s patricide and incest. The catharsis, or emotional cleansing for the audience, comes as Oedipus learns the truth about his parentage and accepts his fate.

Irony

Dramatic irony is pervasive in Oedipus Rex. Dramatic irony is a device whereby the audience understands the significance of a character’s words or actions but the character does not. The entire premise of the play is based on Oedipus’s ignorance of his parentage and, by extension, the fact that he has killed his father and married his mother. Audiences begin to suspect the tragic truth of Oedipus’s life far earlier than he does. For the original Greek audiences, Oedipus’s story would have already been well known. This foreknowledge enhances the dramatic irony, since the audience does not need to wait for the clues that Oedipus receives.

Throughout the play, Oedipus makes accusations and promises that end up being tragically ironic. When told that the only way to end the plague is to exile or execute Laius’s murderer, Oedipus worries that the murderer may come after him next. He vows to find and punish the murderer and declares that if he were to ever welcome the murderer into his home, then he too should be punished. The ultimate bout of irony arrives when Oedipus accuses Teiresias of the murder. All of these instances reinforce Oedipus’s ignorance, deepening the tragedy of the eventual revelation surrounding his true parentage. Denied the information that might have saved him from his tragic fate, Oedipus unknowingly committed several horrific acts. The audience can only pityingly watch as Oedipus determinedly pursues the information that will bring about his ruin and reveal the tragedy to which he is already fated.

The Chorus as a Dramatic Device

Choruses are an important fixture in Greek tragedies. They are comprised of actors who both participate in and comment on the action of a play through song and dance. Depending on the play, the Chorus can occupy various roles. The Chorus in Oedipus Rex is comprised of Theban Elders, respected members of society who frequently offer advice to Oedipus. They help provide contextual information about the setting, and their reactions to the events of the play help guide the response of the audience. Choruses also often clarify the thematic messages of tragedies, as the Chorus of Theban Elders does at the end of Oedipus Rex. In their final lines, they lament the tragedy of Oedipus’s fall. Most importantly, they remind the audience that fate is inescapable and that fortune’s blessings are fickle.

The Chorus of Theban Elders revere Oedipus. In their words, he is a “great” man and the “mightiest” Theban. This is an important aspect of Oedipus’s characterization. Otherwise, the audience only witnesses Oedipus at his lowest point. The Chorus in Oedipus Rex plays an active role, relative to the choruses in other Greek tragedies, who primarily comment on the action without interfering. The Chorus in Oedipus Rex often speak directly to Oedipus and urge him not to kill Creon. Oedipus’s willingness to listen to their advice makes him seem more reasonable and less tyrannical. The Chorus’s general sympathy for Oedipus ultimately gives the audience license to pity him as well.

Historical Context

Sophocles’s tragedy Oedipus Rex debuted in 429 BCE at the Athenian City Dionysia, a festival dedicated to Dionysus, the God of theatre and revelry. The play took second place at the festival and was received positively by audiences. Oedipus Rex is often considered the first entry in a series of plays by Sophocles that
detail the fate of Thebes in the wake of Oedipus’s tragic fall. The other two plays are *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Together, the three tragedies are often referred to as “Sophocles’s Theban Plays.” However, this is something of a misnomer, because Sophocles is known to have written several other plays set in Thebes that have since been lost. Additionally, the three plays were written years apart and all debuted at different festivals. *Oedipus Rex*, the first play in the series chronologically, was written at least 12 years after *Antigone*, the final play in the series chronologically.

*Oedipus Rex* takes inspiration from the ancient myth of Oedipus, which was briefly mentioned in Homer’s *Odyssey*. During his travels in the underworld, Odysseus meets Jocasta, here referred to as Epicaste, who tells him about how she married her son after he killed her husband. She later committed suicide out of grief. The House of Laius was also the focus of a trio of plays by famous tragedian Aeschylus. Aeschylus’s trilogy won first place at the City Dionysia in 467 BCE, 38 years prior to the debut of *Oedipus Rex*. Only one play out of Aeschylus’s trilogy is currently extant: the third in the series, *Seven Against Thebes*.

### Analysis: Places Discussed

**Thebes**

*Thebes (theebz). Ancient city in east-central Greece, northwest of Athens, where all the action in Sophocles’ play takes place. As the seat of power of King Oedipus, Thebes represents civil power, though as Oedipus comes to realize, his royal power must be subservient to the divine power of Apollo, whose temple is nearby.

**Mount Cithaeron**

*Mount Cithaeron (si-THE-ron). Mountain in southern Greece on which Oedipus was chained and abandoned as an infant. The image of the mountain as the mysterious “parent” of the king whose parentage is clouded continually recurs throughout the choral odes.

**Trivia**

*Trivia. Crossroad where the roads from Daulia, Delphi, and Thebes meet. At this auspicious location Oedipus kills, in self-defense, a man who he later learns was his father. The converging of the roads echoes the intertwining threads of Oedipus’s fate.

**Delphi**

*Delphi. Oracle at the Temple of Apollo that is the source of all divine wisdom for the ancient Greeks. To Oedipus, it represents the place where he learns the truth about his past.

**Corinth**

*Corinth. Distant Greek city from which a messenger arrives at the end of the play to announce the death of King Polybus, who Oedipus mistakenly believes is his father. Corinth represents the untroubled home of the only parents Oedipus ever knew.

### Analysis: Literary Style

**The Genre of Greek Tragic Drama**

Ever since Aristotle’s high praise regarding its structure and characterization in his *Poetics*, *Oedipus Rex* has been considered one of the most outstanding examples of tragic drama. In tragedy, a protagonist inspires in
his audience the twin emotions of pity and fear. Usually a person of virtue and status, the tragic hero can be a scapegoat of the gods or a victim of circumstances. Their fate (often death or exile) establishes a new and better social order. Not only does it make the viewer aware of human suffering, tragedy illustrates the manner in which pride (hubris) can topple even the strongest of characters. It is part of the playwright's intention that audiences will identify with these fallen heroes-and possibly rethink the manner in which they live their lives. Theorists of tragedy, beginning with Aristotle, have used the term catharsis to capture the sense of purgation and purification that watching a tragedy yield in a viewer: relief that they are not in the position of the protagonist and awareness that one slip of fate could place them in such circumstances.

**Structure**
The dramatic structure of Greek drama is helpfully outlined by Aristotle in the twelfth book of *Poetics*. In this classical tragedy, a Prologue shows Oedipus consulting the priest who speaks for the Theban elders, the first choral ode or Parodos is performed, four acts are presented and followed by odes called stasimons, and in the Exodos, or final act, the fate of Oedipus is revealed.

**Staging**
Tragedies in fifth-century Athens were performed in the marketplace, known in Greek as the agora. The dramatic competitions of the Great Dionysia, Athens's annual cultural and religious festival, were held in a structure made of wood near the Acropolis. The chorus performed on a raised stage. There were no female actors, and it is still unknown (though much speculated upon) whether women attended these performances. It is also noteworthy that the performance space was near the Priyx, the area in which the century's increasingly heated and rhetorically sophisticated political debates took place—a feature of Athenian cultural life that suggests the pervasive nature of spectacles of polished and persuasive verbal expression.

**The Chorus**
The Greek chorus, like the genre of tragedy itself, is reputed to be a remnant of the ritualistic and ceremonial origins of Greek tragedy. Sophocles added three members of the chorus to Aeschylus's twelve. In terms of form, the choral ode has a tripartite structure which bears traces of its use as a song and dance pattern. The three parts are called, respectively, the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode; their metrical structures vary and are usually very complex. If the strophe established the dance pattern, in the antistrophe the dancers trace backwards the same steps, ending the ode in a different way with the epode.

With respect to content, the choral odes bring an additional viewpoint to the play, and often this perspective is broader and more socio-religious than those offered by individual characters; it is also conservative and traditional at times, potentially in an effort to reflect the views of its society rather than the protagonist. The Chorus's first set of lyrics in *Oedipus Rex*, for example, express a curiosity about Apollo's oracle and describes the ruinous landscape of Thebes. Its second utterance reminds the audience of the newness of Teiresias's report: "And never until now has any man brought word/Of Laius's dark death staining Oedipus the King." The chorus reiterates some of the action, expressing varying degrees of hope and despair with respect to it; one of its members delivers the play's final lines, much like the Shakespearean epilogue. Sometimes the chorus sings a dirge with one or more characters, as when it suggests to Oedipus not to disbelieve Creon's protestations of innocence.

**Setting**
The play's action occurs outside Oedipus's palace in Thebes. Thebes had been founded, according to the myth, by Cadmus (a son of Agenor, King of Phoenicia) while searching for his sister Europa, who had been abducted by Zeus in the form of a bull. A direct line of descent can be traced from Cadmus to Oedipus; between them are Polydorus, Labdacus, and, of course, Laius.

**Imagery and Foreshadowing**
Associated with knowledge and ignorance are the recurring images of darkness and light in the play, and these
images work as examples of a kind of foreshadowing for which the play is justly famous. When the play begins, the priest uses this set of contrasts to describe the current condition of Thebes: "And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste/All emptied, and all darkened." Shortly after this moment, Oedipus promises Creon: "Then once more I must bring what is dark to light," that is, the murder of Laius will out and Oedipus will be responsible for finding and exposing the culprit(s). Metaphorical and literal uses of darkness and light also provide foreshadowing, since it is Oedipus's desire to bring the truth to light that leads him to a self-knowledge ruinous and evil enough to cause him to blind himself. After the shepherd reveals his birth he declares, "O Light, may I look on you for the last time!" In saying this he sets up for the audience, who are, presumably, familiar with the legend of Oedipus, his subsequent actions. The second messenger describes his command to himself as he proceeds to perform the gruesome task: "From this hour, go in darkness!" thereby enacting both a literal and metaphorical fall into the dark consequences of his unbearable knowledge. These are but a few examples of how imagery and foreshadowing as techniques can meet, overlap, and mutually inform one another in the play; through subjective interpretation, many more may be found.

**Analysis: Compare and Contrast**

**Fifth Century B.C.:** The development of trial by jury in the law courts and the art of sophistry as practiced by philosophers such as Zeno, led to the creation of the first hired lawyers. The ability to persuade a public audience was an important feature of cultural life, and philosophers tutored leaders such as Pericles in oratorical skills.

**Today:** Rhetorical efficacy remains the chief attribute of today's courtroom lawyers. The public has limited access to these trials unless they garner media attention, as, for example, did the infamous trial of former football star O. J. Simpson, who was accused of murdering his ex-wife Nicole Simpson and her acquaintance Ronald Goldman.

**Fifth Century B.C.:** In one of many bids for popularity, Athens ruler Pericles spent extraordinary sums of money to support the arts through pageants, processions, public banquets, and monetary allowances for theatrical performances. The theater was associated with the cultural and religious festivals of the Great Dionysia, in whose annual competitions Sophocles won over twenty first-place awards.

**Today:** Public funding for the arts constitutes less than one percent of the federal budget, and the Republican leaders in Congress have proposed to eliminate this public source of support in favor of a privatized system of grants generated by donations from actors and other private citizens. While the theater continues to be a popular form of entertainment, the festivals surrounding public performances are rarely state-funded.

**Fifth Century B.C.:** There was a great conflict leading to a long war between Athens and Sparta, the most powerful city-states, and the two supported radically different governmental structures—Athens was a democracy; Sparta, an oligarchy (absolute rule by a committee).

**Today:** Until the early 1990s, the two largest global powers, the capitalist, democratic United States and the communist U.S.S.R., were fighting the Cold War, with both sides building up conventional weaponry and nuclear arms. The U.S.S.R. fell because of inner strife, and the Cold War mentality gave way to an understanding of the potential for global peace, on the one hand, and the escalation of more localized, civil strife, on the other.

**Fifth Century B.C.:** Scientific advancement and great progress in mathematics coincided with a belief, in the words of Protagoras, that "man is the measure of all things," and that people can control their own destinies, mastering the universe through the power of knowledge.
Today: Developments in artificial intelligence and bioengineering lead to difficult, controversial issues about the potential for computers and robots to "think," and about the ethics of such techniques as cloning.

**Analysis: Topics for Further Study**

In his *Third Letter on Oedipus*, Voltaire, a French Enlightenment philosopher and writer, expressed incredulity at the fact that Oedipus, upon discovering that the shepherd who witnessed Laius's murder was still alive, decides to consult an oracle rather than actively to seek the testimony of this witness. How does Voltaire's questioning of Oedipus's decision-making reveal the differences in religious belief between Athenian society in the fifth century B.C. and the Enlightenment? Research the status of belief in oracles in Athenian culture and compare it to the debates between the Jesuits and Jansenists in Voltaire's France. Discuss this difference in the context of *Oedipus Rex*.

During the fifth century in Athens, the skill of sophistry—the ability to be a rhetorically persuasive public speaker, and to gain political power through the effectiveness of one's speech performances—was becoming an increasingly important aspect of civic culture. One of the most famous sophists, Protagoras, is famous for saying "Man is the measure of all things," and this statement is indicative of the sophists' attitude toward man's potential to learn to excel at rhetoric and thereby win court cases, for example, even if their causes are unjust. Research this aspect of Athenian society, and juxtapose the powers of rhetorical persuasion with the treatment of fate in *Oedipus Rex*. You might wish to start by looking at the well-known first choral ode in *Antigone*, which warns against the kind of over-confidence in man's abilities that Athens was famous for. How does Sophocles use oracular knowledge to comment on man's belief that he can master the universe through knowledge?

*Oedipus Rex* was written in Athens shortly after its war with Sparta—commonly referred to as the Peloponnesian War—broke out in 431 B.C. Investigate the war-torn environment in Athens during Sophocles's day by reading Book II of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, paying close attention to Pericles's funeral oration in the middle of the book. Imagine what it would have been like to have been an audience member for opening night, 426 B.C., of *Oedipus Rex*, and write a journal entry from the perspective of such a person.

Were a person in contemporary America to unwittingly commit the crimes of Oedipus, to what kind of moral scrutiny would they be subjected? Do you think it's fair that a person is punished for a crime they did not realize they were committing? How might contemporary society (as opposed to Athenian culture) deal differently with this issue?

**Analysis: Media Adaptations**

There is an outstanding sound recording from 1974 of the opera-oratorio adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* by Igor Stravinsky and Jean Cocteau; the text is translated by e. e. cummings. It is available from Columbia Music.

*Oedipus Rex* was adapted as a film by Tyrone Guthrie, starring Douglas Campbell, Donald Davis, Eleanor Stuart, and Douglas Rain, Motion Pictures, 1957. The translation is by poet William Butler Yeats.

The play was also adapted for film by Pier Paolo Pasolini, starring Franco Citti, Silvano Mangano, Julian Beck, and Pasolini himself as the High Priest, Euro International Films, 1967. This epic film was shot in Morocco. Its interpretation of the Oedipus story is bleak, emotionally demanding, and self-consciously autobiographical.
Another film version from the 1960s is that of Philip Saville, starring Christopher Plummer, Lilli Palmer, Orson Welles, and Donald Sutherland, Universal, 1968.

Rainer Simon, a German filmmaker, directed Der Fall Dipus, or The Oedipus Case. Set in summertime Greece when a foreign military detachment camp out near Thebes and film the Oedipus story, the film stars Sebastian Hartmann, Tatiana Lygari, and Jan-Josef Liefers, 1990, Toro Film.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) adapted the play for film, starring Michael Pennington, Claire Bloom, and John Gielgud, 1991, Films for the Humanities, British Broadcasting Corporation. Excellent performances from the principal actors as well as from the chorus; staging is minimal but sufficient.

*Oedipus Rex* was adapted as a film for the *Living Literature: The Classics and You series*, Lesson No. 5., 1994, available from RMI Media Productions.

Two half-hour, made-for-video stage performances of the play are available from Children's Television International (The Play Series, volume 2) and Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation (The EBE Humanities Program, Drama Series).

Far from a literal translation of the play is Woody Allen's *Oedipus Wrecks*, a short comedy about a Jewish New York attorney, Sheldon Mills, who is constantly being nagged, followed, and publicly humiliated by his overbearing mother, Sadie Millstein. The film stars Allen, Julie Kavner, Mia Farrow, and Mae Questel, 1989, Touchstone Pictures; it is the third segment in an anthology film entitled *New York Stories*.

**Analysis: What Do I Read Next?**

Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced posthumously by his grandson in 401 B.C., tells the story of Oedipus's wanderings after going into exile. He was attended by Antigone, his daughter, to Colonus, and there Theseus protected him until he died. Before he died he cursed his sons Eteocles and Polynices that they should kill each other, and after Eteocles had ruled for a time he refused to surrender the throne to his brother, who gathered seven champions known as the Seven against Thebes. They attacked the city at each of its seven gates. The brothers died in battle. *Oedipus at Colonus* is the second play in the trilogy of Theban plays, which also includes *Antigone* (the final play) and *Oedipus Rex*.

In *Antigone*, the title character (Oedipus's daughter) and her uncle, Creon the king of Thebes, quarrel because the king will not permit the burial rite to be performed for her brother, Polynices, who was condemned as a traitor. Creon punishes Antigone for her attempts to bury her brother by sealing her alive inside a stone tomb. She hangs herself, and her husband-to-be Haemon, Creon's son, stabs himself next to her body.

*The History of the Peloponnesian War*, by the Athenian citizen and general Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.), is a careful, compelling, and often first-hand account of the war between Athens and Sparta (431-404 B.C.), which occurred during the heyday of Sophocles’s career.

Written in the first century A.D., the lives of Athenian leaders presented in Plutarch's *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives* include Theseus, Pericles, Alcibiades, and Lysander; these last three figures played key roles in Athens during the Peloponnesian War, and their lives provide an instructive political and cultural context for Sophoclean drama.

*Democracy, Ancient and Modern* (1973), by M. I. Finley, traces the history of democratic culture from fifth-century Athens to the present day. It compares the political, social, and economic structures as well as the role of the arts and literature in different historically significant democracies.
Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written c. 1600, recounts the story of a young man whose father has died and his brother Claudius has assumed the throne, marrying his widow Gertrude. The ghost of king appears to his son, Hamlet, and urges him to avenge his death; Hamlet is obsessed with the memory of his father's death and is repulsed at the thought and sight of his mother's hasty remarriage; he wants to kill his uncle, Claudius, but does not succeed in finding the right opportunity until the final scene, when most of the main characters die in the tragedy's final blood bath. Since Freud, the mother-son relationship in the play has been historically considered to be driven by the son's Oedipus complex.

*My Oedipus Complex*, a short story by Frank O'Connor (published in 1956), sets the Oedipus story in Ireland during World War I. While his father is away fighting in the war, a young boy, the first-person narrator, develops a misunderstood attraction toward his mother, a situation which becomes complicated by his father's return home and the parents' decision to have another child. An ironic but very touching version of the myth, complete with a happy ending.

**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

**Sources**

**Further Reading**
Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe. London: Heinemann, 1927. Aristotle's important discussion of effective tragic form includes many references to the exemplarity of Sophocles's play, and provides a useful understanding of classical poetic theory.

Bates, William Nickerson *Sophocles, Poet and Dramatist*. London: Oxford University Press, 1940. In a chapter on Oedipus, Bates summarizes the plot and offers general, laudatory remarks on Sophoclean tragedy, followed by discussions of the protagonist and Jocasta.

Bowra, C. M. *Sophoclean Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944. Bowra's focus is on the role of Apollo and the gods in the play, offering a historical reading that contextualizes the oracle in Athenian society.


Davies, M. "The End of Sophocles's O.T." *Hermes*, Vol. 110, 1982, pp. 268-77. Davies argues that the last scene of the play, in which Creon ushers Oedipus into the palace but does not send him into exile as some have assumed, shows us that neither character has changed psychologically as a result of the reversals of fortune in the play. Oedipus still understands himself in the majestic terms of a king, and Creon remains cautious and concerned.

Dawe, R. D., ed. *Sophocles: The Classical Heritage*. New York: Garland, 1996. This collection of criticism of the play includes excerpts for the works of Aristotle, Corneille, Voltaire, and modern theorists as well. Also contains a few discussions of performances of the play from the Italian Renaissance to the present day.


Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Translated by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. [New York], 1949. This volume also contains *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*; all three translations are considered standard ones.

Waldock, A. J. A. *Sophocles the Dramatist*. Cambridge University Press, 1951. Waldock challenges Bowra's discussion of the play, claiming that its plot does not center around the role of the gods in human life but rather the consequential pain of ambitious desires to gain knowledge.


Winnington-Ingram, W. P. *Sophocles: An Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1980. Offers detailed account of the second choral ode, or second "stasimon," in order to demonstrate the usefulness of close attention to commonly neglected aspects of the play.

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

Aristotle considered *Oedipus Tyrannus* the supreme example of tragic drama and modeled his theory of tragedy on it. He mentions the play no fewer than eleven times in his *De poética* (c. 334-323 b.c.e.; *Poetics*, 1705). Sigmund Freud in the twentieth century used the story to name the rivalry of male children with their fathers for the affection of their mothers, and Jean Cocteau adapted the tale to the modern stage in *La Machine infernale* (1934; *The Infernal Machine*, 1936). However, no matter what changes the Oedipus myth underwent in two and a half millennia, the finest expression of it remains this tragedy by Sophocles.

Brilliantly conceived and written, *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a drama of self-discovery. Sophocles achieves an amazing compression and force by limiting the dramatic action to the day on which Oedipus learns the true nature of his birth and his destiny. The fact that the audience knows the dark secret that Oedipus unwittingly slew his true father and married his mother does nothing to destroy the suspense. Oedipus’s search for the truth has all the tautness of a detective tale, and yet because audiences already know the truth they are aware of all the ironies in which Oedipus is enmeshed. That knowledge enables them to fear the final revelation at the same time that they pity the man whose past is gradually and relentlessly uncovered to him.

The plot is thoroughly integrated with the characterization of Oedipus, for it is he who impels the action forward in his concern for Thebes, his personal rashness, and his ignorance of his past. His flaws are a hot temper and impulsiveness, but without those traits his heroic course of self-discovery would never occur.
Fate for Sophocles is not something essentially external to human beings but something at once inherent in them and transcendent. Oracles and prophets in this play may show the will of the gods and indicate future events, but it is the individual who gives substance to the prophecies. Moreover, there is an element of freedom granted to human beings, an ability to choose, where the compulsions of character and the compulsions of the gods are powerless. It is in the way individuals meet the necessities of their destiny that freedom lies. They can succumb to fate, pleading extenuating circumstances, or they can shoulder the full responsibility for what they do. In the first case they are merely pitiful, but in the second they are tragic and take on a greatness of soul that nothing can conquer.

A crucial point in the play is that Oedipus is entirely unaware that he killed his father and wedded his mother. He himself is the cause of the plague on Thebes, and in vowing to find the murderer of Laius and exile him he unconsciously pronounces judgment on himself. Oedipus, the king and the hero who saved Thebes from the Sphinx, believes in his own innocence. He is angry and incredulous when the provoked Teiresias accuses him of the crime, so he jumps to the conclusion that Teiresias and Creon are conspirators against him. As plausible as that explanation may be, Oedipus maintains it with irrational vehemence, not even bothering to investigate it before he decides to have Creon put to death. Every act of his is performed rashly: his hot-tempered killing of Laius, his investigation of the murder, his violent blinding of himself, and his insistence on being exiled. He is a man of great pride and passion who is intent on serving Thebes, but he does not have tragic stature until the evidence of his guilt begins to accumulate.

Ironically, his past is revealed to him by people who wish him well and who want to reassure him. Each time a character tries to comfort him with information, the information serves to damn him more thoroughly. Jocasta, in proving how false oracles can be, first suggests to him that he unknowingly really did kill Laius, thus corroborating the oracles. The messenger from Corinth in reassuring Oedipus about his parentage brings his true parentage into question, but he says enough to convince Jocasta that Oedipus is her son. It is at this point, when he determines to complete the search for the truth, knowing that he killed Laius and knowing that the result of his investigation may be utterly damnable, that Oedipus’s true heroism starts to emerge. His rashness at this point is no longer a liability but becomes part of his integrity.

Learning the full truth of his dark destiny, his last act as king is to blind himself over the dead body of Jocasta, his wife and his mother. It is a terrible, agonizing moment, even in description, but in the depths of his pain Oedipus is magnificent. He does not submit passively to his woe or plead that he committed his foul acts in ignorance, though he could be justified in doing so. He blinds himself in a rage of penitence, accepting total responsibility for what he did and determined to take the punishment of exile as well. As piteous as he appears in the final scene with Creon, there is more public spirit and more strength in his fierce grief and his resolution of exile than in any other tragic hero in the history of the theater. Oedipus unravels his life to its utmost limits of agony and finds there an unsurpassed grandeur of soul.

**Critical Essays: Critical Overview**

The history of the critical reception to *Oedipus Rex* begins with Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who in his *Poetics* inaugurated the history of formalist and structural analysis of literature, two important cornerstones for the enterprise of the critical interpretation of literature. In some ways, *Poetics* can be regarded as the first book of literary criticism.

The influence of Sophocles in general and *Oedipus Rex* in particular is enormous, due to the exemplary status Aristotle granted the play as the greatest tragedy ever written. He gave it high praise for its outstanding fulfillment of the requirements he set out for tragedy, including reversal of situation, characterization, well-constructed plot, and rationality of action.
Oedipus Rex contains an excellent moment of "reversal" in the scene in which the messenger comes to tell Oedipus of the death of Polybos, whom he believes to be Oedipus’s father. According to Aristotle, because Oedipus learns from him inadvertently that Polybos is not his father, "by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect." Aristotle also praised the play for its characterization of the hero, who causes the audience to feel the right mixture of "pity and fear" while observing his actions. The hero should not be too virtuous, nor should he be evil: "there remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families."

The plot receives commendation by Aristotle for its ability to stir the emotions of not only its audience members but, even more significantly, those who merely hear the story: "he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place." In addition, Oedipus Rex succeeds in shaping the action in such a way that its ramifications are unknown until after the event itself occurs: "the deed of horror may be done, but done in ignorance, and the tie of kinship or friendship be discovered afterwards here, indeed, the incident is outside the drama proper." Lastly, Aristotle remarks that he prefers the role of the chorus in Sophocles to that of Euripides, and that the Oedipus Rex excludes from the play proper any irrational elements, such as Oedipus’s ignorance of the mode of Laius’s death. This last point is taken up by Voltaire, who subjected the play to intense questioning on the basis of the improbability of aspects such as this one.

After Aristotle, the major figures who have analyzed the play include those dramatists, from antiquity to the present, such as Seneca, Corneille, Dryden, and Hofmannsthal, who respectively translated the play into Latin, French, English, and German. Poets and dramatists are themselves acting as critics when they embark on projects of translation, even if they have not given explicit accounts of how and why they have proceeded. Implicitly, these works ask their readers to attempt to answer these questions for themselves, and a short list of the variations on Sophocles's play should begin to generate such study. In 50 A.D, the Roman writer Seneca, for instance, decided to add an unseen episode narrated by Creon in which the ghost of Laius identifies his murderer to Teiresias.

In the 1580s in England the Tudor university dramatist William Gager sketched out five scenes for an unfinished version of the play, combining elements of Seneca's Oedipus and his Phonecian Women with scenes of his own creation; the first original scene is a lament of a Theban citizen for his dead father and son, to whom he seeks to give a proper burial in the midst of the plague-ridden city. His Jocasta kills herself because of her sons’ fratricidal struggle for power. In 1659 Corneille prefaced his neo-Classical version of the play with a notice that he has reduced the number of oracles, left out the graphic description of Oedipus's blinding because of the presence of ladies in the audience, and added the happy love story of Theseus and Dirce in order to satisfy all attendees. He keeps Seneca's additional scene but makes Laius's speech more vague. Dryden, two decades later, self-consciously drew upon Corneille's subplot but channeled its ending to an unhappy one. Like Corneille he laments the fact that audiences demand such light entertainment accompanying their experience of great tragic drama.

In the next century, translators and commentators in England and France beginning with Voltaire and including Pierre Brumoy, Thomas Maurice, and R. Potter brought unique perspectives to the play. Voltaire believed the play to be defective in ways that many scholars expected from the Enlightenment thinker. Following Aristotle and going much further in his skeptical stance, in 1716 Voltaire criticized the lack of plausibility in Oedipus's ignorance of the manner of Laius's death: "that he did not even know whether it was in the country or in town that this murder was committed, and that he should give neither the least reason nor the least excuse for his ignorance, I confess that I do not know any terms to express such an absurdity."

Another famous criticism of his concerns the fact that Oedipus, upon learning that the shepherd who knows his origins is still alive, chooses to consult the oracle "without giving the command to bring before him the only man who could throw light on the mystery." In contradistinction to Voltaire, in the middle of the
eighteenth century Brumoy movingly expressed his satisfaction with the play. Of the opening scene he wrote: "This is a speaking spectacle, and a picture so beautifully disposed, that even the attitudes of the priests and of Oedipus express, without the help of words, that one relates the calamities with which the people are afflicted, and the other, melted at the melancholy sight, declares his impatience and concern for the long delay of Creon, whom he had sent to consult the Oracle." Brumoy also recognizes that the play's values are pagan rather than Christian, and specifically he emphasizes the influential classical notion of destiny, after him, the English translators Thomas Maurice (1779) and R. Potter (1788) did the same.

German authors, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, dominate the reception history of Oedipus in the nineteenth century.

**Essays and Criticism: Oedipus: Possibly the Greatest of all Tragedies**

*Oedipus Rex* is arguably the most important tragedy in all of classical literature. Ever since Aristotle used it in his *Poetics* in order to define the qualities of a successful tragedy, its strengths have been emphasized again and again by countless notable authors, whose remarks illuminate the play's historical reception as much as they help us to understand the broader critical climate in which they wrote. When Freud, for example, helped to shape the direction of twentieth-century thought with his 1900 *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his coinage of the term "Oedipal Complex" was an integral part of his definition of dreams and imaginative literature as representations of wishes that usually remain hidden during normal social interaction. For Freud, then, Oedipus's predicament dramatizes the desire of every man to marry his mother and kill his father, but whereas most people tend to harbor or hide these feelings, Oedipus unknowingly acts them out. While still remaining extremely controversial, his theory's suggestive placement of Oedipus in closer psychological proximity to his readers throughout history raises fundamental questions about possible relationships between literature and reality. Other twentieth-century scholars have occupied themselves less with these issues than with local readings of the play's characters, its plot, structure, and, finally, what it can teach its readers about religious values and human knowledge in fifth-century Athenian culture, a moment of great historical importance for its artistic achievements as well as its political culture.

The character of Oedipus has historically inspired a combination of fascination and repulsion. It is generally acknowledged, however, that he is to be admired for many reasons, and especially for demonstrating, as a responsible leader, his desire—from the very opening lines of the play—for honesty and directness in approaching the problem of Thebes's plague. In the Prologue, when he asks the priest to speak for the petitioners before him, he does so with majestic generosity: "Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you / In every way I can; I should be heartless / Were I not moved to find you suppliant here." The Priest responds to him with equal magnanimity, praising Oedipus for his past achievements (he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, sent to Thebes as divine punishment for Laius's sins) and pleading for the help that the capable Oedipus has proven he can provide. Oedipus's position of power in relation to the Priest is extraordinary; as C. H. Whitman pointed out in *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, pagan culture customarily reversed those roles: "The appeal of the priest, with its moving yet dignified description of the general suffering, is especially remarkable in that it is an inversion of the usual situation, in which the secular ruler consults the priest or seer about divine things, as Oedipus later consults Teiresias."

The scene establishes Oedipus as a ruler not with divine intuition (the Priest also says "You are not one of the immortal gods, we know"), but with the intellectual prowess to ameliorate Thebes's grave situation. A later exchange between Creon and Oedipus and the first scene's dialogue between Teiresias and Oedipus, in which Oedipus presses both figures publicly to utter the oracular knowledge they possess (but are extremely reluctant to offer) show Oedipus as extremely eager to gain the knowledge that will help to rid Thebes of its ills. In her recent study of Sophocles, *Prophesying Tragedy Tragedy: Sight and Voice in Sophocles's Theban*
Plays, Rebecca Bushnell agrees that the play establishes Oedipus as someone "who believes in speaking freely, but he is not content merely to speak himself; he also forces others to speak." Oedipus shows fearlessness in the face of turmoil, and his unstoppable quest for public utterance of the truth of the oracle leads him, tragically, to the knowledge that he has fulfilled its terms. His perception of his responsibilities as king, however, have led him to be compared to Pericles, the ruler when Sophocles lived and wrote, remembered for heroically facing the most famous epoch of war and civil strife in Athenian history.

Oedipus has also been noted for possessing a less desirable quality related to his desire for disclosure, and that quality, *hamartia*, is an ancient Greek concept that B. R. Dodds, in *Greece and Rome*, classified as "sometimes applied to false moral judgments, sometimes to purely intellectual error." Hamartia can be understood to refer to the all-too-human limitations possessed by the tragic hero, his faults that make him less than perfect but not blameworthy in any moral sense. While he may have flaws (like the heel of Achilles), we cannot attribute his downfall to them. Oedipus's impatience with Teiresias's attempt to withhold the contents of the oracle, for example, led him to suspect the prophet of conspiring against him on behalf of Creon. He calls Teiresias a "sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man."

A. J. A. Waldock related Oedipus's *hamartia* to his approach to oracular knowledge. In his *Sophocles the Dramatist*, Waldock wrote: "he was in fault for not perceiving the truth, now he is in fault because he is too urgent to see it." In other words, Oedipus's eagerness to use his mind to act upon and thereby to solve every problem he encounters, when taken to its logical extreme, leaves no room for the gods’ influence over the fate of man, an idea considered somewhat heretical in a culture which places much emphasis on, and had faith in, the role of the gods in shaping man's destiny. Readers such as W. P. Winnington-Ingram, in *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, have criticized Oedipus because he "trusts his intellect too much and must learn how fallible it is."

Ultimately, while we can regard Oedipus as both admirable for his leadership skills and noble intentions and imperfect for his overconfidence and harsh treatment of others, he is a figure whose fate inspires pity and terror because of his ability to endure misfortune. He blinds himself in an act of self-punishment and self-protection, since he is deeply horrified by his own crimes and unwilling to face others' gazes: "After exposing the rankness of my own guilt, / How could I look men frankly in the eyes?" Rather than ending his life, Oedipus lives to bear the weight of two curses, one imposed on his family line by the gods and the other self-imposed when he announces his intention to send Laius's murderer into exile. Dodds nicely captured the pathos of his suffering: "Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position—for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream—but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found."

Notably, the end of the play does not show Oedipus leaving Thebes; although we see him ask Creon again and again to lead him into exile, the play ends with him being led into the palace, into a private space and away from a public domain polluted by his presence. In a detailed discussion of the last scene, M. Davies wrote in an issue of *Hermes* that it leaves our vision of Oedipus as a commanding figure very much intact: it "shows him still acting spontaneously like a king, in the old imperious manner, although the once equivalent temporal power has now fallen away."

In order to understand both the protagonist and the play itself in the larger context of fifth-century Greece, it is important to consider the conflicting roles of oracular knowledge and Athenian self-confidence in their culture's perception of man's place in the universe. At the time of the Peloponnesian War, oracular knowledge was often doubted because the oracles came from Apollo's shrine at pro-Spartan Delphi; the messages often reflected an anti-Athenian bias. In an essay on *Oedipus Rex in Homer to Brecht: The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions*, Paul Fry noted that "around 427 B.C., when the play was first acted, the priests of Apollo were out of favor because Apollo's oracles considering the Peloponnesian War were all pro-Spartan."
While this historical fact does not mean that the Priest and Teiresias would have been ridiculous figures for the play's first audiences, it does mean that Oedipus's skepticism would have been understood and sympathized with. In the context of the very different times of turmoil that the play depicts, however, Oedipus's disbelief may have appeared slightly more threatening, since, as Bushnell argued, Oedipus has no system of belief other than his own intellectual power with which to replace oracular knowledge: "Tiresias's arrival initiates the conflict between Apollo's signs and Oedipus's voice—a conflict that strikes at the roots of the city's order, which is based on the cooperation between sacred and secular interests. Oedipus seems to threaten directly the stability that the fulfillment of oracles represents, without establishing any new structure." In the plot thus conceived, Apollo's oracle is truth and Oedipus chastises himself for having believed otherwise: "Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned, / Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand!" As an efficacious tool by which to shape human destiny, the power of oracular knowledge is retained by the gods, while Oedipus is able to reach lyrical heights in expressing the tragic consequences of being confined in such a world.

In ancient Athens, dissatisfaction with oracular knowledge was coupled with a growing sense that, in the words of Protagoras, "man is the measure of all things." Self-confidence in man's ability to order and rule his world reached even new heights under the leadership of Pericles, whose extensive training in sophistry and lack of fear in the gods led him to be a highly persuasive thinker who inspired in his subjects a sense of man's ability to accomplish limitless goals. For Sophocles's contemporaries, Oedipus's intellectual prowess was probably strongly reminiscent of Pericles—his eloquence and devotion to his country in a time of upheaval were legendary, and his investment in public building projects (the Parthenon among them) employed laborers and inspired artists to create beautiful memorials to their epoch.

While Oedipus's affection for Thebes is of a very different nature, his expression of care is moving: "Let me purge my father's Thebes of the pollution / Of my living here, and go out to the wild hills, / To Kithairon, that has won such fame with me, / The tomb my mother and father appointed for me, / And let me die there, as they willed I should." His desire to "purge [his] father's Thebes" and move mentally and physically towards death provides a powerfully cathartic closure for the play. In The Birth of Tragedy, the philosopher Nietzsche wrote of the spirituality of this final scene, its ability to leave audiences with a sense of rejuvenation: "Sophocles understood the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage, the unfortunate Oedipus, as the noble human being who, in spite of his wisdom, is destined to error and misery but who eventually, through his tremendous suffering, spreads a magical power of blessing that remains effective even beyond his disease."


**Essays and Criticism: Review of Oedipus Rex**

In the fall 1992 issue of The Explicator, Bernhard Frank presented an unusual interpretation of the dramatic climax of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. In the scene, reported by the Second Messenger, Oedipus, horrified by the truth and distraught by his discovery that Jocasta has hanged herself, first lowers his queen/mother/wife to the ground and then plunges the long pins of her robe's brooches into his eyes. Professor Frank suggests that Jocasta's rope is an umbilical cord, that here we have a "role reversal," in which Jocasta becomes "the dead infant Oedipus should have been, if the tragedy was to have been averted." Then, in "another stage of the role reversal," he blinds himself. He is not castrating himself—a Freudian theory that Frank rightly rejects—but in the persona of Jocasta he "rapes his own eyes with her 'phalluses'."

It is sometimes tempting in literary criticism to seek in a thrusting instrument a sexual parallel, but one should carefully base such a parallel on hints and statements in the text. I do not find suggestions in Oedipus Rex for Frank's interpretation of the blinding scene, which raises several difficulties. For example, there are many nonsexual references to "eyes" and "sight" in the play. In fact, "seeing" could be called a unifying metaphor.
Why should this passage, with no hint from the translators, be read as having such powerful sexual meaning? Oedipus's beard, into which the blood gushes, is identified as "the pubic region, as it were, of his pierced eyes. It is Jocasta's twofold revenge, reciprocating his off—repeated coital act." This reading poses considerable anatomical difficulties. Then, too, how can Jocasta at one moment represent her dead son and at the next a raging rapist? What is one to make of the blood that gushes forth? (Herman Melville symbolizes a bloody beard successfully in his poem, "The Portent," about the mutilation of John Brown's corpse.)

The Frank essay also considers the use of the brooches highly significant, inasmuch as Oedipus could have used "any nearby object for the purpose." But not just "any nearby object" is agreeable for blinding oneself, and probably weapons did not lie scattered about a queen's apartment as part of the decor. When Oedipus asks the Chorus for a sword with which to pursue Jocasta, the Frank essay concludes that in his frenzy, Oedipus "intends to thrust his sword into her offending womb, which ironically would emulate the sexual act one last time." What the text really says, however, is this: "From one to another of us he went, begging a sword, / Hunting the wife who was not his wife, the mother / Whose womb had carried his own children and himself."

Across the fiery enthusiasms of Professor Frank fall the long and soothing shadows of Aristotle and Sophocles. Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy, in The Poetics, stresses that pity and fear will be evoked by action of "a certain magnitude." His frequent praise of Oedipus Rex proves that Sophocles' masterpiece met his highest standards. We can therefore safely conclude that the emotions Aristotle thought that the play produced were pity and fear—not disgust and revulsion, which would be our more likely reactions to the interpretation that Professor Frank suggests.

Sophocles' treatment of blindness in the drama accords with Aristotle's reading of the play. It has far greater meaning than that of a symbolically achieved sexual act. Spiritual blindness is equated with obduracy and arrogance—hubris—and towards the end of Oedipus Rex, the physical blinding is already encouraging new insight, awareness, and compassion. When Oedipus could see, he beheld the piercing light of Greece, but he had then less understanding of his fate, less inner vision, and less humility than he is beginning to achieve after he loses that flooding, outer light. The resemblance between Oedipus and the blinded Gloucester in King Lear often comes to mind. Gloucester says, "I stumbled when I saw." And when Lear observes, "[Y]et you see how this world goes," Gloucester answers, "I see it feelingly."

Light, to the ancient Greeks, was beauty, intellect, virtue, indeed represented life itself. The Choragos asks Oedipus, "What god was it drove you to rake black / Night across your eyes?" And Oedipus replies in anguish:

Apollo, Apollo, Dear  
Children, the god was Apollo  
He brought my sick, sick fate upon me.  
But the blinding hand was my own!  
How could I bear to see  
When all my sight was horror everywhere'

We have in the drama, then, not just bitter irony played out by incredible coincidence, nor the story of a proud man rightly humbled. We have a powerful statement that the inscrutable gods exert extreme power over the unjust and the just, who suffer alike from their mysteriously random power. We do not need to make Oedipus's self-blinding into a sexual symbol or allegory to feel his baffled woe. Surely, enough sorrow is here to achieve the effect that Aristotle underlines so often and Sophocles creates with such skill.

Source: Janet M. Green, review of Oedipus Rex, in the Explicator, Vol. 52, no. 1, Fall, 1993, pp 2-3. Green is an educator and critic.
Essays and Criticism: Oedipus: From Man to Archetype

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* [Oedipus Rex] (c. 427 B.C.) ... the supernatural agency that dominates the action is Apollo. Unfortunately, however, there is no certainty concerning meaning of the role of the Apollonian god in Sophocles' work. Apollo appears to use a man of noble, innocent, and pious nature to undermine social and religious values, despite his horror of sinning against them. But it is obvious that interpretations of this fundamental conflict between the irresistible power of destiny and the sacredness of natural ties will vary, depending upon what tone is read into the richly human and ambiguous lines. Here a representative selection from the vast resources of Sophoclean scholarship, particularly the work of modern American and English scholars, will made in order to illustrate the diversity of interpretation and provide a basis for understanding the adaptations of the creative writers.

Sir Richard Jebb, taking the traditional position in the nineteenth century, sees in Oedipus a symbol of modern man facing a religious dilemma. Both Oedipus and Jocasta, he points out, do not reject the gods—both are reverent, both believe in the wise omnipotence of the gods. But, on the other hand, both also reject the gods' moral ministers—Oedipus, the prophet Tiresias, and Jocasta the priests at Delphi. Oedipus, Jebb states, is a rationalist, intellectually self-reliant; Jocasta, likewise, is a sceptic who questions the reliability of the oracles. Considering their views, Jebb feels that they represent a "spiritual anarchy" that not only unbalances the "self-centered calm" of Sophocles' mind but also endangers "the cohesion of society." Thus, through their experience, "a note of solemn warning, addressed to Athens and Greece, is meant to be heard." But Jebb concludes by reading into the drama the nineteenth-century problem of adjusting religious faith to the findings of science: "It is as a study of the human heart, true to every age, not as a protest against tendencies of the poet's own, that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* illustrates the relation of faith to reason." Jebb's view is interesting because it illustrates in scholarship the possibility of accommodating the myth to changing life—in general, the attitude of the later imaginative critics of the myth. The modern trend in Sophoclean scholarship, however, is historical in orientation, for the scholars look at Sophocles' work not in the light of universal values but in the light of the ancient Greek past, particularly that of Sophocles himself in the Periclean Athens of the fifth century.

For example, Sir John Sheppard, the first to demonstrate carefully the possibility of presenting Sophocles' opinions in fifth-century terms, relates ancient Greek meanings given to the maxims of the Delphic oracle, "Know Thyself" and "Nothing Too Much," to an understanding of Oedipus' character, and concludes that they provide the final moral of the play. Sheppard interprets the philosophical theme of Sophocles' play as a mild agnosticism or neutral fatalism. Oedipus, he declares, behaves normally, commits an error in ignorance, and brings suffering upon himself. "Sophocles justifies nothing.... His Oedipus stands for human suffering. His gods ... stand for the universe of circumstances as it is.... He bids his audience face the facts.... Oedipus suffers not because of his guilt, but in spite of his goodness."

Sir Maurice Bowra also synthesizes the two Delphic maxims, his point being that Oedipus has learned that he must do what the gods demand, and in his life illustrates what the Platonic Socrates means when he says the commands "Know Thyself" and "Be Modest" are the same. Oedipus finds modesty because he has learned to know himself: "So the central idea of a Sophoclean tragedy is that through suffering a man learns to be modest before the gods." Bowra argues that Sophocles' *Oedipus*, reflecting such tragic contemporary events (noted by Thucydides) as a catastrophic plague in Athens and an unsuccessful war with Sparta, as well as a current disbelief in the oracles, dramatizes a conflict between gods and men. He concludes that "Sophocles allows no doubts, no criticism of the gods.... If divine ways seem wrong, ignorance is to blame.... For this conflict the gods have a reason. They wish to teach a lesson, to make men learn their moral limitations and accept them," (Sophoclean Tragedy, [Oxford], 1944). But Bowra appears to be too committed to supporting the religious establishment, and as a result misses the subtle and humane questioning suggested in the dramatic situation. For example, is not a very
critical irony intended by the dramatist when Jocasta's offering at the altar of Apollo on center stage is seen still smoking at the time the messenger informs us of her suicide by hanging? Another such irony may be intended in the epilogos when Oedipus, blind and polluted, craves to be sent out of the land as an outcast only to have Creon reply that Apollo must first pronounce. This need not only suggest respect for the power of the god; it may also suggest the god's failure at empathy. For it is as if the dramatist were asking Apollo to show a little charity, love, and forbearance towards erring man.

On the basis of such evidence, Cedric H. Whitman takes issue with Bowra. He states that the picture of a pure and pious Sophocles never questioning the oracles and serenely supporting the traditional belief in the Greek theodicy is completely wrong. Sophocles, Whitman believes, appears in the Tyrannus to have suffered a loss of faith; he is bitter, ironic, and pessimistic because of the irrational evil perpetrated by unjust gods on a morally upright man who wishes to be and do good. Whitman's point is that the ancient Greeks used the gods to explain where evil came from, especially that irrational evil which seemed to have no cause or moral meaning. Thus Sophocles was doubting the moral trustworthiness of the Greek gods: "The simple fact is that for Sophocles, the gods, whoever they are, no longer stand within the moral picture. Morality is man's possession, and the cosmos—or chaos—may be what it will." Sophocles dramatizes the theodicy "with a kind of agnostic aloofness. Sophocles was religious rather than pious" (Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism, [Cambridge], 1951).

Such, briefly, are a few of the more significant prevailing views in American and English scholarship concerning Sophocles' handling of the myth in his masterpiece. They demonstrate, despite differences of opinion about Athenian life and Sophocles' character, that the meaning of the myth in the Tyrannus derives from the society and culture of Athens during the fifth century, and that Sophocles accommodates the basic story not only to his own time but also to his personal ideological and spiritual needs. So, depending upon how the critic reads the complexities and ambiguities of Athenian culture and the author's tenuous character, Sophocles, in this play about King Oedipus, is impious or pious. But whatever the stand on Apollo and his oracles that Sophocles has really taken, there is no doubt about the depth, conviction, and art with which he expresses his credo. These qualities have always been admired, and, as a result, the form in which Sophocles has cast the myth has often been imitated.


**Oedipus Tyrannus, Sophocles: Introduction**

*Oedipus Tyrannus* Sophocles

c. 425 b.c.

(Also translated as *Oedipus Rex*) Greek play.

The following entry presents criticism on Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*. For more information on Sophocles's life and career, see CMLC Volume 2.

*Oedipus Tyrannus* is considered Sophocles's masterpiece and is probably the most famous of all the Greek tragedies. Aristotle deemed it a perfect play. First performed about 425 b.c., not long after a plague had ravaged Athens, *Oedipus Tyrannus* is set in Thebes, a city falling to ruin from a similar calamity. King Oedipus is told that the city will continue to suffer until the murderer of the previous king is brought to justice. Oedipus vows to discover the evildoer's identity and to punish him. Unaware that he himself is the killer, Oedipus relentlessly pursues the truth until he discovers his own guilt and blinds himself so that he may
never see his father in the afterworld. Sophocles took a well-known legend and intensified it for his Athenian audience by emphasizing qualities they held dear: courage, self-assuredness, and love for their city. In this play of man versus inexorable fate, Sophocles used dramatic irony to further develop audience interest: they know how the play will end, relishing the irony of the words spoken by the characters, who do not know. In his Poetics, Aristotle used Oedipus Tyrannus as a model tragedy, analyzing Sophocles's masterful use of reversal, discovery, and character. Oedipus Tyrannus has received considerable attention in modern times partly due to Sigmund Freud, who, tremendously moved by the play, popularized the notion of the Oedipus Complex. The play continues to engage audiences and scholars to this day.

Plot and Major Characters

Oedipus Tyrannus opens with the people of Thebes praying for King Oedipus to save their dying city. Creon, the brother of Oedipus's wife, Jocasta, returns from a visit to the oracle of Apollo. He reports the oracle's message: the plague on Thebes is the result of the unpunished murder of the previous king, Laius. Oedipus vows to discover the murderer's identity and avenge Laius's death. He calls for Tiresias, an old blind seer, to reveal what he knows. The seer refuses and Oedipus is enraged at his disobedience. Tiresias, also angered, then tells the King that it is Oedipus himself who, as the murderer, has defiled the city, and further, that he is unknowingly living with his closest kin in a shameful manner. Oedipus accuses the seer of conspiring with Creon to overthrow him. Tiresias replies that Oedipus will soon be horrified when he learns the truth of his parentage and of his marriage. Oedipus considers executing Creon but Jocasta intercedes, and Creon is exiled instead. Jocasta tries to reassure her husband by insisting that no one, not even oracles, can divine the future. As an example, she tells him that she and Laius were once told that their son would kill his father, and that this did not happen since their son died on a mountain, where he was abandoned as an infant, and Laius was killed by thieves—there was a witness to the murder. This information does anything but calm Oedipus. He tells his wife that he had believed his parents to be Polybus of Corinth and Merope, a Dorian, until a drunken reveler at a banquet announced that Oedipus was someone else's son. Polybus and Merope, when questioned, were angry and upset, but neither confirmed nor denied the charge. Oedipus further recalls that he traveled to Delphi, to ask the oracle of Apollo the truth about his parentage. He was not given the answer he sought, but was instead told that he would slay his father and have children with his mother. In horror, he fled in the opposite direction of Corinth, until he came to a place where three roads intersected. He met a small party of men who rudely tried to shove him out of their way. Oedipus struck the driver and in return was struck by the man being drawn in the wagon; in the fight that followed, Oedipus slew them all—or so he thought. After Oedipus finishes his story, a messenger brings news that Polybus has died and Oedipus must return to rule Corinth as their king. He refuses, fearing that Apollo's oracle of fathering children by his mother might come true. The messenger tells Oedipus not to worry, that he was not really Polybus's son nor was Merope his mother. In reality a herdsman who worked for Laius gave Oedipus to the messenger, who in turn gave him to Polybus to raise as his own. Jocasta begs Oedipus to stop his search for the truth, but to no avail. The herdsman, who was also the witness to Laius's death, arrives. He admits that Laius had instructed him to kill the infant Oedipus but that he had given the child to the messenger instead. At last Oedipus realizes that he indeed has killed his father and sired four children with his mother. He rushes to find Jocasta and learns that she has locked herself in her room. He breaks the bolts of the doors and finds her hanged by her own hair. He rips out the brooches from the shoulders of her dress and gouges his eyes with them. Creon returns, now king, and Oedipus begs that he be exiled. Creon answers that the matter must be decided by the gods.

Major Themes

Sophocles includes several themes in his play: he explores the potential dangers of pursuing self-knowledge, the question of guilt and innocence, and the nature of fate. Perhaps no play has better demonstrated the maxim that a man's character is his fate, for it is in fulfilling his personal characteristics—his relentless pursuit of knowledge, his absolute confidence in himself, and his quickness to anger—that Oedipus meets his destiny, and the prophecies are realized.
Critical Reception

Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides were recognized in their own time as masters of drama, and *Oedipus Tyrannus* was hailed as Sophocles's masterpiece. Since its brilliance is indisputable, critics concentrate on other matters, including formulating their own interpretations of the play and discussing its themes, Sophocles's use of irony, and the function of the chorus. Francis Fergusson explores audience expectations and perceptions. Eric A. Havelock contends that signs of oral composition can be found in the play and that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was written during a major shift in composition styles. R. Drew Griffith explains that the ancient Greeks had a different view of what constituted guilt than modern man—that even though Oedipus was unaware of his father's identity when he killed him, he was nevertheless guilty of patricide. Some critics insist there are problems with understanding what actually transpired in the play's recalled events due to unresolved contradictions, for example the report that there were many men, not just one, who attacked and killed Laius. Erich Fromm considers Freud's interpretation of the play and the nature of patriarchal and matriarchal psychological principles. Critics agree that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a gripping exploration of the role of the gods in man's life and a warning to mankind to avoid becoming too proud, too godlike. The numerous modern translations of the play, its continuing performance, and unwavering critical interest in it all attest to the magnitude of its popularity.

**Oedipus Tyrannus, Sophocles: Principal Works**

*Ajax* ([Aias](#)) (drama) 450 B.C.

*Antigone* ([Antigone](#)) (drama) 442? B.C.

*The Trackers* ([Ichneutai](#)) drama 440? B.C.

*The Trachiniae* ([Trakhiniai](#)) (drama) c. 440–30 B.C.

*Oedipus Tyrannus* (drama) 425? B.C.

*Electra* ([Elektra](#)) (drama) c. 425–10 B.C.

*Philoctetes* ([Philoktetes](#)) (drama) 409 B.C.

Oedipus at Colonus (drama) 401 B.C.

*Oedipus Tyrannus* (translated by Luci Berkowitz) 1970

*Oedipus the King* (translated by Stephen Berg and Diskin Clay) 1990

*Oedipus Rex* (translated by E. H. Plumptre) 1993

*Oedipus the King* (translated by Bernard Knox) 1994

*The Theban Plays* (translated by David Grene) 1994

*Oedipus Plays of Sophocles* (translated by Paul Roche) 1996

*Oedipus the King* (translated by Nicholas Rudall) 2000
If the Oedipus Rex is capable of moving a modern reader or playgoer no less powerfully than it moved the contemporary Greeks, the only possible explanation is that the effect of the Greek tragedy does not depend upon the conflict between fate and human will, but upon the peculiar nature of the material by which this conflict is revealed. There must be a voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the compelling power of fate in the Oedipus, while we are able to condemn the situations occurring in Die Ahnfrau or other tragedies of fate as arbitrary inventions. And there actually is a motive in the story of King Oedipus which explains the verdict of this inner voice. His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we are all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers; our dreams convince us that we are. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is nothing more or less than a wish-fulfillment—the fulfillment of the wish of our childhood. But we, more fortunate than he, in so far as we have not become psychoneurotics, have since our childhood succeeded in withdrawing our sexual impulses from our mothers, and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers. We recoil from the person for whom this primitive wish of our childhood has been fulfilled with all the force of the repression which these wishes have undergone in our minds since childhood. As the poet brings the guilt of Oedipus to light by his investigation, he forces us to become aware of our own inner selves, in which the same impulses are still extant, even though they are suppressed. The antithesis with which the chorus departs:

"... Behold, this is Oedipus
who unraveled the great riddle, and was first in power,
Whose fortune all the townsmen praised and envied;
See in what dread adversity he sank!"

—this admonition touches us and our own pride, us who since the years of our childhood have grown so wise and so powerful in our own estimation. Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of the desires that offend morality, the desires that nature has forced upon us and after their unveiling we may well prefer to avert our gaze from the scenes of our childhood.¹

The concept of the Oedipus complex, which Freud so beautifully presents in the passage just quoted, became one of the cornerstones of his psychological system. He believed that this concept was the key to an understanding of history and of the evolution of religion and morality. His conviction was that this very complex constituted the fundamental mechanism in the development of the child, and he maintained that the Oedipus complex was the cause for psychopathological development and the “kernel of neurosis.”

Here we shall limit ourselves to a brief description of the Oedipus complex with regard to the little boy.
Freud assumed that the little boy at the age of 4 or 5 is sexually attracted to his mother; hence he is jealous of his father, who appears to him as a superior, threatening rival; hence he becomes intensely afraid of his father and specifically afraid of being castrated. Since this fear becomes too intense for comfort and security, the boy changes his aim. He gives up the mother as an object of his sexual strivings and identifies himself with the father. In doing so he overcomes his fear, and at the same time his own masculine development is strengthened by the fact that he now wants to be like his father. Freud assumed that a particular identification takes place—namely, with the father's conscience, his commands, and his prohibitions—and that thus the bases for the development of conscience in the boy are laid.

In normal development, the Oedipus complex results in the strengthening of masculine development and in the growth of conscience. The boy's attachment to the mother is transferred later on to girls of his own age, although his choice of a love object may remain determined to some extent by the image of the mother. In the neurotic development the tie with the mother is not severed. She herself, or women who resemble her, remains the exclusive love object. In the latter case, the relationship to the mother surrogate retains the qualities which were characteristic of the little boy's attachment to his mother—those of dependency, lack of responsibility, and the need to be taken care of. Simultaneously, rivalry with the father or father surrogates and the hate and fear of them remain active too.

Freud assumed that the Oedipus complex determines also the development of the little girl, who is attached to the father and competes with the mother. Some theoretical difficulties, however, arise in the concept of the girl's Oedipus complex, a discussion of which would lead us too far into the intricacies of Freud's system and is at the same time not necessary here. For the same reason we shall omit a discussion of the passive attachment of the boy to the father, rooted in the boy's feminine component.

Freud's concept was a result of clinical observations and theoretical speculation, and it must have been very gratifying to him to discover that one of the classic Greek myths, that of Oedipus, seemed not only to be a symbolic expression but also a confirmation of his theory and that the fact of the incestuous tie to the mother and the resulting rivalry with the father was revealed by the myth to be one of the most profound, though unconscious, strivings in man.

Freud referred to the Oedipus myth in the version of Sophocles' tragedy King Oedipus. This tragedy tells us that an oracle has told Laius, the King of Thebes, and his wife, Jocasta, that if they would have a son this son would kill his father and marry his own mother. When a son, Oedipus, is born to them, Jocasta decides to escape the fate predicted by the oracle by killing the infant. She gives Oedipus to a shepherd who is to abandon the child in the woods with his feet bound so that he would die. But the shepherd, taking pity on the child, gives the infant to a man in the service of the King of Corinth, who in turn brings him to his master. The king adopts the boy as his own son, and the young prince grows up in Corinth not knowing that he is not the true son of the King of Corinth. He is told by the oracle in Delphi that it is his fate to kill his father and to marry his mother. He decides to avoid this fate by never going back to his alleged parents. On his way back from Delphi he engages in a violent argument with an old man riding in a carriage, loses his temper, and slays the man and his servant without knowing that he has slain his father, the King of Thebes.

His wanderings lead him to Thebes. There the Sphinx is devouring the young men and women of the city, and she will cease doing so only if someone will find the right answer to a riddle she asks. The riddle is this: "What is it which first goes on four, then on two, and eventually on three?" The city of Thebes has promised that anyone who can solve the riddle and thus free the city from the Sphinx will be made king and will be given the king's widow for a wife. Oedipus undertakes the venture. He finds the answer to the riddle—which is man, who as a child walks on all four, as an adult on two, and in his old age on three (with a cane). The Sphinx throws herself into the ocean, the city is saved from calamity, and Oedipus becomes king and marries Jocasta, his mother.
After Oedipus has reigned happily for some time, the city is ravaged by a plague which kills many of its citizens. The seer, Theiresias, reveals that the plague is the punishment for the twofold crime which Oedipus has committed, that of patricide and incest. Oedipus, after having tried desperately not to see this truth, blinds himself when he is compelled to see it, and Jocasta commits suicide. The tragedy ends at the point where Oedipus has suffered punishment for a crime which he committed unknowingly and in spite of his conscious effort to avoid committing it.

Was Freud justified in concluding that this myth confirms his view that unconscious incestuous drives and the resulting hate against the father-rival are to be found in any male child? Indeed, it does seem as if the myth confirmed Freud's theory that the Oedipus complex justifiably bears its name.

If we examine the myth more closely, however, questions arise which cast some doubts on the correctness of this view. The most pertinent question is this: If Freud's interpretation is right, we should expect the myth to tell us that Oedipus met Jocasta without knowing that she was his mother, fell in love with her, and then killed his father, again unknowingly. But there is no indication whatsoever in the myth that Oedipus is attracted by or falls in love with Jocasta. The only reason we are given for Oedipus' marriage to Jocasta is that she, as it were, goes with the throne. Should we believe that a myth the central theme of which constitutes an incestuous relationship between mother and son would entirely omit the element of attraction between the two? This question is all the more weighty in view of the fact that, in the older versions of the oracle, the prediction of the marriage to the mother is mentioned only once in Nikolaus of Damascus' description, which according to Carl Roberts goes back to a relatively new source.2

Furthermore, Oedipus is described as the courageous and wise hero who becomes the benefactor of Thebes. How can we understand that the same Oedipus is described as having committed the crime most horrible in the eyes of his contemporaries? This question has sometimes been answered by pointing to the fact that it is the very essence of the Greek concept of tragedy that it is the powerful and strong who are suddenly struck by disaster. Whether such an answer is sufficient or whether another view can give us a more satisfactory answer remains to be seen.

The foregoing questions arise from a consideration of King Oedipus. If we examine only this tragedy, without taking into account the two other parts of the trilogy, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone, no definite answer can be given. But we are at least in the position of formulating a hypothesis, namely that the myth can be understood as a symbol not of the incestuous love between mother and son but of the rebellion of the son against the authority of the father in the patriarchal family; that the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta is only a secondary element, only one of the symbols of the son's victory who takes his father's place and with it all his privileges.

The validity of this hypothesis can be tested by examining the whole Oedipus myth, particularly in the form presented by Sophocles in the two other parts of his trilogy, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone.3

In Oedipus at Colonus we find Oedipus near Athens at the grove of the Eumenides shortly before he dies. After having blinded himself, Oedipus had remained in Thebes, which was ruled by Creon, his uncle, who after some time exiled him. Oedipus' two daughters, Antigone and Ismene, accompanied him into exile; but his two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, refused to help their blind father. After his departure, the two brothers strove for possession of the throne. Eteocles won; but Polyneices, refusing to yield, sought to conquer the city with outside help and to wrest the power from his brother. In Oedipus at Colonus we see him approach his father, begging his forgiveness and asking his assistance. But Oedipus is relentless in his hate against his sons. In spite of the passionate pleading of Polyneices, supported by Antigone's plea, he refuses forgiveness. His last words to his son are:
And thou—begone, abhorred of me, and unfathered!—begone, thou vilest of the vile, and with thee take these my curses which I call down on thee—never to vanquish the land of thy race, no, nor ever return to hill-girt Argos, but by a kindred hand to die, and slay him by whom thou hast been driven out. Such is my prayer; and I call the paternal darkness of dread Tartarus to take thee unto another home,—I call the spirits of this place,—I call the Destroying God, who hath set that dreadful hatred in you twain. Go, with these words in thine ears—go, and publish it to the Cadmeans all, yea, and to thine own staunch allies, that Oedipus hath divided such honours to his sons.  

In *Antigone* we find another father-son conflict as one of the central themes of the tragedy. Here Creon, the representative of the authoritarian principle in state and family, is opposed by his son, Haemon, who reproaches him for his ruthless despotism and his cruelty against Antigone. Haemon tries to kill his father and, failing to do so, kills himself.

We find that the theme which runs through the three tragedies is the conflict between father and son. In *King Oedipus*, Oedipus kills his father Laius who intended to take the infant's life. In *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus gives vent to his intense hate against his sons, and in *Antigone* we find the same hate again between Creon and Haemon. The problem of incest exists neither in the relationship between Oedipus' sons to their mother nor in the relationship between Haemon and his mother, Eurydice. If we interpret *King Oedipus* in the light of the whole trilogy, the assumption seems plausible that the real issue in *King Oedipus*, too, is the conflict between father and son and not the problem of incest.

Freud had interpreted the antagonism between Oedipus and his father as the unconscious rivalry caused by Oedipus' incestuous strivings. If we do not accept this explanation, the question arises as how otherwise to explain the conflict between father and son which we find in all the three tragedies. One clue is given in *Antigone*. The rebellion of Haemon against Creon is rooted in the particular structure of Creon's relationship to Haemon. Creon represents the strictly authoritarian principle both in the family and in the state, and it is against this type of authority that Haemon rebels. An analysis of the whole Oedipus trilogy will show that the struggle against paternal authority is its main theme and that the roots of this struggle go far back into the ancient fight between the patriarchal and matriarchal systems of society. Oedipus as well as Haemon and Antigone are representatives of the matriarchal principle; they attack a social and religious order based on the powers and privileges of the father, represented by Laius and Creon.

Since this interpretation is based on Bachofen's analysis of Greek mythology, it is necessary to acquaint the reader briefly with the principles of Bachofen's theory.

In his “Mutterrecht” (mother right), published in 1861, Bachofen suggested that in the beginning of human history sexual relations were promiscuous; that therefore only the mother's parenthood was unquestionable, to her alone consanguinity could be traced, and she was the authority and law giver—the ruler both in the family group and in society. On the basis of his analysis of religious documents of Greek and Roman antiquity, Bachofen came to the conclusion that the supremacy of women had found its expression not only in the sphere of social and family organization but also in religion. He found evidence that the religion of the Olympian gods was preceded by a religion in which goddesses, mother-like figures, were the supreme deities.

Bachofen assumed that in a long-drawn-out historical process men defeated women, subdued them, and succeeded in making themselves the rulers in a social hierarchy. The patriarchal system which was thus established is characterized by monogamy (at least so far as women were concerned), by the authority of the father in the family, and by the dominant role of men in a hierarchically organized society. The religion of this patriarchal culture corresponded to its social organization. Instead of the mother-goddesses, male gods became supreme rulers over man, as the father was in the family.
One of the most striking and brilliant illustrations of Bachofen's interpretation of Greek myths is his analysis of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which according to Bachofen is a symbolic representation of a last fight between the maternal goddesses and the victorious paternal gods. Clytemnestra had killed her husband, Agamemnon, in order not to give up her lover, Aegisthus. Orestes, her son by Agamemnon, avenges his father's death by killing his mother and her lover. The Erinyes, representatives of the old mother-goddesses and the matriarchal principal, persecute Orestes and demand his punishment, while Apollo and Athene (the latter not born from woman but sprung from the head of Zeus), the representatives of the new patriarchal religion, are on Orestes' side. The argument is centered around the principles of patriarchal and matriarchal religion, respectively. For the matriarchal world there is only one sacred tie, that of mother and child, and consequently matricide is the ultimate and unforgivable crime. From the patriarchal point of view, the son's love and respect for the father is his paramount duty and therefore patricide is the paramount crime. Clytemnestra's killing of her husband, from the patriarchal standpoint a major crime because of the supreme position of the husband, is considered differently from the matriarchal standpoint, since “she was not related by blood to the man whom she killed.” The murder of a husband does not concern the Erinyes, since to them only ties of blood and the sanctity of the mother count. To the Olympian gods, on the other hand, the murder of the mother is no crime if it is carried out as revenge for the father's death. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Orestes is acquitted, but this victory of the patriarchal principle is somewhat mitigated by a compromise with the defeated goddesses. They agree to accept the new order and to be satisfied with a minor role as protectors of the earth and as goddesses of agricultural fertility.

Bachofen showed that the difference between the matriarchal and patriarchal order went far beyond the social supremacy of men and women respectively, but was one of social and moral principles. Matriarchal culture is characterized by an emphasis on ties of blood, ties to the soil, and a passive acceptance of all natural phenomena. Patriarchal society, in contrast, is characterized by respect for man-made law, by a predominance of rational thought, and by an effort to change natural phenomena by man. Insofar as these principles are concerned, the patriarchal culture constitutes a definite progress over the matriarchal world. In other respects, however, the matriarchal principles were superior to the victorious patriarchal ones. In the matriarchal concept all men are equal, since they are all the children of mothers and each one a child of Mother Earth. A mother loves her children all alike and without conditions, since her love is based on the fact that they are her children and not on any particular merit or achievement; the aim of life is the happiness of men, and there is nothing more important or dignified than human existence and life. The patriarchal system, on the other hand, considers obedience to authority to be the main virtue. Instead of the principle of equality we find the concept of the favorite son and a hierarchical order in society.

The relationship [Bachofen says] through which mankind has first grown into civilization which is the beginning of the development of every virtue and of the formation of the nobler aspects of human existence is the matriarchal principle, which becomes effective as the principle of love, unity, and peace. The woman sooner than the man learns in caring for the infant to extend her love beyond her own self to other human beings and to direct all her gifts and imagination to the aim of preserving and beautifying the existence of another being. All development of civilization, devotion, care, and the mourning for the dead are rooted in her. Its principle is that of universality, whereas the patriarchal principle is that of restrictions. The idea of the universal brotherhood of man is rooted in the principle of motherhood, and this very idea vanishes with the development of patriarchal society. The patriarchal family is a closed and restricted organism. The matriarchal family, on the other hand, has that universal character with which all evolution begins and which is characteristic of maternal life in contrast to the spiritual, the image of Mother Earth, Demeter. Each woman's womb will give brothers and sisters to every human being until, with the development of the patriarchal principle, this unity is dissolved and superseded by the principle of hierarchy. In matriarchal
societies, this principle has found frequent and even legally formulated expressions. It is the basis of the principle of universal freedom and equality which we find as one of the basic traits in matriarchal cultures. … Absence of inner disharmony, a longing for peace … a tender humaneness which one can still see in the facial expression of Egyptian statues penetrates the matriarchal world. …

Bachofen's discovery found confirmation by an American scholar, L. H. Morgan, who entirely independently came to the conclusion that the kinship system of the American Indians—similar to that found in Asia, Africa, and Australia—was based on the matriarchal principle and that the most significant institution in such cultures, the gens, was organized in conformity with the matriarchal principle. Morgan's conclusions about principles of value in a matriarchal society were quite similar to Bachofen's. He proposed that the higher form of civilization “will be a repetition—but on a higher level—of the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity which characterized the ancient gens.” Both Bachofen's and Morgan's theories of matriarchy were, if not entirely ignored, disputed by most anthropologists. This was also the case in the work of Robert Briffault, who in The Mothers continued Bachofen's research and confirmed it by a brilliant analysis of new anthropological data. The violence of the antagonism against the theory of matriarchy arouses the suspicion that the criticism was not entirely free from an emotionally founded prejudice against an assumption so foreign to the thinking and feeling of our patriarchal culture. There is little doubt that many single objections to the matriarchal theory are justified. Nevertheless, Bachofen's main thesis that we find an older layer of matriarchal religion underneath the more recent patriarchal religion of Greece seems to me to be established by him beyond any doubt.

After this brief survey of Bachofen's theory we are in a better position to take up the discussion of our hypothesis that the hostility between father and son which is the theme running through Sophocles' trilogy is to be understood as an attack against the victorious patriarchal order by the representatives of the defeated matriarchal system.

*King Oedipus* offers little direct evidence except in some points which will be mentioned presently. But the original Oedipus myth in the various versions which existed in Greece and upon which Sophocles built his tragedy gives an important clue. In the various formulations of the myth, the figure of Oedipus was always connected with the cult of the earth goddesses, the representatives of matriarchal religion, according to Bachofen. In almost all versions of the Oedipus myth, from parts which deal with his exposure as an infant to those which are centered around his death, traces of this connection can be found. Thus, for instance, Eteonos, the only Boeotian city which had a cult shrine of Oedipus and where the whole myth probably originated, also has the shrine of the earth goddess, Demeter. At Colonus (near Athens), where Oedipus finds his last resting place, was an old shrine of Demeter and the Erinyes which has probably existed prior to the Oedipus myth. As we shall see later on, Sophocles has emphasized this connection between Oedipus and the chthonic goddesses in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Another aspect of the Oedipus myth—Oedipus' connection with the Sphinx—seems also to point to the connection between Oedipus and the matriarchal principle as described by Bachofen. The Sphinx had announced that the one who could solve her riddle would save the city from her wrath. Oedipus succeeds, where everyone else before him had failed, and thus becomes the saviour of Thebes. But if we look at the riddle more closely we are struck by the insignificance of the riddle in comparison with the reward for its solution. Any clever boy of 12 might guess that that which goes first on four, then on two, and eventually on three is man. Why should the right guess be proof of such extraordinary powers as to make their possessor the saviour of the city? The answer to this question lies in an analysis of the real meaning of the riddle, an analysis which must follow the principles of interpretation of myths and dreams as they were developed by Bachofen and Freud. They have shown that often the most important element in the real content of a dream or myth appears as a much less important or even insignificant part of the manifest formulation, whereas that part of the manifest formulation which has the main accent is only a minor part in the real content.
Applying this principle to the Sphinx myth, it would seem that the important element in the riddle is not the part which is stressed in the manifest formulation of the myth, namely, the riddle itself, but the answer to the riddle, *man*. If we translate the Sphinx's words from symbolic into overt language we hear her say: He who knows that the most important answer man can give to the most difficult question with which he is confronted is man himself can save mankind. The riddle itself, the answer to which required nothing but cleverness, serves only as a veil for the latent meaning of the question, the importance of man. This very emphasis on the importance of man is part of the principle of the matriarchal world as Bachofen described it. Sophocles in *Antigone* made this principle the center of Antigone's as against Creon's position. What matters for Creon and the patriarchal order he represents is the state, man-made laws, and obedience to them. What matters to Antigone is man himself, the natural law, and love. Oedipus becomes the saviour of Thebes, proving by his very answer to the Sphinx that he belongs to the same world which is represented by Antigone and expressive of the matriarchal order.

One element in the myth and in Sophocles' *King Oedipus* seems to contradict our hypothesis—the figure of Jocasta. On the assumption that she symbolizes the motherly principle, the question arises why the mother is destroyed instead of being victorious, provided the explanation suggested here is correct. The answer to this question will show that the role of Jocasta not only does not contradict our hypothesis but tends to confirm it. Jocasta's crime is that of not having fulfilled her duty as a mother; she had wanted to kill her child in order to save her husband. This, from the standpoint of patriarchal society, is a legitimate decision, but from the standpoint of matriarchal society and matriarchal ethics it is the unforgivable crime. It is she who by committing this crime starts the chain of events which eventually lead to her own and to her husband's and son's destruction. In order to understand this point we must not lose sight of the fact that the myth as it was known to Sophocles had already been changed according to the patriarchal pattern, that the manifest and conscious frame of reference is that of patriarchy, and that the latent and older meaning appears only in a veiled and often distorted form. The patriarchal system had been victorious, and the myth explains the reasons for the downfall of matriarchy. It proposes that the mother by violating her paramount duty brought about her own destruction. The final judgment, however, whether this interpretation of Jocasta's role and of *King Oedipus* is correct must wait until we have analyzed *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*.

In *Oedipus at Colonus* we see the blind Oedipus accompanied by his two daughters arriving near Athens, close to the grove of the goddesses of the earth. The oracle has prophesied that if Oedipus would be buried in this grove he would protect Athens from invasion by her enemies. In the course of the tragedy Oedipus makes known to Theseus the word of the oracle. Theseus gladly accepts the offer that he become the posthumous benefactor of Athens. Oedipus retreats into the grove of the goddesses and dies in a mysterious way not known to anybody but Theseus.

Who are these goddesses? Why do they offer a sanctuary to Oedipus? What does the oracle mean by telling us that Oedipus in finding his last home in this grove reverts to his role of saviour and benefactor?

In *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus implores the goddesses, saying:

> Queens of dread aspect, since your seat is the first in this land whereat I have bent the knee, show not yourselves ungracious to Phoebus or to myself; who, when he proclaimed that doom of many woes, spake of this as a rest for me after long years—on reaching my goal in a land where I should find a seat of the *Awful Goddesses*, and a hospitable shelter—even that there I should close my weary life, with benefits, through my having dwelt therein, for mine hosts, but ruin for those who sent me forth—who drove me away.14

Oedipus calls the goddesses “Queens of dread aspect” and “Awful Goddesses.” Why are they “dreadful” and “awful,” since to him they are the goddesses of his last resting place and those who will give him peace eventually? Why does the chorus say:
A wanderer that old man must have been—a wanderer, not a dweller in the land; else never
would he have advanced into this untrodden grove of the maidens with whom none may
strive, whose name we tremble to speak, by whom we pass with eyes turned away, moving
our lips, without sound or word, in still devotion.15

The answer to this question can be found only in that principle of interpretation, valid both for myths and
dreams, which has been recognized by Bachofen and Freud. If an element appearing in a myth or in a dream
belongs to a much earlier phase of development and is not part of the conscious frame of reference at the time
of the final formulation of the myth, this element often carries with it the quality of dread and awfulness.
Touching upon something hidden and taboo, the conscious mind is affected by a fear of a particular kind—the
fear of the unknown and the mystifying.

Goethe, in one of the least understood passages of Faust, has treated the problem of the dread of the
mysterious mothers in a spirit very similar to that in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus. Mephistopheles says:

Unwilling I reveal a loftier mystery—
In solitude are throned the Goddesses,
No space around them, Place and Time still less;
Only to speak of them embarrasses;
They are the Mothers!
Faust (terrified): Mothers!
Mephistopheles: Hast thou dread?
Faust: The Mothers! Mothers!--a strange word is said.
Mephistopheles:
It is so. Goddesses, unknown to ye,
The Mothers, named by us unwillingly.
Delve in the deepest depth must thou,
to reach them:
It is thine own fault that we for
help beseech them.

Here too, as in Sophocles' tragedy, the feeling of dread and terror is bound up with the mere mentioning of the
goddesses, who belong to an ancient world which now is banned from the light of day, from consciousness.

As we see from this short passage, Goethe anticipated Bachofen's theory; according to Eckermann's diary
(January 10, 1830) Goethe mentioned that in reading Plutarch he found “that in Grecian antiquity the Mothers
are spoken of as Goddesses.” This passage in Faust has appeared enigmatic to most commentators who tried
to explain the mothers as a symbol of Platonic ideas, the formless realm of the inner world of spirit, and so
forth. Indeed, it must remain an enigma unless one understands it in the light of Bachofen's findings.

It is in the grove of these “awful” goddesses where Oedipus, the wanderer, at last comes to rest and finds his
real home. Oedipus, although himself a man, belongs to the world of these matriarchal goddesses, and his
strength lies in his connection with them.

Oedipus' return to the grove of the goddesses, though the most important, is not the only clue to the
understanding of his position as representative of the matriarchal order. Sophocles makes another and very
plain allusion to matriarchy by having Oedipus refer to Egyptian matriarchy16 when he tells about his two
daughters. This is the way he praises them:

O true image of the ways of Egypt that they show in their spirit and their life! For there the
men sit weaving in the house, but the wives go forth to win the daily bread. And in your case,
your daughters, those to whom these toils belonged keep the house at home like girls, while ye,
in their stead, bear your hapless father's burden.17
The same trend of thought is continued by Oedipus when he compares his daughters with his sons. Of Antigone and Ismene he says:

Now, these girls preserve me, these my nurses, these who are men not women, in true service: but ye are aliens, and no sons of mine.\(^{18}\)

We have raised the question whether, if incest was the essence of Oedipus' crime, the drama should have told us that he had fallen in love with Jocasta unwittingly. In \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} Sophocles has Oedipus himself answer this question. The marriage to her was not the outcome of his own desire and decision; instead, she was one of the rewards for the city's saviour.

Thebes bound me, all unknowingly, to the bride that was my curse.\(^{19}\)

We have already pointed to the fact that the main theme of the trilogy, the conflict between father and son, finds its full expression in \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}; here the hate between father and son is not, as in \textit{King Oedipus}, unconscious; indeed, here Oedipus is very much aware of his hate against his sons, whom he accuses of having violated the eternal law of nature. He claims that his curse is stronger than the sons' prayer to Poseidon, “if indeed Justice (Dike, the Goddess of Justice who protects the eternal law of natural bonds and not the man-made rights of the first-born son), revealed of old, sits with Zeus in the might of eternal laws.”\(^{20}\) Simultaneously he gives expression to his hate against his own parents, accusing them of their intention to sacrifice his life. There is no indication in \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} that the hostility of Oedipus' sons against their father has any connection with the incest motif. The only motivation which we can find in the tragedy is their wish for power and the rivalry with their father.

The end of \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} clarifies still further the meaning of Oedipus' connection with the goddesses of the earth.

After the chorus has prayed to the “Unseen Goddesses,” “the Goddess Infernal,” the messenger reports how Oedipus died. He had taken leave of his daughters and—accompanied only, though not guided, by Theseus—walks to the holy place of the goddesses. He seems to need no guidance, since here at last he is at home and knows his way. The messenger sees Theseus

... holding his hand before his face to screen his eyes, as if some dread sight had been seen, and such as none might endure to behold.\(^{21}\)

We find here again the emphasis on something awful and terrifying which was already mentioned at the beginning of \textit{Antigone}; it is the same awe of the unknown, of the mystery of the goddesses. The line following the ones just quoted makes it very clear how the remnants of the forgotten matriarchal religion as blended with the ruling patriarchal system. The messenger reports that he saw Theseus

... salute the earth and the home of the gods above, both at once, in one prayer.\(^{22}\)

But by what doom Oedipus perished, no man can tell, save Theseus alone. No fiery thunderbolt of the god removed him in that hour, nor any rising of storm from the sea; but either a messenger from the gods, \textit{or the world of the dead, the nether adamant, riven for him in love}, without pain; for the passing of the man was not with lamentation, or in sickness and suffering, but, above mortals, wonderful. And if to any I seem to speak folly, I would not woo their belief, who count me foolish.\(^{23}\)

The messenger is puzzled; he does not know whether Oedipus was removed from the earth by the gods above or by the gods below, by the world of the fathers or that of the mothers. But there seems to be little doubt that,
in a formulation written centuries after the mother goddesses had been conquered by the Olympian gods, this doubt can only be the expression of a secret conviction that Oedipus was brought back to the place where he belongs, to the mothers.

How different is the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* from that of *King Oedipus*. In the latter his fate seemed to be sealed as that of the tragic criminal whose crime removes him forever from his family and from his fellow men, destined to be an outcast, abhorred though perhaps pitied by everyone. In the former he dies as a man surrounded by two loving daughters and by new friends whose benefactor he has become, not with a feeling of guilt but with a conviction of his right, not as an outcast but as one who has eventually found his home—with the earth and the goddesses who rule there. The tragic guilt which had pervaded *King Oedipus* has now been removed, and only one conflict has remained as bitter and unsolved as ever—that between father and son.

The conflict between the patriarchal and matriarchal principles is the theme of the third part of the trilogy, *Antigone*. Here the figure of Creon, which has been somewhat indistinct in the two former tragedies, becomes colorful and definite. He has become the tyrant of Thebes after Oedipus' two sons have been killed—one by attacking the city in order to gain power, the other defending his throne. Creon has ordered that the legitimate king should be buried and that the challenger's body should be left unburied—the greatest humiliation and dishonor to be done to a man, according to Greek custom. The principle which Creon represents is that of the supremacy of the law of the state over ties of blood, of obedience to authority over allegiance to the natural law of humanity. Antigone refuses to violate the laws of blood and of the solidarity of all human beings for the sake of an authoritarian hierarchical principle.

The two principles for which Creon and Antigone stand are exactly those which Bachofen characterized as the patriarchal as against the matriarchal principles. The matriarchal principle is that of blood relationship as the most fundamental and indestructible tie, of the equality of all men, of the respect for human life and of love. The patriarchal principle is that the ties between man and wife, between ruler and ruled, take precedence over ties of blood. It is the principle of order and authority, of obedience and hierarchy.

Antigone represents the matriarchal principle and thus is the uncompromising adversary of the representative of patriarchal authority, Creon. Ismene, in contrast, has accepted the defeat and given in to the victorious patriarchal order; she is a symbol of women under patriarchal domination. Sophocles makes her role very clear by having her say to Antigone, who has decided to defy Creon's command:

> And now we in turn—we two left all alone—think how we shall perish, more miserably than all the rest, if, in defiance of the law, we brave a king's decree or his powers. Nay, we must remember, first, *that we were born women, as who should not strive with men*; next, that we are ruled of the stronger, so that we must obey in these things, and in things yet sorer. I, therefore, asking the *Spirits Infernal* to pardon, seeing that force is put on me herein, will hearken to our rulers; for 'tis witless to be over busy.\(^{24}\)

Ismene has accepted male authority as her ultimate norm; she has accepted the defeat of women “who should not strive with men.” Her loyalty to the goddesses is only expressed in begging them to forgive her who has to yield to the force of the ruler.

The humanistic principle of the matriarchal world, with its emphasis on man's greatness and dignity, finds a beautiful and forceful expression in the chorus' praise of the power of man.

> Wonders are many, *and none is more wonderful than man*; the power that crosses the white sea, driven by the stormy south-wind, making a path under surges that threaten to engulf him; and *Earth, the eldest of the gods*, the immortal, the unwearied, doth he wear, turning the soil...
with the offspring of horses, as the ploughs go to and fro from year to year.\textsuperscript{25}

The conflict between the two principles unfolds in the further development of the play. Antigone insists that the law she obeys is not that of the Olympian gods. Her law “is not of today or yesterday, but from all time, and no man knows when they were first put forth”;\textsuperscript{26} and, we may add, the law of burial, of returning the body to mother earth, is rooted in the very principles of matriarchal religion. Antigone stands for the solidarity of man and the principle of the all-embracing motherly love. “‘Tis not my nature to join in hating but in loving.”\textsuperscript{27}

For Creon obedience to authority is the supreme value; human solidarity and love, if in conflict with obedience, have to yield. He has to defeat Antigone in order to uphold patriarchal authority and with it his virility.

\textit{Now verily I am no man, she is the man}, if this victory shall rest with her, and bring no penalty.\textsuperscript{28}

Creon lays down the authoritarian, patriarchal principle in unequivocal language:

\begin{quote}
Yea, this, my son, should be thy heart's fixed law—in all things to obey thy father's will. 'Tis for this that men pray to see dutiful children grow up around them in their homes—that such may requite their father's foe with evil, and honour, as their father doth, his friend. But he who begets unprofitable children—what shall we say that he hath sown, but trouble for himself, and much triumph for his foes? Then do not thou, my son, at pleasure's back, dethrone thy reason for a woman's sake; knowing that this is a joy that soon grows cold in clasping arms—an evil woman to share thy bed and thy home. For what wound could strike deeper than a false friend? Nay, with loathing, and as if she were thine enemy, let this girl go to find a husband in the house of Hades. For since I have taken her, alone of all the city, in open disobedience, I will not make myself a liar to my people—I will slay her.
\end{quote}

So let her appeal as she will to the majesty of kindred blood. If I am to nurture mine own kindred in naughtiness, needs must I bear with it in aliens. \textit{He who does his duty in his own household will be found righteous in the State also. But if any one transgresses and does violence to the laws, or thinks to dictate to his rulers, such a one can win no praise from me. No, whomsoever the city may appoint, that man must be obeyed, in little things and great, in just things and unjust; and I should feel sure that one who thus obeys would be a good ruler no less than a good subject, and in the storm of spears would stand his ground where he was set, loyal and dauntless at his comrade's side.}

\begin{quote}
\textit{But disobedience is the worst of evils.} This it is that ruins cities; this makes home desolate; by this, the ranks of allies are broken into headlong rout; but, of the lives whose course is fair, the greater part owes safety to obedience. \textit{Therefore we must support the cause of order, and in no wise suffer a woman to worst us. Better to fall from power, if we must, by a man's hand; than we should be called weaker than a woman.}\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Authority in the family and authority in the state are the two interrelated supreme values for which Creon stands. Sons are the property of their fathers and their function is to be “serviceable” to the father. “Pater potestas” in the family is the basis for the ruler’s power in the state. Citizens are the property of the state and its ruler, and “disobedience is the worst of evils.”

Haemon, Creon's son, represents the principles for which Antigone fights. Although he tries at first to appease and persuade his father, he declares his opposition openly when he sees that his father will not yield. He relies
on reason, “the highest of all things that we call our own,” and on the will of the people. When Creon accuses Antigone of being tainted with the “malady of disobedience,” Haemon's rebellious answer is:

Our Theban folk, with one voice, denies it.(30)

When Creon argues:

Am I to rule this land by other judgment than mine own?

Haemon's answer is:

That is no city which belongs to one man ... 
Thou wouldst make a good monarch of a desert.(31)

Creon brings the argument again to the crucial point by saying:

This boy, it seems, is the woman's champion.

And Haemon points to the matriarchal goddesses by answering:

And for thee, and for me, and for the gods below.(32)

The two principles have now been stated with full clarity, and the end of the tragedy only carries the action to the point of final decision. Creon has Antigone buried alive in a cave—again a symbolic expression of her connection with the goddesses of the earth. The seer, Teiresias, who in King Oedipus was instrumental in making Oedipus aware of his crime, appears again, this time to make Creon aware of his. Stricken by panic, Creon gives in and tries to save Antigone. He rushes to the cave where she is entombed, but Antigone is already dead. Haemon tries to kill his father; when he fails, he takes his own life. Creon's wife, Eurydice, upon hearing the fate of her son, kills herself, cursing her husband as the murderer of her children. Creon recognizes the complete collapse of his world and the defeat of his principles. He admits his own moral bankruptcy, and the play ends with his confession:

Ah me, this guilt can never be fixed on any other mortal kind, for my acquittal! I, even I, was thy slayer, wretched that I am—I own the truth. Lead me away, O my servants, lead me hence with all speed, whose life is but as death! ... 

Lead me away, I pray you; a rash, foolish man; who have slain thee, ah, my son, unwittingly, and thee, too, my wife—unhappy that I am! I know not which way I should bend my gaze, or where I should seek support; for all is amiss with that which is in my hands,—and yonder again, a crushing fate hath leapt upon my head.33

We are now in a position to answer the questions which we raised at the beginning. Is the Oedipus myth as presented in Sophocles' trilogy centered around the crime of incest? Is the murder of the father the symbolic expression of a hate resulting from jealousy? Though the answer is doubtful at the end of King Oedipus, it is hardly doubtful any more at the end of Antigone. Not Oedipus but Creon is defeated in the end, and with him the principle of authoritarianism, of man's domination over men, the father's domination over his son, and the dictator's domination over the people. If we accept the theory of matriarchal forms of society and religion, then, indeed, there seems to be little doubt that Oedipus, Haemon, and Antigone are representatives of the old principles of matriarchy, those of equality and democracy, in contrast to Creon, who represents patriarchal domination and obedience.34
Our interpretation, however, needs to be supplemented by another consideration. Although the conflict between Oedipus, Antigone, and Haemon on the one side against Creon on the other contains a memory of the conflict between patriarchal and matriarchal principles, and particularly of its mythical elements, it must also be understood in terms of the specific political and cultural situation in Sophocles' time and of his reactions to that situation.

The Peloponnesian War, the threat to the political independence of Athens, and the plague which ravaged the city at the beginning of the war had helped to uproot the old religious and philosophical traditions. Indeed, attacks against religion were not new, but they reached a climax in the teachings of Sophocles' Sophist adversaries. He was opposed particularly to those Sophists who not only proclaimed despotism exercised by an intellectual elite but also upheld unrestricted self-ishness as a moral principle. The ethics of egotistical supermen proclaimed by this wing of the Sophists and their amoral opportunism were the very opposite of Sophocles' philosophy. In Creon Sophocles created a figure representing this school of sophism, and Creon's speeches resembled the Sophist pattern even in style and expression.

In his argument against the Sophists, Sophocles gave new expression to the old religious traditions of the people with their emphasis on love, equality, and justice. “The religious attitude of Sophocles … is primarily concerned not with the official religion of the state but with those helpful secondary powers which always were closer to the faith of the masses than the aristocratic Olympians and to whom the people turned again in the dangers of the Peloponnesian War.” These “secondary powers,” which were different from the “aristocratic Olympian” gods, are easily identified as the goddesses of the matriarchal world.

We see, then, that Sophocles' views expressed in the Oedipus trilogy are to be understood as a blend of his opposition to contemporary sophism and of his sympathy for the old, non-Olympian religious ideas. In the name of both he proclaimed the principle that the dignity of man and the sanctity of human bonds must never be subordinated to inhuman and authoritarian claims of the state or to opportunistic considerations.

Thus far we have been concerned only with the interpretation of the Oedipus myth and not with Freud's clinical description of the Oedipus complex. Quite regardless of the question of whether or not Freud's clinical description is correct, we arrive at the result that the complex centered around the boy's incestuous strivings toward his mother and his resulting hostility against the father is wrongly called an Oedipus complex. There is a complex, however, which fully deserves to be called an Oedipus complex, the rebellion of the son against the pressure of the father's authority—an authority rooted in the patriarchal, authoritarian structure of society.

The child does not meet society directly at first; he meets it through the medium of his parents, who in their character structure and methods of education represent the social structure and are the psychological agency of society, as it were. What, then, happens to the child in relationship to his parents? He meets through them the kind of authority which prevails in a patriarchal society, and this kind of authority tends to break his will, his spontaneity, his independence. But, since man is not born to be broken, the child fights against the authority represented by his parents; he fights not only for his freedom from pressure but also for his freedom to be himself, a full-fledged human being and not an automaton.

In this struggle some children are more successful than others; most of them are defeated to some extent in their fight for freedom. The ways in which the defeat is brought about are manifold, but, whatever they are, the scars left in the child's unsuccessful fight against irrational authority are to be found at the bottom of every neurosis. Such a scar is represented in a syndrome the most important features of which are: a weakening or paralysis of the individual's originality and spontaneity; a weakening of the self and the substitution of a pseudoself in which the feeling of “I am” is dulled and replaced by the experience of self as the sum total of expectations others have about the self; a substitution of heteronomy for autonomy; a fogginess, or, to use Dr. Sullivan's term, a parataxic quality in all interpersonal experiences.
It is the child's rebellion against proprietary paternal authority in all its various forms which can be properly called the Oedipus complex.

Does our interpretation of the Oedipus myth and of the Oedipus complex imply that Freud's theory was without foundation?

The history of thought is a history of continuous revision and reinterpretation of previous theoretical statements which at a later period appear to have expressed the optimum of truth attainable in a given historical period. With regard to Freud's theories the same holds true; there is hardly any theoretical statement of Freud's which does not contain at least a true kernel from which one can proceed to a more correct insight into the facts. Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex is a case in point.

Freud observed three facts, and each of these observations was valid. We now propose to show that the unified theoretical interpretation which he gave to his three observations was fallacious and that the progress of psychological theory lies in the direction of seeing the observed phenomena afresh and of interpreting them differently. The facts which Freud observed were the following: First, he noted the presence of sexual strivings in children. Although this phenomenon has found wide recognition today, at the beginning of the century it was a revolutionary and significant discovery which furthered our knowledge of child psychology tremendously. Second, Freud observed that the ties by which children are bound to their parents are often not severed at a time when in the normal development they should be severed and the child should become independent. He saw that this irrational “fixation” of children to their parents is to be found in all neuroses and is one of the causes for the development of neurotic symptoms and neurotic character traits. The significance of this discovery can hardly be overestimated. The more data we collect, the more it becomes apparent that the peculiar lack of maturity and self-assertion and the emotional and intellectual distortions which are so characteristic of every neurosis result from this fixation, which paralyzes the person's free use of his own emotional and intellectual powers. Third, Freud recognized the significance and frequency of conflicts between father and son, and he showed how an unsuccessful rebellion against the father's authority and the fears resulting from the defeat form the basis for a neurotic development.

The observation of these three phenomena led Freud to the formulation of a brilliant theory. He assumed that the second phenomenon, the attachment to the mother, was rooted in the first phenomenon, the sexual strivings of the child, and that the third phenomenon, the conflict with the father, was a result of this sexual rivalry. This theory is very appealing, indeed, because it has the advantage of explaining three different phenomena by one assumption and thus to require the least amount of theoretical construction. Individual and anthropological data\(^3\) gathered since Freud formulated his theory, however, have shaken our conviction as to its validity. These data have shown that the Oedipus complex in Freud's sense is not a universal human phenomenon and that the child's rivalry with the father does not occur in cultures without strong patriarchal authority. Furthermore, it has become evident that the tie to the mother is not essentially a sexual tie—in fact, that infantile sexuality when not suppressed has as its normal aim autoerotic satisfactions and sexual contact with other children. Moreover, it has become evident that pathological dependence on the mother is caused by nonsexual factors—particularly by the dominating attitude of the mother, which makes the child helpless and frightened thus intensifying the need for the mother's protection and affection.

Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex is part of a broader concept in which neurosis is explained as the result of a conflict between the irrational passions of the child and the reality represented by the parents and by society. It is the child who is the “sinner,” and neurosis is the punishment, as it were. The concept of the Oedipus complex presented here is also part of a larger concept of neurosis. The cause of neurosis is seen primarily not in the conflict between man's irrational passions and the justified demands of society but in man's legitimate striving for freedom and independence and in those social arrangements which thwart it and thus create destructive passion which in turn must be suppressed by external or internal force.\(^4\)
While Freud assumes that the conflict arising from the child's incestuous strivings is rooted in his nature and thus unavoidable, we believe that in a cultural situation in which respect for the integrity of every individual—hence of every child—is realized the Oedipus complex will belong to the past.

Notes

3. While it is true that the trilogy was not written in this order and while some scholars may be right in their assumption that Sophocles did not plan the three tragedies as a trilogy, the three must nevertheless be interpreted as a whole. It makes little sense to assume that Sophocles described the fate of Oedipus and his children in three tragedies without having in mind an inner coherence of the whole.
6. Ibid., pp. 15, 16.
11. Ibid., p. 21.
12. Their interpretation of the Sphinx myth, however, differs from the one which follows here. Bachofen emphasized the nature of the question and stated that the Sphinx defines man in terms of his telluric, material existence, that is, in matriarchal terms. Freud assumed that the riddle is the symbolic expression of the child's sexual curiosity.
13. For those readers who are not familiar with Freud's dream interpretation, one brief explanatory remark is in order. What I have called here the real thought of the dream or myth is what Freud calls the latent dream in contrast to the manifest content, which is the dream as remembered. Freud assumed that symbolic language was a secret code the main function of which was to distort and veil the latent thought. While in my opinion the main function of symbolic language is not that of hiding but of giving fuller expression to inner experiences than conventional language permits, it remains nevertheless true that both dreams and myths also frequently tend to hide and distort the real meaning of the thought expressed. In dreams this is the case if the dreamer is not aware in waking life of the thoughts which he expresses in a dream and does not want to be fully aware of them even in his sleep. In myths the latent content is censored and changed if it deals with elements which are rooted in older historical periods forgotten, feared, or despised at the time the myth is formulated.
17. Ibid., pp. 338 f.
18. Ibid., pp. 1367 f.
19. Ibid., pp. 525 f.
20. Ibid., pp. 1380 f.
21. Ibid., pp. 1650 f.
22. Ibid., pp. 1656 f.
23. Ibid., pp. 1660 f.
24. Ibid., pp. 50 f.
25. Ibid., pp. 332 f.
26. Ibid., pp. 455 f.
27. Ibid., pp. 523 f.
28. Ibid., p. 483.
29. Ibid., pp. 640 f.
30. Ibid., pp. 730 f.
31. Ibid., pp. 740 f.
32. Ibid., pp. 745 f.
33. Ibid., pp. 1320 f.
34. No less a thinker than Hegel saw the conflict represented in Antigone in the same light many years prior to Bachofen. He says of Antigone: “The gods, however, which she worships are the gods below, the gods of Hades, the inner gods of emotion, of love, of blood, and not the gods of the day, of the free and self-conscious life, of the nation, and the state.” (Hegel, Aesthetik, vol. II, p. 2, Absch., chap. 1; compare also Philosophy of Religion, vol. XVI, p. 133.) Hegel in this statement is so much on the side of the state and its laws that he defines Creon's principle as that of “the free life of the people and the state” in spite of the undeniable evidence that Creon does not represent freedom but dictatorship. In view of this one-sided sympathy of Hegel's, it is all the more significant that he states so clearly that Antigone stands for the principles of love, of blood and emotion, which later on Bachofen found to be the characteristic principles of the matriarchal world. While Hegel's sympathy for the patriarchal principles is not surprising, one does not expect to find it in Bachofen's writings. And yet Bachofen's own attitude to matriarchal society has been quite ambivalent. It seems that he loved matriarchal and hated patriarchal principles, but inasmuch as he was also a religious Protestant and a believer in the progress of reason he believed in the supremacy of the patriarchal principle over the matriarchate. In a great part of his writings his sympathy with the matriarchal principle finds expression. In other parts, and this holds true of his brief interpretation of the Oedipus myth (Bachofen's “Mutterrecht” in Der Mythos vom Orient und Okzident, op. cit., pp. 259 f.), he, like Hegel, sides with the victorious Olympian gods. To him Oedipus stands on the frontier between the matriarchal and the patriarchal world. The fact that he does not know his father points to a matriarchal origin in which only the mother but not the father is certain. But the fact that he discovers eventually who his real father is, according to Bachofen, marks the beginning of the patriarchal family in which the true father is known. “Oedipus,” he says, “is connected with the progress to a higher level of existence. He is one of those great figures whose suffering and pain lead to a more beautiful form of human civilization; one of those still rooted in the old order of things who are at the same time sacrificed and thus become the founders of a new epoch” (p. 266). Bachofen stresses the fact that the dreaded mother-goddesses, the Erinyes, have subordinated themselves to the Apollonian world and that the connection between Oedipus and them marks the victory of the patriarchal principle. It seems to me that Bachofen's interpretation does not do justice to the fact that Creon, although he is the only one who survives physically, symbolizing the victory of the patriarchal world, is the one who is morally defeated. It may be assumed that Sophocles intended to convey the idea that the patriarchal world was triumphant but that it would be defeated unless it adopted the humanistic principles of the older matriarchal order.
37. It is interesting to note that the same blend between progressive political ideas and a sympathy with mythical matriarchal principles is to be found again in the nineteenth century in Bachofen's, Engels', and Morgan's work. (Compare my paper on “Zur Rezeption der Mutterrechtstheorie” in Zeitschrift fuer Sozialforschung, III (1934).
The problem of hostility between father and son was also of great personal significance in the life of the poet. His son Jophon sued the aged father and wanted the court to deprive him of the right to manage his own business affairs, a suit from which Sophocles emerged victoriously.

39. Cf. particularly Malinowski's work.

**Criticism: Francis Fergusson (essay date 1949)**


[In the following essay, originally published in 1949, Fergusson describes the ritual involved in the audience's reception of Oedipus Tyrannus and the importance and function of the chorus.]

The Cambridge School of Classical Anthropologists has shown in great detail that the form of Greek tragedy follows the form of a very ancient ritual, that of the Eniautos-Daimon, or seasonal god. This was one of the most influential discoveries of the last few generations, and it gives us new insights into Oedipus which I think are not yet completely explored. The clue to Sophocles' dramatizing of the myth of Oedipus is to be found in this ancient ritual, which had a similar form and meaning—that is, it also moved in the “tragic rhythm.”

Experts in classical anthropology, like experts in other fields, dispute innumerable questions of fact and of interpretation which the layman can only pass over in respectful silence. One of the thornier questions seems to be whether myth or ritual came first. Is the ancient ceremony merely an enactment of the Ur-Myth of the year-god—Attis, or Adonis, or Osiris, or the “Fisher-King”—in any case that Hero-King-Father-High-Priest who fights with his rival, is slain and dismembered, then rises anew with the spring season? Or did the innumerable myths of this kind arise to “explain” a ritual which was perhaps mimed or danced or sung to celebrate the annual change of season?

For the purpose of understanding the form and meaning of Oedipus, it is not necessary to worry about the answer to this question of historic fact. The figure of Oedipus himself fulfills all the requirements of the scapegoat, the dismembered king or god-figure. The situation in which Thebes is presented at the beginning of the play—in peril of its life; its crops, its herds, its women mysteriously infertile, signs of a mortal disease of the City, and the disfavor of the gods—is like the withering which winter brings, and calls, in the same way, for struggle, dismemberment, death, and renewal. And this tragic sequence is the substance of the play. It is enough to know that myth and ritual are close together in their genesis, two direct imitations of the perennial experience of the race.

But when one considers Oedipus as a ritual one understands it in ways which one cannot by thinking of it merely as a dramatization of a story, even that story. Harrison has shown that the Festival of Dionysos, based ultimately upon the yearly vegetation ceremonies, included rites de passage, like that celebrating the assumption of adulthood—celebrations of the mystery of individual growth and development. At the same time, it was a prayer for the welfare of the whole City; and this welfare was understood not only as material prosperity, but also as the natural order of the family, the ancestors, the present members, and the generations still to come, and, by the same token, obedience to the gods who were jealous, each in his own province, of this natural and divinely sanctioned order and proportion.

We must suppose that Sophocles' audience (the whole population of the City) came early, prepared to spend the day in the bleachers. At their feet was the semicircular dancing-ground for the chorus, and the thrones for the priests, and the altar. Behind that was the raised platform for the principal actors, backed by the
all-purpose, emblematic façade, which would presently be taken to represent Oedipus' palace in Thebes. The actors were not professionals in our sense, but citizens selected for a religious office, and Sophocles himself had trained them and the chorus.

This crowd must have had as much appetite for thrills and diversion as the crowds who assemble in our day for football games and musical comedies, and Sophocles certainly holds the attention with an exciting show. At the same time his audience must have been alert for the fine points of poetry and dramaturgy, for Oedipus is being offered in competition with other plays on the same bill. But the element which distinguishes this theater, giving it its unique directness and depth, is the ritual expectancy which Sophocles assumed in his audience. The nearest thing we have to this ritual sense of theater is, I suppose, to be found at an Easter performance of the Mattias Passion. We also can observe something similar in the dances and ritual mummary of the Pueblo Indians. Sophocles' audience must have been prepared, like the Indians standing around their plaza, to consider the playing, the make-believe it was about to see—the choral invocations, with dancing and chanting; the reasoned discourses and the terrible combats of the protagonists; the mourning, the rejoicing, and the contemplation of the final stage-picture or epiphany—as imitating and celebrating the mystery of human nature and destiny. And this mystery was at once that of individual growth and development, and that of the precarious life of the human City.

I have indicated how Sophocles presents the life of the mythic Oedipus in the tragic rhythm, the mysterious quest of life. Oedipus is shown seeking his own true being; but at the same time and by the same token, the welfare of the City. When one considers the ritual form of the whole play, it becomes evident that it presents the tragic but perennial, even normal, quest of the whole City for its well-being. In this larger action, Oedipus is only the protagonist, the first and most important champion. This tragic quest is realized by all the characters in their various ways; but in the development of the action as a whole it is the chorus alone that plays a part as important as that of Oedipus; its counterpart, in fact. The chorus holds the balance between Oedipus and his antagonists, marks the progress of their struggles, and restates the main theme, and its new variation, after each dialogue or agon. The ancient ritual was probably performed by a chorus alone without individual developments and variations, and the chorus, in Oedipus, is still the element that throws most light on the ritual form of the play as a whole.

The chorus consists of twelve or fifteen “Elders of Thebes.” This group is not intended to represent literally all of the citizens either of Thebes or of Athens. The play opens with a large delegation of Theban citizens before Oedipus' palace, and the chorus proper does not enter until after the prologue. Nor does the chorus speak directly for the Athenian audience: we are asked throughout to make-believe that the theater is the agora at Thebes; and at the same time Sophocles' audience is witnessing a ritual. It would, I think, be more accurate to say that the chorus represents the point of view and the faith of Thebes as a whole, and, by analogy, of the Athenian audience. Their errand before Oedipus' palace is like that of Sophocles' audience in the theater: they are watching a sacred combat, in the issue of which they have an all-important and official stake. Thus they represent the audience and the citizens in a particular way—not as a mob formed in response to some momentary feeling, but rather as an organ of a highly self-conscious community: something closer to the “conscience of the race” than to the overheated affectivity of a mob.

According to Aristotle, a Sophoclean chorus is a character that takes an important role in the action of the play, instead of merely making incidental music between the scenes, as in the plays of Euripides. The chorus may be described as a group personality, like an old Parliament. It has its own traditions, habits of thought and feeling, and mode of being. It exists, in a sense, as a living entity, but not with the sharp actuality of an individual. It perceives; but its perception is at once wider and vaguer than that of a single man. It shares, in its way, the seeking action of the play as a whole; but it cannot act in all the modes; it depends upon the chief agonists to invent and try out the detail of policy, just as a rather helpless but critical Parliament depends upon the Prime Minister to act but, in its less specific form of life, survives his destruction.
When the chorus enters after the prologue, with its questions, its invocation of the various gods, and its focus upon the hidden and jeopardized welfare of the City—Athens or Thebes—the list of essential *dramatis personae*, as well as the elements needed to celebrate the ritual, is complete, and the main action can begin. It is the function of the chorus to mark the stages of this action, and to perform the suffering and perceiving part of the tragic rhythm. The protagonist and his antagonists develop the “purpose” with which the tragic sequence begins; the chorus, with its less than individual being, broods over the agons, marks their stages with a word (like that of the chorus leader in the middle of the Tiresias scene), and (expressing its emotions and visions in song and dance) suffers the results, and the new perception at the end of the fight.

The choral odes are lyrics but they are not to be understood as poetry, the art of words, only, for they are intended also to be danced and sung. And though each chorus has its own shape, like that of a discrete lyric—its beginning, middle, and end—it represents also one passion or pathos in the changing action of the whole. This passion, like the other moments in the tragic rhythm, is felt at so general or, rather, so deep a level that it seems to contain both the mob ferocity that Nietzsche felt in it and, at the other extreme, the patience of prayer. It is informed by faith in the unseen order of nature and the gods, and moves through a sequence of modes of suffering. This may be illustrated from the chorus I have quoted at the end of the Tiresias scene.

It begins (close to the savage emotion of the end of the fight) with images suggesting that cruel “Bacchic frenzy” which is supposed to be the common root of tragedy and of the “old” comedy: “In panoply of fire and lightning / The son of Zeus now springs upon him.” In the first antistrophe these images come together more clearly as we relish the chase; and the fleeing culprit, as we imagine him, begins to resemble Oedipus, who is lame, and always associated with the rough wilderness of Kithairon. But in the second strophe, as though appalled by its ambivalent feelings and the imagined possibilities, the chorus sinks back into a more dark and patient posture of suffering, “in awe,” “hovering in hope.” In the second antistrophe this is developed into something like the orthodox Christian attitude of prayer, based on faith, and assuming the possibility of a hitherto unimaginable truth and answer: “Zeus and Apollo are wise,” etc. The whole chorus then ends with a new vision of Oedipus, of the culprit, and of the direction in which the welfare of the City is to be sought. This vision is still colored by the chorus's human love of Oedipus as Hero, for the chorus has still its own purgation to complete, cannot as yet accept completely either the suffering in store for it, or Oedipus as scapegoat. But it marks the end of the first complete “purpose-passion-perception” unit, and lays the basis for the new purpose which will begin the next unit.

It is also to be noted that the chorus changes the scene which we, as audience, are to imagine. During the agon between Oedipus and Tiresias, our attention is fixed upon their clash, and the scene is literal, close, and immediate: before Oedipus’ palace. When the fighters depart and the choral music starts, the focus suddenly widens, as though we had been removed to a distance. We become aware of the interested City around the bright arena; and beyond that, still more dimly, of Nature, sacred to the hidden gods. Mr. Burke has expounded the fertile notion that human action may be understood in terms of the scene in which it occurs, and vice versa: the scene is defined by the mode of action. The chorus's action is not limited by the sharp, rationalized purposes of the protagonist; its mode of action, more patient, less sharply realized, is cognate with a wider, if less accurate, awareness of the scene of human life. But the chorus's action, as I have remarked, is not that of passion itself (Nietzsche's cosmic void of night) but suffering informed by the faith of the tribe in a human and a divinely sanctioned natural order: “If such deeds as these are honored,” the chorus asks after Jocasta's impiety, “why should I dance and sing?” (lines 894, 895). Thus it is one of the most important functions of the chorus to reveal, in its widest and most mysterious extent, the theater of human life which the play, and indeed the whole Festival of Dionysos, assumed. Even when the chorus does not speak, but only watches, it maintains this theme and this perspective—ready to take the whole stage when the fighters depart.

If one thinks of the movement of the play, it appears that the tragic rhythm analyzes human action temporally into successive modes, as a crystal analyzes a white beam of light spatially into the colored bands of the spectrum. The chorus, always present, represents one of these modes, and at the recurrent moments when
reasoned purpose is gone, it takes the stage with its faith-informed passion, moving through an ordered succession of modes of suffering, to a new perception of the immediate situation.

Notes

1. See especially Jane Ellen Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual*, and her *Themis* which contains an “Excursus on the ritual forms preserved in Greek Tragedy” by Professor Gilbert Murray.
2. In an earlier passage in his book (p. 18), Fergusson has explained “tragic rhythm” as the movement which constitutes the shape of the whole play and of each episode in the play. He adds: “Mr. Kenneth Burke has studied the tragic rhythm in his *Philosophy of Literary Form*, and also in *A Grammar of Motives*, where he gives the three moments traditional designations which are very suggestive: *Poiema, Pathema, Mathema*. They may also be called, for convenience, Purpose, Passion (or Suffering) and Perception. It is this tragic rhythm of action which is the substance or spiritual content of the play, and the clue to its extraordinarily comprehensive form” [Editor's note].

Criticism: Philip Wheelwright (essay date 1954)


*[In the following essay, originally published in 1954, Wheelwright argues that a key to understanding the meaning of Oedipus Tyrannus is found in its Greek title, which the critic renders as Oedipus the Usurper.]*

If we compare the best Hellenic studies of the last two or three decades with those of the half-century preceding, three new emphases become apparent: anthropological, psychological, and semantic. The change has been gradual, of course; and it might be objected that anthropology, in particular, is no new arrival, having been a factor in the critical consciousness of western Europe almost since the founding of the Royal Anthropological Institute in the early 1870's. But although that is true, and although scattered anthropological references can be found in the books and textual annotations of the older classicists, there are two reasons, I think, why the influence of anthropology did not become a substantial factor in classical scholarship until somewhat recently. One reason was the natural intellectual lag between any large discovery and the full realization of its pertinence. Partly the ingrained conservatism of many (by no means all) classical scholars, and partly the magnitude of the field newly opened up, made the process of reinterpretation a gradual one. The other reason lay in the uncertainty and lively disagreement among anthropologists themselves regarding the theoretical substructure of their researches. Until the turn of the century the animism of Tylor and Spencer exercised strong influence, especially in England; and such theories offered little to classical scholars that would change the tenor of their thinking or the direction of their researches. Belief in ghosts, in dreams, and in magic had always been a popular disposition, exploited by every teller of tales, without need of gloss.

But another anthropological theory began to find expression in the first decade of our century, which was to affect classical procedures a great deal. This was the theory variously called animatism, pre-animatism, and theory of mana—*protopsyehism* might denote it best—associated particularly with the names of T. K. Preuss in Germany, R. R. Marett in England, and (as has been mentioned in another context), Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in France: that the primary religious phenomenon, the primordial stage in religious evolution (if we choose to think chronologically), is something vaguer and more fluid than either gods or human or ancestral souls; that it is an undefined sense of presence, stirring awe and perhaps dread in the beholder, capable on the one hand of developing at length into an object of reverence, and on the other of inviting attempts at magical control. Such is declared to have been the primitive belief-matrix from which religion, myth, and magic gradually, and sometimes divergently, evolved. The clearest indication of the power of the new theory to affect classical scholarship appears in Gilbert Murray's emphasis on the “error of treating Homer as primitive, and more
generally in our unconscious insistence on starting with the notion of ‘gods.’” Although Murray's specific evidences were drawn from within his own field of study, the new anthropological emphasis on intangibles was creating a climate of opinion and an openness of intellectual sensibility most favorable to his view.

The psychological element in classical modernism owes most, I suspect, to Nietzsche. The Nietzschean symbols of Apollo and Dionysus, although they oversimplified the many-sided phenomena of the Greek mind, provided a schema of interpretation which, so far as it went, was relevant. Moreover it set limits to the over-intellectualization of the Greek achievement of which traditional scholarship has often been guilty; and in doing so it invited attention to a rich field of evidence and allusion which the older scholars had not adequately explored. The effective presence of dark, vague chthonic forces, lacking the clear bright outlines and specious personality of the Olympian gods, was an aspect of the Greek thinkers' world which in the heyday of classical scholarship could be, if not quite neglected, at least explained away as atavisms. The Nietzschean rehabilitation of Dionysus, backed by such related German theories as Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will and von Hartmann's of the unconscious, and subsequently by the experimental approach to unconscious phenomena associated largely with the name of Freud, encouraged a disposition to look for nonrational mental factors in the interpretation of human phenomena. When this trend of psychological voluntarism (largely German, since the analogous work of de Biran, Ravaisson, and Fouillée in France exercised no comparable influence) began to unite early in the present century with the new protopsychic anthropology emanating largely from England, the result was to provoke the more forward-looking classicists—Jane Harrison and Gilbert Murray, for instance—to reëxamine their postulates of method and interpretation. Sometimes enthusiasm pushed them too far, as in Miss Harrison's celebrated cry, “There, I knew Zeus was only that old snake!” But a revised equilibrium was sought, and, in such admirable scholars as Werner Jaeger, Georges Méautis, and the late Francis M. Cornford, eventually found.

Of course the outstanding, or at any rate the most vociferated example of psychological method applied to classical problems has been Freud's Oedipus theory. Whatever the clinical uses of that provocative idea (and I suspect they have been overplayed) its interpretive value for an understanding either of the ancient legend or of Sophocles' two plays is sharply limited. For it is a commonplace among classical scholars that Oedipus himself never exhibits the well-known complex that bears his name. His marriage to Jocasta was a matter of civic duty: having rid the Thebans of the baleful Sphinx by answering her riddle correctly, he received the throne of Thebes and the widowed queen to wife as his due reward. There is no indication in Sophocles' play or in any of the surviving records of the ancient myth, that Oedipus and Jocasta were drawn to each other erotically. But clearly Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus pattern could hold good of the ancient story only if there were an erotic attraction, whether conscious or repressed, between Oedipus and Jocasta, and moreover only if they felt, or if at least one of them felt, some conflict, however dimly, between the two relationships of son-mother and husband-wife.

Freud, to be sure, foresaw and met the objection after a fashion. The fact that Oedipus performed both acts, the slaying of his father and the bedding of his mother, without suspecting the true relationships, is in Freud's view “a deviation from the analytical subject matter which is easily intelligible and indeed inevitable.” Inevitable, he explains, because of the need for “a poetic handling of the material”; for Freud's idea of poetry and the poetic seems to be pretty much limited to its alleged psychic function as a ritualized substitution for ideas which in their native form are suppressed. Intelligible, he goes on to explain, because “the ignorance of Oedipus is a legitimate representation of the unconsciousness into which, for adults, the whole experience has fallen; and the doom of the oracle, which makes or should make the hero innocent, is a recognition of the inevitability of the fate which has condemned every son to live through the Oedipus complex.” Thus in interpreting the Greek myth of Oedipus as an embodiment of that psychotic pattern which he has named the Oedipus complex Freud is not insisting on the motivations of the characters in Sophocles' play but on the general unconscious acceptance of that pattern, by reason of which the myth took strong hold of the Greek popular imagination, finally causing Sophocles to recognize its unparalleled dramatic possibilities.
The first palpable expression of incestuous and patricidal elements in Oedipus' own psyche occurs, so far as I know, in Dryden and Lee's late seventeenth century version of the tragedy. In the opening scene of their *Oedipus*, Jocasta addresses her husband as though haunted by some dark intuition of her true relationship with him:

When you chid, methought  
A mother's love start [sic] up in your defence,  
And bad me not be angry. Be not you;  
For I love Laius still, as wives should love,  
But you more tenderly, as part of me.

So much was Dryden's work. Nathaniel Lee, who wrote the second act, becomes tediously explicit:

... This horrid sleep  
Dash'd my sick fancy with an act of incest:  
I dreamt, Jocasta, that thou wert my mother;  
Which, though impossible, so damps my spirits,  
That I could do a mischief on myself,  
Lest I should sleep, and dream the like again.

And Dryden, back on the job again in Act III, has Oedipus tell of an omen which struck him like “a pestilential blast”:

A young stork  
That bore his aged parent on his back;  
Till weary with the weight, he shook him off,  
And peck'd out both his eyes.

It would seem to have been Dryden and his collaborator then, not Sophocles, who introduced the Oedipus complex into literature. But the Dryden-Lee *Oedipus* is an inferior play, and the Oedipus story as they develop it is a hothouse growth, so artificial as to have lost most of its properly *mythic* character. Let us therefore look back to Sophocles' great play, the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and inquire what its depth-meaning really is. For if we are to understand an archetype rightly, we must study it in its mature and artistically finished expressions even more painstakingly than in its cruder psychological and anthropological embodiments.

Erich Fromm, in *The Forgotten Language*, raises just this question of the depth-meaning of the play. Rejecting Freud's interpretation as inconsistent with the play's premises, he offers an alternative hypothesis of his own: namely that the Oedipus myth is “a symbol not of the incestuous love between mother and son but the rebellion of the son against the authority of the father in the patriarchal family; that the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta is only a secondary element, only one of the symbols of the victory of the son, who takes his father's place and with it all his privileges.” The dramatic conflict presented by Sophocles recapitulates, in Fromm's view, the prehistoric struggle between the matriarchal and the patriarchal forms of social organization. To substantiate this interpretation he appeals to Bachofen's theory that the earliest human sexual relations were promiscuous, and therefore, since only the mother's parenthood could be known, the inheritance of blood and hence of authority had to descend through her. Woman, therefore, Bachofen deduces, must have been the earliest lawgiver, and since the character of divinity in any period tends to reflect certain basic characteristics of human society, he draws the corollary that the religion of the Olympian gods was predated by a religion in which mother archetypes, dire and awful goddesses of which the Furies are the best known classical survival, were the supreme powers. Then in subsequent history (so the theory runs) man revolted against his servile role, and gradually succeeded in subduing woman, in establishing a patriarchal order on earth and the dynasty of the Olympian gods in heaven.

On the basis of Bachofen's provocative but tenuous theory Fromm amplifies his hypothesis, suggesting “that
the hostility between father and son, which is the theme running through Sophocles' trilogy, is to be understood as an attack against the victorious patriarchal order by the representatives of the defeated matriarchal system.” Notice his word “attack.” Fromm interprets Sophocles as taking sides, as presenting a thesis. He sees the Theban dramas as intended to put across an idea—“the idea that the patriarchal world was triumphant, but that it would be defeated unless it adopted the humanistic principles of the older matriarchal order.” The dramas, in short, (if we accept this interpretation) are didactic in intent; they are not primarily dramas, but dramatic vehicles for Sophocles' attack on the too brittle and too authoritarian principles of patriarchal rule, dramatic extrapolations of his nostalgia for the good old days of matriarchy.

In all interpretations let's keep our focus clear. The primary evidence of what a work of art means is always the work itself. Hints and clues may legitimately be sought outside, but their relevance and validity must always be appraised internally. Even if the theory of a primitive matriarchy should happen to be true, it does not follow that every ancient play must serve as a record of the prehistoric struggle. The Oresteia may indeed do so; the conflict between Apollo's command to Orestes to slay his mother and the wrath of the Furies as avengers of Clytemnestra's maternal rights lends a good deal of color to that view. But if we make any such judgment of the depth-meaning of the Oresteia, or for that matter if we dispute such a judgment, it must be primarily on the basis of evidence found within the play, rather than by undue reliance on sociological or psychological hypotheses. Can we find, then, in the Oedipus Tyrannus, any internal evidence of a conflict between the matriarchal and patriarchal principles?

The answer is plainly no, as any reader can see for himself; and even Mr. Fromm does not claim otherwise. He bases his interpretation of Oedipus Tyrannus partly upon the sociological theory just cited and partly upon an incident in each of Sophocles' other two Theban plays. In Oedipus at Colonus the now aged Oedipus expresses hatred and resentment against his two sons Polyneices and Eteocles. In the Antigone, where the dramatic action takes place after Oedipus' death, there is a violent flare-up of antipathy between Creon and his son Haemon. Fromm concludes: “If we interpret King Oedipus in the light of the whole trilogy, the assumption seems plausible that the real issue in King Oedipus, too, is the conflict between father and son …”

Note the three main assumptions of his argument: (1) that the father-son antagonism in the other two Theban plays is of primary, not incidental, dramatic importance; (2) that the three Theban plays are closely enough related to justify a deduction of the meaning of one of them from the supposed meaning of the others; (3) that granted the legitimacy of such a deduction in general, it is reasonable to argue a father-son antagonism between Laius and Oedipus (for which there is no independent evidence) from the acknowledged father-son antagonism between Oedipus and his sons, and even from the existence of such a relationship between Creon and Haemon. The last assumption is so inherently weak as a principle of dramatic interpretation, and moreover is so logically dependent upon the validity of Assumption 2, that I shall not do more than cite it as a curious sample of circumambulatory reasoning. What, then, of the two remaining assumptions?

The Antigone is the one Theban play to which Fromm's theory of a patriarchal-vs.-matriarchal conflict might conceivably apply. Creon and Antigone in that play do seem to stand, as Fromm maintains, for the principle of order and authority, obedience and hierarchy on the one side, and on the other for the principle of blood relationship as the fundamental and indestructible tie. But this is only one aspect of their relationship to each other and to the total dramatic pattern. To overstress the dramatic conflict in these terms is to convert the Antigone into a sociological tract. Robert F. Goheen in his recent study of the play's dominant imagery adopts a more promising approach, examining (as Fromm never bothers to do) the specific language and imagery that constitute the play's symbolic action. “The imagery employed by Sophocles,” Goheen writes, “is a functional means of communication in his dramas. It is aesthetic not simply in the sense of the decorative, but in the true sense of being a means of perception (aisthêsis) offered to the reader by the poet to take him into the meaning of the work.” The recurrence of sight imagery, especially in the Haemon scene, throws the Creon-Antigone conflict into another perspective than the sociological. The drama becomes internalized: the emphasis is not merely on the question of domination by one sex or the other, nor even on the preferability of one or the other way of life; it is also, and far more subtly, upon the nature of human awareness. The conflict is primarily
between two ways of grasping truth: Antigone's, the way of direct intuition, vs. Creon's, the way of sound sense and reason, or reliance on “right thinking” (phronēsis), on the linear, the measured, the plainly ordered. Each way of knowing has both its special reward and its special limitation of partial blindness. Fromm, to be sure, admits this spiritual antithesis as an aspect and derivative of the matriarchal-patriarchal conflict. But he errs, I believe, in two respects. He underrates Sophocles' artistic objectivity by assuming him to be taking sides. And he ignores the rich pattern of associated imagery—Goheen stresses in particular the images drawn from money and merchandising, from warfare, from animal life, and from seafaring—in which the characters of the two protagonists are caught up and given both fullness and concretion of meaning.

In any case, whatever our interpretation of the Antigone, there is no ground for drawing deductions from its supposed meaning to the meaning of the Oedipus Tyrannus. Fromm distorts the evidence by speaking repeatedly of the three Theban plays as a “trilogy”—despite his footnoted acknowledgment that they were not composed in the same order as the dramatic action represents. As a matter of fact they were written long intervals apart. The Antigone is generally accepted as having been written in or about 441 b.c., the Oedipus Tyrannus in 430 or later, and the Oedipus at Colonus shortly before Sophocles' death in 406. Moreover, each play was originally produced with two other Sophoclean tragedies, of which no record remains. Not in any sense, then, do the three extant Theban plays constitute a trilogy, and it is by no means permissible to deduce the purpose of the Oedipus Tyrannus from the purpose (if we know it) of the Antigone.

In the Antigone Creon is something of a melodramatic villain. In the plays written later his character becomes more ambivalent. Fromm, since he mistakenly treats the Antigone as if it had been written after the two other plays, misses the significance of the character change. He describes the figure of Creon as “indistinct” in the two Oedipus plays and as “becoming” colorful and definite in the Antigone. Since the Antigone was actually written first of the three, our critical problem is the reverse of the one he raises. Why does Sophocles blur the moral outlines of his Creon figure in the later plays? The likeliest answer surely is that with advancing maturity he no longer saw the moral issue in the relatively simple black-and-white terms of the Antigone; he had come to accept his characters as irresolvably ambivalent—no plain heroes and villains but multi-dimensional men steeped, like all of us, in moral ambiguities, which, though we see them in shifting perspectives, we must carry with us to the grave.

How, then, may a critical reader discover proper clues to the depth-meaning of Oedipus Tyrannus?

The first evidence is found in the title. You cannot perfectly rely on a writer to give you a major clue in the title of his work, but it is likely enough that he may want to do so, and the possibility should be explored. What is the meaning of the title Oedipus Tyrannus? Not, as in so many translations, “Oedipus Rex” or “King Oedipus.” And of course not “Oedipus the Tyrant” either. Liddell and Scott's unabridged Greek lexicon declares that in classical Greek the word tyrannos was never applied to a hereditary monarch, for whom the word was basileus; it was restricted to those who had received the royal power by some means other than direct succession. Not even force or trickery was necessarily involved. Oedipus used none; he was offered the throne by the grateful Theban people. No matter: he was still a tyrannos, or usurper, within the accepted meaning of the word. The closest translation we can give for the play's title, then, is Oedipus the Usurper. And we must try to see a little further what tyrannia or “usurpation” connoted, and especially what its moral involvements were, to the mind of a fifth-century Greek.

To usurp is to overstep the measure, to erupt the proper limits of one's station in life, or of what is morally fitting, or (it may be) of the area of human as distinguished from divine prerogative. It is the vice or guilt or “tragic flaw” (hamartia) of arrogance (hybris). Cornford's alluring hypothesis that the rise of the idea may have been connected with the agricultural arrangements in prehistoric Greece has been mentioned in Chapter X. At all events, whatever its early history the idea of overstepping the boundary soon developed cosmic, moral, and political analogies. Just as (in the fragment quoted from Heraclitus) the sun dare not overstep his appointed path, lest the Furies, in their role of the handmaidens of Justice, find him out and punish him, so
likewise a man dare not step beyond the path which Destiny has appointed him. Specifically he dare not emulate the gods, for divine indignation and vengeance \textit{(nemesis)} will crash down upon him if he does. The primary \textit{hamartia}, from this standpoint, is usurpation.

Oedipus was a usurper not only with respect to his father's throne and his mother's bed. That aspect is present in the play to be sure, and to a Greek audience Oedipus' ignorance of the relationships would not absolve him of guilt, nor does Oedipus ever expect that it will do so. Usurpation is still a half-physical, half-mythical thing; it happens and produces its terrible consequences regardless of motive. In this respect, therefore, so far as it goes, Freud would seem to have made a valid point after all. But there is another respect in which Oedipus was a usurper more consciously. His victory over the Sphinx was almost godlike, and for man to become too nearly godlike in any way at all (recall Hippolytus' tragic excess of chastity) is a display of \textit{hybris}, arrogance, which by the inherent laws of destiny must be stricken down. The half-articulate usurpation imagery, then, together with the accusations of usurpation which the characters directly or obliquely hurl at one another, represents one depth-theme of the drama.

Next, there is the blight, afflicting the Theban countryside as the play opens. And here we meet with a quite different conception of moral law from the one involved in usurpation. The earlier idea is primarily an Olympian conception—an affair of clear boundary lines marked off in the bright vault of space. Blight and sickness, together with their opposite, which is health, are elements in the chthonic conception, appropriate to Mother Earth and the flora and fauna that grow out of her womb. Evil doing, from this standpoint, is felt as a kind of sickness, a malady in the individual, the commonwealth, and environing nature alike, and with terrible powers of contagion. When the blood of a murdered man seeps into the earth all vegetation sickens. And the same infection creeps into the human commonwealth, the \textit{polis}, the city. What to do save lop off the offending member as one would lop off the diseased branch of a tree? The penalty of sin is at once a withering away in some sense of the individual and his exile from the commonwealth—not by arbitrary decree but by the sheer logic of the chthonic idea.

It is worth noting with what thematic effectiveness Sophocles introduces the word \textit{polis} again and again at the beginnings and ends of lines, where it will have greatest prominence. Finally, after numerous such echoings Oedipus caps his emotional attack on Creon with the cry, “\textit{O polis polis!” (“O city city!”) The contrasting word \textit{xenos} (alien) is first used by Oedipus with unconscious irony when, in explaining why he did not know the details of King Laius' murder, he says “I'm just an alien here.” The irony is a double one: he is not an alien in the way he thinks, since he is actually a son of the Theban royal house; but he is presently to be an alien in a more terrible sense, namely an exile.

The third and most central set of thematic images has to do with the blindness-vs.-vision antithesis and the solving of riddles. As the usurpation theme epitomizes Olympian morality and as the blight theme epitomizes chthonic morality, so I might venture the proposition that the blindness-riddle-vision theme epitomizes the morality of the mystery cults of Greece, and in a broader way one aspect of mystical religion generally. In the higher forms of Greek mystery cults, such as the worship of Demeter at Eleusis, the rebirth cycle of crops and seasons develop into the idea of spiritual rebirth. And when that happens the agency of rebirth is no longer magic, nor is it mere orgiastic ecstasy; it involves both inward purification and the imparting of a secret. The initiates at Eleusis performed a symbolic act of entering into darkness; in the inner shrine of the Eleusinian temple a new light was lit, and the sacred mysteries were revealed through such symbols as the sacred ear of grain. Oedipus, who solved the Sphinx's riddle and now would open up the dark mystery of his own origin, is inwardly blind, as the blind visionary Tiresias tries to tell him; and in putting out his eyes after his dreadful self-discovery he completes the symbolic pattern.

What can be concluded, then, as to the depth-meaning of \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus}? Nothing in plain expository terms; of that I am sure. Sophocles was not at all the didactic and partisan writer that Fromm would have him. Francis Fergusson remarks in \textit{The Idea of a Theatre} that “the peculiar virtue of Sophocles' presentation of the
myth is that it preserves the ultimate mystery by focusing upon the tragic human at a level beneath, or prior to any rationalization whatever.” I fully concur, and at the same time I think we can penetrate a little farther into the mystery—never to its heart—by awareness of the “concrete universals” that reside in the most characteristic uses of imagery. Our analyses are at best propaedeutic. They explain nothing essential, but do their work if they steer us to a fresh reading of the play with our visual and auditory imagination newly alerted.

**Criticism: Alister Cameron (essay date 1968)**


*In the following excerpt, Cameron discusses what can be learned from Oedipus Tyrannus concerning guilt, the past, and fate.*

In the middle of the *Oedipus* we find this juxtaposition: Oedipus and Creon quarrel, and before the scene is finished Oedipus has threatened to kill Creon, or at least to have him killed. Only the most strenuous pleading of both Jocasta and the chorus stops him. Then, in the next scene, Oedipus describes to Jocasta how he met Laius and his party, how he and they disputed the passage of the road, and how he killed them all.

Here, placed together, are Oedipus virtually on the point of killing now and Oedipus who did kill many years ago. An arresting juxtaposition, and surely not an accidental one. It immediately raises questions about the part played by Oedipus in the patricide. It also suggests that in this play crucial events of the past are in some sense being repeated in the present, and that is something about the play that has far-reaching implications for its interpretation.

Later we shall examine the relation of these two incidents to each other in detail, but let us look, for a moment, at another point of similarity between Oedipus’ story of the past and the present action itself. In the scene with Teiresias, just before the quarrel with Creon, the following exchange occurs: ¹ the old seer makes a mysterious reference to Oedipus’ parents at which Oedipus pulls him up short, shouting, “Wait. What man gave me birth?” (437) Teiresias replies, but as Oedipus says bitterly, in nothing but “riddles.” And Oedipus is right, because Teiresias, without meeting the question, goes on in his riddling talk to tell what in the end will become of Oedipus. The parallel to this, in event and situation, is of course the experience of the young Oedipus at Delphi. He had asked the god then who his parents were. Apollo had not answered his question. Instead, as Oedipus in his account of the incident says, again bitterly, the god had sent him away “dishonored” and given him “other things” in reply, saying that he would marry his mother, produce an accursed race, and kill his father. In short, as between these two moments the question is the same, the answer in each case is not directly to the question, but is instead, riddles and prophecies in which Teiresias repeats the role of Apollo. That should not surprise us, since we have already been told plainly about Teiresias that he is “the lord who sees most like the lord Phoebus” (284-85).

Repeating the past in this action then is not limited or peculiar to the two juxtaposed incidents we cited first. In fact, the perspective on time and events which the juxtaposition reflects is something that belongs to the whole action.²

How does the past in general stand in this play? When we put it all together, we find that there is a surprising lot of it, which in itself is an indication of its importance and relevance to the action. In the play, of course it is not all together. Different items are brought out at different times. This is common dramatic practice to be sure, but here the past is wholly dictated by the interests of the action; what is told about it, when and how it is told.
We often speak of events that have taken place in a given story before the play itself begins as being its “antecedents,” almost as if they did not belong to the play. Aristotle categorizes certain things as lying “outside the drama,” “the tragedy,” “the mythos.” Such terms, of themselves, settle nothing about how much or how little prior events belong to an action, and how much or little they mean to it. That remains a matter of the particular play. And about the Oedipus, it can certainly be said that the past is very little introduced for secondary purposes, such as to fill the audience in on the story, or to get things started, or to supply interesting information. Here, past and present are so closely identified that there is no outside and inside. To anyone who knows the play, a simple catalogue of the past events involved is enough to prove the point: the oracle to Laius, the birth, the “exposure,” the passing of the infant from hand to hand, the young prince in Corinth, and all that is contained in that narrative; the coming of Oedipus to Thebes, the Sphinx, the marriage and his elevation to the throne, the children, the plague, and the appeal to Delphi. This is all past and clearly all of it is taken thoroughly into the action. The past, in other words, becomes an integral part of the dramatist's formation of the subject.

We have already had some indication of how thoroughgoing this taking in of the past is. But it is time to see in detail what the repeating consists of, and the best place to do that is the juxtaposition we began with. What does the similarity between Oedipus on the stage quarreling with Creon and Oedipus in the pass fighting Laius consist of?

Let us divide the question into two basic components: first, the character, and second, the situation in which the character exists. Oedipus' character at any given moment in the action is the sum of what he has been shown to be from the beginning to that point. In the briefest kind of summary, thus. First, there is the noble king, “famous to all,” who took up the challenging task that came to him from Delphi, and took it up as his deeply felt duty, with all the eager force of his nature. But then, no sooner had he done so than he was attacked, or so he thought, by Teiresias. This he resented, took as a personal affront, grew angry, arrogant, threatening, and dangerous. That, let us say, is the character of Oedipus brought up to the time of the meeting with Creon. Then, in that meeting, suspicion and anger are accelerated to the point where he is ready to kill: “No indeed I do not want your exile,” he cries to Creon, “It is your death I want” (623). The threat is far from idle. It is deadly serious; we must not fail to see that. Oedipus in this moment, before he is stopped by Jocasta and the chorus, is in the act of laying his hands on Creon.

Now let us go on to the young man in the pass, as he is described shortly after this in the story Oedipus tells to Jocasta. As the prince of Corinth, he had enjoyed the highest esteem among his fellow countrymen. But the shocking incident at the banquet in Corinth, when he was taunted with being a bastard, “rankled” so that he went off secretly to Delphi. There he was “dishonored,” as he says, by Apollo's prediction, and fled out into the world, away from Corinth. But, directly, he met Laius and his party in the mountain pass.

This then was the young Oedipus: in Corinth, proud, vulnerable to the personal affront; at Delphi, a figure of sympathy for the terrible predicament in which he found himself. But in both places, he was also a young man who relied on himself, made his own decisions, and acted on them. Then, in the encounter in the pass he showed himself resolute, high-tempered, indeed more than that. Quick to resent the affront that was offered him on the road, he acted with no second thoughts: “I struck in anger … and I killed the whole lot” (774-813).

The point to be grasped is the simple one, that when in the course of the play we reach this story Oedipus tells about himself, the man we hear about, the young Oedipus in the story, is the same man acting in the same way as the Oedipus we have just now been watching in action upon the stage. I do not mean that the whole of Oedipus, in all his parts as he has been presented from the beginning of this action, is repeated. Only this, that enough of the essential Oedipus is there, and vividly there, so that we cannot fail to recognize him as unmistakably the same man, to recognize that the young man who at the moment of challenge to himself took things into his own hands and slew his father is indeed this Oedipus. The correspondence is that direct.
The question of situation is more complex. As between the young Oedipus, who was cut off from home by the god's prediction and driven out alone into the world, and the great king who stands very high in the eyes of the world, the contrast in external situation and circumstance is complete. But also, it is perfectly well understood that there is another situation, not the openly declared public one, but an undeclared real one behind it. And that is Oedipus' situation with Apollo. It was Apollo's words at Delphi that drove Oedipus out into the world; therefore, when immediately he met Laius face to face, we know perfectly well that this was no simple coincidence but something that had its place within the divine scheme of things for Oedipus. In other words, we know that Oedipus met his fate there. I have already suggested where Teiresias stands, and that he and Oedipus face to face are a repeating of Oedipus with Apollo. But we should notice now that it is the whole setting of the play that repeats itself. Thus, when the plague comes, Oedipus turns directly to Delphi; he does not go up himself, but Creon goes as his representative. The question asked is Oedipus' question, and the answer Creon brings back is Apollo's answer to Oedipus. It is also another "riddle," and one that again sets fateful action on its course. Moreover, this action is hardly well started when Oedipus once again finds the enemy across his path, or so he thinks, first in Teiresias and then Creon. In other words, while immediate circumstances change for Oedipus, the old situation remains, the fateful situation in which he lives and acts.

But a more specific question has to be reckoned with. Can we speak seriously of a fateful resemblance in situation between the incident in the pass and the quarrel with Creon on the stage, when it was Oedipus' fate on the former occasion to meet and kill not just anybody that blocked his way but his own father—not homicide but patricide? And if to that is added the necessary condition for the patricide, namely Oedipus' ignorance of the man he confronted, then are we left with any possible resemblance between Laius and Creon?

Let us consider Creon. Who is he? A prince of Thebes, of virtually equal standing with Oedipus himself (581 ff.). The homicide in this case, in other words, would have serious political implications. But Creon is also a kinsman, by marriage to be sure, but still a man to whom Oedipus is bound by the closest ties. Oedipus had made a considerable point of the relationship earlier when he said, “For I sent my own brother-in-law to Phoebus' house.” And the truth of the matter is that this is the man of all men alive to whom Oedipus is most closely bound, by public and private obligations alike. Sophocles cannot repeat the patricide, but I suggest that by creating a situation in which a violation of the most sacred bonds is in prospect, he does the nearest thing to it.

There is also a resemblance in the point of ignorance. Naturally it falls short of the absolute ignorance of not knowing who a man is. Still, the fact is prominently held before us that Oedipus is as ignorant about Creon as a man could well be. He has delusions about him: that Creon is plotting against his life and throne, that Creon is a “murderer” and a “robber” (532 ff.). The ignorance, in short, is tragic ignorance, the familiar condition in which the hero, not knowing what he is up against, acts disastrously. One may, I think very properly, ask whether Oedipus' situation with Laius is anything more than this ignorance in its most extreme form. Certainly Oedipus on the stage acts constantly in blind ignorance.

Where do we stand with our juxtaposition? The facts are these: we do not hear about Oedipus in the pass until we have come to know him well on the stage, and until we have been made thoroughly aware of the fateful situation in which he acts there; we do not hear how Oedipus killed Laius until after we have seen him brought to the point of killing on the stage. These are the plain facts of construction. But the point of this construction lies in the resemblance it contains and the parallel it makes. We have already seen enough to realize that this is a matter which involves the fundamental issues of the play.

Let me repeat. When we reach the point in the action where Oedipus tells his story, we recognize through his words and actions the character in it. The gestures made to us from the past, as it were, have a familiarity about them as being the gestures of a man we have already come to know remarkably well. This recognition is almost forced upon us and it has its obvious implications which, however, need to be stated pretty flatly. It is a
commonplace to speak of Oedipus' fate being given. But, if the play makes a point of showing us as between past and present the same man acting in essentially the same situation, the implication is that whenever Oedipus' fate occurs, or can be said to occur, Oedipus is characteristically active in it. We cannot then speak of a given fate without also speaking of a given character. In fact, the implication seems to be that it is nonsense to speak of Oedipus' fate as if it at any time existed without his being active and alive in it.

Then where does this take us in the interpretation of the play? A perspective in which the past is seen through the present, we said, has important implications. And perhaps what comes to mind first is the controversial question of Oedipus' guilt or innocence in the patricide.

This debate always begins with Oedipus' account of what happened. Who pushed whom first? Didn't Laius mean to kill Oedipus and, therefore, didn't Oedipus resist and kill in self-defense? If so, he cannot be guilty of homicide, let alone patricide. In brief, that is the argument for innocence. From the other side, it is argued that for a young man who has been warned by Apollo that he will one day kill his father (whom he has some reason to believe he does not know), Oedipus acts with criminal disregard of the possible consequences when he kills a man he does not know. Moreover, by his own account, he was hotheaded, proud. This points to guilt. True, in the eyes of the law, he cannot be guilty of patricide, for there is no denying the fact that he did not know that the man was his father; but in the eyes of gods and men he cannot be exonerated, which is to say, in some sense he must be guilty. To those who maintain Oedipus' innocence, this argument is feeble, indeed intolerable. All it has to say is that Oedipus is human, fallible like other men, and to suppose that Sophocles would advance that as proof of guilt, they argue, is absurd. On the other hand, the argument for innocence, in the eyes of those who see Oedipus as guilty, has to ignore those qualities which are simply obvious.

If I had to choose between these two positions I should choose the second. Everybody would like Oedipus to be innocent if only because it is outrageous that a man placed in the position he was, and such a man, should be found guilty. But then one must remember that tragedy is outrageous; it is only the good man's suffering that is tragic and only the wicked man's that is reasonable. And what sort of innocent could Oedipus be? An "injured innocent"? The argument for innocence seems forced to say so, for it implies that the point we must see about him, very much the point of the play, is that in no sense does he deserve his fate, that he is either a man who simply sustains a terrible fate or who nobly resists it. I think we must see clearly that he is neither of these, the reason being that such a reading of Oedipus simply removes him from the action, takes him out of the play. Apart from the anachronism this view entails, making him a romantic hero rather than a Greek one, the fact is, the decisive one I think, that the play presents us with a character who is almost exactly the opposite of an "injured innocent." Oedipus is not a man who is assailed by fate or who waits until it comes to him; on the contrary, he seizes his fate and throws the whole force of his personality into it.

It is the perspective that is wrong. The proponents of both sides of this argument, in making their case, start from the account of what happened in the pass and then, for confirmation, appeal to the rest of the play or to the parts of it which seem to support one or the other view. It is my point that we have no right to appeal to the present action except within the perspective that the action itself provides.

So let us follow the perspective. In an action where the past is taken into the present, it is the present that counts. What we must judge, in other words, if we judge at all, is Oedipus faced with the command from Delphi, and Oedipus with the different forms that situation takes: with Teiresias, Creon, Jocasta, right through the blinding. The first questions one should ask then are these: is Oedipus innocent with Teiresias, with Creon, with Jocasta, with himself? After that we may ask who pushed whom. True, this does not make a legal case against him for patricide. But then, tragedy does not take place in the law courts. Also true, and most startling in the whole sequence, is the evidence of our senses about this man that when aroused as he is by Teiresias he is capable of killing, and, as with Creon, of killing his own kinsman.
Thus, if we are forced to choose between guilty and innocent in the patricide, the weight of evidence comes down for guilty, as guilty in the past as he is now. That, as I see it, is the bearing of the action, and not just of this or that part of it, but of the whole.

Yet, are we forced to choose? Have we any right to judge? There is at least the possibility that we import this issue into the play ourselves, since Sophocles makes no explicit statement here about guilt or innocence. That he took up in the Coloneus, a very different sort of play. I myself believe he is intent in the Tyrannus on something more elementary. That is, the fact that in the fullest sense Oedipus' fate belongs to him. For I do not think we can fail to see what I should call a fitness in him or even an aptitude for what happens. That judgment, I feel sure, the play does make, although perhaps more fact than judgment. But it is a fact which one comes upon in considering any major issue in the play, as we ourselves have found repeatedly. Earlier, we put it that the character appears to belong to this action as if by some profound natural right. The fitness we see now within the perspective of the play is exactly the same thing.

We had better look back now and take further note of the conclusion we reached earlier here; that whenever and wherever Oedipus' fate may be said to occur, Oedipus always appears to be an agent in it. And this carries with it an implication which we have also met before: that Sophocles shows us how Oedipus' fate comes about. The point is an important one to consider again, because it is so widely believed that fate in the Greek tragedy, whether in the past or in the present, does not come about but is simply given, and nowhere so clearly as in the Oedipus.

So let us consider once more the “givenness” of this play and the question of Oedipus' fate. Before the play begins, he had already done what Apollo had said he would do: kill his father and marry his mother. How then, in all conscience, can we speak of Sophocles as showing us Oedipus' fate coming about? Isn't his fate already complete? That is an obvious but not a simple question. And there are other related questions which have to be asked that have the opposite implication. Is it conceivable that Sophocles' interest in this play lies in the fact that Oedipus' fate already exists without his also asking how it came to exist? Can it be doubted that he is enormously interested in the acts into which Oedipus falls during the course of the action and could these be anything, therefore, but fateful acts? In other words, if Sophocles is not showing us Oedipus' fate in the process of coming about, what could he be showing us? Again, if Oedipus' fate is complete before the play beings, then does the play stand somewhere outside his fate? Where? A sequel to his fate, an epilogue, a commentary on it? These are the possibilities, and I cannot see that they are not absurd.

Oedipus' fate is, of course, not complete before the play begins. Apollo commands the search for the guilty man, commands Oedipus, knowing him well, knowing both that he is guilty and will search and therefore find himself. This Oedipus does. That is the literal record of the action. Fate is, to be sure, an ambiguous word, but not so ambiguous that we cannot recognize it here; at least if this is not a fate and its fulfillment, then I do not know what a fate can be. And yet, it remains true that Oedipus' fate by the acts he has committed is, if not complete, already in existence and indeed sealed. How can his fate be in existence and coming into existence at the same time without contradiction? That is the question we have to ask now.

It is not a question to be limited to the Oedipus. It applies as well, for example, to the Ajax or to the Hippolytus, for the heroes of both these plays have also already committed irrevocable, fateful acts before action begins on the stage, and as between them and the Oedipus there is no essential difference in this matter. And actually, it is a matter which affects Greek tragedy as a whole. Always things have happened, or been done in the past from which the individual or individuals involved cannot escape. In other words, what we are talking about is a condition inherent for the Greek in the world of tragedy. There are different ways of recognizing this world, some more explicit than others, and these two plays I have cited are perhaps the most explicit. With their formal opening divine declarations, they represent the world in which tragic action takes place less subtly than does the Oedipus. But the result is the same, for although the fateful situation of Oedipus—that he has killed his father and married his mother—is undeclared, it is no less well understood
that it exists.

Then what about the action that does take place? As an example, let us again take the Hippolytus. What about the hero, his purity and his hauteur; about Phaedra's mad passion for him and his response (to say nothing about how bad his rhetoric is); about the revenge she took; about Theseus' blind anger, and the catastrophic death of Hippolytus that followed on it? In short, about the whole action, although Aphrodite had announced that the gates of hell were open for Hippolytus (56-57), can it be doubted that this play shows us a fate coming about? And what does the showing consist of? Clearly, the sealed world of tragic action is there, but also clearly within it the characters, their relations and responses to each other; in other words, a showing or a bringing out of the tragic necessities which together make the fate a reality. Thus, it is not a contradiction to say of the same fate that it is in existence and that it is also coming about now.

Earlier, in following the tragic inevitability of Oedipus' self-discovery, we were dealing with the same problem. And we said then that this process was not among the things which were given in advance to the dramatist. Similarly, here, while it is a principle of the world of tragedy that a man cannot escape his acts, it remains for the dramatist to find the tragic necessities in the particular story which demonstrate the truth of the principle. Perhaps since the Greek tragic world, between the people who lived in it and the powers that governed it, was more clearly formulated, the tragic necessities about Oedipus were closer at hand; more given in that sense for Sophocles than they were for Shakespeare, say, about Macbeth. Even so there was nothing cut and dried about finding them. We said earlier that it seems a fate does not ever exist here without a character, for, as between Oedipus and his fate, we never find one without the other. And that is to say in other words, that the creating or the finding of the character who is necessary to his fate, that creative insight, was as much the business of tragedy then as it has been since.

Bearing in mind, then, the fact that a fate is not simply given, but that it comes about and that a character is necessary for it to become a reality, let us return to the patricide and to the point that we recognize Oedipus in it. What conclusions do we draw? We must try to state them as explicitly as possible. First, the one we have already drawn, that our recognition of Oedipus in the patricide means that we see the same character who is at work now in his fate was also at work in it in the past. It was in that perspective, we maintained, that the question of guilt or innocence in the patricide had to be assessed. But now, I think we must go a step further. Since that event is taken into the present action, and seen through it, we are in effect seeing the patricide coming about as if it were happening now. If that is true, since there can be no doubt that patricide is his fate, there can also be no doubt that we are seeing his fate come about. The perspective of the action, it seems to me, will admit no other conclusion. If it is agreed on the basis of the present action that a fate can never exist without a character, or characters, who execute it, the only alternative I can see would be to say that the play shows us Oedipus' fate as if it were coming about now, whereas, in reality, it had come about in the past. But this is inadmissible because it would take us back to the proposition that we have seen is false: that Oedipus' fate is complete before the play begins. It would also, in my opinion, imply a literary posture which is quite foreign to the spirit of the play, or to any other Greek play, saying, in effect, that Oedipus on the stage was acting symbolically or allegorically, not really acting. The conclusion we are left with then is simply this: that the patricide being taken into the present action, as if it were happening now, takes its place and its meaning in Oedipus' fate as a part of the process that is going on now. This is the process of Oedipus meeting his fate, still going on and completed nowhere but here.

We have said nothing about the marriage, the other act by which in the past Oedipus sealed his fate, and we should like to know how it was committed. Sophocles does not describe how it happened in the way he describes the murder. The theme of incest, however, is always present. Naturally, the action being concerned specifically with the search for Laius' murderer, as between the two issues, patricide and incest, it is the former that for most of the distance up to the recognition occupies the foreground. But the lines play ironically on the incest before Jocasta appears on the scene, and when she does appear, her presence of course keeps it before us. And then, when the action shifts its course from the search for Laius' murderer to the question of
Oedipus' birth, with Jocasta on the stage throughout, the incest has displaced the patricide and become the first interest. And certainly, when we reach the discovery, and from there on, the lines make it clear that it is the thought of the marriage that haunts Oedipus and overwhelms him. Thus, in different ways, the marriage looms very large in the action, and if the play tells us how Oedipus' fate comes about it cannot be totally silent on this score.

We are, as I said, told nothing in detail about the event itself. There is, however, an understanding: that the people of Thebes, in gratitude and as the prize of victory for his conquest of the Sphinx, had offered Oedipus the throne and with it the queen, and he had accepted both. Thus the victory and the marriage are, in effect, one event and, as a result, it is in connection with the Sphinx that we learn what we do learn about how the marriage happened. From the priest in the prologue we hear about the great reputation Oedipus has won in the eyes of the world for his conquest: he is the “noblest of men,” the “savior” of his country, “first among men” in dealings with the gods, he overcame the monster “with the adherence of a god,” etc. (31-51). But it is from Oedipus himself that we learn how it happened and, after the laudatory and pious remarks of the priest, it comes as a shock when we hear Oedipus saying angrily and arrogantly to Teiresias that he defeated the Sphinx himself, by his own wits:

But I came, I Oedipus the ignorant one, and I stopped her, hitting the mark with my wit, not by learning from birds.

(396-98)

Oedipus' point here in his duel with Teiresias is that whereas he, Teiresias, with all his mantic art could do nothing when the Sphinx was ravaging the country, he, the famous Oedipus, came along and “without birds” saved Thebes single-handed.

The clue to the marriage, I suggest, is found in this picture Oedipus gives of himself as the man who came along and where others had failed, risked all (presumably he risked his life) and won all. In other words, he is a man who trusts his luck and his wits and wins, or so he thinks. Don't we know that supreme self-confidence and the readiness to risk all very well? And the image of the gambler with fortune is not farfetched. Teiresias at one point refers directly to the marriage, thus:

What harbor shall not be filled with your cries, what Cithaeron will not echo soon, when you shall realize what bad anchorage it was you entered in the marriage to this house, for all the luck of your fair voyage?

(420-23)

A few lines later the reference is indirect but no less pointed, when again we here Teiresias say:

And yet it was just that fortune (tyche) that destroyed you.

(442)

Oedipus had won the game with the Sphinx, or so it seemed, and had picked up as his winnings the throne and the queen. Jocasta, in other words, he had won as a part of his political “fortune.” What Teiresias puts to him here is that his fortune with the Sphinx had been his misfortune, and he is referring, of course, to the disastrous marriage.

Admittedly being told nothing directly about the marriage itself, we have to read between the lines to find Oedipus in this fateful event. But when we do, it is the same Oedipus we find, the one acting before our eyes,
and the marriage takes its place in Oedipus' fate accordingly. We need only look at him in the moment before
the scene of recognition to see how much the gambler with fortune is a part of the present action: “Let break
what will … I deeming myself Fortune's child, generous Fortune, shall not be deprived of my inheritance”
(1076-81). This is surely the gambler for high stakes, ready to risk all and reckless of the consequences.

Difficult as it was in the case of the patricide to say that Oedipus was guilty, it seems preposterous in the
incest. Yet, the fact presented by the action cannot be denied, that Oedipus took Jocasta in the same way;
blindly Teiresias would say,19 arrogantly as Oedipus' own words betray him. He put his hand to his fate in this
event as he had in others, and continues to do now.20 This leaves us with the thought, however preposterous,
that in the marriage he cannot be called innocent. And perhaps the most revealing thing in the whole matter
and the most damaging, is what Oedipus does to Jocasta in that last scene. He treats her roughly, very roughly,
so that when she leaves the stage there is a sense of her being driven off to her death by him. True, she has her
own reasons for going, of which he is still unaware but, after all, what happens to her here at the hands of this
“child of Fortune” is not totally different from what happened to Laius. She too looks like a casualty of his
acting.

Earlier, we said that while it made no sense of the play to call Oedipus innocent to find him guilty was
outrageous. Then, is it less outrageous to say about acts which in the eyes of gods and men are the most
unnatural of all acts—and this the play makes very clear—that the noble Oedipus was somehow fit to perform
them?21 For whatever his faults, Oedipus is noble. And, after all, the acts he performs he is condemned to
perform in ignorance. Therefore, whenever he acts, necessarily he acts blindly. Blindness is given him in his
situation. The Greek word for it is ̓ate.

All this is very true. However, what we have also seen many times is that Oedipus acts not only in blindness
but with blindness. That is, there is not only the built-in ignorance of the situation, there is also a condition
of the soul, a blindness which leads him, for example with Creon, to act with a passionate ignorance.22 The
Greek word for this is again ̓ate, which is to say that the phenomenon we recognize here of a fitness in the
soul for the tragic situation is common enough. The odds against Oedipus are certainly enormous, notoriously
so. But tragedy always works with such odds, and it is nonetheless Oedipus who threatens Teiresias, who
would kill Creon, and not Oedipus by name only, but the noble Oedipus with the whole force of his
personality. In short, it is put down at the center of this story that this noble nature is somehow itself
productive of a fantastically ugly tragedy. The chorus after the discovery see Oedipus’ fate as the paradeigma
(1193) of the great fall from blessedness. The appalling part of the lesson is how Oedipus brought it about.
Oedipus, even Oedipus, is fit for his fate. That is the remarkable and tragic thing the play has to say.

Guilt and innocence are moral judgments which in their different ways resolve the problem of suffering.
Tragedy has its limitations, one being that it does not provide solutions to the problems it poses. If it tried, or
when it tries, it runs the risk of denying the fact by which it exists, that suffering is real and cannot be
explained away. That does not mean that it leaves the problem alone. Sophocles does not leave the story of
Oedipus where he found it, in Homer or in Aeschylus, or in fantasy, folklore, or nightmare, where it
originated in the first place. He explores it, he has vision about it, and he illuminates it. The center of this
vision which he leads us to recognize is Oedipus fully human and alive in the terrible story. This, as I say,
solves no problems, but it does one thing which apparently never loses its fascination. It grasps the joint of the
world at which tragedy arises, and that is nothing more nor less than what we have been seeing, here and
elsewhere in these pages; that however monstrous the things given, the man has a capacity for them. This is,
of course, for such a man as Oedipus an outrageous vision; it does not satisfy common sense; it is not
comfortable. But Sophocles, neither in this nor any other play, thought he was making a world in which such
terrible fitness exists either acceptable or comfortable. What he was doing was presenting the world as he
saw it. And this we must believe the “serene” Sophocles believed passionately he must show, and we must
see. To some, this vision has been undeniably true. Others deny it, like Plato, and insist that the tragic
necessities it poses are false. No one, I should think, Plato included, has been able to forget it.
We have had much to say about knowing the self and about Sophocles' Oedipus as the unforgettable exemplar of this drive to the real world. But one thing remains to be added: that it is surely Sophocles who knows himself. Sophocles, it was said in antiquity, was the happy one, and the one “loved of the gods.” He was also, as his plays show, the one beyond others who knew how to look unhappiness and suffering in the face. To be “loved of the gods” and to be “happy,” as Aristotle said, is not easy. It means in Sophocles' writing finding one's true self in the real world. In Sophocles himself this happiness is an awesome achievement.23

Still, whether we are convinced or not by this vision, it is a matter of more than historical interest to consider further what sort of world it presents and what position it gives to man. Two things we said in connection with the blinding were excluded: first, the idea of a tragic Oedipus who is nothing but a victim struggling in the grip of his fate; and second, the other extreme conclusion, that he is a free agent. The only fitness of “the worm on the hook” for his fate would be, so far as I can see, his impotence. As for free agent, it means—if it means anything at all—freedom of choice, and although we have been able to say of Oedipus that he chose to act and that this was profoundly expressive of his nature,24 it would be obvious nonsense to say that Oedipus would choose to kill his father of his own free will. And then further, perhaps it is necessary to say, just because we have been making much of Oedipus' fitness or capacity for tragedy, that this does not signify a world in which the fatality is lodged in the character, at least not in the sense of tragedy which would have no existence except as it is created out of the psyche. In other words, this is not private tragedy, but tragedy which takes place in a world which has fatality built into it, therefore objective, public tragedy.

Then how does this built-in fatality function? That is the question we should like to be able to answer. Naturally, nobody could pretend to be able to dispose of so vast a question, but, as Aristotle might put it, we can still try to say something about it. If we look back once more to the command from Delphi with which the play begins we can say this: that Apollo confronts Oedipus with a fate which he, being the man he is, cannot but take up.25 Doesn't that mean then that the god knows the particular fate that belongs to the particular man and knows his capacity to take it up?26 Perhaps we can say that this is tragedy's way of expressing the terrible fitness or symmetry it sees between what is given to a man and what he does. And it is abundantly clear in the play that Apollo knows Oedipus through and through. Therefore, what sort of a world? One in which the gods know men but know at least some men to their misfortune. In other words, it seems that this is a world where the man, or the woman, who is known to the gods, or of whom they take notice, is a man who is in for trouble, headed for disaster. A merciless sort of world for some people then. Is that the point?

It is part of the point, but not the whole of it. Certain things are left in this world for certain men or women beyond, or along with trouble. And two characteristic positive findings or interests of tragedy I think we can put a name to: honor for one, and for the second, the capacity of a man to act and declare himself in his own actions. Honor, to which the Greeks were acutely sensitive, is the public recognition of a man's achievements. Accordingly, the heroes of tragedy win honor from the gods. Even Aphrodite, perhaps the cruelest divinity, while she brings about Phaedra's death (in the Hippolytus) also gives her “glory.” And, it might be added, Artemis in the same play goes beyond honor. She decrees perpetual honor for her devoted Hippolytus, but in explaining that she, being a goddess, may not weep for him, there is more than a suggestion that she gives him love and compassion as well as honor (1394). But it seems that honor is implicit in the tragic relation itself. For who are the men to whom the gods offer a fate and a destiny? They are the heroes. And what is a hero in tragedy? The man who has the capacity for tragedy. That is, the man who can and will take up his fate.27 These are the men the gods know. Knowing them they see that they “walk proudly” (883-85), whereas only the gods have the right to be proud. Such men, it seems, the gods in their government of the world with its “high-footed laws” must bring down or, as in Artemis’ case, keep hands off while they are brought down.28 It is, to be sure, a merciless world but just as surely not one in which the gods act at random. Certain men the gods confront with a fate, and that in itself we are given to understand is a title of nobility.29

Human pity for Oedipus there is in the Tyrannus, but not divine, and no divine honors are decreed for him. Honor certainly, and perhaps compassion, are implicit in the divine summons and the “marvelous” departure
from life in the *Coloneus* (1665). By comparison, the earlier play remains silent, painfully silent. Nevertheless, at the end, as I have said more than once, this play contains the classic example of the man who acts and declares himself in his own actions. All men may have the capacity for action, but Greek tragedy is not much concerned with that. Its concern is with the men and women who have this capacity in a heightened degree, and in the fact that for such men, the world is inevitably tragic. For the heightened capacity for action does not enable the hero to escape tragedy, only to go further and further into it. The Greek tragic world allows no room for taking your life into your own hands and making it something different from what it is. Nonetheless, it is you in the last analysis who make it. In other words, we come to the crucial fact of which the play by its present action gives eloquent evidence: that the fate comes about, and that the actor is essential to the process, whether now or in the past. A fate, it follows, without an actor would exist only in a secondary sense, as something written in the books of the gods, not lived. The tragic poet was certainly not interested in such an abstraction. What fascinates him is the man, the kind of man who, with his actions, brings the universe alive. In showing this, he makes the point, I suggest, that there is room in this universe, or opportunity for such great action.

A play where situation and character remain constant, where the past is taken into what happens on the stage, raises questions about time. And they are general questions affecting Greek tragedy as a whole; for the perspective on action in the *Oedipus* was not contrived for a single play. Ajax equally with Oedipus was active in his fate in the past. In fact, the perspective is an *optique* on the world that belongs to all. And a world in which Oedipus old or young remains the same and acts in the same situation must be a timeless world in some sense, at least one with no past in the historic sense; rather, since what it contains is a repeated enactment of the same factors, a world of a continuous present. This is thoroughly Greek, and to give it its Greek name, it is a world in *being*. And then we must go further; if a world in being, then not only with no historic past but with no future either. And this too is profoundly true of Greek tragedy. As we watch the progress of events, we hope passionately that things will become different. But it is the central truth of these tragedies that hope precisely prevents men from seeing things as they are and must continue to be; that, in the tragic world, hope is a delusion.

The tragic function of the gods, for example, is very much that they force men to recognize and face the fact that there is no escape into the future from things as they are and must be. Then, finally, we might raise the question: is it not true of all tragedy that it offers no escape into the future? I have referred earlier to the view that only later tragedy is capable of expressing a genuine interplay of character and circumstance, and I have tried to show that on the contrary nothing is more striking about this fixed world, this world in being as we are now calling it, than that by its repeated enactment or reenactment it is a being, fully alive, repeatedly enlivened by the actor. Not a Parmenidean world, therefore, which excludes motion and variety, for surely no one can deny the variety in Oedipus, or the fact that it registers itself on events. On the other hand, if it is claimed for other tragedy that it is capable of producing a new situation, is creative of wholly new events in a future, then that is another matter, for of this achievement the Greek was certainly not capable.

A Hellenist wonders, naturally, if the distinction is valid. What is the newness, the creative novelty, in Shakespeare? Is there a difference in kind from the *Oedipus*? Are Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello really changed, transformed in the course of the play, and do they by their choices and acts transform their world, the situation in which they act? Or, is tragedy there too the exploration of the fateful situation and the character or characters that fit it? And do we, the spectators, not hope that things will be different for this character or that, and yet know they will not? In whatever age, is it not just this point that tragedy makes to us—the ancient point that we cannot escape what is?

We are talking here about tragedy and tragedy alone. I do not believe that a fixed world of being was the only world the Greeks conceived of, and I am certainly not questioning the fact that since the Greeks, in history, religion, and science, a sense of change and novelty has been achieved which is not found in Greek tragedy. But I am asking if that sense of change is compatible with tragedy. In a world of genuine novelty, I myself
find it difficult to imagine the kind of happening which the Greeks called by the name “tragedy.” And if there is a later drama that we still call tragedy, which represents such a world, I should be inclined to give it some other name in recognition of the fact that it has broken out of the tragic world into some other world. In short, I wonder whether men who no longer believe in a world in being can go on writing tragedy. Perhaps that is what O'Neill felt when he said it was so difficult for a dramatist to capture a “classic fate” in a modern play.

Notes

1. See above, Chapter 2, pp. 48 ff., for the implications of this exchange in relation to the self-discovery.
2. This question of time so far as I know has not been discussed in the literature. Letters (p. 104) speaks of the “telescoping of the present with the past or the imminent which is the essence of classic irony.” This is a suggestive remark but Letters does not follow it up. Knox (*Oedipus*, p. 41) says more: “The character of Oedipus in action in the present time of the play makes plausible and explains his actions in the past; it does this with especial force since one of the purposes of Oedipus’ present action is precisely to reconstruct and understand his past.” I agree. However, I cannot see Knox’s further point that the situation in the present is different from the one that existed in the past, because if it were it simply could not explain the past. See also Kirkwood, pp. 69 ff.
3. “I think you and he who plots it (Creon) will have reason to lament your purging of the land. If you didn’t look old to me you would have realized to your cost … what your plots deserve” (401-03). Knox (p. 28) is able to say on the basis of these lines that Oedipus “disclaims any intention of punishing Teiresias.” The bald threat of physical violence here should not be minimized.
4. I cannot see Oedipus here as anything but a man acting in terrible excitement. But I can't agree with Reinhardt (p. 122) who thinks Oedipus' threat to kill Creon more a “passionate outburst” than a serious threat. Knox (pp. 17 ff.) thinks him deliberate and reflective. What Knox (p. 30) and Adams (pp. 95 ff.) are impressed with is not the fact that Oedipus wants Creon put to death but that Creon is not killed. To Knox this shows a “democratic temper” and, to Adams, Oedipus’ “own essential goodness.” I must say that these interpretations strike me as extraordinarily lighthearted. The fact is that Oedipus barely escapes a terrible deed and, as he says, by no will of his own (688). He is, in fact, what Creon says he is: “sullen” …, “over-bearing” …, “ignorant” … (673-77).
5. See Kirkwood’s interesting note (p. 69 n) stressing the point that Laius, by Oedipus' own account, “paid no equal penalty.”
6. Creon emphasizes the relationship: “For to cast off a noble friend I say is like casting off one's own life which is the thing he loves most” (611-12). This reminds one of Aristotle's statement, “a friend is another self” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166a31). The lines, of course, bear ironically on the point that Oedipus is constantly injuring himself. See also Sheppard, p. lv, where he observes that a tyrant typically is unable to distinguish friend from foe. And Plato, *Republic* 575e, the tyrant “has no friends.”
7. Sophocles, through Creon, stresses Oedipus' ignorance in different ways here, most subtly thus: “I do not know and where I do not understand it is my habit to be silent” (569). A contrast runs through the whole scene of course, between the man governed by prudence … and the man who acts blindly, thus emphasizing Oedipus' ignorance. The contrast between the two is maintained to the end: Creon, “What I do not mean, it is not my habit to say idly” (1520).

Perhaps Sophocles, *Fr*. 238N 924P should be read in this context: “The hardest evil to wrestle with is ignorance.” The sense seems to be that it is ignorance which makes a man most dangerous.

One must remember that many things with Oedipus in the *Oedipus* are pushed to an extreme, and ignorance is one of them. But does his ignorance differ essentially from Ajax'? Ajax acted in madness sent upon him by Athena when he slaughtered the flocks. Deianeira certainly did not know any more than Oedipus what she was doing. What about Antigone? Could anyone make the plea of ignorance
for her? It would hardly seem so. She knew the great risk when she chose to act. And yet when Creon makes it quite clear that she will in fact die, she like many another pleads that she too has been led by the gods. She speaks of herself as “ill-fated,” as being carried off by Death, as being a victim of the blind follies of her race (857-928).

8. Letters (p. 218) justifies Oedipus as “having his head almost split open.” This is fun, but for what happened see Jebb's comment on 804-12. The herald, and Laius, told Oedipus to get off the road. Evidently he wouldn't budge, so the driver pushed him, Oedipus hit him, and then Laius brought his stick down on Oedipus' head, etc. I would add from my own experience that it is very annoying and rather dangerous to meet someone who insists on having the road to himself, especially when you are driving a “narrow” … “hidden” … (1399) pass in the mountains in Europe.

9. Kirkwood, p. 276: “Scarcely anybody doubts that Oedipus is morally innocent.” This I find a rather ambiguous statement especially in view of the fact that Kirkwood himself is also able to speak about Oedipus' responsibility. But perhaps all that is meant is that Oedipus is a good man, which I should think nobody at all would question.

Letters defends the innocence of Oedipus vigorously, and apparently thinks anybody who doesn't is a numbskull or worse. His case (p. 220) is based largely on the distinction between guilt and ritual uncleanness and on Oedipus' arguments in the Coloneus.

Waldock, p. 167: “Oedipus is indisputably a victim; that fact is at the very heart of the drama.” He believes Oedipus' “deficiencies fade into nothingness.” Oedipus, as he thinks, is “normal,” and it is absurd that he should pay the price for being so (p. 146). Waldock does not want us to have anything to do with “the veritable matters behind human conflicts.” They “abolish the drama,” he believes. Sophocles, he says, “eschews thinking,” and Waldock is down on anybody who tries “smuggling significance into Oedipus Tyrannus” (p. 159); “There is no meaning in the Oedipus Tyrannus” (p. 168); “the theme of Lear is universal, Oedipus is not.”

10. See Whitman, pp. 122-46 for the opposite view, e.g., “Oedipus remains a type of human ability condemned to destruction by an external insufficiency in life itself.” See Kirkwood, p. 171 on the interpretations of recent “hero-worshippers.”

11. It has been argued that an Athenian jury would have acquitted Oedipus: see Sheppard, p. xxviii, and see Wilamowitz, Hermes, 34 (1899), pp. 55 ff. It seems to me that the only court Oedipus is judged by in the play is on Olympus (867). No doubt Creon too in the Antigone, for different reasons, would have been acquitted in law, but I think there can be no doubt that the gods find him guilty: the chorus does, he finds himself guilty (1257 ff.) and we, not as judges but as men, agree with him. To argue to a conclusion in the play from Athenian legal practice is open to the criticism of judging the play by criteria other than its own.

12. I am not sure whether Adams (p. 90) is justifying Oedipus' conduct toward Teiresias when he says that his suspicion of the seer is not unfounded. To say “they are the natural suspicions of any tyrannos” does not of course justify, although it does explain, and that may be all that Adams means. What his pages here (pp. 90-95) really bring out very well is the fact that given his situation (ruler) and his character (at this point tyrannical), Oedipus' conduct with Teiresias and Creon is thoroughly convincing. Letters on the other hand (p. 223) apparently thinks there is nothing tyrannical about Oedipus. I think Oedipus in certain circumstances behaves tyrannically. I do not mean by that he is a tyrant, and I think the play shows the word … as no more applicable to Oedipus than it would be to some other king when he behaves badly. See Knox, passim, for quite a different view. And for Knox' point (pp. 74 ff.) that an Athenian audience would have accepted Oedipus' suspicions of Creon with relish because they were familiar with such plots, to that I must say that he (and Whitman whom he cites) are a good deal more complacent about the Athenian suspicion of plots and counterplots than, say, Thucydides, who regarded it as a sign of moral deterioration.

13. The difference between the two plays in this matter is, of course, very striking. We cannot read one play in terms of the other without getting into difficulties. Thus, for example, Sophocles, when he
wrote the *Antigone*, had no thought of the *Coloneus* in his mind, for in the earlier play (50), Oedipus, according to Ismene, had died “odious and infamous” (also it seems to be the implication of 897 ff. that he had died in Thebes). On the other hand, no one can doubt that when he wrote the *Coloneus* he did have the *Oedipus* in mind.

Does Sophocles say in the *Coloneus* that Oedipus was innocent in the patricide and the marriage? Perhaps he does, though the question is open to some doubt on the grounds that it is Oedipus who is doing the talking and not Sophocles. Perhaps the whole question is a biographical one. Did Sophocles have second thoughts on the question of Oedipus' guilt, and did that question interest him in the later play in a way that it had not in the earlier one? It is also possible that he felt the *Oedipus* had been misunderstood, that people had drawn conclusions on this score (like mine, for example) which he had not intended and did not like. But equally possible is that he felt that he himself had done less than justice to Oedipus and therefore wrote the *Coloneus* as his palinode, the amend of the gods and his amend too. Did the old gentleman also see a dilemma on this question of guilt left by the *Oedipus* which confronted us and him with an obscure, unresolved, and terrifying problem? And did he now with other ideas about guilt and innocence, seeing perhaps more clearly—and less tragically—set about resolving the dilemma? These are different ways in which one can make sense of the difference between the two plays. Each of them, it is worth noting, implies that Sophocles, whether he meant it or not, had himself implied that Oedipus was guilty (and, of course, Oedipus in the *Coloneus* blames himself for thinking just that at the time: 437 ff., 768). The one thing we can be sure of is that the criterion for judging guilt or innocence in the *Oedipus* is not to be found in the *Coloneus* or in Sophocles' state of mind but in the play itself. See Nilsson, *Geschichte*, p. 758 on the “innocence” in the *Coloneus* as reflecting a change in Sophocles' attitude towards the gods. Letters (p. 295) finds that Sophocles “virtually remade his hero.”

14. I do not think Sophocles wrote the *Oedipus* to show that Oedipus was guilty. What he is doing, as I see it, is putting before us the sort of man Oedipus was or must have been, and the sort of world it must have been that he lived in for such things to happen. Therefore he did not write the Creon scene with the idea of proving that after all Oedipus was guilty; nevertheless, from the scene and the number of other things which show Oedipus' temper in the play it follows that he is guilty. And not guilty in a ritualistic sense … but guilty in a sense that his character and will, as demonstrated by the action, are implicated. Sheppard, pp. xxiv ff., puts all the emphasis on the blood-pollution. Oedipus certainly becomes pure … and the theme of purification is very strong in the play: cf. pp. 466 ff. See Jebb's excellent remarks *OC*, p. xxii) on the conclusion of the play. They imply, I believe, that not only is there justice in the “amend” but also in the suffering that the gods had led Oedipus through.

15. See Sheppard, p. xxii, for an example of the opposite view: “Sophocles has been at pains to make the hero innocent: and since the tragic truth was true before the play began, had Oedipus been as reasonable as Creon, and as modest as the chorus, the tragic result would, in Apollo's own time, have come to light.” This amounts to saying that Oedipus' character has nothing to do with his fate and also that he is “the injured innocent”; to saying that the play says, in effect, “How good a man and how terrible and undeserved a fate,” and I should think one would have to say if Sophocles had been at pains to make Oedipus innocent he could very easily have done a better job of it.

16. I do not believe there are really any exceptions to the rule. It might be argued that there is a difference in this respect between the *Oedipus* and, for example, the *Antigone*. However, I think it more apparent than real. Creon has already issued his edict before the play begins (and Antigone has already revolted against it). This does not mean that Creon's actions are not decisive in bringing about his fate; it means rather that his present conduct towards Antigone shows how he became fated in the first place. Further, at the end of the play the process of a man bringing about his fate is “repeated.” When Creon through Teiresias comes to some realization of his position, then he is like Oedipus in his flight from Apollo's prediction, seeking to avoid his fate but precisely doing everything (the burial of Polyneices first, for example) to bring it to its final completion.
This is the account given in the *Phoenissae*: Jocasta speaking, “My brother Creon proclaimed my nuptials, to join my bed in marriage with him who could read the riddle of the subtle maiden” (47-49). Apollodorus, III, v. 8: “Creon proclaimed that he would give both kingdom and the wife of Laius to the one who solved the riddle.” In the *Coloneus* (525 f.) Oedipus argues that Thebes “bound” him to the fatal marriage and when the chorus say “you did it,” he replies that it was a “gift” which he wishes he had never “taken up” … (539-41). We must bear in mind that Oedipus in the *Coloneus* speaks proudly and passionately in his own defense, and we should be careful therefore about taking him exactly at his own estimate.

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There are perhaps two points to be kept in mind about Oedipus from the *Coloneus*. The first from his defense of the patricide and the marriage, that his parents were the guilty ones, not he: “And yet how could I be really evil … ? I who acted in reply to what I had suffered, so that had I done those things knowingly I would not even then have been evil … ?” This is going pretty far. The second point has to do with the Polyneices' scene, in which it becomes so distressingly clear that Oedipus in his wrath is quite willing to send his son to certain and horrible death. And this is distressing not only to us of a later age, as Antigone's intercession for her brother at this point makes quite clear. One is loath to recognize the capacity in Oedipus to kill his father knowing that he was his father, but it is not out of the question. There can be no doubt that Sophocles accepts the common view that these are the most unnatural and frightful acts and makes the most of it (for a mockery of this attitude see André Gide's *Oedipe*). The point, or one point of the plague is that what Oedipus has done causes a revulsion in nature herself. Other crimes. Ajax' for example, or Creon's in *Antigone*, are great offenses against the political, moral, and religious order but they are comprehensible, somehow contained within a context of law, the state etc. as Oedipus' cannot be. Ajax is finally tried in a sort of court of his peers. Oedipus is beyond that. He in his singular fate is a creature apart, beyond human judgment. This point is made much of. Thus Creon at the end says only a god can deal with Oedipus (1518). The public measure of his apartness is given in these horrendous words, also by Creon: “But if you no longer feel shame before the race of mortal men at least respect the flame of the lord Helios which pastures all creatures, so as not to show thus a naked pollution, one which neither the earth, nor the sacred rain, nor the light will receive” (1424-28).

Oedipus is what he charges Teiresias with (371), “blind in his [noûs].” This is a state of his being in contrast with what he appears to be, or thinks he is. See Reinhardt, pp. 116 ff. Reinhardt (p. 110) points out that Creon's suspicions in the *Antigone* are a matter of the external situation whereas with Oedipus they have to do with his soul.

See Dodds, p. 5 on *ate*: “Always, or practically always, *ate* is a state of mind”; but also (p. 38): “*Ate* always, I think, retains the implication that the ruin is supernaturally determined.”

See Schadewaldt's brilliant treatment of this question (pp. 28 ff.).

Snell (p. 123) says of the tragedy that with it “for the first time in history man begins to look at himself as the maker of his own decisions.” But “decision,” “choice,” etc. are terms I think which when applied to the Greek tragedy bring a good deal of ambiguity with them. There is little reflective decision pictured to us in the Greek. It is certainly more implicit than explicit. But see Snell, pp. 124 ff., on *Medea*. I prefer to limit myself to speaking of the decisive act which is expressive of the character. It is well known that what we commonly mean by “choice,” “will,” “decision” etc., is not easy to find even in Plato and Aristotle.

See Sophocles, Fr. 879N, 964P: “This is the gift of the god, and whatever gifts the gods give one must never flee, my child.” Also *Philoctetes*: “The fortunes that are given men by the gods one must bear.”
(1316-17). Cf. Homeric Hymn to Demeter, 147: “The gifts of the gods we men endure of necessity however much we suffer.” And Solon 12, 64 (Hiller): “and the gifts of the immortal gods are inescapable.”

Plato’s myth of Er (Republic, 614-21) offers an interesting comparison. The man who had the first lot, and therefore the first choice of the patterns of life which lay on the ground, sprang forward and blindly picked up the greatest tyranny. He discovered he had chosen a fate which among other evils led to the eating of his own children. He complained bitterly that the fault lay not with him but with the gods. Plato makes a point of saying that the man was not bad, but that he acted quickly and in ignorance. Plato does not deny a certain leading by the gods. Necessity and her daughters in Er preside over the disposition of the lots and the lives. These are the symbols of law and order. Over against them are the souls. The two sides meet, as it were, when the individual takes his place within the scheme and chooses. The choosing in other words takes place within a divine control and at the same time is dictated by the individual's character.

So much tragedy and Plato have in common. Oedipus is not “bad” … either; the quick, headlong acting in ignorance of the consequences by the first chooser in Er is like him, and it is clear that Plato here had the grisiest stories of tragedy in mind—from Cronos to Thyestes. Plato claims the chooser is responsible … and so in its own way, although to a lesser degree, does tragedy. The differences are, of course, deep. Plato gives a choice, not an unlimited one (the lots are to some extent fixed, if only by the series of numbers) but a choice which contains the real possibility in the immortal history of the soul, through knowledge, of escape from evil and suffering. Such a possibility is nothing but an illusion in tragedy. Also there is the difference between the two formulations that in tragedy the divine order is not abstract and unmoved like necessity. Apollo comes up close, in effect, personally, to the hero. The “offering” of a fate there is direct and active, and it is, so to speak, the “right” fate from which, therefore, there is no escape. Paradoxically in this rightness, the fact that it belongs to him, the character comes most fully alive.

26. “But Zeus and Apollo are sharp and they know the destiny of mortals” (Oedipus 497-99).
27. Antigone is a case in point. She goes beyond … (see Adams' observations on this point; p. 44) and yet compels the admiration of gods and men. None the less, in the justice of things which is honored and protected by the gods, she must pay the price of this greatness. This, it seems to me, is the point of the second stasimon at 613-14, although the lines are admittedly obscure and the text is not certain.
28. On the gods bringing heroes to their doom, cf. Herodotus, VI, 135 on Miltiades. Aeschylus expresses this relation between gods and men pretty clearly through Darius’ ghost in the Persians: “Alas, swift indeed has the completion of the oracles come, and upon my son Zeus has brought them through. I for long have been confident the gods would work them out; but whenever a man hurries on himself the god too joins in.” Athena to Ajax illustrates this in grim fashion when she says “Since it is your pleasure [to beat the imagined Odysseus] go ahead with your intent” (114-15). See Knox, HCS, LXV (1961) for a somewhat different view of Athena's relation to the hero.

Also the gods, it seems, must not only bring down but they must publish abroad the whole truth of the matter. So, in the second stasimon here, things must be clear so that all men “can point to them” (902); and in the fourth, “all-seeing time has found Oedipus out and judges the marriage that was no marriage, etc.” Athena shows Ajax' crime to Odysseus for him to proclaim it to all the Argives (Ajax 66). And perhaps it is this function of the gods in the life of Oedipus we would recognize in the brief account of the Odyssey: “Suddenly the gods made these things known among men” (XI, 280).
29. See Sophocles, Fr., 703N, 770P: “And what a daimon you will come before … who knows neither what is fair-seeming, nor favor, but cleaves to Justice absolute alone.”

And see Blumenthal (RE., col. 1086) succinctly that it is an Hellenic law that “a great fate grips only the great.”
30. The ancient sentiment is well-known, particularly in Aeschylus Cho., 312. Cf. also Sophocles, Fr. 209N, 229P: “For the one who does something is bound to suffer.”

And of course the capacity for action means also the capacity for suffering. Cf. Schadewaldt, p. 24: “Oedipus ist gross durch seine Fähigkeit zum Leiden, zu einem Leid von grosser Art.”

On Creon without the capacity either for acting or for suffering, see Reinhardt, p. 142 f.

31. The chorus of the Trachiniae express a similar thought: “The having of evils and the waiting on them are equal” (952).

32. In Sophocles, hope feeds men: “For it is hope that feeds the majority of men.” (Fr., 862N, 948P), but again doom it is powerless: “Fow how shall I being a man fight with divine fortune where hope avails nothing in the face of terror?” (197N, 196P). In Aeschylus, Suppl., p. 96f., Zeus hurls men from “their high-towered hopes” to ruin. For hope, the solace and the delusion, see Thucydides, 5.103.

33. On common ground between Christian tragedy and Greek, see Aylen, pp. 158-65. Enlightenment, Christianity, Naturalism, are often said to be hostile to tragedy. Cf. Saint Evremond (De la tragédie ancienne et moderne): “The spirit of our religion is directly opposite to that of tragedy.” He disliked its “black ideas” and thought he had banished them.

34. Aylen (p. 186), far from believing that the possibility of tragedy has been eliminated, maintains that philosophy is dead, science limited in what it can say, and that for the future the best possibility of illuminating life lies with tragedy.

Works Cited


**Criticism: Jonathan Culler (essay date 1981)**


*[In the following essay, Culler uses Oedipus Tyrannus to illustrate some of his points concerning the importance of semiotics in literary criticism.]*

If one is interested in the consequences of semiotics for the study of literary signification, one needs a reliable account of what semiotics is or says; and for that it may be important to reflect on the strange consequentality of semiotics itself, for semiotics is not a continuous discipline with a progressive historical evolution.\(^1\) Thinkers have often produced major insights about signs and signification, but semiotics is not the sum of insights about the sign. It comes into being when the problem of the sign is brought to the fore, made to organize a field—a consequent intellectual development.

One consequence of the advent of semiotics is the creation of precursors and thus of a history. The history of semiotics involves not an ordinary causal sequence but that special historical relationship which Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit*, whereby an experience not understood at the time it took place (such as witnessing a Primal Scene) is later invested with traumatic meaning and, as trauma, can then be treated as a cause of later events.\(^2\) Semiotics now identifies, as the trauma which determined its character, the activities in the early years of this century of a strange couple, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce.

They are all ill-sorted couple. Saussure was a successful and respectable Swiss professor who had doubts about the foundations of linguistics as then practiced and therefore wrote practically nothing; but he did argue, in lectures that have come down to us through students' notes, that since language was a system of signs, linguistics ought to be part of a larger science of signs, «a science which would study the life of signs within society. We call it semiology from the Greek *semeion*. It would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist we cannot say what it will be, but it has a right to existence; its place is ensured in advance.»\(^3\)

These suggestions were not taken up, and only later, when various disciplines had taken structural linguistics as a methodological model and become versions of structuralism, did it become evident that the semiology Saussure postulated had begun to develop. At this point he became a powerful influence, partly because he had written little and because the program outlined for semiotics seemed easy to grasp: linguistics was to serve as example and its basic concepts applied to other domains of social and cultural life. The semiotician is attempting to grasp the system (*langue*) which underlies and makes possible meaningful events (*parole*). He is concerned with the system as a functioning totality (*synchronic* analysis) not with the historical provenence of its various elements (*diachronic* analysis), and he must describe two kinds of relations: contrasts or oppositions between signs (*paradigmatic* relations) and possibilities of combination through which signs create larger units (*syntagmatic* relations).

Peirce is a very different case. A wayward philosophical genius, denied tenure by Johns Hopkins, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to «semeiotic,» as he called it, which would be the science of sciences, since «the entire universe is perfused with signs if it is not composed entirely of signs.»\(^4\) If the universe consists entirely of signs (and he argued that even man was a sign—not the word *man* but man as category or individual), then there is a great deal of classifying to do. Peirce's voluminous writings on semiotics remained unpublished and
unreadable until recently. Only with the growth of semiotics in the last few years have our levels of tolerance risen to the point where we can read Peirce, but it is still difficult, since the laboriously produced *Collected Papers* did not recognize semiotics as a field of enquiry and disrupted by their arrangement Peirce's attempts to constitute it through his writing. The failings of this edition have doubtless confirmed many in the view that «who steals my Peirce steals trash.» His revaluation will not be accomplished until the new, semiotically-oriented edition of his works appears.

Peirce's writings are full of proliferating categories (in arguing that men are like other signs he cited the fact that both men and signs procreate): distinctions combine to produce such species as «rhematic indexical sinsign.» There are, he decided, ten trichotomies by which signs can be distinguished, giving us 59,049 classes of sign. Fortunately, there are redundancies and dependencies so that one only need deal with 66 categories, but even this has proved too much for all but the most masochistic theorists, and this excessive or impractical character of Peirce's ambitious constructions has prevented him from exercising the influence he might have. Today, it is becoming increasingly evident that he is a radical theorist of the first magnitude.

Peirce is a philosophical pragmatist. He defines truth not as correspondence with some objective reality but as what works: to call a judgement objectively valid is to predict that eventually «all the world will agree in it.»^5 Reality is what is presented in the opinion which will prevail. Peirce shows, in an argument worthy of Nietzsche or Derrida, that «external reality» is something we postulate in order to account for our conviction that investigation will lead to agreement. The reality of things is the postulate we make in order to explain our belief that people will, after discussion and investigation of alternatives, when all the evidence is in, reach agreement. We account for this conviction by assuming that there is an independent, external reality that will induce agreement. «This involves,» Peirce says, «no error, and is convenient for certain purposes, but it does not follow that it affords the point of view from which it is proper to look at the matter in order to understand its true philosophy.»^6

Those who do not know Peirce well and simply cite him to buttress an argument sometimes assume that since he is known as a pragmatist he must be above all a practical man, a believer in brute facts, suitable guru for a practical American semiotics which would repudiate the excessive theorizing of Europeans, especially the French. On the contrary, Peirce, much more than Saussure, is the brilliant, speculative theorist, delighted to pursue ideas wherever they may take him. Deciding that the answer to the question «what is man?» is that he is a symbol or sign, Peirce works towards a more specific answer by asking in what respects a man differs from the word *six* (this is a fascinating lecture in which, incidentally, he concludes that the differences are primarily physiological).^7

Peirce and Saussure are very different (at sixes and sevens, one might say) but recent theoretical work, such as Umberto Eco's *Theory of Semiotics* and the papers by Sebeok and Eco in the 1975 Peirce symposium, has shown that their teachings are congruent or complementary on a surprising number of matters. Indeed, a major achievement of recent semiotic theory is to have made it impossible to oppose Peirce to Saussure in a simplistic way. As Thomas Sebeok, doyen of American semioticians, has noted, «the distinction between the traditions has lost its force.»^9 Occasionally someone still will appeal to one parent against the other, as children trying to get away with something will do, but usually this can be shown to rest on a misunderstanding of Peirce: that he is practical while Saussure is theoretical. There are at least four important points on which the approaches of these two founders of semiotics meet and form a tradition. The first two points are not directly related to the study of literature but the last two are.

1. The first point is presented by Peirce's claim that «the entire universe is perfused with signs if it is not composed entirely of signs.»^10 Since the late nineteenth century, a series of eminent thinkers has insisted that our world be discussed in terms not of physical objects and events but of social and cultural facts: objects and events with meaning, which is to say, signs. Philosophers, sociologists, psychologists have shown that even the most elementary processes of perception themselves are already semiotic, involving social and cultural
matrices, categories, distinctions. It has become almost banal truth that there is no perception, in the sense of unmediated presence of objects: the perceptual object is already a sign. We perceive an example of a chair.

Semiotics can take no credit for these discoveries about the symbolic nature of all human experience, which have been made in other fields. Semiotics is the systematic culmination of this perspective. As Peirce says, it is not that we have objects on the one hand and thoughts on the other; it is, rather, that we have signs everywhere, «some more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular.» The task of semiotics is to describe the various systems of signs and sign processes which make up the world and, in particular, to study the ways in which semiotic systems and activities create the cultural units which are the objects of our world.

Here the basic semiotic principle is what Saussure called the arbitrary nature of the sign. Occasionally people think this means only that the signifiers of forms used to express concepts are arbitrary: determined by convention rather than by any natural affinity between form and concept. To restrict the principle in this way is to fall into an error which Saussure frequently warned against, the error of thinking of a language as a nomenclature which supplies its own names or forms to denote concepts or classes given in advance. Students and teachers of languages are, of course, only too aware that each language has not only its own system of signifiers but also its own system of signifieds, its own concepts. Languages articulate the world in different ways, which is why translation cannot be undertaken by looking up each foreign word in a dictionary and writing down the English word which stands for the same concepts—it doesn't work because the concepts are never quite the same. Each language articulates a system of signifieds which are, in Saussure's terms, arbitrary and conventional: arbitrary because not determined by an independent reality (French and English are equally valid articulations of the world); conventional because however natural they seem they are always determined by social rule, semiotic convention. This is the fundamental principle of semiotics.

It is perhaps worth adding here that the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign should not be confused with the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language determines thought. On the contrary, semiotics insists that there is a whole range of cultural activities and practices—not just language—semiotic in nature, which create categories that will find a place as signifieds in natural languages. Thus the rules of basketball create categories which English then names as «dunk-shot» or «foul.» Clearly it is not the case that because «foul» is a sign of English there will be fouls in basketball. The rules of the game are a semiotic sub-system which interacts with the language. For semiotics, we live among a series of systems of this kind which articulate a world. What we think of as things or events are semiotic constructs, cultural units.

2. I have already broached the second point which defines the heritage of Peirce and Saussure and which bears on the relation of verbal signs to non-verbal signs. Peirce, in one of his tentrichotomies, distinguished symbols (which were purely conventional and best represented by linguistic signs) from indices (where signifier is related to signified by causality or contiguity) and icons (where there is a relation of resemblance). Saussure too noted that there were different sorts of signs, but he argued that however natural the relationship between signifier and signified may appear in non-verbal signs, there is always a convention which semiotics must investigate. Semiotics must always resist the tendency among members of a culture to take their signs as natural, as based on a non-conventional relation. Recent work on Peirce's concept of the icon by Sebeok and Eco has shown how much Peirce agreed with Saussure: whether we are dealing with maps, paintings or diagrams, every material image «is largely conventional in its mode of representation.» It is only after taking for granted a great many complicated conventions that one can suggest that a map actually resembles what it represents. The task of semiotics is to uncover these conventions on which our everyday activities depend. The principle of the arbitrary and conventional nature of all signs is the guarantee against sloppiness and delusion.

I have said that these two points did not relate directly to the study of literature, but they do confirm something which students of literature already know to be the case. If a poem tells us that the beloved wore a
silver gown, we do not think that this sequence simply represents an extra-linguistic reality which has
determined the sequence. We know that what is represented here is itself part of a sign system, so we ask what
this means and how it fits in with the rest of the poem. In literature we are free from the delusion that signs are
determined (and accounted for) by realities which are simply there prior to any semiosis. Semiotics is a
codification of this understanding of sign systems which literary critics, for the most part, already have.

3. The third point on which Peirce and Saussure would agree is that semiotics is not a method of interpretation
which can be applied to a text to produce new readings. It is, rather, a theoretical framework within which the
study of signifying processes of all kinds takes place. It asks not «what does this work mean?» but «how is the
process of signification organized here?» It is important to note, though, that rigorous attention to the
signifying procedures that a work establishes and to the work's own representation of the signifying process
can yield subtle and penetrating interpretations of literary works. This kind of criticism, which involves a
scrupulous analysis or taking apart of the logic of signification in a text, is now often called «deconstruction.»

4. Finally, by posing the problem of what kind of sign processes are at work in texts, semiotics ought to have
one very important consequence: it ought to make criticism confront a problem which it has always tried to
weep under the rug, the problem of the relationship between signification and communication.

This is a central issue in semiotics. Those who see semiotics as studying communication are content to think
of meaning as what is communicated by signs, and this view has its virtues in some cases. We are not likely to
object to the notion that a word's meaning is what it means to speakers of the language, but those who want
semiotics to deal, as Peirce did, with all kinds of correlations among semiotic phenomena, find that the
attempt to treat meaning as what is communicated does not suffice in practice. As soon as we look at actual
texts or situations we begin to make discoveries, to see relationships and correlations which had not
previously been noticed and which have not therefore been communicating anything to anyone. If one were to
study the behavior of undergraduates—highly codified and ritualized, always communicating to those in the
know—we might discover, for example, that the fad of «streaking» coincided with the Watergate cover-up.15
Whatever we think of this correlation, it seems wrong to reject it on the grounds that this meaning was not
communicated to spectators at the time. When we come to literature, the critic certainly will not be content to
reject a pattern or correlation he has just discovered on the ground that it has not been communicating
meaning to previous readers. On the contrary, literary criticism as a semiotic activity has been predicated on
the attempt to discover and interpret new patterns, structures, and correlations.

However, criticism has usually tried to avoid facing this semiotic problem. The New Criticism, by identifying
the intentional and affective fallacies, simply denied the relevance of a communicational perspective and
assumed that literature involved signification which was inherent in the structures of the work and which
patient study might discover. Recent ventures into what has come to be called «reader-response criticism,»
whether sophisticated as in Stanley Fish or bathetic as in versions based on ego psychology, simply reverse
the claim: there is no signification, no meaning to be discovered. Meaning is simply the experience of each
reader, what is communicated to him. This is not only false to literary criticism, which has been able to make
discoveries about meaning that have become part of our knowledge of literature, but also false to the
classroom situation on which it claims to focus. What we find in a classroom, when you give a class a poem,
is not 25 students projecting their unique personalities onto works and each producing a complex
interpretation which precisely reflects his personality, but rather varying degrees of incomprehension,
interpretations carried over from previous classes, etc.—until discussion begins; patterns, structures, and
correlations are pointed out; and students begin to make discoveries about meaning and come to see
interpretive possibilities which their teachers had not envisioned. That we are dealing with complex structures
and an interpretive competence becomes clear in the work of Stanley Fish. Though Fish says he is recording
the experience of an informed reader like himself, that is improbable, for any real reader, as he started on his
14th «self-consuming artifact,» would not have the experience Fish describes—the experience of being
surprised and disturbed to see the work question its own categories and negate its own claims.16 On the
contrary, he would expect this and be pleasantly gratified to see his expectations confirmed. What Fish presents as meaning communicated is in fact significance discovered.

Semiotics, with its focus on the problem of meaning, ought to make critics aware of the necessity of working out a dialectic between signification and communication, constructing a theory that accounts for the possibility of discovering meaning, instead of either rejecting the communicational perspective or else arguing that criticism has been an elitist activity which ought to stop *studying* works and simply record what they mean to those who have not yet learned to read carefully and skillfully.

So far I have proceeded without examples, except for that bare reference to streaking, and to put some clothes on this naked form I should like to conclude with some remarks about a work well known to most readers, a work which our culture has interpreted as central to our definition of the nature and situation of man: *Oedipus Rex*. Freud, one of millions of enthusiastic readers, describes the play as follows:

> The action of the play consists of nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement (a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis) that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. Appalled at the abomination he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home.\(^17\)

Freud emphasizes that the play involves the bringing to light, the revelation, of an awful deed—the event *par excellence*—and this event is so powerful that it imposes its meaning (Oedipus is «appalled»), irrespective of any intention by the actor. This is what has always been communicated by the play: the event is revealed; it makes Oedipus guilty; and he attains true human dignity in accepting the meaning imposed by the revealed event.

But this reading fails to account for an interesting element in the play, discussed in a different perspective by Sandor Goodhart.\(^18\) When Oedipus first asks whether anyone witnessed Laius's death he is told, «All died save one who fled in terror and could tell us only one clear fact. He said that robbers, not one but many, fell in with the King's party and killed them.» And later, when Oedipus begins to wonder whether he may in fact have killed Laius, he tells Jocasta that all hangs on the testimony of this witness, whom they await. «You say he spoke of robbers, that robbers killed him. If he still says robbers, it was not I. One is not the same as many; but if he speaks of one lone traveller, there is no escape: the finger points to me.» To which Jocasta answers, «Oh, but I assure you, that was what he said. He cannot go back on it now; the whole town heard it, not only I.»

The only witness has publicly told a story that is incompatible with Oedipus's guilt. This possibility of innocence is never effectively eliminated, for by the time the witness arrives Oedipus is busy discovering that he is the son of Laius and asks only about his birth, not about the murder. The witness is never asked whether the murderers were one or many.

I am not suggesting that Oedipus was really innocent and has been falsely convicted for 2400 years. I am interested in the significance of the fact that the possibility of innocence is never properly dispelled: the whole action of this play is the revelation of the dastardly deed, but we are never confronted with the deed itself, given the testimony of the eyewitness. Oedipus himself and all his readers are convinced that he is guilty, but our conviction does not come from revelation of the deed. Where *does* it come from? From a repetition of prophecies, from signs. It was prophesied that Laius would be killed by his son; it was prophesied that Oedipus would kill his father; and Tiresias, asked who is guilty of murder, prophesies that it will prove to be Oedipus. Given this conjunction of signs, this textual interweaving of prophecies, when Oedipus discovers that he is the son of Laius he leaps to the conclusion that he is the murderer.
He becomes the murderer of his father not by a violent act that is brought to light but by deeming the act to have taken place: by assuming that what the signs claim must have happened, by appropriating what the signs represent. The network of signs which the prophecies have woven leads to the affirmation of the event which those signs predict. And we as readers cannot escape this process either: the text compels us to affirm the truth of the parricide.

I offer this beginning of a reading of Oedipus to support my claim that literary criticism must not limit itself to what has been communicated but must preserve the possibility of discovering meaning by reinterpreting elements previously disregarded. But from a semiotic point of view what is important here is the play's implicit commentary on the relation between meaning and event, between signs and the «realities» often thought to be independent of them. On the one hand, in working toward revelation of the murder, the play implicitly claims that the revealed event will determine meaning. If it took place, then Oedipus is a parricide; and the play compels readers to affirm, with Oedipus, that because it did, he is. But the play also shows that this deed is not revealed as such but inferred from signs. We are given not a deed from which we infer meaning but meaning from which we infer a deed. Peirce identified «external reality» as what is inferred from our belief in agreement, and we find much the same position here. We are not wrong to think Oedipus is guilty, but it can be shown that the event which we take as imposing is already a consequence of signs and not a reality independent of semiosis. In the beginning was the word. We are not wrong to think that there are events, that they create meaning, but whenever we try to grasp a thing or event said to have determined meaning, we discover that the thing or event is already a product of signs, already enmeshed in semiosis. We cannot get outside textuality.

What I offer here is not a semiotic reading of Oedipus—there is no such thing—but a reading attentive to the logic of signification and in that sense a reading made possible by semiotics. Here as elsewhere, one consequence of semiotics is the demonstration that events, the originary events which we always seek to discover, are themselves already semiotic consequences.

Notes

1. This paper was originally written for a Forum on semiotics at the December 1977 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Chicago. It bears some traces of that occasion, particularly in its attempt to criticize proleptically the general position espoused by Robert Scholes in a paper, «Semiotics: The American Way.» for the same Forum—a position which I believe he no longer holds.
In addition to the articles by Eco and Sebeok cited in note 8, see Michael McCanles, «Conventions,» *Diacritics*, 7, No. 3 (Fall 1977), 54-63.

Peirce, 2, 276.

Alan Dundes, «Projection in Folklore» *MLN*, 91, No. 6 (Dec. 1976), 1526.

For further discussion see Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, chapter 6.


### Criticism: Eric A. Havelock (essay date 1984)


[In the following essay, Havelock describes elements of oral composition that can be found in the text of Oedipus Tyrannus.]

A stage play is by definition composed for performance by action and elocution. To argue for “oral” composition may seem to be arguing for the obvious. The “orality” of Greek drama, however, if it exists, goes deeper than a mere management of stage conventions. It would mean that what had to be spoken on the Greek stage in the fifth century before Christ was molded in a very special way. There are of course compositional rules common to all drama *qua* drama. But I shall argue that there were certain rules operating in classic Greek drama which were peculiar to it, and which stage production of later periods from the Hellenistic age to the present has, in the nature of things, been unable to share.

The surviving plays have come down to us as texts carefully read, copied, and transmitted over hazardous centuries and now at last printed in books. It is surely as texts that they deserve to be estimated, that is, as literate creations by literate authors. So runs the consensus of scholars, critics, translators, and adapters, to whom it would not occur that something like the “oralism” now accepted as inherent in the Homeric poems would survive in a Greek tragedy and be detectable there, let alone one so tightly constructed as the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. These plays were written down at the time of composition, else we would not have them. They were composed, so we usually think, with that kind of economy that is expected of the written word, and so rank as “literate” composition.

But suppose the case is more complicated than that? Allowing their share in literacy, does one also perceive a share in preliteracy? Historically speaking, these are admittedly unique productions. It has not occurred to any postclassical playwright to put anything quite like them on stage, or if he has tried this he has failed. Even as we translate, imitate, or adapt, we are aware of our modern distance from them. Could it be that the uniqueness of their nature derives from a uniqueness in their cultural position, poised midway between previous centuries of oral composition and coming centuries of literate composition?

The case for “orality” as a genre of verbal composition specifically distinct from the textual has now won critical acceptance, though not its possible application to Greek drama. It grew from seeds implanted by Milman Parry’s perception that the Homeric poems were oral constructs, the work of nonliterate, and has been slowly strengthened by the cumulative weight of comparative studies of surviving pockets of orality in various parts of the world of today, notably the Balkans (where Parry and his assistant Albert Lord initiated the practice of recording local singers) and now also Africa, Polynesia, and other areas. The ground thus covered and the conclusions to be drawn have recently received masterly summation and interpretation by Walter J. Ong.¹ That the concept has needed vigorous defense of the kind he supplies is sufficiently indicated.
by the fact that his opening chapter devotes itself to an argument for “The Orality of Language.” Why feel compelled to defend a concept which, when you think of it, seems obvious unless it be true that the written and printed word has become an obstacle to our understanding of the nonwritten as it was spoken and managed for millenia of human history? Might it even be true that it has prevented a full understanding of the ancient Greeks?

Arguments for orality in a Greek play must rely on evidences supplied by the text, for that is all we now have, but to recognize what these are one has to know first what one is looking for. Direct inspection as such cannot yield the secret. Recognition of what may be latent there depends upon guidance supplied by retrospection, into the history of human culture and of that particular Greek cultural experience which had preceded the appearance of Attic drama. One has to consider what orality really means both as a historical term representing a specific social condition and as a psychological one representing the use of certain restricted physical senses for purposes of communication.

Three books of my own previously published have proposed some answers, of which I here shall offer a brief summation, a necessary detour which will bring us back in due course to consideration of Sophocles' most famous play.

The character of orality, a condition of the past, is best imagined in the light of its opposite in the present, namely literacy. Ever since late antiquity, the European peoples, including those who migrated overseas, have lived within the ambience of literacy and have taken its existence for granted, even under circumstances where its advantages were available only to minorities within their ranks. Its presence has relied on a technological invention, the Greek alphabet, which superseded all previous technologies of written communication, and the use of which, like literacy itself, has become an unconscious historical habit. It has supplied the means of documentation for the national cultures in which it is available, whether handwritten, printed, or electronically coded. Though documentation is used daily for ephemeral purposes—a letter to a friend or a throwaway leaflet—it's fundamental use is to provide a receptacle, a storehouse, for the preservation and reuse of the “knowledge”—using the term in its broadest possible application—which allows the culture to “work.” This knowledge is not a static body; its reuse implies continual replenishment, revision, and extension, also carried out by the same instrument, the alphabet. In an industrial society like ours it is easy to see, after a moment's reflection, how this works at the technical level, in production: the manufacture of an automobile depends ultimately upon the guidance supplied by previous documentation covering perhaps tens of thousands of items of technical information. But alphabetization works at a more fundamental level, to place in storage the legal system, the governmental apparatus, the religion and customs, the history and sense of identity of a given cultural group. Such information, in the widest sense, becomes the responsibility of the educational system to transmit between the generations while also interpreting, qualifying, amending, or enlarging it (a very slow process). The court of appeal has always to be a textbook, or a “program,” or a work of what we call “literature”—in other words, an alphabetized document. It is there in the background. Enough people have read it to make it effective as a control over what may be ephemerally communicated, whether we are reading a newspaper, watching a televised program based on a previous script, or just conversing with our friends about what we have read or seen. A great deal of modern communications theory—and indeed, the term communication itself—deriving from the seminal ideas of Marshall McLuhan, has tended to concentrate upon the techniques of ephemeral transmission of ephemeral speech—as on radio or television—and what this does to speech, rather than on the technology of the storage of speech for reuse, and what this does to speech. It is of course possible that the introduction of the computer with its memory bank will redirect attention to these matters. All too often even the introduction of the written word is treated merely as an improved or at least altered form of “communication” rather than as a drastic revolution in the storage of information, producing a parallel revolution in its content. The temptation to see primary orality as a system devoted to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships in direct “human communication” (Ong, pp. 176-77) must be resisted. The clue to the character of any culture, oral or literate, lies in the character of what it saves up for reconsideration.
We think of knowledge—if we ever think of it at all—as something residing within our own heads, which of course is true. But in a structural sense knowledge is something shared by a community in varying degree in order to enable it to function, and we commonly refer to this shared resource as a “body” of knowledge. We would not use such an expression if the said knowledge did not exist in documented form as an artifact separable from ourselves which we can “read,” that is, physically survey with our eyes and handle with our hands, instead of merely hearing it with our ears and pronouncing it with our mouths. It is contained not in an acoustic and ephemeral medium like spoken language, but in a visible and material one, and a verifiable one, and as such acquires an objective existence independent of what goes on in our own heads.

The question arises: Has such a documented basis for human culture with all its concomitants always existed? It is very difficult for us to think otherwise, but in fact the historical evidence is overwhelming that for the larger part of our previous life as a species the answer has been no, which forces upon us the further question: In its absence, could human culture itself exist? If we restrict the reference of the term culture to a system of civil society, ordered government, and a recognizable architecture and art, the answer is unequivocally yes. Even in recent memory, the case of the Incas of Peru in the Western hemisphere furnishes an irrefutable example, as do many prehistoric societies of the Old World.

To reconstruct an image of such a society and how it would work requires an unusual effort of historical imagination, and one which at the same time has to be rigorous in insisting on the exclusions that are necessary. We must presuppose not only the nonexistence of writing and documentation, but also the absence of all those results of such documentation as have been described above. It is one among many merits of Ong’s treatment of this problem that he insists that we accept the concept of a “primary orality” (p. 6 and passim) as a cultural condition which exists or has existed in its own right, in distinction from any of those mixed situations, partly oral, partly literate, which so often confront the investigator in the contemporary world. He has also placed his finger on the psychological cause which makes the necessary effort so difficult for us to accept, and particularly for the literate scholar to accept: “To dissociate words from writing is psychologically threatening, for literates' sense of control over language is closely tied to the visual transformations of language: without dictionaries, written grammar rules, punctuation, and all the rest of the apparatus that makes words into something you can ‘look’ up, how can literates live?” (p. 14).

How indeed! And how could nonliterates live at all! Since they undeniably did, one answers by asking the further question: In a society of totally oral communication, what is there that can take the place of documentation as a cultural underpinning? What if anything can constitute the equivalent of a “body” of objective knowledge on which the members of the community can rely for consultation and guidance? That they would need some such guidance would seem likely if such a society were to retain coherence and a historical sense of itself and a measure of law, government, and morality.

In dealing with other problems, scholar and scientist are used to testing hypotheses against physical or textual evidences. The difficulty with understanding the climate of primary orality is that in the nature of the case the investigator has to rely, to a quite unprecedented extent, upon a priori methods alone, guided only by insights derived from a mixture of anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and a common sense of how the human animal would behave or has to behave in given circumstances. It is of the essence of primary orality that it vanishes like a bubble when pricked by the arrival of literacy from the outside. This has happened in the Americas, to the societies destroyed by the Spaniards, and to the Red Indian societies destroyed by the French and English. It has happened to the Polynesians as their preliteracy gave way to the inroads of traders, missionaries, and colonial administrators. It is not merely a matter of the literate scholar arriving to investigate and pretending to reconstruct the oral original within his own concepts and language. The original itself succumbs with incredible swiftness from within, as it absorbs with eagerness the educational advantages of script, whether the text be that of its own tongue or that of the foreigner.
The anthropological literature which has sought to describe such societies and report their speech has done so only after their speech habits and thought habits have already been infected by literate contact. Understanding and interpretation have been supplied in terms of categories drawn from the literate presuppositions of Europeans, the basic one being that which assumes as a matter of course that the purpose of oral performance and therefore of oral composition is to entertain rather than instruct. That indeed is what it starts to do, once relieved of other responsibilities. The loss of contact with primary orality comes out very well in the otherwise invaluable reports of Ruth Finnegan,\(^3\) when she writes: “At the same time, the increasing availability of these written versions fed into the oral literary tradition. In the South Pacific, it seems, these were not (as sometimes supposed) two separate and opposed modes but, both now and in the past, form part of one dynamic in which both written and oral forms interact.”\(^4\) This defense of literate manipulation of oral tradition certainly reflects a literary rather than an anthropological judgment, since it ignores, at least by implication, that deprivation of ethical, legal, and social function which overtakes orality once literacy intrudes and converts it into mere entertainment. As worded, her statement in effect dismisses the existence of Ong's “primary orality” as irrelevant to the Polynesian case. “It [oral literature, in her terms] may no longer be circulating in some pure ‘natural' and ‘uncontaminated’ state—\textit{if such ever existed} [my italics]—but in the perhaps even more interesting and variegated situation of the modern Pacific, interacting with writing, broadcasting, Christianity, education, entertainment. …”\(^5\) This modern phenomenon of a mixed orality is thus evaluated as a more significant and interesting subject of study than an original which is hypothetical and in any case now beyond the reach of investigation.

Ong's view of this problem is very different, and his warning against the dangers of mental confusions arising from the use of an ambiguous nomenclature is well taken:

One might argue (as does Finnegan 1977, p. 16) that the term “literature”, though devised primarily for works in writing, has simply been extended to include related phenomena such as traditional oral narrative in cultures untouched by writing. Many originally specific terms have been so generalized in this way. But concepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever. The elements out of which a term is originally built usually and probably always linger somehow in subsequent meanings, sometimes obscurely, but often powerfully and even irreducibly. Writing moreover … is a particularly pre-emptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself even without the aid of etymologies.

(P. 12)

On the other side of the world from the South Pacific, the investigation and recording of the oral poetry of the Balkans has been threatened by a similar confusion of interpretation and a similar misuse of nomenclature, which arises from the parallel existence of a body of revivalist poetry, some of it under Italian influence, pretending to be traditionalist and therefore to be a resurrection of oral tradition but in which the supposedly oral element is essentially spurious. In Albert Lord's words: “Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained. The written technique on the other hand is not compatible with the oral technique and the two could not possibly combine to form another, a third ‘transitional’ technique. … When and how then does the ‘literary’ technique start? The poet of whom we have been speaking can read and write, but he is still an oral poet. To become a ‘literary’ poet he has to leave the oral tradition and learn a technique of composition that is impossible without writing or that is developed because of writing.”\(^6\)

However, not even Balkan oral poetry can supply the answers we are seeking. Primary orality is a social condition governing the consciousness and behavior of whole peoples, not merely a condition of personal nonliteracy existing as a survival in individual singers. The Parry-Lord collection of Jugo-Slav recorded songs, while shedding invaluable light on the methods of primary oral composition, fails to offer models of its content because for centuries such songs and their singers have been relieved of the responsibility of supporting the culture in which they are performed. The Balkans and Eastern Europe have ever since Rome
been governed by literate elites. Law and religion, history and morals, have enjoyed the support and guidance of documented speech; oral poetry, practiced in pockets of these regions, no longer is asked to perform this magisterial, that is, Homeric, role. It is composed or rather improvised as a peasant survival to entertain but not to guide, govern, or instruct.

We return for a moment to the previous question: In a culture of primary orality, what if anything can constitute the equivalent of a body of objective, that is, documented knowledge? Since recourse to material evidence is impossible, the answer must rely on theory and on psychology. Since all communication is under these conditions acoustic, its storage, if it is to occur, must be acoustic also. Can a verbal technique suitable for this purpose be devised? Being acoustic, the content of communication is normally ephemeral as uttered, in contrast to the relative permanency of the written word. If it is to be reused, it must be not only uttered but remembered, and the instrument for guaranteeing this resides nowhere else but in the personal memories of individuals, which however are fallible and also impermanent since their owners will die. What is needed is a form of uttered speech not only memorizable by an individual but transmissible by him to his juniors.

It would seem that at an elemental level the ordinary language of a cultural group—its vernacular—as it is learned and transmitted would supply guidance for cultural continuity, and this is true, for any given vernacular comprises idioms which state and repeat relationships, behavior patterns, and beliefs common to the group using it. But at some indeterminable point in the social-evolutionary process, as relationships within the group and its common beliefs become more complex, it would feel the need for some reinforcement of these through a special statement or set of statements set apart from the vernacular so as to be treated with a kind of reverence and so learned and transmissible as such—an enclave of contrived speech existing within the current vernacular. This would require some acoustic stability to be effective as a transmittant. The acoustic device available for the purpose is rhythm, which can take a variety of forms. The origin of poetry, according to this theory, lies in social function: it is a preservative which ensures a degree—no doubt fluctuating—of acoustic storage; it is the mnemonic technique par excellence, and is used as such in all cultures of primary orality. Since rhythm is in the first instance melodic, the linguistic form being secondary, all such verbal poetry is also at the same time musical in varying degree and requires the services of musical instruments. The resultant product in primary orality consists of songs chanted or sung, continually recited and repeated within a given society, covering the formalities of social custom and belief. They are liable to coalesce into a single magisterial composition, or perhaps two, of a great many verses, which becomes the historical epic of the group. For this purpose, a stringed instrument alone becomes the appropriate assistant, wind and percussion being more serviceable for shorter compositions.

Rhythm as such only guarantees its own repetition. To preserve a lengthy sequence of verbalized statements requires further mnemonic assistance, and this is provided by the syntactical rule which requires they be cast in the form of a tale, a narrative of events performed by human agents within some kind of story line or plot, for it is the tale that we are biologically programmed to remember most easily. The nature of preserved speech in primary orality is therefore bifocal: it is committed to instruction, but this must be contained within the tale; it is at once didactic and recreational, but in social terms the didactic function is prior. The language contrived for this purpose is never the simple vernacular but one which, because of its commitment to preservation and therefore to the past, uses a vocabulary which is itself in varying degree archaic—that is, ritualistic, remote, venerable.

Rhythm used to assist memory need not be confined to sound. It can operate at the level of meaning when it takes the form of statements which either repeat or resemble each other or are balanced against each other. The most evident symptom of this oral habit lies in the verbal formulas—rhythmic units of two, sometimes three words. It is this formulary aspect of oral verse-making which, once noted by Milman Parry, has attracted most attention from scholars. One can say that it operates on the acoustic principle of the echo, which assists recall and so memorization by either repeating a verbal formula already used or giving its acoustic equivalent with some change of meaning which yet resembles a previous meaning. There is also the mnemonic
advantage of encouraging economy in the vocabulary used—you do not need to remember an unlimited number of words—while allowing some degree of novel statement, not mere repetition, which yet resembles previous statement.

The same compositional principle extends itself to the construction of the tale as a whole; it will avoid sheer surprise and novel invention. It has been well observed that oral poetry employs recurrent themes which progressively repeat each other with variations as the story progresses, even to the degree that versified descriptions of recurrent acts and intentions become standardized (e.g., “arming scenes,” “embassy scenes,” and the like). Insofar as they merely replicate, they fail to meet the challenge of stating a “meaning” which is new or distinct but which can nevertheless be preserved. The basic method for assisting the memory to retain a series of distinct meanings is to frame the first of them in a way which will suggest or forecast a later meaning which will recall the first without being identical with it. What is to be said and remembered later is cast in the form of an echo of something said already; the future is encoded in the present. All oral narrative is in structure continually both prophetic and retrospective, and it is this mode of composition—essentially an extension of the acoustic echo principle—which is used to preserve the instructional material of the tale by preserving an easier recollection of the narrative contexts in which the material is incorporated.

These correspondences, when observed, are usually explained as “patterns”—a visual term. More correctly, under conditions of primary orality they are acoustic responsions, sometimes involving wordplay. To speak therefore of a “story line” (Ong, ch. 6) as being just that can mislead, for though the narrative syntax is paratactic—the basic conjunction being “and then,” “and next”—the narrative is not linear but turns back on itself in order to assist the memory to reach the end by having it anticipated somehow in the beginning.

This accretion of acoustic knowledge rhythmically framed and socially shared cannot arise spontaneously. It requires the services of professionals who have mastered the specialized formulaic language required, and at the same time have a comprehensive mentality tuned to the variety of the culture pattern they live in. They are not moralists with a single point of view—a luxury reserved for literate thinkers—but reporters with an instinct for the typical. Finally, unlike writers, they have to be not only composers but performers, for only by performance can such group poetry be published, known, and remembered. This professional ability becomes a craft dependent for its existence on continuous training in successive apprenticeship to master singers and master musicians and provides the technological basis for the power wielded in such societies by shamans, priesthoods, prophets, and “bards of the people” (LRG, p. 243). Often enough the singer who has stood at the king’s elbow becomes the king himself, as in the case of David, King of the Hebrews, who “danced before the Lord.”

I have said that such a reconstruction has to be hypothetical because material evidence or recorded testimony covering primary orality is, in the nature of the case, nonexistent. This is not quite true. There are accounts, meager enough, reported by European navigators who explored the Pacific before the days of colonial penetration or literate research. Fortunately for the present purposes, the data they were interested in collecting were in the main geographic, sometimes economic, which meant that if they cast an occasional curious eye on native customs and habits, it was with a naiveté which forbade over-interpretation. This is true of Captain Cook’s encounter with Tahiti, which has given us some account of a cadre of professional singers, dancers, actors, and musicians revered by the society they served, using a specially contrived speech to celebrate the seasonal festivals and those that marked the great events of communal life (GCJ, pp. 31-32). More recently, what is probably the closest approximation to primary orality still surviving, if it still does survive, is located among some of the tribes of the central African hinterland.

The “Myth of the Bagre,” recovered and recorded by Jack Goody and his associates, supplies a text which, though touched by the influence of literacy, still retains evidences of the mnemonic rules of oral composition, has a content which carries out the magisterial function of cultural guidance, and is recited and taught by a group of professionals (GCJ, p. 346, nn. 13, 14).
When we read the classics of what is styled Greek “literature,” we confront written works which are rooted in a previous condition of primary orality. Whatever claims may be put forward for the Mycenaean culture, inflated as they have been by specialists in the field, they would dwindle were it not for the celebration of Mycenaes in the oral poetry of Homer, an imaginative construct which arose within the compass of perhaps five centuries of complete nonliteracy that followed Mycenae's collapse. In parallel with the poetry there emerged in the same period corresponding achievements in visual art, architecture, and politics. These were the preconditions for that flowering of Athenian culture in the fifth century which produced Greek drama.

If the Homeric poems constitute one of these preconditions, it is natural to suppose that they also constitute the oral storage mechanism of the original culture, and this is borne out first by their compositional style—the verbal formulas metrically shaped, the archaic narrative, the patterns of anticipation and responsion; second, by social content—the typical situations and statements, the repeated moral formulas, the ritualized performances, the contained maxims; third, in manner of transmission—recited by professional singers on public occasions to audiences gathered for this purpose, and taught to the young in schools by these same professionals (LRG, p. 267). All these symptoms of cultural oralism will later reappear, in attenuated form, in Athenian drama.

The alphabet which enabled these epics and later poetry to achieve the status of artifacts by being written down seems to have been invented near the end of the eighth century. This “commitment to writing,” as we say, occurred under unique circumstances which have never recurred, and in the nature of things never could recur. (1) An oral language was transcribed by a means invented by people who were themselves oralists and (2) who themselves spoke the language that was being transcribed and (3) who had to learn to apply the new technique from scratch unaided by the guidance of literate mentors either domestic or foreign. The result is that in the Homeric poems we are left an alphabetized report of a composition of primary orality unique in its integrity.

A further conclusion follows, concerning the transitional process which set in after Homer and led to literacy. This must have been equally unique in its gradualness, quite unlike what happens when literacy and nonliteracy either collide or coexist in modern situations. Between 700 and 400 B.C., roughly speaking, there were no ready-made models of literate composition, or habits of reading, or literate ways of thinking available to accelerate the transition. Alphabetization had to be introduced into a population which, having previously brought the oral manner of composition to a fine art, cherished it as a familiar companion to daily life. What was expected at first from alphabetized scripts as they became available was not a literate “literature” but an extending series of written versions of oral storage. Education remained oral; cultural expectations remained oral. Only as the teaching of letters was introduced into primary schools before adolescence could a population of readers become available; and this occurred about the time Plato went to school, or a little before. It had not yet occurred at the time when Aeschylus initiated the golden age of Athenian drama.

The long-term effects of a transfer of the balance of the senses used in communication, from ear to eye and from mouth to hand, were drastic. Conversion of an acoustic performance into a visible artifact fostered the conception of an ownership of the composed word and hence of authorship. Poetry could now be circulated with a name firmly attached to it. Previous modes of composition had been inherently collectivist; idiom and themes had to be shared; you could not copyright a recitation. With authorship came the potential for taking a more personal charge of what was uttered so as to manipulate and reorganize it according to the private intentions of the composer. To be sure, previous recitations of oral verse might differ in quality according to different levels of accomplishment in the singers, and would be recognized as such. But the material was drawn from a shared repertoire, not personally invented.

The Oedipus therefore is, under one aspect, a personally produced product embodying a degree of personal creativity. Nevertheless its composition, like that of all Greek drama, involves a partnership between the oral and the written, the acoustic and the visual, a dichotomy which can also be rendered in terms of tradition.
versus design, generic versus specific, communal versus personal. It is a combination which lies at the heart of all high classic Greek “literature” from Homer to Euripides.

This partnership was not mechanical but creative. Literacy did not take over from orality but slowly interpenetrated it. It is a mistake to suppose, as G. S. Kirk and others have argued we should, that once the Homeric poems were written down the results for the creative oral process became negative. Under modern conditions this does occur when a mature literacy invades and takes over an original orality. The partnership concept, as applied to the Greek high classical, is at first hard to understand just because it is unique and calls for a critique not yet developed by comparativists. Nor does the Yugoslav analogy, for reasons already stated, offer any help.

In Greek drama we perceive the last flowering of this partnership, the supreme product of a creative tension between the needs and expectations of the oral and those of the written, of the listener and of the reader. Since the latter component has hitherto received the lion's share of critical attention, it seems appropriate in this place to shift focus in order to disclose the oral side of the partnership.

We now know what we are looking for—namely, a type of composition which at the level of style meets the mnemonic requirements: it will be versified and to a degree musical; its vocabulary will be grandiloquent and slightly archaic, in a manner superimposed upon the current vernacular; it may retain traces of formulaic idiom and is likely to use a syntax suitable to the actions of agents performing in a narrative context which itself is archaic, that is, drawn from past memory or what passes for memory. The story, however, is to be told in such a way as to avoid novelty; it will turn back on itself, through responsion or reversal, so that the conclusion is partially anticipated in the beginning. To this end we expect the use of prophetic anticipations and retrospective summations, employing the principle of acoustic echo which may extend as far as verbal assonance.

This style of composition is to be placed at the service of a content which, as it tells its tale, continually recalls and recommends the social ethos and nomos of the audiences to which it is addressed. We use these convenient Greek terms to comprehend the customs, beliefs, loyalties, proprieties, and rituals of that society to which the audience belongs.

Versified language is something the Oedipus shares with all Greek plays, and the scholarly critic taking the obvious in his stride automatically attributes the choice to the personalities of their authors: they all happened to be professional “poets.” But was the choice of verse also socially conditioned, reflecting the pressure to compose speech suitable for nonreaders to remember? Plato in the next generation tried poetry but dropped it for prose, for he could expect a supply of readers not originally available for Sophocles. Drama's musical component, however, had now shrunk; dialogue is spoken without its help, and in a rhythm which, as the Greeks themselves noted, is closest to the cadences of ordinary speech. The hexametric formulas have disappeared; the vocabulary is Attic and contemporary, not archaic. And yet a flavor of the archaic is retained; the syntax is manipulated; ordinary usage is remodeled, intensified; the style is neither that of inherited oral epic on the one hand, nor that of written prose on the other. It can assume individuality when used by three different authors, and yet remain consistently “high classical” and somewhat remote, an effect assisted by an infusion of some Doric dialectical forms in the choruses.

Action is enclosed within an antique tale, in modern terms a “myth,” employing a syntax which is largely performative—a natural result of drama's art form, a vehicle second only to epic as a suitable repository of memorized speech. The tale is culled from oral memory; the names of its agents and the settings within which they live or act are archaic, drawn from that same legendary Greek past which is presupposed in the Homeric poems. Only one extant play by Aeschylus breaks this rule, and even so assigns its personalities to a remote and mysterious kingdom.
These properties being common to Greek drama are not difficult to appreciate in themselves; only when viewed against the background of primary orality do they acquire a fresh dimension. The mnemonic rules that operate to control the way the plot is constructed are at first sight less evident and can best be tested by recourse to a specific text. The testing becomes the more stringent as applied to the *Oedipus*, a composition which on the surface appears to be unusually sophisticated, that is to say, constructed with a care that only a literate author composing for a literate audience might be expected to apply.

The plot is woven into an elaborate pattern of prophecies of what will happen and repetitions that it has happened. Among these, the utterances ascribed to Teiresias, oracular in tone, exercise dominant control. Reluctantly appearing in answer to summons (a recollection of the part played by a prophet in the opening of the *Iliad*) and provoked by his ruler's intemperate accusations, he breaks out at last into a defiant reply, or rather two replies, in which he spells out and then recapitulates a detailed definition of the real identity of the culprit who has caused Thebes' present distress, what his situation is, and what his fate will be:

I

You have eyes, but do not see
Where you are living or whose house is your home
Do you know your origins? Unawares you have become abhorrent
to your own kin, the dead and the living
Double-lashed the curse of mother and father both
that dire-footed will hound you from this land
clear your vision now but darkness soon—
Hark! hear Kithairon echoing to your anguished cries

II

This man, the object of your menaces
and inquisition, proclaimed the murderer
of Laius, is right here now,
styled foreigner and migrant, till as native
Theban exposed. No pleasure to him
in what will befall. Vision lost,
wealth lost, blind and beggared, to foreign land
will he fare forth with staff to feel his way.
Exposure will reveal him consorting with his own children
as brother and father combined, and as of her who gave him birth
both son and husband, and of his father
a partner in bed and in murder.

Viewed as oral management, the design of these overlapping declarations is to alert the listening audience to follow in detail the future course of the action. It knows perfectly well now what is going to happen to the protagonist; the words have been riveted on their attention. The barrier of impenetrability between what on the surface is said and what is really meant is placed between Oedipus and Teiresias, but not between the audience and Teiresias. The details as stated define both present circumstance and its future unraveling, and do it twice over, with repetitiousness characteristic of oral composition.

As the unraveling occurs, the various dramatic items promised in this disclosure are not only performed but compulsively recapitulated by way of retrospective comment and lamentation. The blinding previously predicted is announced as the moment for it arrives (l. 1183), and after performance through self-infliction is ceremoniously reported (ll. 1268-79) and then continually reviewed in words put into the sufferer's own mouth (ll. 1313-18, 1323, 1326, 1334, 1337, 1371, 1375, 1385, 1389, 1470, 1482-83, 1486). The complex set of sexual interrelations first laid out in all detail of possible permutations and combinations by Teiresias is elaborately and compulsively recapitulated by the victim in the last third of the play (ll. 1256-57, 1357-61,
1403-8, 1481-85, 1496-99). Even the predicted exile to Mount Kithaeron (l. 421), scene of his babyhood (l. 1090), is in the conclusion recalled, reasserted, and demanded (ll. 1451-54). The total effect is that of an extended ring composition. Initial statements in effect addressed to the audience are echoed and re-echoed in the conclusion, to assist the purpose of imprinting upon acoustic memories the totality of what is said and done. This indeed might seem to be the main purpose served by the introduction on stage of the two daughters, still small children with no speaking parts, but providing occasion for a last obsessive retracing of Oedipus's complex sexual dilemma (ll. 1496-99).

The prophecies of Teiresias are only the most conspicuous portion of a series of oracular warnings, initiated by Creon's report of an oracular reply which supplies the first clue to the whereabouts of the slayer of Oedipus's father: he is here in Thebes (ll. 95-111). The implications are not understood. Teiresias follows with riddling descriptions of Oedipus himself, as already noted. Again they are not understood, even though Oedipus is challenged to understand them: “Go and think this out” (ll. 460-61). In the next instance we are transported into a past which has created the present. Laius and Jocasta had been given the original fateful oracle which threatened Laius's life, predicting he will be killed by his own son. They think to evade the prediction by exposing the infant (ll. 711-25). But this exercise of independent intelligence turns out to be mistaken, leading to a result the precise opposite of that intended. Their son as he grows up in his turn will commit himself to the same fatal sequence, by the same kind of error, against the same antagonist, for (as he recalls in response to prompting) he was given an oracle from the same source, prophesying parricide and incest on his part. He was in Corinth when he heard this, and like his real parents he thinks to cheat it by fleeing, this time from his supposed parents (ll. 787-97). The correct hint given to him that they are not his parents (ll. 779-80) is ignored. He has flunked all the tests and guaranteed first his fatal involvement and then its exposure.

In effect these statements, whether prophetic or oracular, are riddles. The entire play is composed so as to turn upon their pronouncements and attempted solutions. Oedipus himself is first introduced as a famous riddle solver (ll. 8, 35-40), and the title is echoed, with poignant irony, in the finale pronounced by the chorus (l. 1525). He had correctly understood and solved the riddle of the Sphinx. But the developing action soon casts him in the reverse role, as a man who fails to solve a series of further riddles. His second opponent has now in effect become Apollo, a more formidable antagonist in the battle of wits (ll. 1329-30).

Riddles are wordplays exchanged in competition between interlocutors, in this case between Apollo on the one hand and Oedipus's parents or Oedipus himself on the other; in two instances Apollo uses intermediaries. The diction employed can exploit not only correspondences between meanings, but acoustic assonances and responsion. This kind of dramaturgy reverts to the roots of orally communicated wisdom. It exploits matchings of similarities and contrasts at the two levels of meaning and of sound simultaneously, which because of the echo system employed are friendly to any effort of oral memorization. They constitute a kind of intellectual exercise—a dialectic—at the primary level of oral exchange and oral manners. The audience went home from the theater with their heads full of it.

The riddling of the Oedipus, then, while giving to this particular play a peculiar degree of dramatic tension, can be seen as a revival of a traditional device, mnemonic in character and having its roots in the habits of primary orality. A complete critique of a play so cunningly constructed would have to grant also that the total effect could have been gained only as a level of literate intelligence came to operate upon a level of oral intelligence. In psychological terms, a verbal architecture, made possible by the visualization of words in script, is to be inferred as superimposed upon an echo system resounding in the author's ears.

The anthropological obligation to commemorate the social mores had been assigned in the first instance to the chorus as constituting the original element in dramatic composition. As a replacement for epic, it had the advantage that verbal mimesis (PP, ch. 2) (to use Plato's term) could be reinforced by dance and by a use of melody beyond the range of a stringed instrument (PP, ch. 9). Choric composition can best be defined by the
term *generic* as opposed to personal. The art of the composer is devoted to expressing as poignantly as he can what his community feels or would feel, as opposed to whatever unique and private thoughts he himself might be capable of contributing. This becomes conspicuous in the choric compositions of Aeschylus; and those of Sophocles, sophisticated as they may seem, still carry the same generic stamp. The five choruses of the *Oedipus* are ceremonial representations of five types of public ritualized performance. The *parodos* (ll. 151-215), responding to the delivery of Apollo's first oracle, is a hymn of ritual supplication, a prayer for succor from danger and death, addressed to five gods, including Athena. The first stasimon (ll. 463-511), responding to the dreadful riddle of Teiresias, is formulated as an averting prayer, and as a formal imprecation upon the unknown source of pollution, designed to protect the city from peril. The second (ll. 863-910) responds to the premature confidence expressed by Oedipus and Jocasta—and especially Jocasta—that they have outwitted the oracles addressed to them. This time it is not supplication or imprecation but deprecation, a solemn litany designed to avert what might be dangerous—namely, skepticism or impiety at the expense of a powerful god. The third stasimon (ll. 1086-1109) is in an altogether different key, though equally ritualistic, being a brief birthday song, of a rather special kind, surprisingly touching and tender, responding to the revelation that Oedipus was a foundling discovered on the mountainside. He is saluted as a true child of nature, of Kithairon, or of the nymphs, or perchance of Apollo or Pan? These sentiments have been widely misunderstood. They are not “ironic,” on the one hand, or mistaken on the other. They anticipate the final reception of Oedipus by the earth, his true mother, in the last play of the *Oedipus* series, the *Oedipus at Colonus*. The fourth (ll. 1186-1222), following the culminating and catastrophic revelation of his true sexual situation, is a funeral dirge, a lament for the children of men in general (the Homeric echo is very plain here) and for Oedipus himself. He may still live on, but he has become dead to this world and its proprieties; by breaking a sexual taboo, he has become a kind of nonperson. Four of these five ritualized songs address themselves to preoccupations commonly experienced in early societies: the need to guard against plague, to identify sources of social pollution, to preserve esteem for oracles, to come to terms with the uncertain hazards of life. Their expression is generic, repeating normal components of an ethic orally preserved and celebrated.

The same four include observations which bear more directly upon the action. The *parodos* contains a vivid description of the plague's present and local effects (ll. 167-88); the first stasimon adds a meditation upon the possibility that Oedipus himself may after all be the culprit sought (ll. 483-511); the second concludes by criticizing the protagonists for their skeptical impiety (ll. 897-910); the fourth enlarges upon the personal reversal of fortune that Oedipus has suffered (ll. 1197-1222).

In these passages the chorus functions as a partner in the plot, furthering the process of the tale as it is told—the particular tale the dramatist has chosen. Accompanying as they do the generic statements, they serve to integrate generalized themes into the context of a given narrative, much as had occurred in epic composition, but with the difference that the themes have become more explicit, a natural result of being expressed in song rather than in the course of chanted narrative. Such meditation offers no innovative inventions designed to challenge existing views, prejudices, habits, and conventions. Nor on the other hand does it seek to expose or exploit them. It simply weaves a familiar texture in and out of a cautionary tale, clothed in a dress which the listening audience instinctively followed, accepted, and remembered because they recognized artistic versions of what they commonly performed, and commonly believed, week in and week out in their corporate and family capacities.

When Aristophanes in his comedy *The Frogs* chose to dramatize an imaginary poetic contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, the god Dionysus, acting appropriately as judge of their respective performances, submits them to a final examination, in which the contestants are required to offer for comparison rival *gnomae*, that is, maxims or aphorisms, of their own composition. “Though today we would not think of testing dramatic expertise in this way, the texts (of both tragedians) demonstrate that the test was reasonable at the time” (*LRG*, p. 302). Wisdom of this sort is in fact a rooted characteristic of classic drama, symptomatic of its closeness to primary orality, in which the saying, couched as proverb, maxim, or aphorism, is such a
conspicuous element, framed mnemonically by use of parallelism, antithesis, pithy compression, and acoustic balance to be repeated and reused on the lips of the people.

While it is relatively easy to identify maxims in the dramatic texts when they are framed as such, they more commonly appear in disguise, lurking within statements which appear to be addressed directly to what is happening. The iambic rhetoric which constitutes nine-tenths of what passes for “action” in a Greek play ordinarily prefers language which is normative, implying that “what I am doing or saying is only what is to be expected under the circumstances.” In this way the sentiments of oral-cultural storage get into the text indirectly as part of the action, giving it that air of formality which separates it and always will separate it from the stagecraft of later centuries.

The prologue to the *Oedipus*, which gets the plot moving, is cast in the form of an exchange between the protagonist and a priest acting as spokesman for a delegation of citizens. Within the first fifty-seven lines there occur eight examples of statements apparently addressed to specifics, which can be transferred backwards into the generic oral formulas which are being echoed in them.

(Oedipus)

2-3 [specific]: What means this session of all of you before me with your suppliant boughs all wreathed?
   [generic]: civic emergencies call for supplication offered to gods with appropriate equipment

6-7 [specific]: here I am in person, preferring not to rely on mes-sengers other than myself
   [generic]: direct intelligence obtained personally is preferable to news communicated by others [cf. Seven Against Thebes, ll. 67-68]

9-10 [specific]: aged sire, speak up, since it is natural and apro-priate for you to speak on their behalf
   [generic]: the older members of a community are its appro-priate spokesmen

(Priest)

15-20 [specific]: you can see us in our respective age groups as we sit at your altars, some not yet strong enough to fly far, some burdened with age, priests like me, and here too the chosen of our young men. The rest of the populace crouches garlanded in the market-places.
   [generic]: a civic population is made up of the children at one extreme, the aged at the other, the male youth [as the fighters] in the middle, and the rest of the pop-ulation [i.e., the women; cf. Seven, ll. 10-16]

25-27 [specific]: our city is dying as the fruits of its soil die and is dying as its flocks and herds die and as the preg-nancies of its women are aborted.
   [generic]: pestilence is a visitation which destroys plants and animals, and renders women barren.

41-45 [specific]: we supplicate you of all men, for I can see that it is the counsels of men already experienced that have successful issue.
   [generic]: here the maxim lacks disguise, aside from its appli-cation to present emergency.

49-50 [specific]: let us never by any means have cause to remember your government as one under which we originally stood erect and then fell flat.
   [generic]:
stability and continuity of government is best [or: the measure of good
government is the continuous prosperity of its subject]
if indeed you intend to govern this land as well as control it, better to
control it in company with its men then control a land that is emptied
of them.
[generic]: a governing power which destroys its own citizens is no government.

Equipped with this sample, the reader can thread his way through the remaining text, observing the recurrent intrusion of similar generic observations. It is interesting to compare their comparative density as between the Seven Against Thebes and the Oedipus. Nearly forty years of growing literacy have registered their effect, not only in decreasing the proportion but in increasing the degree of linguistic manipulation applied by the author to the language used (LRG, pp. 303-4).

The matrix enclosing these materials, giving opportunity for their enunciation, is provided by the myth chosen by the dramatist for exploitation. Because of modern preoccupation with the heroic ideal as it has been supposed to inform the life-style of ancient Hellas, and also under the influence of Freud, the Athenian stage has lately been viewed as providing an arena for the display of autonomous personalities grappling in depth with dilemmas personal to themselves. Even Professor Ong, otherwise observant of the nuances of the transition from the oral to the “chirographic,” succumbs to the temptation to see Oedipus as a character cast in this mold, and therefore as a “chirographic” character represented “in depth” (pp. 152, 154), when in fact objectively speaking Sophocles' hero could be regarded as a rather stupid, or at least insensitive man in whose predicament we become involved because (a) he happens to be in a position of great authority and (b) has nevertheless entangled himself in circumstances beyond his control which are bound to destroy that authority.

Orally preserved communication committed to the preservation of social propriety favored stories which focused on the social and collective context within which individuals were allowed to operate. This is as true of Achilles as it is of Oedipus. The social matrix for Attic drama is the polis, the city-state, and in particular the city of Athens. Mycenaean and other antique fables furnished a backdrop, a kind of fantasy (GCJ, p. 56), which served to give to the dramatic statement a ritual and even religious flavor. But the overriding theme is the fortune and fate of the contemporary city; the social wisdom preserved in the text is that appropriate to civic preoccupations. In those preliminary fifty-seven lines already reviewed, the issue to be settled in the rest of the play is plainly stated to be the restoration of a city to a health it has lost. The image of its assembled population is there on stage and compulsively noted. The term polis itself, introduced by Oedipus in the fourth line of the play, is reiterated four times in the priest's reply (ll. 21, 28, 46, 51), not counting its synonyms (land, town, soil: ll. 14, 25, 35, 47, 54). As the plot winds down to its conclusion, it is announced that the source of the city's pollution, now discovered, is to be segregated from the community (ll. 1425-31). Oedipus's fate is not his own to decide, but waits upon a newly constituted political authority (l. 1523). Between these two terminal points, the plot as it proceeds continually places its chief actors against the background of a civic community in which they rule and in which their government is crucial. The fantasy element is supplied by the mythology of Thebes. The actual community which the audience feels is on trial before their eyes is their own. Need we wonder then that the plot turns on a practice of population control accepted silently, and we can guess uneasily, by this same community? So much that has been written about this play fails to note the relevance of the plot to contemporary practice. The omission is striking. How many of the audience shifted in their seats as the tale of the exposure of the infant Oedipus unfolded itself, an exposure implicitly condemned by the results to which it leads?

Social custom apart, there were historical memories both past and recent waiting to be stirred by what the play says. The prayer of supplication offered by the chorus as they enter sets up the ambivalent geographic context with which and within which the members of the audience are invited to identify themselves: it is at once ancient Thebes, a city of the imagined past, and contemporary Athens, a city experienced in the present. After
first identifying Thebes as the location of the myth and the recipient of Apollo's oracle (ll. 151-57), their first invocation (marked as first) is addressed to Athena, Zeus's daughter, followed by Artemis and Apollo, whose previous succor of a city in dire peril is commemorated (ll. 165-66). Are we in the legendary Thebes rescued by Oedipus, or in the theater on that acropolis once occupied over fifty years ago by the Persians and rescued and reoccupied after Salamis? Such memories were always close to the surface in the Athens of the later fifth century. The audience begins to realize where it is and is made doubly sure when the next two stanzas describe in woeful detail a civic plague and its effects. They were now listening to verse composed for themselves, the recent survivors of just such a calamity, the Great Plague of Athens of 429—a present memory reinforced by Homeric memory of that plague which initiates the action of the *Iliad*.

Plague had occurred in the course of a war still being waged when the play was produced, and with oppressive results on the population. The chorus next names Ares as the war god whose presence terrifies them with thoughts of escaping from the city by sea eastward or westward (ll. 190-99). Against him they invoke the protection of Apollo’s arrows and Artemis’s flaming torches (ll. 203-8) before concluding with an appeal to Dionysus, patron deity of their present (mythical) location (ll. 210). The ode thus ends where it began, in Thebes. Overall, the effect once more is of ring composition, a standard oral form, used in this case to evoke contemporary concerns as they are enclosed within an envelope of the archaic and traditional.

The archaeology of Thebes is not likely to throw much light upon reasons for such inclusion. The imagined inhabitants of a Mycenaean capital in the Greek hinterland could not plausibly be represented as resorting to a long sea voyage as an immediate means of escape, nor would such a civic community be described by its priest as one not only of warriors but of ships (l. 56). The same speaker addresses himself to a ruler described as hitherto supremely successful, but who might now fall (l. 50) and who may face the prospect of ruling over a depopulated territory (ll. 54-57). His proper title is not one of divinity—*isotheos*, an unacceptable impiety—but “first of men” (ll. 31-33); we can hear an echo of this in the tribute paid later to Pericles by the historian Thucydides. As one takes in all the contemporary allusiveness of the play, the impression grows that in the role of the protagonist we hear a muted memory at once critical, mournful, and sympathetic of Athens’s leading statesman, and his fate as a plague-stricken victim of his own policies.

After the same fashion, Aeschylus’s *Seven Against Thebes*, drawing on the same cycle of Theban legend, had celebrated recent Athenian history within an antique tale (*LRG*, pp. 294, 295, 297). This is not to be understood as a departure from the anthropological function. Customs, rituals, and beliefs commemorated in oral storage can be perceived as rooted in a distant past, provided the perceiving is done by the literate historian. For the oral composer and his audience the material is felt to be contemporary. The memory of oral societies is short; the specific memories they are able to retain are recent. A Shakespeare could, if he chose, dramatize distant history—that of a Lear or Macbeth—because he could read documented sources which were historical in intention. The composers of Attic tragedy had only the epic compositions of Homer and a few successors now alphabetized. The antique background of the plays—Trojan, Argive, Theban, Corinthian—remains formal and sketchy, a convenience for the commemoration of the present community represented in the audience, a commemoration of the way they are living now, presumed to be the traditional way, commingled with some experiences of the recent past. It is a theatrical situation well summed up in the words of Jean-Paul Vernant: “The performance of tragedy is not only an art form, it is a social institution … to which the city, by founding the tragic competitions, gives status along with its political and legal instruments. By establishing … a performance open to all citizens … the city makes itself into a theater, in a way it becomes an object of representation, and plays itself before the public.”

To this I would add that such a type of performance, unique to the Attic stage, becomes understandable when its causation is perceived to exist in the conditions governing poetic composition in a culture of oral communication requiring oral storage of cultural information.

*Notes*
7. Lord, ch. 4.

**Criticism: Bernhard Frank (essay date 1992)**


*[In the following essay, Frank contends that during the climax of Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus reverses roles with Jocasta.]*

... There, there, we saw his wife
hanging, the twisted rope around her neck.
When he saw her, he cried out fearfully
and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay,
poor woman, on the ground, what happened after
was terrible to see. He tore the brooches—
the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—
away from her and lifting them up high
dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out
such things as: they will never see the crime
I have committed or had done upon me!
Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on
forbidden faces, do not recognize
those whom you long for—with such imprecations
he struck his eyes again and yet again
with the brooches. And the bleeding eyeballs gushed
and stained his beard—no sluggish oozing drops
but a black rain and bloody hail poured down.

lines 1263-80; David Grene, trans.

The self-blinding of Oedipus, a scene that Harold Bloom, in his introduction to *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), singles out as “too terrible for acting out … [and] also too dreadful for representation in language,” has been read, time and again, as the manifestation of *either* Apollo’s (and secondarily, Teiresias’) prophecy, or of Oedipus’ free will. Bloom interprets the act as Oedipus’ “protest
against Apollo, who brings both the light and the plague” (3). He dismisses the Freudian theory of the act as a form of castration as “less relevant here than the outcry against the god” (4).

Another, very different interpretation of the scene emerges, however, which ultimately serves to explain, or at least mitigate, the lame ending, in which the blind Oedipus enters the house to await Apollo's further instructions.

When Oedipus bursts through the double doors, which to Bloom suggest the female labia (3), he is already inured to the knowledge of being a parricide. He had known for many years that he had killed a man and suspected early on in the play that it was Laius. His total preoccupation, that of a man gone amok, now centers on the discovery of his incestuous relationship with Jocasta. He intends to thrust his sword into her offending womb, which ironically would emulate the sexual act one last time. When he finds the queen dead by her own hand, however, a strange reversal occurs. Jocasta becomes the newborn, the dead infant that Oedipus should have been, if the tragedy was to have been averted. And it is Oedipus who delivers the child and, severing the “twisted” umbilical cord, lowers it to the ground.

It is significant that the brooches (or, as sometimes translated, pins) with which he then blinds himself come from Jocasta's dress. Oedipus could have used any nearby object for the purpose—why Jocasta's brooches? The act appears as another stage of their role reversal. Far from seeking to castrate himself, Oedipus takes on Jocasta's persona and rapes his own eyes with her “phalluses.” The blood gushes down and stains his beard—the pubic region, as it were, of his pierced eyes. It is Jocasta's twofold revenge, reciprocating his oft-repeated coital act.

By their role reversal, Oedipus has avenged both the crime he committed and the one of which he was the victim. He has paid Jocasta back for sending him to his infant death and avenged the incest perpetrated on her. The climax of the play is here. The disposition of the Oedipus who survives the ordeal is really only of secondary importance. His exile, now, can wait.

**Criticism: Richard Fabrizio (essay date 1995)**


*[In the following essay, Fabrizio examines how Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara, a Renaissance writer, dealt with what he deemed inconsistencies of characterization in his adaptation of Sophocles's text.]*

To discuss so minor a writer as Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara (ca. 1517-1571) seems like an exercise in willful obscurantism or personal enthusiasm for what is better dead and buried. Of course, it could be claimed with Ernst Robert Curtius and Aby Warburg that “God lurks in detail,” that only by a minute exploration of even the minor figures of a period can we achieve any synthesis and understanding of literary history. We are all aware from experience how often a second or even third rate writer illuminates more clearly than a master the mentality of a period. But a more tangible justification exists for conjuring up the name of Anguillara from the dusty tomes of the past. His *Edippo tragedia* was both the first performed and first printed vernacular version of the Oedipus story in the Renaissance. Called “among the most famous tragedies” by one of those eighteenth-century collectors of details, Crescimbeni (I. iv. 309), the *Edippo* was printed twice in 1565,1 once in Padua and once in Venice. It was also performed twice, first in Padua in 1556 (Pelaez 77) or 1560 (Lorini 88) on a permanent stage designed by Falconetto for the home of Alvise Cornaro (Fiocco 142; “Idea” 219) and, I believe, a second time in Vicenza in 1561 on a temporary wooden stage designed by Palladio for the Olympic Academy. Both productions were done with a splendor and pomp befitting the famous story and befitting a text that would return the story of Oedipus to the stage after more than a thousand year hiatus.
While the stage history of the 1585 production of Sophocles' *Oedipus* for the inauguration of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico has been told repeatedly, both in its own time (Ingegneri) and after (Gallo, Puppi, Schrade), the tale of Anguillara's play is hardly known. And it probably will never be told, lacking as it does early MS or printed evidence and depending on contradictory reports in those ponderous but charming biographical and bibliographical texts of the seventeenth and eighteenth century: Castellini, Temanza, Mazzucchelli, Tiraboschi, Fontanini, Angiolgabriello, and others. That the *Edippo* has been confined to the dust bins of literature by an unfortunate loss of evidence is ironic, for Anguillara repeatedly complained, often with a broad smile, against his fate. In one poem, he said that while “Fortune” showed “Her smiling face” to his patron, he only saw “Her behind” (“culo”: “Capitolo: Nella Sedia” 115). Yet according to our standards, he was quite fortunate: a poet of many witty poems in the style of Berni; a translator who even recently was called a star (Melczer 246-265); a letterato called upon by the Olympic Academy to write the preface for the first Italian performance of the first Italian tragedy, Trissino's *Sofonisba* (Corrigan 199); a writer who served at the court of King Henry II and Catherine de' Medici; and last but not least, an aspiring inventor (“Lettera alla Signoria”).

And yet his reputation has become as small and misshaped as his body; he was, in fact, a dwarfish hunchback. Though he laughed at his deformity, calling his body a mess of mountains and valleys (“Capitolo al Cardinale di Trento” 301-302), he—I think—would have cried at his historical neglect, and especially at the neglect of his *Edippo*, which as his preface shows, he hoped would bring fame by association with the noble tragic genre. Not fame, but infamy came to it instead. His *Edippo* was damned by both contemporaries and by nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics, and by all for the same reason: its additions to Sophocles' text. A Latin letter by the priest Girolamo Negri mentions its first performance, complaining that its four hour production was “undecipherable” (tota … est etrusca; 120). De Nores, in his 1588 *Poetica*, called these added episodes that ran so counter to Aristotle's prescriptions little less than vicious. Later critics were no less kind, castigating Anguillara on the same basis: those dreaded episodes (D’Ovidio 277; Pelaez 79; Bosisio 83-84; Symonds II 244). But these additions are at the heart of Anguillara's vision. While all translation involves a degree of exegesis, particularly in the Renaissance (Norton 179), Anguillara literally recreated the figure of Oedipus. His *Edippo* is close to those types of imitations recognized by modern criticism, imitations that have a “dialectical relation” to their subtexts (Greene 39-40), works that retain the terms of their sources but “mean them in another sense” (Bloom 14). But the *Edippo* is really unique in what it attempts. Other Renaissance writers did one of two things: they translated Sophocles' text and left it as is; or they mimicked its structures, as defined by Aristotle, in newly conceived plots and characters. No one else in the period completely redefined Oedipus.

Both Anguillara and his contemporaries start from the same point: the riddles embedded in Sophocles' text. Not what is understood there but what is incomprehensible forms the basis of the Renaissance Oedipus. While his contemporaries shun the textual riddles, Anguillara faces them head on. He accepts Sophocles' plot and modifies Oedipus' behavior. Into his second and third acts, Anguillara confines the whole of Sophocles' plot, interjecting into it new allusions that redefine its characters. In the rest of the text, Anguillara does the opposite: he expands the plot by inventing new material and by drawing bits and pieces from Euripides, Seneca, and Statius, and then interjects back into it material from Sophocles. At the same time, Anguillara maintains a link with the Middle Ages and the medieval Oedipus *romans*: their concern for pathos in particular. No wonder critics were dumbfounded and distraught. Nevertheless there is a sense to the whole, a reason for using such a variety of sources and motifs. Anguillara tried to solve a problem, a problem that he and his contemporaries noticed in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and its Aristotelian interpretation: Oedipus did not act consistently. Anguillara's object is to bring consistency to Edippo's life, to reconcile what I call the paradox of the two Oedipuses. With an almost Freudian fervor, Anguillara transforms his *Edippo* into a study of desire within the family, geometrically plotting its course from compassion and love to rivalry and incest. So what follows is not the story of the resuscitation of a dead body as much as an attempt to expose how a Renaissance writer understood or misunderstood the classic mind. And this story is very much the story of the two Oedipuses.
Oedipus is famous for his intelligence. To Sophocles (8) and Euripides (1506), he is glorious and wise for his ability to decipher a riddle. But in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Oedipus is also obtuse. He is unable to put together elementary facts of his past with his present—facts of time, of place, of number, and of genealogy. Every student has been perplexed and stimulated by this paradox, the paradox of the two Oedipuses. Elaborate theories have been devised to explain away the paradox of the two Oedipuses. In one theory Oedipus may be in fact neither parricide nor incestuous (Goodhardt; Ahl); he is guilty rather of misreading his past, his parentage, of blindly behaving as if the oracle must be his fate (Ahl). In another theory, Oedipus has always been sure of his past, of his patricide and incest; when the plague comes, he engages in a performance of ignorance in order to allow his people to ritually expiate themselves in the unravelling of his guilt (Vellacott). And of course, the most famous theory of our time, Freud's, explains away the paradox of the two Oedipuses by a dichotomy of the mind, a division between unconscious desire and conscious action, between suppression and anxiety. In each of these theories, the Oedipuses are reconciled, denying either that Oedipus commits a crime or accepting the crime and explaining it away. Whichever theory we accept, we realize that Sophocles' language is rich in paradox.

Against a backdrop of Aristotelian theory, Renaissance writers and critics also struggled to repair the split in the two Oedipuses. Some recognized that Aristotle's theory of character transformation rationalized the dichotomy, the theory of *peripeteia*—a reversal of fortune that forces one to face the past—and the theory of *anagnorisis*—a recognition of the meaning of one's past in terms of the present. Aristotle's rationalization provided little practical help. Oedipus' past was filled with so many inconsistencies that writers avoided the text and instead used its motifs. For example, in the tragedy *Alidoro* (1568) a baby is cast out of its royal home because of a dire oracle; later he returns and unknowingly commits incest with his sister (Neri 173-174). Gabriele Bombace, who probably wrote this tragedy, explains its creative methodology in his description of the play's first performance. He pinpoints the connections between Sophocles' text and Aristotle's theory: “There are no lack of literati who, comparing diligently the anagnorisis and peripeteia of *Oedipus* with that of *Alidoro*, dare for several reasons to affirm that this is better than that: and among other reasons because it is beyond belief that Oedipus … with so many signs of correspondence between place and time … had never thought that he was the murderer of Laius, the which error was sustained and defended by Aristotle the best he could as something outside the scenic action of the play itself. It is nevertheless very important and very far from the verisimilitude found in *Alidoro*” (Tragedia II 1004). There are three key elements here: 1) the reference to the passage in Aristotle that concerns a play's inner action and prior events (*Poetics*. XV. 1454b. 10d); 2) the intimation that Aristotle's theory of tragedy rationalizes the inconsistencies in *Oedipus*; and 3) the appeal to verisimilitude—fidelity to real life—as the standard that constitutes rationality.

Anguillara is unique in his use of the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus* to solve what such writers saw as the irrationalities of the text. Most eliminated the plot of *Oedipus* and either imitated its handling of peripeteia and anagnorisis or competed with its horror by exploiting the shock of incest. Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* (1590) imitates not the life of Oedipus but the way Oedipus came to recognize the meaning of his acts through reversals of fortune. Guarini so complicates and multiplies the reversals in plot that they outdo those in *Oedipus*. Each new twist foils the characters; they are blind to its meaning. But all finally becomes clear, for the world is rational once the secret design of Fate is revealed (Perella 257-259). Although concentrating on these reversals, Guarini retains certain elements of the plot of *Oedipus*: a child lost to its true parents, a dark fate for the state, an oracle that predicts a cure. Tasso's *Torrismondo* (1573) also manipulates and “renews” the story of Oedipus (Neri 147), while forsaking its plot. It retains a dire prediction, a child purposely separated from its parents, and incest. But here too the episodes are constructed so as to complicate the plot and thus rival the way its classical source, *Oedipus*, used peripeteia and anagnorisis. And again the hero, perfectly rational, is victimized by the irrationality of the daily world in which he lives (Dainard 45).

Rather than its complex structure, most Renaissance writers tried to imitate *Oedipus*' horror. Dramatists noticed that Aristotle modeled his cathartic theory on *Oedipus*; therefore, they began to locate the catharsis of pity and fear in the attraction and repulsion for incest. Cesare della Porta, in his *Delpha* (1586), says that his
subject is so terrible that “it will overwhelm (involva) Oedipus in perpetual silence” (Neri 157). Muzio Manfredi's *Semiramis* (ca. 1583; Herrick 206-209) was long praised for its exploitation of the “ferocious” passions (Neri 140). But it was Speroni's *Canace* (1542) that most exploited the incest theme. In fact, Speroni theorized that incest may not be an evil (Speroni 215); but even if it is, an evil hero may evoke a catharsis (Speroni 229). In the critical battle over the *Canace*, one thing is clear: incest is justified as a legitimate way to arouse pity and fear (Cf. Weinberg II. 925, 948-952). *Canace* was, nevertheless, castigated for its lasciviousness (Cinzio 139) and, like the *Edippo*, for its use of disparate episodes from a variety of sources (Cinzio 107-109; Roaf I-LI). Constructed according to those laws of Aristotle that explain *Oedipus* (Roaf XLVIII, n. 43), the *Canace* pays homage to Sophocles' but refuses to imitate its plot.

Anguillara does both. He takes on the great text; he takes on the problem of the two Oedipuses who act inconsistently. He does everything with the object of eliminating the contradictions in Sophocles' text and in Oedipus' character. Bombace, as already mentioned, pointed out not only the inconsistencies in *Oedipus*, but also the way in which Aristotelian criticism tried to justify them as material “outside the scenic action of the play” (*Tragedia* II 1004). Apparently alluding to the same passage in Aristotle, De Nores (*Poetica*, 1588) takes the opposite position. He attacks Anguillara based on a justification of Aristotle's theory. Aristotle says: “The irrational (alogon) must not be in the episodes/incidents (pragmata). If this can't be done, [the irrational must be kept] outside the tragedy” (alogon de méden einai en tois pragmasin, ei de me exso tes tragoidias; XV. 1454b. 10d). Aristotle, thus, distinguishes a double structure in every play: a structure of words referring to the past and a structure of acts performed in the present. The irrational (alogon) may exist in the verbal allusions to the past; so it is justifiable that in all his time in Thebes prior to the play's opening Oedipus had never mentioned Laius (see *Poetics*, p. 57, note d). To explain such prior matters would require material to be added to the play. De Nores, in his criticism of Anguillara, points out that verisimilitude demands that the episodes (pragmata) in a play be “few” and “necessary.” Like “too many feet,” too many episodes impede rather than improve movement (18 verso). According to De Nores, the episodes Anguillara added to Sophocles' *Oedipus* are “beside the point,” violate “decorum,” are “unnecessary” and “superfluous” (18 verso-19 recto).

For example, Anguillara reconciles events prior to the play's opening with each other and with those in the play. Polibo, whose wife is barren, prepares in advance for a foundling to be accepted as legitimate by having his wife feign pregnancy. Thus Edippo leaves Corinth not because he is accused of bastardy and doubts his parentage but because he wishes to know his future. Motivated by doubt, Sophocles' Oedipus goes to Delphi not to learn his future but to recover his past. Leaving Delphi still in doubt, Sophocles' Oedipus nevertheless acts as if he is sure of the identity of his parents by shunning Corinth. Edippo acts logically. After hearing the oracle, he refuses to return to Corinth because he is sure of his parentage, sure that he can control his future, sure that he will subvert the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother.

The way Anguillara repairs what he must have thought as the illogic of Sophocles' text is apparent in the handling of Edippo's knowledge of his past as a prelude to his investigation of Laio's death. In spite of all his years in Thebes, Sophocles' Oedipus is strangely ignorant of the facts of Laius' death until he begins his relentless inquiry. Edippo knows everything; he talked many times about it. He knows when and how Laio was killed. Only one detail he does not know: where the murder took place, a detail that we may forgive anyone for overlooking. But at the end of every correction a new error pops up. Knowing the facts, why had Edippo never done anything? Every age seems to negotiate a path between tolerable and intolerable irrationalities.

Anguillara, like commentators today (Goodhardt; Ahl), noticed that the case Oedipus builds against himself is not reasonably strong. Therefore, Anguillara piles up so many clues to prove that Edippo killed Laio that all doubt vanishes. Not only are all the numbers correct: time, place, and witnesses, but new details are added. Edippo accepts that he has killed Laio only because the Theban shepherd, Forbante, proves he is a reliable witness by even more physical evidence, a distinctive wound on his head and distinctive words at the scene of
the killing that Edippo recognizes. But it is a final clue that confirms his belief: at the time of the killing, Laio wore “a red cloak all adorned in gold and embroidery” (un manto rosso / Tutto guarnito d'oro, e di ricami; Act III, Sc. 2, 29 verso-30 recto). Discovery (anagnorisis) is a matter of purely physical evidence. Guilt is detached from a personal judgment of responsibility. Investigatory objectivity and expository balance are deemed the essence of rationality.

Irrational unbalance is an expository technique in Sophocles. While the murder investigation is in the foreground, incest floats in the background. As the one investigation turns into the other, many details of the first are left unanswered and of the second unasked. In Anguillara, the murder and the incest run along parallel but separate tracts. First, he establishes a history of familial love and simultaneously a mechanism to prevent its eruption into its opposite—incest and rivalry. Next he arranges a curse on incest to preface the curse on regicide. To introduce the incest, he carefully builds a family structure marked by compassion and love.

Edippo flees Corinth when he is close to twenty. This allows Anguillara to stress Edippo's loving relationship to his supposed parents as well as the age difference between him and his wife, who is sixty when the play begins. Edippo has been loved by his Corinthian parents, has had a full childhood, has felt safe and sound in Corinth. As he has been loved, Edippo loves his own children, who when the play opens are old enough to rule and to marry, old enough to have a history of his guiding and protecting them. Anguillara was surely influenced in the matter of age by Euripides' Phoenissae and Statius' Thebaid and the medieval Oedipus romans. Sophocles hardly mentions age at all. When Oedipus talks about parents and family, he speaks about them in terms of unfulfilled desire. The “sweetest” (hediston) sight of all must be to see “the faces” (ommatas) of one's parents (999), he conjectures.

Surely one of the episodes De Nores found “superfluous” is what may be called “the contracts scene” (Act I, Sc. 2): a scene that demonstrates Edippo's deep love for his children and his apprehension of the danger of familial love. Assuming that he controls two kingdoms, one that he will inherit (Corinth) and one that he has conquered (Thebes), Edippo draws up an elaborate contract in which one city is given to Polinice and the other to Eteocle. He then assures the future of his daughters, contracting each to a noble marriage. To a great extent any rivalry or jealousy within the family is prevented by these contracts before it begins. But is the attempt to block out such future conflicts a mark of their strength? Incest and civic rebellion, Edippo tells his children, are tied together, a connection found in every work on Oedipus from Statius' Thebaid to Lydgate's Siege of Thebes, from Silvestrius (76) to the works of the Medieval mythographers (Anderson 121-125). And thus, within this civic context, Edippo issues his first curse: “May God send his anger and vengeance / Against anyone who with his own flesh / Tries to vent his lasciviousness; / Let him live in misery, a beggar. / Deprived of light, and suffer / Every anguish, either in prison or in exile” (Act I, Sc. 2, 7 recto). Incest becomes a part of the foreground of Anguillara's play; it is tied not only to the prediction given to Laio and Edippo but paralleled to the later oracle about the cause of the plague (Act II, Sc. 3).

Thus Anguillara's Edippo issues a double curse, one against incest that balances the one against the murderer. Sophocles' curse is directed only against the murderer. Nor is incest, apparently, introduced as the cause of the plague in Sophocles, while in Anguillara the cause is linked both to murder and to incest. Nowhere is Sophocles' use of misdirection that leads to misinterpretation better seen than in the wording of the oracle about the plague's cause. To understand the Apollonian oracle in Sophocles, one is forced to devise a theory to put its clues together. Indeed, it is not very clear which words belong to the god and which to Creon (Bollack II. 59; Ahl 59). In a rather off-hand manner, Creon says:

I'd like to say what I heard from the god.
Phoibos, the king, clearly (emphanos) commands us
To drive out (elaunein) the miasma nourishing the
land,
And not to nourish the incurable.

(95-98)
Does the word “clearly” (emphanos) refer to the manner of the command or to its content? Does it mean that Apollo commands openly or “unambiguously” (Kamerbeek 48)? The cause of the plague is not named. What or who should be driven out is not named. Are the words that follow Apollo's or Creon's interpretation of them?

Driving out the man (andrelatountas), or
for blood spilled paying back with spilled blood,
For it is blood that has turned the city into a wintry place.

(100-101)

The words “driving out the man” (andrelatountas) are syntactically connected to Phoibos' commands in Creon's earlier report of the oracle (Kamerbeek 48). But are they logically connected? Creon's “driving out the man” is an exact parallel to Apollo's words “driving out … the miasma” (elaunein). Has Creon substituted his word “man” for the god's word “miasma”? Nowhere is the incest explicitly mentioned, for it is unclear whether miasma, which is almost always associated with a dead body (Parker 128-132), may ever be connected with incest (Parker 97; Oudemans 48, 50-51, 128).

All this is changed in Anguillara. His oracle is perfectly clear:

These are Apollo's own remarks:
An infamous foreigner (peregrino) inhabits Thebes,
Who is not a foreigner, in fact he's Theban,
But believes he's a foreigner, and all believe the same of him.
He's already killed Laius, King of Thebes,
To whom he's closely tied by blood;
And he does now, and has done even greater evil.

(Act II. Sc. 3, 14 recto)

One person committed the crime; that person is a Theban who thinks he is a stranger; he is a relative of the dead king; he has committed an even greater evil than regicide: clearly incest.

Incest, incorporated into a family structure filled with love, provokes constant talk of rivalry and jealousy. Edippo labels his Corinthian father “rival.” He did not go back to Corinth “because the oracle had already predicted / That I must be … / … adulterer and rival to my father” (… perché già l'oracol mi predisse, / Ch'io … dovea … / di mio padre farmi / Adultero, e rival …”; Act III, Sc. 4, 35 recto). The accusation of adultery and rivalry is repeated over and over again in the text (e.g., Act 5, Sc. 2, 58 recto). In fact, all along Giocasta and Edippo have lived aware that their relationship is symbolically incestuous. After the discovery that Edippo has killed Laio, but before the discovery of the incest, Giocasta calls Edippo “son.” To his question about why she calls him son rather than husband, Giocasta says: “Edippo, because I am much older than you / I may still call you son” (Edippo, per l'età c'haggio maggiore, / Di voi, posso figliuol chiamarvi anch'ora; Act III, Sc. 4, 36 recto). Edippo responds: “Out of the same kind of respect I have always / Treated you with the reverence I would have for a mother” (Per lo stesso rispetto anch'io v'ho sempre / Portato riverentia come a madre; 36 recto).

Creating a close family structure for Edippo forced Anguillara to psychologize its internal mechanism. Every family member's action dovetails with an appropriate motivation. And motives conform to rules of verisimilitude and decorum: fidelity to ordinary reality and popular manners. The blinding scene demonstrates this. In Sophocles, blinding is epistemological, tied to the question of how we know; in Anguillara, it is psychological, tied to the question of why we feel.
Anguillara, following Euripides, Seneca, and Statius, times Edippo's blinding prior to Giocasta's suicide. Sophocles alone orders the blinding after it, transforming it from an act of simple self-punishment to a stage in the discovery of truth. Knowing is a function of memory and so is action. If our memories are fantasies, how can we act intelligently? There are indeed two Oedipuses: the fictitious character created by circumstance and coincidence, and the real person created by “mis-memory” and misunderstanding. Oedipus acts foolishly because he thinks he is someone other than who he is. With eyes dependent on fiction, he failed to recognize a distinction most fundamental to self-knowledge: the meaning of his origin. But without eyes, and with memory re-formed, he sees in a new way. Does he now see the “real” Oedipus? His words at the scene of the blinding force us to consider the question of knowing:

Because they [his eyes] did not see either the things (outh') I suffered or the evil things (outh') I did, but in darkness the remaining time, seeing the things (ous) that I wished not to see and seeing the things (ous) I wished to see but did not know.

(1271-1274)

To what does he refer by the paralleled set of four unidentified “things”? Do the first two refer to his past? Do the things he suffered refer to his exposition as a baby and the evil oracle he was given? Do the things he did refer to his patricide and incest? Does the third thing, the thing he wished not to see, refer to the future of his incestuous children? And finally does the fourth thing refer to his present, to his desire to have seen and to have known as a child his biological parents? Perhaps these “things,” the particles (outh’ … outh’, ous … ous), ought not to be taken as literally as they are here (Parry 269) or as Bassi does in his edition of the Greek text (129, note to II. 1271-1273). We are misled by such traps and almost cannot prevent ourselves from falling into them. But to misunderstand is to enter the world of Oedipus and into the possibility of discovering error and therefore of realizing truth.

Anguillara avoids the traps. He concentrates on the psychological impact of the blinding, on the shock of learning that his loving Corinthian parents were not his real parents, on the guilt of discovering that the wife with whom he lived as if she were a mother and who treated him like a son was indeed his mother. Finding Giocasta screaming in their bedroom, he says to her: “Mother, wife, turn to me / Your eyes, and look at your son and husband / And you will see what penalty (pena) he has chosen / To punish himself (punirsi) for his sin” (Act IV. Sc. 1, 44 recto). Horror and passion dominate the description of the scene. Oedipus displays bloodied eyes to Giocasta. Timing his blinding before her suicide gives him the opportunity to act as if he were a child asking for approval or at least for acknowledgment that what he has done is right. The Edippo who closes the play is the same Edippo who opened it, except that he is in possession of a few more facts—however pertinent. His emotional and instinctual ties to Giocasta are as powerful as before he knew the truth. He still loves her. Everything in the scene highlights the deep-rooted ties of love that exist among family members. Edippo kisses Antigone and bloodies her face. Ismene runs for bandages to bind Edippo's bloodied eyes. Blood, tears, and screams replace the contracts at the beginning of the play that were meant to bring about calm and to achieve peaceful social and familial relationships. Edippo's reasonable concern and love for his children is mirrored in the logic of such legal devices. But the more Edippo tries to construct a logical world, the more Anguillara tries to find fitting reasons for action, the more reason fails and the unruly passions are released. The Edippo reflects the logic of Freud's version of the family drama more than anything we find in Sophocles.

What is really a minor play, rather melodramatic and unpoetic, pinpoints a Renaissance tendency: in spite of its reverence for the ancients, the Renaissance destroyed their myths in trying to understand them.

Notes
1. I believe that the earlier printed editions mentioned in the literature are all in error: 1556 (Mazzucchelli, Vol. I, Pt. 2, 789-790; Paitoni IV 60; Ginguéné; Mutini); 1554 (Bárberi-Squarotti, who in a letter to me disavows this date); 1560 (Bosisio 80).

2. For example, see Alessandro Pazzi de’ Medici, Edipo principe, 1526, existing only in MS (Neri 51, note 2, and 189; Inventari IV 225, No. 372; Quadrio IV 103); Guido Guidi, Oedipus, 1532 (Bolgar 525, listed without date); Bernardo Segni (d. 1559), Edipo principe (Quadrio IV 103), not printed until 1778 (Neri 96, note 1); Pietro Angelii Bargeo, Edipo tiranno, printed in 1589 (Quadrio IV 103; Schaaber 481).

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Criticism: Charles Segal (essay date 1995)


In the following excerpt, Segal discusses how indefinite descriptions of time in Oedipus Tyrannus are part of what obscures the identity of Laius's killer.

The story of Oedipus is the archetypal myth of personal identity in Western culture. It is the myth par excellence of self-knowledge, of human power and human weakness, of the determining forces of the accidents of birth that we can neither change nor escape. Its concerns are the interplay of supreme rationality and supreme ignorance, control and aggression in the human personality, and the relation of individual existence to order or chaos, meaning or meaninglessness in the world as we experience it and interpret it. Oedipus is a kind of black fairy tale; but, as Vladimir Nabokov remarks a propos of another fiction about self-discovery and self-deception, “Without these fairy tales the world would not be real.”

For the modern interpretation of the Oedipus myth three models have been the most influential. They are Nietzsche's proto-existentialist view, Freud's psychoanalytic reading, and Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach. As the last is not concerned directly with the problem of knowledge or with a knowing subject, it is only incidental to my theme, and I shall here be concerned mostly with the Nietzschean and Freudian readings.

The existentialist interpretation of Oedipus in Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy, whose influence can be traced in varying degrees in the work of Karl Reinhardt, Cedric Whitman, Bernard Knox, and R. P. Winnington-Ingram, sees in Sophocles' hero man alienated from the rest of nature and therefore cut off from his intellectual power, which probes nature's secrets and would wrench from nature even the secret of his place in nature. What Nietzsche distinguishes as the triple fate of Oedipus—answering the Sphinx's riddle, killing his father, and marrying his mother—marks the unnaturalness of this terrible wisdom. It is a look into the abyss from which, however, the tragic poet comes away with the “luminous after-image” that is the “metaphysical solace” of tragedy. This Oedipus is an anomaly, a monster. His “extreme unnaturalness” is symbolized by the incestuous union, a form of resisting nature, forcing her to “yield up her secrets.” To seek such wisdom is itself “to break the consecrated tables of the natural order” and to experience the disintegration of nature in himself. In this view, combines in himself the poles of the monstrous and the exemplary, a unio oppositorum parallel to his combination of intellectual power and ignorance.

In Freud's reading this ambiguity of knowledge lies in the contrast between the hero's intellectual feats and a kind of “knowledge” that has become ignorance through the force of repression. The hidden violence in the past is not the accidental, unique event of an accursed family, but the aggressive and sexual drives of the libido in the deepest, oldest, and most intractable parts of our mental life. The necessity given in the oracle that Oedipus will marry his mother and murder his father is the “fate” or “destiny” to which each of us is subject in the repressed desires of the unconscious. Freud's emphasis on the unbreakable chain of events that
includes the incest and the parricide is true to the quiet objectivity of the oracle, which in Sophocles is merely a descriptive statement of what will happen, not, as in Aeschylus, a warning to Laius about the consequences of disobeying the oracle (Seven against Thebes 742-749). For Freud the fascination of the play lies in its unveiling of the impulses of our earliest childhood, repressed but still alive as archaic residues, and often troubling ones, in our unconscious. When the Corinthian Messenger tells Oedipus that Polybus and Merope are not his parents, he sets him free to explore his repressed knowledge of darker origins. In place of Polybus and Merope, whose names he knows, Oedipus discovers the parents whose names he does not yet (consciously) know, the father he killed and the mother he married. The guilt that we carry with us for having wished, and thus, in the uncompromising judgment of the superego, having performed those terrible crimes, is acted out, made visible, and expiated by the suffering of Oedipus. This suffering is a retribution that (as George Devereux and others have argued) strikes at the root of the crime by the symbolic substitution of eyes for phallus: the self-blinding is a symbolic self-castration, the fitting punishment for one who has used his sexual organ in the outrageous crime of intercourse with his mother.

The fact that the Sophoclean Oedipus does not have an “oedipus complex” because he has never known his true mother or because his greatest desire is to avoid his mother and father, as some antipsychological interpreters have objected, does not invalidate the Freudian reading of the relation between conscious and unconscious knowledge in the Tyrannus. Jean-Pierre Vernant and others are right to point out that the psychological aspect of the myth so fully developed by later playwrights from Dryden to Cocteau receives little emphasis in Sophocles' work. For a fully psychological rendering of the myth in antiquity we have to wait for Seneca. Yet Freud was by no means wrong to trace his reading of the myth to Sophocles. Whatever the Tyrannus may or may not reveal about the emotional life of its protagonist, the play remains valid and important for its presentation of a model of knowledge that Freud applied to the unconscious: a paradoxical kind of knowledge that at every point coexists with ignorance.

Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud, with a stronger emphasis on the place of language in the blockage between conscious and unconscious knowledge, bypasses some of the objections to psychoanalyzing Oedipus as if he were a neurotic individual. On a Lacanian reading, the play constitutes a Discourse of the Other speaking as the hidden self from which Oedipus is irremediably alienated. This is a part of himself whose language he will not allow himself to understand. The so-called ambiguity or “tragic irony” of Sophocles' double and triple meanings, therefore, serves as a model of the “intransitive” or “noncommunicating language” of the unconscious (to adopt the terms of Francesco Orlando). This is a language that conceals as much as it reveals, masks as well as unveils knowledge. This language, thickened around the signifier rather than transparent to the signified, is both the medium and the condition of Oedipus' alienation from himself. It is a language that both contains and withholds; and the knowledge in its realm is a knowledge that Oedipus cannot permit himself to know.

Sophocles makes the ambiguity of language impinge inescapably on the ambiguity of personal identity. In the play language and kinship function as parallel modes of situating oneself in the world and so of knowing who one is. To know the truth of what we are, we need to understand the discourse through which we create ourselves. We construct ourselves through our language about ourselves.

The mental order that language gives us about ourselves, however, cannot be separated from the mental order that it imposes on the world around us, and vice versa. For this relation between language and coherence that we find, or make, in our world, Lévi-Strauss' refocusing of the myth on logical classification—excess and deficiency in treating kin and nonkin, born from one and born from two, autochthony and incest—makes an important contribution. By combining the verbal fusions of the riddle with the generational fusions of incest, Sophocles brings together language and personal identity as obverse and reverse of a single entity, man as a being in time and man as a maker of meanings, a user of language. Language, like Oedipus himself, becomes
both exemplary and irregular. Oedipus is both the paradigm of man and the monster, the anomaly. He comprehends (in both senses) the essence of human identity by answering the Sphinx's riddle—what goes on four, two, and three feet at changing periods of strength and weakness; but he is the exception to his own formulation of the answer, for his own feet were “yoked” at birth (Oedipus 718), made one from two, because of the prediction that he would occupy two generations at the same time; and so he was never to progress on the path of life at all. The man who has solved the riddle of stability and progression that defines identity in time is ignorant of the coincident planes of diachrony and synchrony in his own life pattern.

The (con)fusion of kin terms in incest generates the (con)fusion of differences in language. Oedipus' very name, the primary word of the language of the self, incessantly confuses meanings instead of distinguishing the oneness of individuality made possible in human society. As Know-Foot (oida, pous), he is the exemplary hero of the victory of language and intelligence over the demonic monstrousity of the Sphinx. But Oedipus Swell-Foot (oidein, pous) or Oedipus Know-Where (oida pou) is exemplary of man's helplessness, despite his intellectual victories, before the greater mystery of who he “really” is and what violence his origins, maturation, and attainment of power may contain.\(^{12}\)

For Freud that violence points to something below the level of conscious knowledge. The past is not a specific family curse but the expression of universally existing archaic strata in the self. For Nietzsche that violence is itself the intellectual power by which man asserts his dominion over nature. For ritualists like René Girard, it is the means by which a necessary social mechanism can be set into motion. The implications of Sophocles' play make all such universalizing extrapolations possible. The Tyrannus remains a founding text in European culture. It is one of the most revealing documents of Western man's determination to define self-knowledge in intellectual and rational terms, and one of the most powerful statements of the limitations of the enterprise.

Modern classical scholars, whether their orientation is philosophical like Karl Reinhardt, or linguistic like Bernard Knox, or anthropological like Jean-Pierre Vernant, often see their task as salvaging the historical specificity of the play from such universalizing interpretations. Like the Oresteia or Hamlet, however, the Oedipus will always be torn between the historicists and the universalizers. Each side needs to rescue the work from the other; and the play, like every such great work, needs so to be rescued, from both and either.

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From Aristotle to Lévi-Strauss interpreters have analyzed the structure of Oedipus Tyrannus and admired the orderliness of the mental world which that structure exemplifies. Others have emphasized the contrast between the formal beauty of the play's logical design and the frightening role of chance and necessity in its contents. This division may be compared to (although it does not fully coincide with) that between the pious serenity that some have found in Sophocles and the deep questioning of all meaning seen by others. If we join the two sides in a dialectical rather than a disjunctive relation, we may be able to grasp better how the Oedipus Tyrannus, perhaps more than any other work of antiquity, forces us to consider both the order-imposing power of art and the arbitrariness of that imposition.

Put in other terms, this play is also about the origins of its own writing, that is, about the modes of representation through which the work of art imposes order upon experience in such a way that the disorder always remains a part of the order. This relation forms a Heraclitean palintonos harmonia, a “back-stretched fitting together,” of opposites held in place by their reciprocal and counterbalancing tensions, “as in a bow or a lyre.” The very perfection of the formal design of the plot sets off the disturbing imperfection of the world that the plot creates.

One attribute of tragic drama as developed by the Greeks is the fact that it inscribes into this very perfection of the form the destructive potential that dissolves the order back into chaos. Hence such tragedy calls attention to its own paradox, the paradox of its pleasurable pain. Like many great tragedies of reversal, from the
Bacchae to Hamlet, the Oedipus is also “metatragedy,” tragedy about tragedy. The proportional relation between tragedy and metatragedy, however, differs from the ancient to the modern author. Whereas Shakespeare or Pirandello uses the awareness of illusion to explore theatricality—the “wooden O” that holds “the vasty fields of France”—Sophocles uses theatricality to explore the moral, religious, and metaphysical questions raised by the suffering of Oedipus.\textsuperscript{13}

In chapter 14 of the Poetics Aristotle cites the story of Oedipus as an example of pity and fear that result not from the spectacle, from the stage effects, but from the composition of the plot, the way events are made to “stand together,” sunestanai. Later in the chapter, in giving examples of such plots, Aristotle mentions two criteria: first, the terrifying or pitiable events should occur within the family; and, second, knowledge should be involved.\textsuperscript{14} Subdividing the latter category, he observes that the terrifying or pitiable acts may be performed with knowledge or in ignorance, but the best action for tragedy occurs in ignorance followed by knowledge or recognition as in the Tyrannus.\textsuperscript{15} In linking knowledge and terror, Aristotle puts his finger on an important element in the dynamics of the Oedipus plot. But these dynamics involve other elements that Aristotle's brief sketch does not include, particularly time and theatricality. By the latter I mean the self-consciousness of the play as a theatrical spectacle. This self-consciousness is a part of the texture and textuality of the work, inherent in the composition of the events, and is to be distinguished from the “external” effects of staging and scenery, what Aristotle calls opsis.

The Oedipus is a play about revealing the potential horror beneath the surface beauty of life, as of art. Oedipus' very person, the body of the king, is emblematic of this division between surface appearance and reality. Near the end he addresses Polybus and Corinth, “in name [logoi] the ancient home of (his) fathers,” who have “nurtured me as a thing of beauty [kallos] with evils beneath the scars” (1395-96). When the chorus declares, “Here is Oedipus” (1297; cf. 1524), it calls attention to the play's theatricality, the act of parading forth on the stage a figure who is a paradigm of irrational suffering and malignant eventuality in human life. At the moment of discovery of the terrible truth beneath the surface, the chorus explicitly calls Oedipus an “example,” paradeigma, of deceptive “seeming” and of the precariousness of happiness (1189-94). “In the present circumstances,” the chorus says, “who is more wretched to hear about?” (1204).

“O you who hold the greatest honor in this land,” the Messenger goes on after the choral ode, “such deeds will you hear and such will you see, and such grief will you gain, if in noble fashion you still feel concern for the Labdacid house” (1223-26).\textsuperscript{16} The words are almost a programmatic announcement of the effect of the tragic spectacle. Yet the scene they introduce, as we shall observe later, still withholds the spectacle of Oedipus from the stage.

The next scene moves the paradigmatic “hearing” of 1204 to the exemplary “seeing” proper to the theater, “the pleasure proper to tragedy,” as Aristotle would say. The Messenger now describes how Oedipus, still offstage and unseen, shouts out to “open the fastenings (of the doors)” (1287-88), to show him to all the Thebans as his father's killer. This anticipation of an imminent entrance of Oedipus upon the stage heightens the tension between the verbal and the visual mimesis of the theatrical situation. The doors then open, as the Messenger says. As he goes on to describe this scenic action, he himself echoes, now in direct discourse, the earlier quoted words of Oedipus that the bolts be opened (1294-95): “For these fastenings of the doors are being opened” (cf. 1287-88). “Soon you will see a spectacle,” the Messenger continues to the chorus, “such that even the one who loathes will feel pity” (1295-96). “Soon you will see a spectacle”: it is almost as if the playwright/director were telling his audience how he is utilizing the visual effects proper to his medium. The chorus, like the audience that now beholds the palace doors opening up, gives voice to the proper theatrical response, again in visual terms: “O suffering terrible for men to look upon” (1297). The chorus' exclamation over the appearance of Oedipus onstage takes up the Messenger's account of the “things terrible to see” (1267) in his long narrative. The obverse of the present spectacle, namely the blinded king with his bloodied eyes, is the unseen “spectacle” of the closed interior: “it was not possible to behold as a spectacle her (Jocasta's) suffering” (1253).
Just at the moment when Oedipus' tragic knowing becomes realized visually as a spectacle full of terror, Oedipus himself moves away from a visual experience of the world. His inarticulate cries of pain, stylized in our text as *aiai, aiai, pheu, pheu* (1307-08), crystallize into the visually disoriented state of the blind man who does not know where he is (1309). His *daimon*, the mysterious power of “divinity” that presides over his destiny, has leapt “into a place of terror, not to be heard, not to be seen,” the chorus replies. But in contrast to this conjunction of sight and hearing in the theatrical experience is Oedipus’ experience of the voice alone, now a quasi-animate entity, endowed with flight (like the Sphinx). In the paradoxical overlay and separation of the visible and the invisible in the revelation of tragic truth, the unique theatrical collocation of sound and sight in the representation of the myth is brought to bear on a figure who has returned to an oral culture, surrounded by presences that he knows only by voice and hearing and having only aural knowledge of the world outside himself. A hundred lines later, however, Oedipus utters the impassioned wish that he had cut off the channels of sight and hearing both: so terrible is his sense of pollution and his feeling of utter separation from his world (1375-90).

The *Oedipus* is unusual in Greek drama in that so much of the present action is concerned with the reconstruction of past events. No other Greek play presents quite this situation to such a degree. No other Greek play so drastically calls into question the reports and narratives of minor characters. Although lies and false reports are not unexampled in Greek tragedy, there is no situation quite analogous to that of the old Herdsman, the sole witness to Laius’ death. From the facts given us in the play, his story—that many robbers, not one, killed Laius—has to be a lie, even though (contrary to the usual practice of Greek tragedy) the audience is never so informed explicitly. The elaborate lies of Lichas in *Trachiniae*, of the Paedagogus in the *Electra*, or of Neoptolemus in the *Philoctetes* are handled very differently, for they give either direct or indirect indications of the true story. In the case of Laius’ death, however, the falsehood in the story is itself a major theme, part of the play’s concern with the problem of knowledge. The contradictions also express the tension between the theatrical time of the performance in which the unities of time and place are observed and the represented or mimetic time indicated in the background.

The *Oedipus* dramatizes this coming together of a complex past action into a single critical moment. When a modern playwright such as Jean Cocteau in his antiheroic version, *La machine infernale*, wishes to represent this situation, he preserves (more or less) the unity of time but abandons that of place, and he adds the supernatural elements of Laius’ ghost on the battlements (an ironic glance at *Hamlet*) and Oedipus’ encounter with the Sphinx outside the walls of Thebes. For all our predilection for regarding the Sophoclean *Oedipus* as a tragedy of fate, in its austere form it is remarkably sparing of direct supernatural intervention. Sophocles devotes most of the action to the problem of logical deduction in the present and thereby brings into focus the problem of the play’s reflection on the problem of recovering the past and therefore on its own theatricality, that is, the means by which a dramatic work creates a plausible representation of the passage of time in a whole human life. The represented time of the fictional action is arranged so as to coincide plausibly with the “real” time that elapses during the performance. And yet this “real” interval of two or three hours serves as a symbolic condensation of an entire lifetime.

Time in the play has a dynamic quality of expansion and contraction, vagueness and density. It is both the indefinite and inert passing of years and the single moment of crisis in decision and action, the irreversible turning point of a man’s life. In this sense Oedipus, who in the prologue calls the day “comeasured with time” (73), is also himself “comeasured with time” (another possible meaning of the phrase in Sophocles' dense syntax) and “found out by time” (1213). Oedipus' innocent-looking “comeasured with time” in the prologue will recur to describe the death of Polybus, “comeasured by great time” (963), as time's pattern is beginning to clarify around Oedipus. The phrase is then echoed a second time to clinch the identification of the Herdsman whom Oedipus “has been seeking of old” (1112), “for in his great old age he is in harmony with this man here, of equal measure” (*summetros*, 1112-13). These “measurings,” however, are now indeed coming
“together” (*sum-metra*): and the result will be the futility of Oedipus’ attempt to escape, by means of measuring distance, what will issue forth inescapably in time (794-796): “And I, on hearing these things, measuring the land of Corinth henceforth by the stars, took flight.”*21

Instead of being defined by his “kindred months” in a slow rhythm of waxing and waning, becoming small and great (1082-83), Oedipus is defined by the abrupt catastrophe of a single day (351, 478) that makes him both “great” and “small,” king and beggar, in one instant. In this respect too he answers in his own life the Sphinx’s riddle about human mortality in general: man is *ephemeros*, the creature whose life can be determined by the events of a single day.

Time can have an unexpected fullness, as in Creon’s account of past events in the prologue. Here there is an indefinite interval between the death of Laius and the arrival of Oedipus to vanquish the Sphinx, an interval in which the Thebans cannot investigate the death of their king because the Sphinx compels them to consider only the immediate present, “the things at their feet, letting go the things unclear” (131). Laius’ death is suddenly pushed into the category of “the things unclear” or “the invisible things” (*ta aphanai*). The expression makes this major crisis in the present life of the city retreat into the obscurity of remote happenings, far beyond living memory.

There is the same vague plenitude in the time surrounding Laius’ death. Oedipus asks, “How much time before did Laius (die?)” and Creon replies (561), “Times [literally, years, *chronoi*] great and old would be measured.” As in the prologue, that determining event becomes surrounded by an aura of remote, almost mythical time, as if it were an act belonging to primordial beginnings (as in one sense it indeed is) and not to a specific historical moment in the life of an individual and a city. Yet at the peripety this vagueness of temporal duration is suddenly rent by the electrifying flash of the single moment of “terrible hearing” (1169). In the relaxed seasonal tempo of herdsmen’s life on Cithaeron, before Oedipus’ birth, only the changes of summer and winter, without events, mark the passage of time (1132-40). Time has a wholly different aspect in the single instant of recognition that suddenly changes the entire shape of a life, revealing it now in the true perspective of an “ill-fated birth” (1181; cf. 1068).

Sophocles’ skillful handling of events moves us back to origins and forward to the dark future. The present is both a recapitulation of the past and a reenactment of the past in symbolic form. Knowledge in the play results from conjoining separate events of the past in a single moment of the present. Oedipus’ intelligence, Jocasta suggests, consists in “inferring the new by means of the old” (916). When Oedipus does in fact bring together the “old things” of his remote infancy and early manhood with the “new things” of his present life and circumstance, he will know himself as both king and pollution, both the savior and the destroyer of Thebes.

As Oedipus begins his “tracking” of Laius’ killer (221; cf. 109), he needs a *symbolon*, usually translated “clue.” But the word also means “tally,” one of two parts of a token that fit together to prove one’s rightful place in (say) a law-court. The investigative skill that Oedipus will demonstrate, then, consists in fitting pieces together. But the word *symbolon* also has another meaning, namely the “token” left with a child exposed at birth in order to establish later proof of his identity. It has this sense in Euripides’ parallel foundling tale of Ion (a kind of Oedipus story in reverse). Presented with an old basket that contains the secret of its origins, Ion hesitates to open it and examine the “tokens from his mother” (*symbola, Ion* 1386) lest he turn out to be the child of a slave (1382-83; cf. *Oedipus* 1063, 1168); but he takes the risk: “I must dare,” he says (*tolmeteion, 1387). Oedipus does the same: “I must hear,” he declares at his critical moment of self-discovery (*akousteion, 1170*), though with a far different result. The initially objective and public task of “tracking down” by “clues” turns into the personal and intimate task of finding the “birth-tokens” that prove his identity.

Just as the forward push for knowledge begins to accelerate, there is a retarding movement that pulls back toward the mysteriously closed and veiled origins of the play’s and of Oedipus’ beginnings. It is appropriately the mother who takes on this retarding role. She who stands at the first beginning of his life and (as we learn)
is involved in a contradictory pull between the birth and the death of her new child (cf. 1173-75) would still
keep him from the terrible knowledge and so save his life. As in the case of all great plots, the play combines
forward movement to the end with the pleasure of delaying and complicating that end. But the play also
reflects on the paradoxes of theatrical narrative as well as on the paradoxes of tragic knowledge. This is a kind
of knowledge in which clarity and dimness coexist and our knowing of ourselves includes at its center a core
of ignorance, the shadowy conjunction at our origins whose mystery we can never fully penetrate.

The contradictions inherent in this tragic knowledge are sharpest in the tension between Oedipus' intellect and
something that is never fully explicable in rational terms. The element of the inexplicable is represented
onstage in the person of the blind prophet of Apollo, Teiresias. It is through signs, not through speech,
Heraclitus says, that Apollo indicates his messages to men at the Delphic Oracle: “The lord whose oracle is at
Delphi,” the fragment of Heraclitus reads, “neither speaks nor conceals, but uses signs” (semainei). It is
precisely in the interpretation of such signs that Oedipus has the greatest difficulty, for the word implies both
“evidence” from which deductions may rationally be drawn and the mysterious “marks” of supernatural
intervention in human life, the omens or bird-signs through which the gods send their messages to men. The
double connotation of the word contains the conflict between human and divine knowledge, between
aggressive rationality and inspired or innate understanding, that embroils Oedipus and Teiresias in their bitter
quarrel (390-398). Oedipus boasts that he defeated the Sphinx without divine help, relying solely on his
resolute intelligence, gnome; he did not need signs from the birds (395-398). The priest in the prologue has
a different view of the matter: to him Oedipus solved the riddle “with the support of a god” (38). To the priest
Oedipus is “not made equal to the gods” (31), whereas the chorus believes that lord Teiresias, divine prophet
(298), “sees the same things as Lord Apollo” (284).

The interpretation of “signs” or “evidence” brings human knowledge into its most problematical juxtaposition
with divine knowledge. The noun semeia, “signs,” and the verb semainein, “designate by signs,” occur
throughout the play at the points where communication among men brings something unknown and
potentially dangerous from the gods. At line 710 Jocasta offers “signs” of the unreliability of oracles, namely
the oracle about Laius' son that leads into the first fateful revelation of past. The Messenger from Corinth
arrives to “indicate as by signs” (semainein) the news of Polybus' death (933, 957). After his news Oedipus
asks the chorus to semainein whether the Old Herdsman is “from the fields or from here, since it is the right
moment for these things to be found out” (1050). Rejecting Jocasta's plea to give up the search a few lines
later, he affirms confidently, “Taking such signs [semeia], I shall not fail to reveal my birth” (1058-59).

Although Oedipus' first act is to consult Delphi, he never integrates what Apollo and Teiresias know into what
he knows. Not until it is too late does he put the oracles together by means of that intelligence whose special
property it is to join past and present and connect disparate events, facts, experiences, stages of life. This
failure in logical deduction was one of Voltaire's objections to the structure of the play. But what was a fault
for the rationalist of the Age of Enlightenment is the very essence of the tragic element for the ancient
dramatist. Oedipus uses his human knowledge primarily in conflict with the divine, to block, deny, contradict,
or evade it. All to no avail.

Knowledge veers not only between human and divine, but also between activity and passivity. Human
knowledge, the knowledge that seems the achievement of man's intellectual power, is actively sought and
willed. Divine knowledge comes, it seems, by chance, on precarious and unpredictable paths. The mystery of
divine knowledge takes the form of the blind prophet; and the knowledge that comes (or seems to come) by
sheer coincidence takes the form of the Corinthian Messenger and the Old Herdsman. It is the latter who
provides the clinching piece of knowledge, Oedipus' identity as the exposed child of Laius and Jocasta.
This figure makes his first appearance early in the play, unnamed except for the vital fact that he saw and “knows” details of Laius’ death. When Oedipus asks Creon if any “messenger or companion of the journey saw [kateide] anything… (116-117), Creon responds (118-120):

Cr. They are all dead, except for some one man [plen heis tis], who, having fled in fear of what he saw [eide], had nothing to tell except one thing he knew [plen hen … eidos].

Oed. What was that? For one thing would find out many [hen … polla] for (us) to learn.

The play on the similar-sounding Greek words for “saw” and “knew,” eide … eidos, in the dense syntax of 119, suggests the identification of “knowing” with “seeing” that is to prove decisive for the play’s large concern with intelligence and ignorance. Just fifteen lines earlier Oedipus has said of Laius, “I know [exoida] (him) (only) by hearing [akouon], for I have never seen [eiseidon] him” (105).

This first mention of one person who “knows” anything is as vague as possible: Creon refers to “some one man” (heis tis, 118). Oedipus makes no attempt to refine this description. Instead he shifts attention from “some one man” to “some one thing” in his next line: “What sort of thing (did he say)? For one thing would find out many for (us) to learn” (120). His “one thing … many (things)” here takes up Creon’s “nothing except one thing” in the previous line; but it also replaces the masculine “some one man” (heis tis, 118) with the neuter “one thing” (hen, 119). The grammatical categories of language itself, the ease of shifting from masculine to neuter in the inflection of the pronominal adjective “one,” seem to lead the investigators astray from what will finally solve the mystery. Language itself encourages their deception in pursuing what will prove, in one sense, misinformation.

Forgotten for some six hundred lines, over a third of the play, this individual surfaces again in the tense scene when Jocasta's reference to the triple roads (another numerical problem) has aroused Oedipus' anxiety (730). “Alas, these things are now clear,” he says. “Who was it who spoke these words to you, my wife?” (754-755). “A house-servant, [oikeus tis],” Jocasta replies, “who reached us, the only one saved [eksotheis monos]” (756). This last expression is the other, objective side of Creon's description of the man's "having fled in fear" in the prologue (118). “Did he then happen to be present in the house [en domoisin]?” Oedipus presses on (757). “No,” answers Jocasta; and she explains how he came to Thebes, found Oedipus already in possession of the royal power (krate) and Laius dead. Touching Jocasta's hand, he asked to be sent to the fields (761) and to the pastures of the flocks, so that "he might be as far as possible out of sight of the town" (762). The contrast between house and field on the one hand and fields and pastures on the other (agrous and nomas, 756-757 and 761) recalls Oedipus' first specific point of investigation of Laius' death: “Was it in the house or in the fields?” (112). The sole witness there was “some one man” (118); and Creon's terminology calls attention to his unitary identity. It now appears that he, like Oedipus, is two: he is the house-servant (oikeus, 756) and the Herdsman in the “pastures of the flocks” (poimnion nomas, 761). He is both the man described by Jocasta and the man described by Creon. The problem of counting and knowing and of the one and the many also links him with Oedipus, whose pride of knowledge lies in having counted correctly in answering the Sphinx's riddle.

The problem of the one and the many murderers of Laius that rests on this man's testimony also touches another crucial part of Oedipus' past, not only the son's killing of the father but also the father's killing of the son. When Jocasta recounts her tale of exposing the infant prophesied to be “his father's killer” (721), she says that Laius “cast him into the pathless mountain by the hands of others [allon chersin]” (719). Yet according to the Old Herdsman the child was taken to the mountain by one, not by many. This figure too possesses “knowing” from a crucial “seeing.” It is after he “saw” Oedipus on the throne that he requested from Jocasta a kind of absence of vision, to be “away from the sight” (apoptos) of the palace (762). Like Oedipus in the future, he seeks a combination of negated vision (ap-optos) and exile from his place in house and city (1384-94, 1451-54).
The phraseology of 758-759, “He saw you having the (royal) power and Laius killed” suggestively conjoins Oedipus’ power (kratos) with Laius’ death. To the receptive listener, it could also suggest that he saw “Oedipus having (possessing) the power and having killed Laius,” a vision truly terrible and truly dangerous. The Old Herdsman has “seen” the double aspect of Oedipus’ kratos, “rule” and “strength.” The king whom this kratos has displaced, like the Old Herdsman himself, will also prove to be double: not just a ruler, but also a father. When the truth begins to emerge the kratos becomes increasingly clear as that of Zeus, who has “power over all things” (895).

When Oedipus is still the confident king searching for the killer of Laius, however, he sends for the old servant, this only survivor of the attack on the former king (765-770). Now the initial “oneness” of that survivor bifurcates even more strikingly and ominously into two. Oedipus’ statement in the prologue apropos of searching out this figure, “One thing would find out many for (us) to learn,” proves truer than he knew. The man who survived the attack on Laius proves to be the old herdsman of Thebes who rescued the infant Oedipus from death by exposure on Cithaeron. The detail is sheer coincidence. And yet that coincidence contains a kind of symbolic necessity. Oedipus cannot progress in his role as ruler of the city, whose task it is to find and expel Laius’ killer (96-146, 241-243), until he has solved the mystery of his own origins. The philosopher George Santayana remarked that those who do not know the past are compelled to repeat it. The Oedipus works out the truth of this statement on the level of personal knowledge: not to know who you are is to be compelled to search ceaselessly for your origins.

In his determined pursuit of these origins, Oedipus forces the figure who holds the missing piece to recapitulate an earlier stage of his life too, when he changed from house-servant (756) to herdsman (761), and in that latter role brought Oedipus to both doom and salvation on Mount Cithaeron (cf. 1349-52). This spatial shift, from the center of palace life (756) to the margins of the city on the mountains, is symmetrical with the movements of Oedipus himself. The Old Herdsman's life, governed by such a different rhythm of time, proves to be both causally and analogically related to Oedipus' life, parallel but more vaguely outlined and set into a larger and remoter frame.

The densely compacted synopsis of Oedipus' whole life in the limited mimetic time of the performance has behind it, like a larger shadow, the more expansive movement of the old Herdsman's passage through time. Both men are simultaneously saviors and destroyers. Oedipus is both the savior (soter) and pollution (miasma) of Thebes. The Old Herdsman saves Oedipus but also destroys him: “I wish that he perished, he who loosed me from the fetter on my feet and rescued and saved me from death, for it was no act of kindness that he did” (1349-54). Both men have an instinctive moment of pity toward what they would save. Oedipus at the beginning “pitied” the citizens (katoiktiras, 13; cf. 58) as the Herdsman had “pitied” the helpless infant (katoiktiras, in the same metrical position, 1178).

Oedipus' life, like the Herdsman's, has its present shape determined by “flight in fear.” “Frightened, he fled,” says Creon of the Old Herdsman in the prologue, “with only one thing to say of what he saw” (118). “I fled,” says Oedipus to Jocasta, “to where I might not see the insults of my oracles fulfilled” (796-797). In his subsequent conversation with Jocasta and the Corinthian Messenger he vividly recreates the mood of fear that hovered about that flight. The Herdsman's “flight” brought him safely away from the city, into the mountains (756-762); Oedipus would return to the mountains (1451-54) from which he was saved, but the kind of “salvation” he finds proves far more ambiguous than that of the Messenger. “I would not have been saved [esothên] from dying,” he says with newfound insight near the end, “except for some terrible suffering [deînon kakon]” (1456-57). The “terror” and the “salvation,” antithetical terms for the Herdsman, come together in a characteristic paradox for Oedipus.
And yet the Old Herdsman who recurs as a figure dimly parallel to Oedipus in his life's movements and spontaneous impulse of pity is also in one essential point the opposite of Oedipus. Among the first specific details that Sophocles supplies about him are his “flight in fear” in order to be “the only one saved” (118, 756). His characteristic mode of action in the play is evasion through running away. This is what he did when Oedipus attacked Laius at the crossroads and what he does again when he returns from that episode to find Oedipus ruling in Thebes. He repeats the pattern a third and last time on the stage when Oedipus interrogates him. He tries to escape by evasion or denial, but now Oedipus compels him to face and speak the “terrible thing” that is contained in the truth (1169-70).

This last scene brings Oedipus and his shadowy double together, finally, on the stage; and this coming together shows us their characteristic divergence. Here the herdsman-slave (cf. doulos, 1123; also 764, 1168) seeks survival by denying the truth, whereas the king goes to meet his destiny head-on, confronting the “necessity” that comes from the oracles surrounding his existence, even if that confrontation means his death. The herdsman-slave at the crossroads was “the only one to be saved” (756). King Oedipus is ready to become the sacrificial victim, the pharmakos, whose single death saves the whole city (1409-15). Here, as the ancient Life says, Sophocles “knows how to adapt the situation and the events so that from a small half-verse or from a single word he can draw an entire character” (section 21).

At the beginning of the play the king shows himself to the people as a potential savior, “to all called Oedipus the famed” (8). At the peripety the doors of the palace again open and Oedipus shows himself to the people as the curse and the pollution: “to all the Thebans the slayer of his father” (patroktonon, 1288). Now he is not only the polluter of Thebes as the killer of Laius, the original definition of the source of the plague by the oracle, but also the polluter of the symbolic center of the city, the royal house of Thebes, under the terms that he applies to himself in 1288, “father's slayer and mother's …” (patroktonos kai metros …). But these words of Oedipus are not spoken dramatically onstage; they are reported by the Messenger as part of Oedipus' shouted command that the gates be thrown open to reveal him to the Thebans as a spectacle of pity and fear (1288-89, 1294-97). The impassioned shout, however, contains a powerful silence. Oedipus calls himself “his father's killer,” but he breaks off as he pronounces the rest of the terrible phrase, “and his mother's …” The Messenger fills in the lacuna with an indirect, explanatory phrase, as narrator: “He said things unholy that I may not speak” (1289).

The partial suppression of speech parallels the partial suppression of sight. This theatrical spectacle works as much by what is not said and not shown as by the spoken and visible elements of the performance. Certain things are more powerful for being left unsaid and unseen. Such are the two long narratives, one by Oedipus and one by the Messenger. The first describes the death of the father at the blow of the son's skeptron, the “staff” carried by the wandering exile and also the “scepter” carried by the ruling monarch; the second describes the death of the mother and the self-blinding of the son. Both scenes are left hidden, without opsis, in order that they may be played out the more effectively in the interior theater of ourselves, the “other scene” that the theater can create.

These two narratives of crucial past events are complementary primal scenes. Both are enacted in the nonvisual medium of a buried memory. In the first case, Oedipus tells his story when what has been “invisible” (aphane, 131) becomes “clearly visible” (aiai tad' ede diaphane, “alas, these things are already clearly visible,” 754). The cry ai ai that accompanies this “clarification,” however, shows knowledge shifting from intellect to emotion. Oedipus will repeat that cry (ai ai, ai ai, pheu, pheu) when, after gaining full knowledge, he blinds himself, and “the things at the feet” (131) are at last fully “visible” (1307-08).

The second narrative, the tale of Jocasta's death, begins with the Messenger's qualification, “Of what was done the most painful things are absent, for vision was not present” (1238-39). The absence of the pain is
symmetrical with the nonpresence of the vision. But, the Messenger goes on, he will tell “the sufferings of
that unhappy woman” insofar as his memory permits (1239). The collocation of presence and absence at 1238
is appropriate both to the indirect mode of narration here and to the necessarily partial recovery of lost events
through memory.

In this crucial scene Sophocles takes pains to show us how we know what we see. The Messenger's “memory”
leads us verbally into the interior chamber (eso ... es ta numphika, 1241-42) of Jocasta's marriage bed.44 He
tells how Jocasta “closed the gates” with violence behind her “when she went in” (1244). The narrative relies
on the medium of sound to reveal what has occurred in the chamber. Those outside have heard a voice from
within. But the account includes also something more than the voice, namely memory (mneme, 1246), which
includes both “memory” and “mention.” This “remembering” by Jocasta is deeper and more painful than the
Messenger's “memory” eight lines before (1239), and it takes us into the remoter past (1244-48):

When she went inside the gates, she dashed the doors closed inside and called on Laius now
long since a corpse, having memory (making mention) of the sowing (seeds) of old [mnemen
palaion spermaton], by which he himself died, but left behind the mother of a child for
ill-starred childmaking with his own.45

The repetition “Laius now long since a corpse” and the “old seeds” (palai, palaion), combined with the
emphasis on memory (mneme, 1239, 1246), reinforces the movement back to the past. At the same time
Jocasta's reported gesture of closing the doors behind her as she calls up the “memory of the sowing of old,”
that is, the night when Laius made her pregnant with Oedipus, prepares for the symbolic reenactment of her
second, incestuous marriage in the ensuing narrative, with the son now replacing the father.46 She, recalling
her union with Laius, her last “memory” in life, closes the “gates” of her marriage chamber, which should
have remained closed. Oedipus bursts into the palace and asks for a sword, searching for Jocasta (1252-57).

The narrative that follows recalls the crimes of Oedipus' past too. The verb used at 1252 for his violent entry
to the palace, eisepaise, “struck his way within,” will recur twenty lines later for his piercing of his eyes
(1270; cf. 1331). It is the same verb that he has used to describe his angry “striking” of Laius when the
process of self-discovery began for him (paio di' orges, “I struck in anger,” 807). The weapon he seeks now is
one of penetration (1255), different from the staff/scepter, the weapon he used to club Laius at the crossroads
(skeptron, 811). He then forcibly “drives into the double gates” (pulais diplais enelato), “pushes at the doors”
(ekline koila kleithra) so that they bend inward (literally, “pushes the hollow doors”), and “enters [literally,
falls into, empipeti] the chamber” (1261-62). He thus forces his way into the mother's closed, interior space,
the interiority being emphasized by the “hollow” doors. This is the private chamber that she has barred behind
her as she remembers those “seeds” of Laius in the past.47

Sophocles gives us our glimpse of that “other scene” through narration rather than as part of the spectacle,
through memory rather than in the immediacy of present event: “There was no vision,” says the Messenger,
“but yet, as far as lies in my memory [mnemes], you will learn her sufferings” (1238-39). The emphasis on
memory is striking when one considers how much memory in the play has distorted the recollection of the
past. Jocasta, Oedipus, and the Old Herdsman have all shown highly selective memories (1057, 1131; cf.
870-871).

Another blockage of vision highlights the indirectness of our access to this scene. Oedipus' very act of forcible
entry deprives the Messenger of certain, visual knowledge of the details. “How after this she perished,” the
Messenger goes on, “I do not know [ouket' oida], for Oedipus, shouting, broke his way in, and by his act it
was no longer possible to behold [as in a spectacle, ektheasasthai] her woe (1253). But rather we turned our
gaze toward him as he roamed around” (1251-54).48
Vision again becomes blurred in the vagueness of the Messenger's report that “some divinity” (daimonon tis) showed Oedipus the way, “for it was not any one of us men [andron] who were present nearby” (1258-59). The men are concrete forms, “nearby,” visible and familiar; the unknown daimon is invisible, mysterious, undefined.

Sophocles makes our vision of the narrated events something deliberately elusive. Vision is blocked first by the closing of doors (1241-48), then by the violent acts and shouts of Oedipus in the palace (1252-53), and finally by his presence over the body of Jocasta (1265-77). After Oedipus has broken down the door, we, the onlookers, are allowed to “see into” (eiseidon) the firmly shut chamber (1263). The penetration of the eye to increasingly inward and hidden space culminates in Oedipus’ “seeing” of Jocasta (1265), the goal and result of his forced entry to the locked, forbidden place. From that point, vision is again permitted, though still in the indirect mode of third person narration. It is now a vision characterized by that quality of “the terrible,” to deinon, that broods over the play from the beginning and finally becomes visible in the spectacle of “things terrible [deina] to look upon” (1267, “The things after that were terrible to look upon” or “From that point there were things terrible to see”).

This last object of sight, these “things terrible to look upon,” is the physical act of putting an end to vision, Oedipus' tearing the pins from Jocasta's robes and striking them into his eyes. It is reported not as the result of an active verb of seeing, as at 1263 (eiseidon, “we saw”) and 1265 (horain, “he sees her”), but in an impersonal way: “From that point there were things terrible to see.” It is as if this “seeing” is already formed into a tableau, a final memorable sight, fixed as the result of a narrative of unforgettable power but not in fact shown on the stage. When that all-pervasive “terror” reaches its climax, “no spectacle is present” (opsis ou para, 1238). Such are ta deina, “the terrible things,” that the unstaged spectacle has finally to “show.”

The horror of the sight is now matched by the horror of the sound. This too comes to us indirectly, by report. Jocasta’s “call” to the dead Laius (1245) and her “lament” over her marriage bed (1249) fade into the silence of her still-mysterious death (“how after this she perished I do not know,” 1251). The sounds we now hear come from Oedipus: he “shouts” (1252) as he breaks his way into the palace, “cries terrible things” (1260) as he forces his way into Jocasta's chamber, “roars terribly” (1265) at what he sees there, and “shouts” again as he strikes his eyes (1271). This last cry recapitulates the crescendo of horror, for it repeats the “terrible shouting” as he has forced the doors ten lines earlier (1260), while the accompanying action, the “striking” of his eyes, repeats his first entry into the palace (eipaise, 1270; eiseipaise, 1252). The last shout (1271) is itself closely linked to vision, for it is a cry that “his eyes will never see the things that he has suffered or the things that he has done” (1271-72). The same verbs of shouting recur less than twenty lines later when Oedipus calls for the opening of another set of gates (boai, audon, 1287, 1289). These are no longer the doors of private, interior chambers, but the public gates of the palace, which reveal to all the Thebans the fearful spectacle that he has become. In both cases the messages of Oedipus' shouting are reported indirectly by the narrator, and both contain a denial or rejection of sight and of speech respectively (1271 and 1289). This most intense point of hearing and seeing in the play is surrounded by declarations of not speaking and not seeing.

This withholding of vision or partial access to vision in a story whose culmination contains the destruction of the power to see is one means by which Sophocles stamps this narration with its characteristic feature, a reluctance to emerge into the light, a horror that wants to remain hidden in the darkness of the unseen. Teiresias' blind seeing, reluctant speech, and uncomprehended utterances in the meeting with Oedipus early in the play form the first explicit model onstage for a story that refuses to be told and a knowledge that refuses to be known. Now, at the most intense point of the action, the suppression of vision and speech moves to the center of the narrative. Not only does the refusal to see and to say pervade this telling, but it is through this powerful “won't tell” that the story in fact gets itself told.

This climactic scene is recovered only by a series of recessive movements into the past and by a steady progression of acts of looking into a closed interior in the present. The discontinuous rhythm of exposure and
concealment, vision and nonvision, closing and removing blocking objects is a symbolical condensation of Oedipus' past. In the narrative movement that retrospectively unfolds the story of his life, as in the patterning of events that constitute that life and give it its tragic form, synchrony and diachrony come together.

When Oedipus has broken down the doors and does at last “see” Jocasta's body in her chamber, the first thing he does after “releasing” her from the noose is to “pull off the gold-beaten pins from her garments, (the pins) with which she was dressed” (1268-69). This is the first of “the things terrible to see” (1267) that is described. Peronai, the pins that hold the robes together, are not merely the decorative “brooches,” as the word is frequently translated. Their removal could suggest the gesture of undressing the queen in her “marriage chamber” (ta numphika, 1242) as she “lay there” (1267), a grotesque and horrible reenactment of the first night of their union. This is the act for which he “strikes the sockets of his eyes” in the next line. As the body of the king becomes that through which the invisible truth is made reality instead of appearance, so the body of Jocasta points to something that remains inaccessible to vision and must remain hidden.

In folktales of this type, as Vladimir Propp has shown, the true identity of the incestuous husband/son is discovered by a scar or other mark in bed on the wedding night. Jean Cocteau brilliantly plays with this age-old motif of the discovery on the wedding night in his Machine infernale. Sophocles withholds that recognition until it can bring only the tragic recognition of indelible pollution. He retains the sexual component of that knowledge, however, by displacing the physical union onto a series of symbolic equivalents: the penetration of the queen's closed chambers and the removal of the pins from her recumbent body. These displacements are, in turn, part of that temporal enlargement and complication of the action that Sophocles everywhere exercises on the myth. He superimposes present acts on a remote past; he fuses, or confuses, the diachronic and the synchronic axes. By deepening the temporal perspective through the motif of discovering and remembering a long-forgotten past, he also calls attention to the representational power of drama, by which a single action unfolding before us on the stage can contain symbolically the meaning of an entire lifetime. In the condensed temporal frame of Oedipus' life the tragedian finds also a mirror image of his manipulation of time in the artistic construction of his play.

At the most intense moment of the stage action, Sophocles brings the forward movement of the play almost to a halt in order to allow his language to congeal, as it were, into a medium that shows both speech and time to us in a new light, revealing some things that we could not see before (1223-96). Speech and time become strange new entities wherein we see ourselves also as somehow strange and new. The otherness of the medium reflects back to us our own hitherto-unperceived strangeness as both subject and object of the message, as the alien content of a knowledge that resists being known, the hidden Other that we carry in ourselves. The external observer is also drawn into the action of self-discovery and becomes, with Oedipus, both the searcher and the one who is discovered.

Notes

2. For fuller discussion of these readings of the Oedipus myth with further references see Segal, OT 57-66.
4. This emphasis on the unnaturalness of Oedipus, his place apart, his monstrosity, reappears as a central element in the view of tragedy expounded by René Girard in La violence et le sacré (Paris 1972) = Violence and the Sacred, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore 1979), especially 68-88. Here Oedipus is the model for the scapegoating process embodied in the sacred kingship and in the tragic hero: a figure who attracts to himself all the pollutions, all the excesses, all the most outrageous crimes in order to become the focal point and the central figure in the expulsion of violence from the social order, the resacralization of violence enacted in the terrible suffering of the hero-king. The arbitrary
victim, chosen by fate, collects all the violence in himself and expels it in his sacred suffering that gives violence back to the gods. For brief discussion and criticism see Segal, OT 65ff.
6. For a brief discussion of Sophocles' revisions of the Aeschylean version of the Oedipus myth see Segal, OT 43 and 46-48.
9. For a brief discussion of Sophocles' revisions of the Aeschylean version of the Oedipus myth see Segal, OT 43 and 46-48.
13. For “metatragedy” see C. Segal, Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae (Princeton 1982), chap. 7.
16. At 1225 I read Hartung's emendation eugenos, accepted by many editors, in place of the manuscripts' engenos, “in kinsmanly fashion” or, more freely, “feel kinsmen's concern for the Labdacid house.” If the manuscript reading is kept, the metaphorical familial feeling of the chorus would contrast with the horror of what is now revealed in the literal family of Oedipus.
17. Throughout the play the metaphor of flying is associated with man's helplessness before the unknown and the supernatural; see 16f., 175ff., 482, 488, 509. See also Chapter 9.
20. On time in the Tyrannus see Segal, T&C 228-231; also Jacqueline de Romilly, Time in Greek Tragedy (Ithaca 1968) 108-110.
21. The relevant passages are as follows: emar … xummetroumenon chronoi, “the day comeasured with time” (73); epheure s' akonth' ho panth' horon chronos, “time, which sees all, found you out against your will” (1213); toi makroi ge sunmetroumenos chronoi, “comeasured by great time” (963); en te gar makroi / gerai xunaidei toide tàndri summetros, “in his great age he is in harmony with this man here, of equal measure” (1112f.); ten Korinthian / astrois to loipon ekmetroumenos chthona, “measuring the land of Corinth henceforth by the stars” (794f.). In this last passage the reasons for replacing the manuscript reading with Nauck's emendation, tekmaroumenos (“inferring”), as Lloyd-Jones and Wilson do in their OCT, do not seem to me decisive. For the manuscript reading see Dawe and Jebb ad loc. For other aspects of 794-796 see Chapter 9.
24. Cf. also 965-967 and, on omens and augury, Knox, *Oedipus* 170ff. See also *Antigone* 998, 1005, 1013, 1021.
25. Buxton, “Blindness” 23, observes the contrast between lines 31 and 298 but understates the difference between equality and sameness.
29. Note also Oedipus' *kateide*, “saw,” at 117.
30. That shift is also anticipated in Creon's movement from *plen heis* at 118 to *plen hen* at 119. On the question of “one” and “many” here see Segal, *T&C* 214ff., with the further literature cited in the notes there.
31. For this movement between country and city see Segal, *T&C* 220ff.
32. Cf. also 1123, where the Old Herdsman is described as *oikoi trapheis*, “brought up in the house.”
33. There is another discrepancy in Jocasta's account of the exposure of the child that the Old Herdsman's account brings out. She has said that it was Laius who cast out the infant (718), whereas when Oedipus asks whether it was the mother who gave him the child, the Herdsman answers in the affirmative (1173; cf. 1175). It is, of course, possible that Jocasta is correct after all and that the change from father to mother at 1173-75 reflects Oedipus' preoccupation here with rejection by his mother. In any case, the Herdsman plays an increasingly important role in giving different perspectives on what “really” happened in the past.
34. Lines 758f. have the second perfect (intransitive) participle, whereas the periphrastic construction requires the active (cf. *Ajax* 22, *Trachiniae* 412, *Electra* 590); but the double meaning is probably still within reach.
35. On Zeus and this passage see Chapter 8.
36. Note too the further irony in this double identity of the Old Herdsman as savior and destroyer: at 763f. Jocasta speaks of the Old Herdsman as Laius' companion, who “deserved to get a favor [charis] even greater than this” (i.e., than permission to leave the city for the pastures). At 1352f. Oedipus regrets that the Herdsman saved him from death by exposure on Cithaeron, “doing nothing to earn gratitude” (*ouden es charin prasson*).
40. For the suppression of the tabooed words of patricide and incest see Diskin Clay, “Unspeakable Words in Greek Tragedy,” *AJP* 103 (1982) 285-286, 288-292. Note too that at 1441 Oedipus calls himself *patrophontes* and *asebes*, again suppressing any reference to the incestuous union.
42. As Knox notes, *diaphane* occurs only here in tragedy (*Oedipus* 243, n. 87). See also his remarks on pp. 132ff. for the importance of *phaino* and related words in the play.
43. Note the similar exclamation, iou, iou, at 1182, with the related word of intellectual clarification saphes.
44. That movement “within” is subtly prepared for at 1171, when the Herdsman, about to reveal Oedipus' identity as the son of Jocasta, refers to her as “the one within,” he d' eso.
45. This translation attempts to bring out the force of the repetition tiktousan ... dusteknon at 1247; the repeated root tek- hammers in the horror of the doubled “mothering.” Note the triple repetition of the root tek- at 1250.
46. On the symbolic reenactment of the union, though with a very different interpretation, see John Hay, Lame Knowledge and the Homosporic Womb (Washington, D.C., 1978) 103ff. and 133f.
47. Mnemen palaion spermaton, “memory of the sowing [or seed] of old,” 1246. On the sexual meaning of gates see Hay, Lame Knowledge 103-105. The implications of sexual violence in the forcing of gates may have played a role in the first Hippolytus of Euripides, close in date to the Tyrannus: cf. Pseudo-Apollodorus, Epitome 1.18; and W. S. Barrett, Euripides, Hippolytus, (Oxford 1964) 38f.
48. In this extremely dense and important passage the phrase huph’ ou, “by his (Oedipus’) act,” at 1252 may be a significant echo of huph’ hon, “by which seed” Laius would die, a few lines before at 1246, also at the end of the verse. If so, Laius’ act of irresponsible begetting (the “seed of old”) is brought into suggestive association with its eventual result, Oedipus' self-blinding, which in turn is a symbolic reenactment of the incest as a crime against both the father and the mother.
49. The motif of fearful seeing is emphasized by the repetitions at 1297, 1306, and 1312. For the atmosphere of fear in the play see Lanza, “La paura di Edipo,” 28-33.
50. Hay, Lame Knowledge 76ff., notes the importance of the denied “vision” here and the connection of opsis with the theatrical spectacle; but his emphasis is rather on the desire to see that such a denial creates in the spectator than on the contrast between the visualization inherent in theater and its firm negation in this climactic event. He observes, however, the possibility of a further play on spectacle in the reemergence of Oedipus from behind the closed gates, now “frightfully transformed by a new mask” (77)—an element of spectacle that is permitted in the midst of so much left unseen.
51. Deina bruchetheis at 1265 escalates deinon aüsas to a new level of violence.
52. Psychoanalytically oriented interpreters regard the eyes here as a substitute for the phallus, that is, as the punishment of castration for incest: see Hay, Lame Knowledge 125ff.; and Devereux, “Self-Blinding of Oidipous.”
54. See Segal, OT 27-29.

Abbreviations

AJP: American Journal of Philology


JHS: Journal of Hellenic Studies


Knox, Oedipus: B. M. W. Knox, Oedipus at Thebes (New Haven 1957)
In the following excerpt, Griffith examines the cases for and against Oedipus and explains why he is guilty of murder.

On the last occasion I had the good fortune to read E. R. Dodds' famous essay “On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex,” I felt certain misgivings at some of his conclusions. Dodds is denouncing a view that he discovered in some undergraduate essays on the question “In what sense, if in any, does the Oedipus Rex attempt to justify the ways of God to man?” The offending view holds that “we get what we deserve”—that is, that Oedipus in some measure merits his suffering. Dodds' position in answer to this has an ethical aspect (Oedipus has an “essential moral innocence”), a religious one (Sophocles’ “gods are [not] in any human sense just”), and a literary-critical one (“there is no reason at all why we should require a dramatist—even a Greek dramatist—to be for ever running about delivering banal ‘messages’”). Many have anticipated Dodds in his position and others have followed him, with very few dissenting. This position is consonant with the emotional reaction of anyone watching or reading the play. Our sympathies are with Oedipus: we feel terror and pity at his plight, and this makes us want him to be innocent and his nemesis, Apollo, to be unaccountably vicious. This emotional reaction is important, because Greek tragedy is an emotional medium.

Tragedy is also, however, an intellectual art-form, and the intellectual clarification of the concepts of terror and pity is arguably as much a part of tragic catharsis as is any psychological purgation through terror and pity. As well as feeling for Oedipus, we must analyse his situation. Texts contemporary with Sophocles suggest that, while feeling about the play much as we do, many members of its original audience would have questioned Dodds' analysis. Oedipus has no essence beyond what we can infer from the deeds that he performs, and of these Sophocles' contemporaries would have found some morally innocent and others not. Apollo's actions, meanwhile, would have seemed to them to be just in an all-too-human sense. The first chapter argues that we should not constrain ourselves to historicist modes of understanding; nevertheless, the present chapter is devoted to the analysis of the roles of Oedipus and Apollo in the play along lines suggested by fifth-century thought in order to show that even within the terms of historicist interpretation, the guilt of Oedipus and the justice of Apollo are clear.
Beyond doubt, Oedipus suffers greatly in Sophocles' play. He has been living in a state of incest, and he blinds himself in order to be unable to see the children conceived in pollution (1273-4, 1369-70). Let us suppose that he is not responsible for his incest and the pain that he experiences is innocent suffering.¹² (We will return to the problem of innocent suffering in chapter 5.) The presence of this innocent suffering explains our sympathy for his actions but should not cloud our analysis of them.

If there is any additional suffering that Oedipus merits, it must be because he has done something. He is not likely punished for a character flaw,¹³ because not all tragic heroes suffer a hamartia, which is in any case more likely an ignorance of fact than a moral flaw,¹⁴ and because actions and not character traits cause things to happen in Greek tragedy.¹⁵

Oedipus does only one thing on stage: he “pursue[s] the truth at whatever personal cost” and “accept[s] and endure[s] it when found.”¹⁶ This is shown by the moment (1170) when he pauses in his course of action, having realized its implications, and chooses to follow Delphi's command and implicate himself by pursuing the truth. This decision recalls that moment in Aeschylus's Libation Bearers (899-903) where Orestes pauses briefly and then immediately chooses to follow Delphi’s command and kill his mother. But this very self-prosecution points backward in condemnation to an earlier act, namely Oedipus's murder of his father Laius (which, on the basis of the arguments advanced in the last chapter, we are justified in considering him to have committed).

The murder of Laius might justify part of Oedipus's suffering, since it is a deed and not a character flaw and since it not only precedes but also paves the way for his suffering.¹⁷ Laius's death makes Jocasta a widow, and so enables Oedipus to marry her¹⁸ and reside in Thebes; the residence of the regicide in Thebes in turn causes the plague (106-7) that sets in motion the plot. Still, small causes can provoke disproportionately large effects, and our question remains.

The crime of parricide has two components: homicide and father abuse. The play enforces this distinction: the quests for Laius's killer and for Oedipus's father remain separate for most of it, not merging until the recognition scene (1182-5). Let us examine the crime under these two headings, beginning by considering the murder of Laius in the context of fifth-century Athenian law. This is relevant, given Greek tragedy's tendency to anachronism,¹⁹ the audience's familiarity with the Athenian judicial apparatus, and the probability that the play draws heavily for its structure on the process of judicial inquiry.²⁰

Classical Athenian jurisprudence recognizes three kinds of killing,²¹ and different scholars have classified Laius's murder under all three. The first is the unintentional killing of an innocent victim (what we would call “manslaughter”). The hero of Oedipus at Colonus claims unintentionality to defend himself from the charge of parricide (273, 547-8, 988-99). Yet if Oedipus did not know that Laius was his father, he knew that he was a human being and that his act was homicide, in contrast to Deianira, who could (but, interestingly, does not) plead unintentional killing, having administered a poison believing it to be a love potion.

The second kind is justified homicide (which has no equivalent in, for example, Canadian jurisprudence), which is the intentional killing of a criminal caught in the act. The best-known example is the killing of an adulterer apprehended in flagrante delicto,²² but another is the killing of a highwayman caught red-handed.²³ Oedipus does not claim to have thought that Laius was a robber.²⁴ Indeed, according to the admittedly none-too-factual report of Laius's surviving slave, Laius and company suspected Oedipus of intending to rob them (122), as he does in Euripides' version.²⁵

The third kind is intentional homicide (ordinary murder). Self-defence²⁶ was a mitigating circumstance in a case of intentional homicide, rather than grounds for lawful homicide.²⁷ Demosthenes (21.71-5) tells how a certain Euaeon, who killed a man in retaliation for a single blow, was convicted by one vote. This case shows that, despite the considerable sympathy that the jury obviously felt for the killer, “the mere fact that the victim
struck the first blow was not sufficient to acquit the killer.”

One must show that the victim intended to kill the murderer. Yet Oedipus does not argue self-defence, claiming, as he would have to do, that Laius was about to kill him, stating in fact that on this occasion Laius wanted only to drive him from the road (805). Moreover, according to Plato (Leg. 869b)—who may or may not be reflecting Attic law—parent murder is the only crime in which self-defence is not an extenuating circumstance.

One might suppose that Oedipus's act was a third-degree murder since he acted without malice aforethought (807), and that he was guilty of something less than premeditated homicide, but this claim would ignore fifth-century Attic law, which reserves no special category for homicide that is intentional but unpremeditated. “The Athenians used [the terms] ‘unpremeditated’ and ‘unintentional’ interchangeably … The practical effect of this was to narrow unintentional homicides to our category of accidental killings. This meant that all other killings were classified as intentional and were subject to the severest penalties. Sudden killings thus received no more lenient treatment than any other intentional killings unless some justification such as self-defence could be shown” (which in Oedipus's case, as we have seen, it could not).

Again, one might argue that, whatever the judgment of a hypothetical fifth-century court, the heroic society in which Oedipus is imagined as having lived would have “acquitted” him. Not so. In Homer and Hesiod a murderer faces one of three penalties. He may either be killed by the victim's family, go into exile, or offer monetary compensation. Only two of the murders mentioned in epic are not followed by such an atonement: one is the murder of Laius; the other is Heracles' murder of Iphitus. When Sophocles recounts the latter (Trach. 38, 270-9), he supplies the penalty, exile, that is missing in Homer's account. Given Sophocles' supplement to this story, Oedipus stands alone among epic murderers in escaping human retribution. We do not know why this is so in the epics, but Sophocles supplies an explanation: the Thebans were too distracted by the Sphinx to investigate the murder and try the killer (130-1). Although postponed by the Sphinx, punishment was as fitting for Laius's killer as for any other. This is why the oracle orders the murderer's exile (98) and why Oedipus pronounces this sentence upon him (236-43).

The audience's appreciation of Oedipus's act was conditioned by the precepts of ancient Greek popular morality. For example, Laius's murder occurred at a crossroads (716, 730, 733, 800-1), an important fact since it is a constant in the myth, while the precise location is variable. The crossroads is a place where a decision must be made, as in the story of the choice of Heracles. As in that story, the alternatives confronting Oedipus were as much moral as directional: by turning one way, he would kill four strangers; either by retreating (an option available to Oedipus, but not to Heracles) or by deviating temporarily from his chosen path, he would spare them.

Three considerations make clear the judgment that morality passes upon these alternatives. First, since Laius was trying to push Oedipus from the road (804-5), which was narrow (1399), and since there was another path available, one party should step aside. According to Homer (Il. 9.69, 160-1), one should yield to the kinglier—that is, to him who commands more men—and to the elder. The old might defer to the young of higher rank, but with both age and rank on his side one would expect deference and try to exact it if not forthcoming. Laius (a king) is actually kinglier than Oedipus (a king's son) and obviously so, travelling in a mule-car (753, 803) with a retinue, while Oedipus goes alone on foot. In the parallel incident in the Iliad (1.188-92), when Achilles is provoked by Agamemnon, who is both kinglier and elder, he contemplates homicide, revealing that the course actually chosen by Oedipus is not unnatural, but then wisely abstains from violence. Laius was also clearly older than Oedipus, for his hair was “a sable silver'd” (742) and Oedipus calls him “elder” (805, 807), not necessarily an old man, but a senior figure deserving of respect. Oedipus should not have quarrelled with Laius, not because he might be his father but because morality demanded respect for elders.

Secondly, Laius was a stranger (813), whom it is wrong to kill, for “all strangers are in the keeping of Zeus” (Od. 6.207-8 = 14.57-8) in his capacity as Zeus of Strangers. Indeed, some may even be Zeus incognito.
These beliefs are grounded in social reality: the stranger lacks brotherhood, law, and hearth (Il. 9.63) and is very vulnerable. To limit this vulnerability and prevent a breakdown of society, the Greeks ritualized the behaviour proper towards strangers. When a stranger presents himself at one's house, he must be entertained no matter how inconvenient (cf Eur. Alc. 76ff). Even in battle one should not attack a man of unknown identity lest he be a god. The proper behaviour of strangers meeting as wayfarers is shown in the Iliad, where Priam, the old man, travelling away from home with his herald, encounters the unrecognized young man, his surrogate son, who is Hermes in disguise and whom he suspects of being a brigand. In contrast to Oedipus, Hermes is a paragon of courtesy. To murder strangers is extreme barbarity, fit for Laestrygonians or Cyclopes, each of whom is a law to himself and cares nothing for others (Od. 9.112-15), but unthinkable to a civilized Greek. Of potentially ironic application to Oedipus is Hesiod's observation (Op. 327-32) that whoever harms a stranger is as bad as a father abuser.

Thirdly, Laius was accompanied by a herald (753), recognizable as such (802), presumably through his caduceus. The herald accompanied him because he was an “envoy sent to consult the oracle” (114) on official religious and state business. Oedipus at first “[forebore] to strike the sacred herald”—whom he does eventually kill—because heralds are inviolable. To violate their rights was “sacrilegious”; to kill them was to break the customs of all men. Herodotus (7.133-7) tells how the Spartans killed Dareius's heralds and were incited by the hero Talthybius, in life the herald of Agamemnon, to send men to Xerxes to die to expiate the crime. Xerxes refused to act illegally like the Spartans; yet, although he spared them, their sons later died, Herodotus editorializes, in requital for Talthybius's wrath. Once, whenever Athenian youths assembled, they wore mourning for the herald Copreus, whom the Athenians had killed (Philostr. VS 2.1.5 = 2.59 Kayser). An Athenian herald murdered by the Megarians was buried with full honours at the Dipylon gate, while his murder caused enmity between the two states.

Three arguments, all inadequate, might be raised in Oedipus's favour. The first is that he did not choose to kill Laius because, unlike Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia (Aesch. Ag. 206-17), his deliberation is not reported. Lacking on his lips is “the characteristic cry of the tragic hero,” “What should I do?” Yet this is a feature of his character, not of his situation. The only one to hesitate in our play is Creon (91-2, 1443); Oedipus is full of Sophoclean self-assurance, impatient at others' slowness (74, 287, 1162) and always quick to jump to a suspicion (124-5, 380-9). More quick-witted than Agamemnon, he will not laboriously deliberate before choosing the wrong course; it is his particular glory to rush “with characteristic decisiveness” into actions whose outcome is ruinous.

Secondly, Oedipus was provoked. Laius was rude to him and seems by nature to share his temperament as well as his looks (743), as we would expect of kings, who laid great store by heredity. Morality, far from counselling one to turn the other cheek, commands vengeance: helping friends and harming enemies is the oft-cited recipe for justice. Still, the vengeance exacted by Oedipus exceeds the wrong done. Oedipus says, “[Laius] paid no equal penalty” (810), a phrase reminiscent of the herald in Aeschylus's Agamemnon (532-3), who says that the Trojans “do not boast that they wrought more than they suffered.” This reminiscence is ominous in view of the consequences that Agamemnon's excessive vengeance had for him. Of course, in all self-defence killings the victim gets more than he gave, but this is only because he is less successful; in terms of intent the acts are equal, with one killing in order to avoid being killed. Yet by Oedipus's own admission Laius only sought to remove him—albeit forcibly—from the road (804-5). On this point again morality suggests that the vengeance should fit the offence, being equal to instead of greater than the crime, a principle enunciated by Antigone (Soph. Ant. 927-8).

If equality of retribution was not an absolute standard of morality, the Greeks were at least sensitive to the problems inherent in excessive retaliation (cf Soph. fr. 589 TrGF). This is clear in the present passage, where the escalating violence spirals rapidly out of control: Laius and his servant drive Oedipus away, perhaps using only words (804-5); Oedipus responds with a blow, evidently of his fist (806-7); Laius is then the first to use a weapon, coming down upon Oedipus's head with an ox-goad (807-9); Oedipus finally kills them all with a
deadlier weapon, his staff (811-13).

Why, then, mention the provocation at all? (It is not in earlier or later accounts.\textsuperscript{64}) The reason is that neither here nor anywhere else did Sophocles portray an irredeemably evil man. Faced with a dilemma, Oedipus chooses a crime that he would never have gone out of his way to commit.

Thirdly, it will be argued that no one censures Oedipus for murder as murder (as distinct from regicide and parricide). On a strict application of the principle that what is not mentioned in the play does not exist (schol. \textit{Il.} 5.385d), such censure must be impossible. The answer to this lies in the play's structure. The rapid movement of the play between two distinct questions, the public one of who killed Laius (106-7) and the private worry of Oedipus over his parents' identity (437, 779-93, 1017), allows no time for the identity of Oedipus's victims to be raised in its own right. If a third question arises at all, it is the red herring of whether one can foreknow the future (720-2, 945-9, 981-2). Oedipus reveals to Jocasta and the audience his past, apparently for this first time, only when the play is half over (813), and in the context of the distracting search for Laius's killer.

If Oedipus chose to kill the old man and his act was no mere accident or reflex, what was his motive? None is explicit in the text, which gives an account remarkable for its succinctness (813); we must infer one from Oedipus's character.\textsuperscript{65} Oedipus, exemplary in so many respects, is led to his crime because he has the Sophoclean hero's impulsive incapacity to yield,\textsuperscript{66} as when he ignores the pleas of his wife and herdsman to stop his investigation (1060-1, 1165).\textsuperscript{67} Read this trait as hubris\textsuperscript{68} or heroism; it keeps him from yielding to the old man and thence leads him to murder. “Character is destiny.”\textsuperscript{69}

If Oedipus is unquestionably guilty of murder, we must turn to the question of whether he is guilty of the other component of parricide, harming his father. Oedipus does harm his father and this was a grave offence,\textsuperscript{70} but he never would have done so knowingly, having taken elaborate, if futile, steps to avoid it. Therefore, he could\textsuperscript{71} defend himself by saying that he did not know that Laius was his father. One can act in ignorance and still bear some blame, according to Pittacus of Mytilene, who enacted a law that one be fined double for an offence committed while drunk.\textsuperscript{72} This law was not designed to discourage drunkenness,\textsuperscript{73} or he would have outlawed wine, but rather, as Aristotle approvingly explains, because one is culpable of a crime committed in ignorance if this ignorance arises through negligence. Oedipus's abuse of his father is an extraordinary example of such a crime.

One would not have thought Oedipus negligent in harming his father. Indeed, his abandoning of his comfortable life in Corinth to embark upon the wandering that brought him to Thebes seems the opposite of negligence. Nevertheless, Oedipus was negligent in remaining ignorant of his father's identity, having been led into this negligence again by his impulsive character. He made the trek to Delphi to learn who his parents were and, upon hearing that he was destined to defile them, immediately abandoned the object of his journey, for the oracle manifestly did not resolve it (788-9), raising instead the separate (789) issue of parricide and incest, and Oedipus set off to flee Corinth. Far from distracting him from his parents' identity as it did,\textsuperscript{74} the oracle's response made it imperative that he pursue just this quest. As a distant second best, he might have contemplated a life of non-violence and celibacy\textsuperscript{75} rather than murdering the first people he met and marrying in the first city to which he came.

The failure to consult the oracle further is an essential ingredient in his downfall and shifts the blame on to his own shoulders, as is shown by Sophocles' friend (cf Soph. fr. 5 \textit{IEG}) Herodotus.\textsuperscript{76} Herodotus tells how Croesus, having received the oracle that if he attacked Persia, he would destroy a mighty empire, caused his own misfortune by attacking without first determining which empire was meant (Hdt. 1.91.4). Delphi addressed a similar rebuke in like circumstances to the children of Heracles (290 Parke-Wormell = L63 Fontenrose). While repeated consultation of an oracle might seem an improbably pestering of the god, myth records many examples of just this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{77} Like that of Croesus and the Heraclids, Oedipus's
ignorance results from his negligence in failing either to understand Apollo's warning or to inquire further about a question that the oracle has just shown to be crucial. In this regard Creon is an important foil, showing constant reliance upon Delphi (603, 1442-3).

There are signs that Oedipus has not been told the truth: the scars on his feet that have always troubled him (1033) and the story of the drunk (780), which was widely circulated, and which Polybus and Merope do not deny outright (783-4). Oedipus, a reader (though often, as we shall see in chapter 6, a misreader) of signs, has to his credit noted these and feels the uncertainty of his parentage as an impairment of his intellect (786); it motivates his hundred-kilometre walk on mountain roads from Corinth to Delphi and repeatedly rears its head during his quest for the regicide (437, 779-93, 1017). He elevates his ignorance into his governing principle, acknowledging that he is “the Know-Nothing Oedipus” (397) and relishing the irony of his apparent superiority over the divinely inspired Teiresias.

This man, who knows of his ignorance, acts not once but repeatedly as though he were privy even to hidden facts, treating the many phantasms of his imagination (124-5, 139-40, 380-9) as though they were manifest revelations (534-5). Likewise at the crossroads he acted—knowingly and yet as though unknowingly—in ignorance, recklessly failing to yield when it was moral and convenient to do so.

In light of these observations, we see that Oedipus is guilty of parricide as well as being an innocent victim of incest. But there is still one point to make in his favour, namely that his fate was unconditionally pre-ordained. “Sophocles,” writes Dodds, “has provided a conclusive answer to those who suggest that Oedipus could, and therefore should, have avoided his fate. The oracle was unconditional … And what an oracle predicts is bound to happen.”

While a conditional prediction allows for the play of free will, an unconditional prediction might be supposed to imply predestination. Even on this assumption the prediction does not exonerate Oedipus, for predestination does not, paradoxically, constitute a compulsion. Dodds knows this. His own book *The Greeks and the Irrational* made familiar the concept of overdetermination, whereby according to early Greek thought an event may be “doubly determined, on the natural and on the supernatural plane.” We cannot deny this overdetermined status to Oedipus's act: he killed Laius by free choice, thereby abdicating any claim to essential moral innocence. Oedipus's act is also determined on the supernatural plane by fate, and the Pythia says so (713), but fate is an impersonal force, not an Olympian deity or even a lackey of the gods like the Furies, and it is as binding upon gods as upon mortals (cf *Il.* 16.433-61).

Oedipus's unsuccessful attempt to elude his fate has been attributed to hubris, but he would have invited greater condemnation either by rushing towards Corinth in homicidal and libidinous determination to fulfil the prophecy or by quietly going about his business like some Stoic avant la lettre. Moreover, Socrates is not hubristic in trying to disprove Delphi's claim that he is the wisest of men, a less than total faith in the ineluctability of the Pythia's predictions being neither unusual at Athens nor in itself evidence of impiety.

Even apart from overdetermination, Oedipus's fate does not absolve him of blame, since he could have fulfilled it in total innocence. Laius could have “died at the hand of his son” (713) and Oedipus become the “murderer” (793) of his father had he killed him accidentally, for example while hunting or playing the javelin or discus (cf e.g. Hdt. 1.43, Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.3.3). One who kills by accident is readily called a “murderer” by a society that denies this name and the consequent legal proceedings neither to animals nor even to inanimate objects (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 57.4; cf Soph. *OT* 969-70).

Furthermore, an unconditional prediction is not evidence for predestination if time for the agent making the prediction is not an abstract, inexorable forward flow. Consider this example: suppose I videotape a group of playing children and, before playing back the tape, I state that during the play-session Lee will steal Tom's teddy bear. My prediction is unconditional and will be brought to pass, and yet I did not compel Lee to act in
this way; I may even wish that it had not happened (it has spoiled my movie). I am, in fact, incapable of imposing my will on the children or of removing theirs from them, but I can accurately predict how they will act because I do not experience time as they do, as a chronometric, impersonal medium. If Apollo has a relationship to time like that in this example, he could accurately predict events without ordaining them and he could have such a relationship to time only if Time itself is a free agent, moving forward or backward, quickly or slowly, for the benefit of those whom he would help. According to the Greek conception, such was in fact the nature of Time. In our play Time is personified as “the All-seer” (1213). The situation in the play is more complex than in the videotape example because Apollo does not predict the event to a disinterested third party but to the protagonist himself, and Oedipus reacts of his own free will to the god's prediction. Yet such is the nature of fate that any action that Oedipus might have taken in response to any prediction that Apollo might have made would have ended in the same result, albeit brought about by a different chain of intermediary events.

To sum up: By murdering the belligerent stranger, his superior and elder, along with his retinue, including the sacred herald, while they were engaged upon official religious and state business, Oedipus violated the prerogatives of Zeus of Strangers, the respect due to superiors and elders, and the principle of fitting retaliation; he is therefore guilty of murder. He knew that he was acting in ignorance and yet behaved as though he did not know this; he is therefore guilty of father abuse. He was fated to commit his crime, but it cannot be shown that he was compelled to do so, and certainly not in the way he did.

What, then, of Apollo, who manifests himself in the story of Oedipus (1329)? If Oedipus had been, as the prevailing view holds, essentially morally innocent, then Apollo would have been unjust in allowing him to suffer as he does. Now that we have found Oedipus in fact responsible in some measure for some of the suffering that he incurs, the possibility arises that Apollo's actions may be just. There is no a priori reason to think that they are so; the gods of Greek myth lie, commit adultery, are gluttons. “Men find some things unjust, other things just; but in the eyes of God all things are beautiful and good and just.” Nevertheless, if the actions of Sophocles' Apollo conform to an accepted definition of justice, we should admit that he at least is in that sense a just god.

We have seen that he did not compel Oedipus to kill his father and sleep with his mother, but neither did he try to prevent him from doing so—for example, by giving him a straightforward answer to his question concerning his parents. The reason he did not is linked, perhaps, to the fundamental difference of power between god and man. Gods cannot reveal themselves undisguised to men without destroying them; when they appear incognito they are often recognized only at the end of the encounter and only by the extremity of their body, their feet (L. 13.71-2, Verg. Aen. 1.405, etc.). This disguise principle is intensified in connection with verbal communication. Gods have their own language and their own special intonation. The inevitable process of translation needed to enable them to communicate with men is complex: at Delphi, when “the enquirer entered, the Pythia was already under the influence of Apollo, and was in some abnormal state of trance or ecstasy … [Her] answer would vary in its degree of coherence and intelligibility. When it had been given, the prophet would reduce it to some form, and dictate it to the enquirer.” The answer given by this convoluted process was perforce oblique: “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks nor hides, but gives a sign” (Heraclitus 22 B 93 Diels-Kranz). It is scarcely surprising if the answer is not so straightforward as we would like.

Even so, Apollo does not lie to Oedipus. The cause of Oedipus's extraordinary ignorance of the events attendant upon his birth lies with Polybus and Merope. The drunk at the banquet accused Oedipus of being a supposititious child (780), but this is itself either a lie or an error, for Polybus was privy to the secret (1021). Even at the drunk's false charge the royal couple express anger, thereby effectively misleading Oedipus (783-4). Later, a quick detection of the regicide is prevented by the lone survivor's mendacious description of “many robbers” (122-3). In both cases humans, not gods, have lied.
Whether we find any justice in Apollo's actions will depend upon our definition of the term. Simonides' definition, cited by Polemarchus in Plato's *Republic*, is "giving back to each person what is owing." So conceived, justice is wholly reactive. It requires one not to initiate any action but only to respond in kind to the actions of others. It does not require one to help any person (by warning of impending disaster or by any other means) unless one has been helped first by him. True to the Greek's anthropomorphic conception of the gods, this rule applies to human-god relationships just as to relationships between humans. In the *Iliad* Apollo helps Chryses because he has roofed many temples for him (*Il.* 1.39). In the *Oresteia* the gods punish Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra in response to their breaking of laws.

According to this conception of justice, Apollo is under no obligation to help Oedipus by warning him of the impending catastrophe, for Oedipus has performed no prior service for him. Yet, once Oedipus has offended the gods by his sacrilegious behaviour at the crossroads, Apollo is obliged to intervene and ensure that the fitting penalty of exile is enforced. He does this through the plague and the oracle to Creon (97); we can also see him at work in the fortuitous arrival of the Corinthian messenger (924), who, again by a striking pseudo-coincidence, is the very man who rescued the infant Oedipus in the first place (1022). Compassionate and comforting Apollo is not, but he is just in this all-too-human sense.

At this point a further objection might be raised. Given that, from Oedipus's perspective, the murder of Laius is a crime justly punished by his subsequent suffering, is not the same act, when viewed from the perspective of Laius, merely an absurd suffering and, as such, evidence for the wanton cruelty of the gods that negates any other hint of divine justice in the play? When viewed from the perspective of Jocasta, does not the incestuous marriage, discovery of which provoked her suicide, also refute any claims of divine justice? I can meet this objection in two ways: first, Laius was not a wholly innocent bystander at the time of his murder, having actually provoked Oedipus to strike. Second, the suffering of Laius and Jocasta may be construed as punishment for an earlier crime of their own: that in which he "yoked" the feet of the infant Oedipus (718) and she gave the child to a herdsman to kill (1173-4).

Opinion is divided over whether newborns were commonly exposed in fifth-century Athens. Even if they were, it would be rare to treat a healthy, legitimate, first-born son like Oedipus in this way. Exposure did not constitute homicide, first because the newborn was not a legal person until its adoption into the family during the naming festival, which took place on about the tenth day of life, and an unwanted child would be exposed before this time—Oedipus, for example, at three days (717-18); and secondly because the parent did not actually kill the child. Yet, while not criminal, the act was open to moral censure: Oedipus blames his parents for hurting him knowingly, while he committed his crimes in ignorance (Soph. *OC* 273, 547-8, 988-99); the servant saved him out of pity (1178), and Jocasta, thinking of the exposure, calls him "wretched" (855). Furthermore, Oedipus's was no ordinary exposure. Ordinary exposure is not necessarily lethal, thrusting the newborn from the family only, not necessarily from life. All children exposed in myth and, presumably, many in real life were saved and reared as foundlings, for the parents, callous enough to abandon their child, scruple actually to shed its blood. By contrast, Laius and Jocasta, intending actually to kill their son, left him on a trackless mountain (719) where the hope of rescue was slight and took the unprecedented step of maiming him, which both weakened him and made it unlikely that he would be rescued even if found. We note the symmetrical justice in the adult Oedipus's causing the deaths in fact of the parents who tried to kill him as an infant. If they had not exposed Oedipus and tried thereby to evade Apollo's oracle, then Oedipus would have known who they were and would not have unknowingly murdered the one and slept with the other (he shows a revulsion from doing so willingly).

Recognition that Oedipus's guilt and Apollo's justice are greater than is usually allowed for affects how we understand what—if any—is Sophocles' message. Sophocles' gods, like those of Aeschylus, are just in an obvious human sense. It is no longer true, on the basis of this play at least, to speak of "the incomprehensible ways of the divine will" or to hold that "one must not bring in false concepts of human morality involving good and evil." These are precisely the concepts necessary to understand Apollo's role in Oedipus's...
suffering. It is even less true to say that “what causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to the truth.” This is only “the immediate cause” of his ruin, and the Greeks are far more sensitive than we to ultimate causes, abounding as their myths do in nativities, inventors, aetiologies, and even an original sin or two. This is especially true in a legal context: for example, in Plato's *Apology* (18a-b) Socrates identifies and refutes his “former accusers.” Oedipus is himself an aficionado of ultimate causes, beginning with confident relish (132) the seemingly hopeless investigation into the regicide and extrapolating from Teiresias's claim that he, Oedipus, has committed parricide and incest not only an alleged proximate cause (Teiresias has been bribed to say this) but also a putative distant cause (Creon bribed him because he wants the kingship [380-9]). We must never forget the ultimate cause of Oedipus's ruin - the murder at the crossroads comes back after all these years (613, 1213) to haunt him.

The profound differences between Aeschylus and Sophocles are not theological, and it is difficult to agree with those who find in the god who tells Orestes, “You must kill your mother,” a kinder, gentler Apollo than the god who tells Oedipus, “You will kill your father.” What is new—and far from comforting—in Sophocles is his assessment, gloomy even by Greek standards, of the limits of human knowledge. The ignorance of Sophoclean characters runs through a broad spectrum: Oedipus mistakes his parents for strangers, homecoming for exile, and hereditary kingship for unconstitutional rule; Creon in *Antigone* twice mistakes the priorities of the living for those of the dead; Deianira mistakes a poison for a love-potion; and Ajax mistakes a sheep for Agamemnon. In Sophocles humans deceive one another and people act with a self-confidence unwarranted by their feeble grasp of reality. Only once does a god deceive—Athena in *Ajax* (51-2)—and her deception, motivated by retribution (762-77), prevents a crime from being committed. It is in his anthropology rather than his theology that the uncompromising quality of Sophocles' world consists.

The function of art, according to Dodds, quoting Dr Johnson, is “the enlargement of our sensibility.” This phrase is perhaps too broad to capture the specific virtue of tragic drama. The virtue of tragedy lies elsewhere, in a region suggested by the examination question set by Dodds for his undergraduates, namely, in adding understanding to our spontaneous emotional response, in order to assert eternal providence, and justify the ways of God to men.

*Notes*

1. Dodds 1966 = Dodds 1973, 64-77. The article has been cited frequently and anthologized several times, e.g. in O'Brien 1968, 17-29; Segal 1983, 177-88; and Bloom 1988, 35-47.
2. Dodds 1966 identifies and refutes two further views (that the *OT* is a tragedy of fate and that Sophocles, as a pure artist, does not concern himself with morality or religion at all), which, since they are mutually exclusive of the view I support, I join him in rejecting.
3. Dodds 1966, 37 = 1973, 64.
4. Ibid., 42 = 69.
5. Ibid., 47 = 75.
6. Ibid., 45 = 73. Dodds holds a similar view of Aesch. *Eum.*; he writes (1973, 47-8): “Nearly everyone agrees … that there is a political point here; but after a century of controversy there is still no agreement on what the point is. I believe myself that this is exactly what the poet would have wished: he was writing a political play, yes; but a propagandist play, no.”
9. The view that Oedipus is guilty is expressed by Vellacott 1964, and Cameron 1968, 133.
12. One could, however, argue (as Charles Daniels has pointed out to me) that by knowing he was acting in ignorance and yet, by marrying Jocasta, behaving as though he did not know this, Oedipus was as guilty of mother abuse as of father abuse.


17. Ibid., 39 = 66.

18. There are no grounds on which to assess Oedipus's guilt or innocence in the case of his incest, for incest was not formally illegal at Athens; see Harrison 1968, 22 n 3, and Broadbent 1968, 155. What matters more than the legality or otherwise of incest is that incest is obviously a violation of motherhood, which the Greeks held in high esteem (see Sommerstein 1989 ad Aesch. Eum. 657-66), and apparently constituted a pollution (Parker 1983, 97-8).


22. … e.g. Lys. 1.

23. … Dem. 23.53; cf Aeschin. 1.91.


25. Eur. Phoen. 44-5. Even in Euripides' version the robbery is incidental to the murder and is not the motive for it.

26. … Lys. 4.11, Dem. 23.50, 47.7, Isoc. 20.1, Pl. Leg. 869d, Arist. Rhet. 2.24.9 (= 1402a), Apollod. Bibl. 2.4.9.


28. Ibid., 117.

29. As is claimed by Wilamowitz 1899, 55 = 1931-37, vi.209; Sheppard 1920, xxix; and Bowra 1944, 165.

30. Not even in the OC does he make this claim explicitly. …

31. For Laius had, of course, wanted to kill him when he exposed him years before, a point to which we shall return. …

32. Loomis 1972, 93.


35. … ll. 9.633, 18.497-508.


37. There are other murderers known to Greek myth as we find it in Apollodorus who make no compensation or purification for murder; these are listed by Parker 1983, 375, sect. 2 and 3.

38. I shall henceforth use the term “morality” as a shorthand for “ancient Greek popular morality.”

39. See App. B.


41. Agamemnon, … commands one hundred ships to Achilles’ fifty (ll. 2.576, 685). See Drews 1983; Geddes 1984, 28-36; and Rihill 1986.

42. E.g. Od. 2.14, Tyrt. fr. 12.37 West, Theogn. 935-6. …

43. The king has naturally undertaken a mission to Delphi himself, rather than delegating it; cf Pind. Ol. 6.37-8. No motive for the mission is given or necessary in the play.

44. Dawe 1982, 174 ad 805.
45. As Vellacott 1964, 140, argues.
50. Il. 6.119-236. This is a special case, since Glaucus and Diomedes are connected by earlier ties of family; but then so too were Oedipus and Laius, if they had only bothered to stop and find this out.
51. The particular relevance of this story to my argument was pointed out to me by Emmet Robbins.
52. So Jebb 1887, 110 ad 804-12.
53. See Bill 1901.
54. Jebb 1887 ad 804-12.
55. See Wéry 1966. The relevance of this evidence to the case of Oedipus has been noted by Fitton Brown 1969, 308. …
56. Plut. Per. 30.3, Dem. 12.4. Oedipus, who killed a man engaged in a theoria, will easily insult a seer (386-9; cf his insulting of the Pythia, 964-5), since that is a relatively common form of disrespect for the god's servants (cf Il. 1.106, 12.231-50, Soph. Ant. 1033-8).
57. Garvie 1986 ad 899.
59. Bowra 1944, 190.
60. Cf Neoptolemus in Soph. Phil., who shares the nature of the father he has never known.
62. … Bowra 1944, 164, is wrong to say, “Laius was the aggressor and got what he deserved”; by Oedipus's own admission he got more than he deserved.
63. Gagarin 1978, 118 n 32. …
64. Earlier accounts: Od. 11.273, Pind. Ol. 2.38-9; later accounts: cf Eur. Phoen. 37-44, in which Oedipus is provoked, but not by Laius. …
65. Dodds 1966, 38-41 = 1974, 66-8, ridicules the scrutiny of character, but I would argue that much of this scrutiny has been rather insufficiently focused than misdirected.
66. See Knox 1964, 15-16.
67. He does yield once in the play, with great reluctance, at 669-72, when he spares Creon in response to the combined pleas of Jocasta and the chorus.
68. In chapter 7 we will see reason for preferring the hubris over the heroism interpretation. Some scholars such as Winnington-Ingram 1980 have tried to have an Oedipus at once arrogant (183) and innocent (203).
71. As he does in Soph. OC 273, 547-8, 988-9.
72. Diog. Laert. 1.76, Ar. Pol. 2.9.9 (= 1274b), Rhet. 2.25.7 (= 1402b).
73. Pace Diog. Laert. …
74. He acts as though he knew that Polybus and Merope were undoubtedly his parents; cf 826-7.
75. Which can only with extreme latitude be characterized as “compil[ing] a handlist of all the things he must not do” (Dodds 1966, 40 = 1974, 69, quoting Waldock); it would be a short list.
76. Sophocles and Herodotus shared views on many topics: e.g. Ant. 908-12 = Hdt. 3.119.6; El. 417-23 = Hdt. 1.108.1; OC 337-41 = Hdt. 2.35.2; OT 1528-30 = Hdt. 1.32.5; El. 62-4 = Hdt. 4.95; OC 1224-7 = Hdt. 7.46.3-4.
77. 4-5, 43-4, 94-5, 161, 216-21 Parke-Wormell = Q58A-B, Q28-9, Q146-7, Q191A-B, Q7-9 Fontenrose.
78. See App. C.
81. Dodds 1951, 31. In the present context he cites, after Knox 1957, 39, the case of Peter, who fulfilled Jesus' prediction that he would deny him (Matt. 26.34, 74-5) but “did so by an act of free choice” (Dodds 1966, 43 = 1973, 71). Kitto 1958, 60, is right in saying, “there was nothing compulsory about the affair at the cross-roads.” Dodds uses the concept of overdetermination in his study of the *Oresteia* 1973, 56. …

82. Halsted 1979, 77.


84. De Romilly 1968, 50, writes, “Even if things are supposed to exist through all eternity and to have been decided regardless of time, it is with time and in time that they come to be. He uncovers them.” See also Vivante 1972, who cites bibliography at 130-1, to which add Komornicka 1976.

85. This is a title of Zeus (Aesch. *Eum.* 1045; Soph. *OC* 1085) and of Helios (Aesch. *PV* 91; cf *II.* 3.277).


89. Parke and Wormell 1956, i.33.

90. Nothing would have prevented Polybus and Merope from openly adopting a child, but, as a foundling (1026), Oedipus cannot be adopted if Athenian laws are imagined as holding good in Corinth; hence they are forced to lie. See Harrison 1968, 71.

91. Goodhart 1978, 56 n 2. …

92. Lloyd-Jones 1983, 121, likewise believes that Laius must deserve his suffering, yet his own solution (that the suffering is provoked by Laius's rape of Chrysippus) violates Aristarchus's rule, “What is not mentioned in the play does not exist,” and so is less economical than the view proposed here.

93. Cameron 1932 and Harris 1982 hold that exposure was common; Golden 1982 holds that the exposure of girls was common; van Hook 1920, Bolkstein 1922, Engels 1980, and Patterson 1985 are far more sceptical about the frequency of exposure of children of either sex.

94. Health: Patterson 1985, 113-14; legitimacy: ibid. 115-16; primogeniture: Cameron 1932, 106 (cf Pl. *Theat.* 161c); maleness: Golden 1981. Tyro in one of Sophocles' plays of that name exposed her twins because they were illegitimate. It would of course be rare in real life, if not unparalleled in legend (cf Paris: Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.12.5), that a child should be prophesied to kill his father (Soph. *OT* 712-13).

95. Richardson 1974, 231-4; Patterson 1985, 105-6; and Golden 1986, 252-6.


97. On exposure as a motif in myth see Murray 1943 and Redford 1967. …


100. Ibid., 43 = 71.


103. First at *Ant.* 773-80, 1068-71; secondly at 1192-1205.


105. Dodds 1966, 45, 49 = 1973, 74, 77. This curious doctrine of enlarged sensibility was no mere temporary aberration of Dodds' thought, for he had enunciated it years before in Dodds 1944, xliii = 1960, xlvi. Dodds does not specify the source of this quotation, but David Sansone has most plausibly suggested to me that it is an inaccurate quotation from memory of Johnson's *Life of Waller* §139: “From poetry the reader justly expects, and from good poetry always obtains, the enlargement of his comprehension and elevation of his fancy.”

Abbreviations

ac: L'Antiquité classique
bics: Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London
cb: Classical Bulletin
cp: Classical Philology
cq: Classical Quarterly
cr: Classical Review
cmc/cv: Echoes du Monde Classique/Classical Views
g&r: Greece and Rome
grbs: Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies
hs: Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
jhs: Journal of Hellenic Studies
lcm: Liverpool Classical Monthly
rhmus: Rheinisches Museum
tapa: Transactions of the American Philological Association
trgf B. Snell, Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1971-

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All of Sophocles' tragedies engage the spectator in the fundamental metatheatrical problem of appearance versus reality. The dichotomy of appearance and essence is one of the favorite subjects of serious drama. By its very nature, drama deals in illusion, in the creative tension of one person or object standing in for or representing something else. As one of the masters of dramatic irony, Sophocles exhibits the keenest appreciation of the often invisible gulf that separates deeds from words and perception from reality. It is natural that someone so attuned to these fissures in experience would want to explore thoroughly the boundaries of his aesthetic medium. This exploration often calls attention to the irony of a character's situation in the story as well as the irony of the theatrical situation itself, the flickering “in and out” of illusion that is repeatedly created and destroyed in the course of a performance.

The so-called Theban Plays, Antigone, Oedipus Tyrannus, and Oedipus at Colonus, were not viewed by Sophocles as a deliberate cycle or trilogy. Oedipus at Colonus may be securely dated around 406, at the very end of the poet's long life; the other two plays came from earlier in Sophocles' career. There is evidence that Antigone dates from around 442, and Oedipus Tyrannus may have appeared between 429 and 425. While Sophocles was not the only tragedian to return to a particular myth at different stages of his career, the story of Oedipus' family obviously held a special fascination for him, drawing the enormous concentration of his powers in these three plays. In varying degrees, Sophocles' three most famous tragedies represent drama about drama.
ANTIGONE

All three Theban Plays use the illusion-versus-reality motif as a major component of their thematics. Antigone, the earliest of the three tragedies, is built on two contrasting visions of reality: the brutal, corporal world of the literalist Creon and the invisible world of the dead, which Antigone seeks to honor. One critic observes that during the course of the play, “Death will finally reveal the true apolís [cityless one] and the true hypsipolis [person held in high esteem by the city] and separate the illusion from the reality.” These contrasting visions of reality are embodied by two characters who strive for dominance as playwrights-within-the-play.

Sophocles was elected as a general in 441/40. One of the ancient hypotheses of Antigone claims that Sophocles won this post due to the popularity of this play. If true, this would place Antigone close to 442. Even if the anonymous author of the hypothesis is incorrect, it seems plausible that such a detail would not have been recorded unless it were at least chronologically possible. As a growing imperial power, Athens would have found particular resonance in a tragedy dealing with conflicts between state authority and private or local traditions and beliefs. Few surviving tragedies suggest the notion of the poet as [didáskalos] or “teacher of the polis” as clearly as does Antigone. The verb derived from [didáskalos] serves literally as the play's last word … (“The old are taught wisdom,” 1353). The tragedy serves as an object lesson in the dangers of tyrannical power—the kind of power that has come to the untested Creon and the expanding Athenian Empire.

Antigone is one of the few Sophoclean heroines who unequivocally sustains the weight of Cedric Whitman's vision of [areté]. Her self-image never suffers the kind of compromises that either threaten, injure, or overtake characters like Ajax or Electra. With Antigone, word and deed are never separate. Creon, on the other hand, offers a fine example of just such a fragmentation. The play ruthlessly exposes the dichotomy of Creon's noble-sounding speeches and sentiments and the hollowness that lies beneath them, a hollowness comparable with that of an egocentric actor.

It does not minimize Antigone's radiant moral purpose that the brunt of the dialogue and stage time is given to the character of Creon. Antigone, during the course of its action, strips away the illusion of Creon's integrity as a ruler, while affirming the real integrity of the heroine. The perception of his true identity as a petty, empty figure grows and develops throughout the play. In Creon's first appearance, his “ship of state” speech (162-210) is an impressive piece of self-representation. There is evidence that this speech was regarded in antiquity as a model of statesmanship. Demosthenes' great rival, Aeschines, had been an actor before turning to oratory; and one of his more notable roles had been Creon in Antigone. In order to bait his opponent about his deficiencies in citizenship, Demosthenes ordered that the “ship of state” speech be read over to Aeschines to remind him of the duties of a true statesman. Demosthenes' tactic would lack point unless Creon's speech were regarded by the average fourth-century audience as an idealistic statement of principle. In ridiculing the former actor, Demosthenes refers to him as “Creon-Aeschines” and berates him for not “repeating [the speech] over to himself to guide him as an ambassador.” Demosthenes might even have seen a deeper similarity between Sophocles' tyrant and “Creon-Aeschines”: both the dramatic character and the ex-actor have a fine patriotic speech in their “repertory” that only serves to illustrate their inner hollowness as politicians and as men.

Sophocles' Creon provides his audience with the necessary criteria to appreciate how far he falls from his own standard for the ideal ruler and citizen. The play's central development takes this exemplary speech of Creon's as a starting point, then steadily reveals his actual character through his ensuing actions. On a metatheatrical plane, Creon sets himself a noble role to play but fails to live up to the part. His selfish and cruel deeds … jar with his noble sounding words. … His failure as a ruler and as a man is a kind of theatrical-performative failure. His blustering tirades and posturing disintegrate his own family, revealing him to be “one who does not exist, equal to nothing” (1325). The “big words of the excessively boastful are punished with great blows”
While Ajax afforded examples of stage tyranny in the bullying figures of Menelaus and Agamemnon (who, like Creon, concern themselves with obstructing a burial), Creon's tyranny is made all the more memorable for its added metatheatrical dimension. During his confrontation with the captured Antigone, the princess remarks that “tyranny is happy in many things / particularly in being able to do and say whatever it wants …” (506-7). Creon's power is theatrically or performatively defined throughout Antigone. Like an egotistical actor/playwright, he controls what may be done … or said … as well as what may be seen and heard. He even endeavors to control other characters' exits and entrances. His attempts at being the only actor or speaker within the theater meet with opposition and failure from early on in the tragedy. By the end of the play, Creon has lost all of his “theatrical” control. Other voices successfully contend with his. He ends the tragedy not as the master of what may be shown or discussed but as a spectatorial object standing amid the ruins of his own family.

Creon will deliver his first public address as ruler as a kind of self-styled herald. … Antigone warns Ismene that he is about to come “here … and make proclamation … to those who do not know his rulings” (33-34). Creon himself uses the same language of heralding in respect to his proclamation: “I make proclamation … to the citizens …” (192-93). Creon's authority as herald is challenged when Antigone tells him, “It was not Zeus who made this proclamation” (450). Creon's authority as a “speaker” or “announcer to all” is directly threatened.

The exposure of Polyneices' corpse is referred to as a kind of ghastly act of showmanship. The body is left “to be seen … as a feast for dogs and birds” (206). This same presentational or spectatorial language is adopted by the Sentry, who describes the mysterious first burial of the body as causing the corpse to “vanish” (… 255). Creon, the cruel showman, is incensed that the grotesque spectacle might be taken from the gaze of his captive audience, the Theban citizens. The worst extremes of Creon's hubris are attained when the king orders Antigone to be brought onstage so that she may be killed “right in front of her bridegroom” (760-61). Haemon averts this ghastly spectacle by leaving the stage.

As ruler, Creon views himself as the ultimate speaker or doer. The burial is referred to repeatedly as “the deed,” that action which the chief “actor” will not allow (252, 262, 273). The presence of the comic Sentry serves to highlight the disparity between Creon's self-image and his real nature. The Sentry allows us to examine, in Reinhardt's words, “the mighty man … seen by a creature who shrieks and shakes, is chosen by lot, dilly-dallies, and comforts himself tragically with ‘fate.’”

David Grene has described the role of the Sentry as “a remarkable experiment in Greek tragedy in the direction of naturalism of speech.” Grene seems to have mistaken the most remarkable aspect of the Sentry's words: his speech is notable not so much for “naturalism,” an effect difficult to achieve in Greek tragic verse, as for the character's use of an inflated, pseudotragic tone (223-24, 235-36). The Sentry speaks as a comic figure, aware that he has been thrust into a tragic setting. He self-consciously views himself as a messenger … bearing bad news (… 277). His self-conscious status as a messenger puts him in contention with Creon who quickly tries to control this "rival" performer, angrily ordering him to say his piece and leave quickly (244). But the Sentry cannot be controlled so easily. The Sentry's ability to share and dominate stage time helps to undermine Creon's authority on stage. Clearly Creon is not the only doer and speaker. In fact, he is powerless to silence even this lowliest of characters and drive him from the stage before the Sentry establishes an easy rapport with the theater audience. The Sentry also displays an ability to “stage” his arguments with himself for the audience's benefit.

Often I was halted by my thoughts,
making me turn myself around in circles.
For my soul … found a voice, speaking many things to me:
"Wretch, why go where you'll pay the price on arrival?"
"Poor one, stalling again? And if Creon learns this
from another man, how could you not suffer for it?"
Revolving like this, I made a short journey long ...

(225-31)

His description of “revolving,” “turning in circles,” and the reported speech of his “soul” suggests rich mimetic possibilities for the actor. For the passage to be effective, the contrast between the Sentry's persona and his “soul” needs to be strongly highlighted by the actor. This reenacted self-interrogation is full of comic potential and prefigures the self-interrogation performed by slave characters in Plautine comedy.  

By his words and body language, the lowly comic character calls attention to playacting. We see an actor playing a character who suddenly fragments into several “characters,” all aspects of the same theatrically represented figure. The Sentry's tendency to “fragment” into different voices makes him appear a character of less dramatic integrity than Creon, with whom he shares the stage. But the Sentry's brief, comic role playing momentarily destabilizes Creon's illusory sense of power; and his ludicrous cringing before Creon somehow makes Creon share in his ridiculousness.

The Sentry's inept use of a tragic-style gnome (“For I come with a firm grasp on the hope / that one cannot suffer anything other than what is fated,” 235-36) along with his explanation of his breathless entry (“My lord, I will not say that I have arrived breathless / due to speed, plying a nimble foot,” 223-24) have a touch of the metatheatrical. They all suggest a consciousness of theatrical convention. Speech and action … are the principal building blocks of all drama, and they are the things Creon most wants to monopolize and control. The Sentry's talkative personality is an affront to Creon's stage management. “You are a chatterer by nature, it is clear,” the tyrant proclaims. Picking up on Creon's need for control, the Sentry responds, “Yes, but at least I'm not the one who did this deed …” (320-21). Another speaker is exasperating enough for Creon in his theater/state, but not as exasperating as another “doer.”

As the Sentry leaves the stage under Creon's bitter mandate to find the criminal, he bids farewell to his monarch.

Well, may [the criminal] be found, that's most important. But whether he is caught or not, for fortune will decide that, you shall certainly not see me coming here again. As it is, I have been saved beyond hope and my own expectation, and owe the gods much thanks.

(327-31)

The force of these lines is directed not at Creon but to the audience. The Sentry's entertaining performance and his incongruous presence have undermined Creon's authority before the eyes of the theater spectators. His promise never to return “here” (… 329) is the remark not only of a character leaving the stage but of a comic actor self-consciously saying good-bye to his audience.

The Sentry's later reentry reminds the audience of his earlier promise.

My lord, men should never swear an oath not to do something. Afterthought belies intention. I could have sworn that it would be long before I came here again because of your threats which lashed at me.

(388-91)
The comedy in the Sentry's reentrance is muted by the fact that he is bearing Antigone to her doom. It is typical of his ambiguous placement within the tragedy that, while offering momentary diversion from the rising tensions of the action, this peripheral figure hints so succinctly at the serious issue of Creon's dangerous stubbornness: unlike the Sentry, Creon will *not* learn to change his mind before it is too late.

The question of who is the central character of the play, Antigone or Creon, would probably have been of little interest to an ancient audience. Modern criticism has exerted much energy on this vexed question, which arises from Antigone's disappearance from the stage in the middle of the play and Creon's control of the rest of the tragedy. This structural feature has led the play to be termed a “diptych,” the result of Sophocles' relative immaturity as a dramatist, before achieving structural perfection in his later plays. The same charge has been brought against *Ajax* and *Trachiniae*. These concerns vanish when the performance conditions of the ancient theater are taken into account in all three of these allegedly “diptych” dramatic structures. The allocation of roles between the three actors is particularly evocative in *Antigone*. One actor doubled as Antigone with Teiresias and either Eurydice or the Messenger. A second actor doubled as Ismene, the Sentry, Haemon, and either the Messenger or Eurydice. One actor played Creon only. The voice and physical presence which brought Antigone to life before the ancient audience would go on to assume the role of Teiresias, the seer who reveals the Gods' anger and leads Creon to yield belatedly to their will (and Antigone's). The same “Antigone” actor would also impersonate either the Messenger, who relates the heroine's fate, or Eurydice, whose brief appearance signals the final destruction of Creon's family wrought by his opposition to Antigone. The “Ismene” actor would enjoy a similar association with his later roles. The Sentry and Haemon represent sympathetic figures who, for all their many contrasts, are both falsely accused by Creon.8

These probable role assignments point to an aesthetic unity attained by the act of ancient theatrical performance. Viewed in this light, the tragedy is no longer a diptych when we can hear and see the “Antigone” actor absorbed into other characters who maintain the conflict “she” had instigated with Creon. Creon's function as a solo role defines that character's position in the play. He is isolated both by his extreme political stance and by the physical realities of performance within the Theater of Dionysus. His role is played by a single actor surrounded by colleagues who continually change their roles. As Creon is isolated from his surrounding actors, so too is he isolated from the polis of Thebes and the polis represented by the theater audience. The play makes frequent reference to the ruler and the polis, often contrasting the populous city-state and the isolated nature of the tyrant. This contrast contains a latent theatrical corollary, the opposition of a crowded *theatron* and a single actor performing before it.

The tragedy opens with Antigone and Ismene furtively entering from the skene door to discuss what Antigone has learned about Creon's decree. The skene becomes the Theban royal palace, and the two women see their situation as one that will potentially isolate them from their polis. That polis, the citizens who make up Thebes, is inescapably equated with the polis that fills the theater auditorium. Ismene balks at setting herself against the overwhelming force of Creon and the city. “What, you intend to bury [the corpse] when the polis has forbidden it?” (44). Ismene tells Antigone she is incapable of defying the citizens (… 79). The performative implications of these two theatrical figures, caught between the skene and the vast auditorium containing thousands of Athenian citizens, resonates throughout these lines.

Antigone proposes the clandestine burial to her sister as a kind of action which will reveal Ismene's inner nature. “You will show … whether your nature is noble or if you are a coward sprung from a noble line” (37-38). Ismene refuses “to act against the citizens” (… 79). She argues that she is weak and incapable of defying those in power. While she may be as appalled as Antigone by the proclamation, Ismene counsels that the sisters keep their feelings to themselves and endure this and whatever worse may follow (61-64). Antigone's rage against her sister is charged with the performative language of action and deeds. “I would not tell you to do it, even if you were / willing to act … after all, nor would I be content for you to act … with me. / Rather you be … the sort of person that you decide, but for my part / I shall bury him. It's noble for me to do
… this and die” (69-72). Antigone refuses to separate her inner and outer nature. She insists on acting or doing the deed dictated by her inherent nobility. By her insistence on action, she irrevocably breaks from her sister and sets in motion her challenge to Creon's political and performative authority. The tyrant's rule necessitates subjects who will be too intimidated to speak or act against the ruler. For Antigone, action and intention are inseparable. She will not be the fragmented, doubly theatrical figure her sister has become. When Ismene attempts to share her sister's punishment, Antigone rejects her. “I don’t tolerate a loved one who only loves in words …” (543). Unlike Ismene or the Sentry, both of whom were undertaken by the same actor, Antigone is unafraid to link deed with word in challenging Creon's autocratic rule. “Did you do this deed?” … Creon demands when she is brought before him. “I say that I did it and I do not deny it” … (442-43). This conflict of inner and outer nature, of word and action, will be developed further by Sophocles in the relationship between Electra, Chrysothemis, and Clytemnestra.

Antigone will make frequent reference to the phenomenon of the single individual (or performer) opposing the will of a vast polis (or audience). At first it is Antigone who is portrayed as the lone outsider. But as the play progresses, Creon is presented increasingly as the lone individual whose folly leads him to oppose the polis and the gods. Antigone's arraignment before Creon marks a turning point in the audience's perception of the outsider or “cityless one,” as well as a development of the conceit of the audience standing in for the Theban polis. Antigone says:

How could I have achieved more glory
Than by burying my brother?
These here all … would
Say this if fear didn't seal their mouths.
But tyranny is happy in many things,
Particularly in doing and saying whatever it wants.
Creon: You alone … among these Cadmeans see this.
Antigone: They … see it too; but they keep their mouths
shut because of you.

(502-9)

The “Theban citizens” or “polis” now becomes the Chorus and the theater audience as well. The theater audience's silence and attentiveness to the “actor” Creon blend into the stage illusion of the Chorus, the onstage audience. This passage begins Creon's isolation from all other stage figures, an isolation that will increase with Creon's condemnation of Antigone. The rhetorical figure of the single person opposing the polis, as enunciated by the Chorus's preceding songs (106, 370), now seems to be identified as Creon alone. In his argument with his father, Haemon cautions Creon: “I can hear in the dark how the city mourns for this girl” (692-93). Creon has replaced Antigone as the figure isolated from the audience and surrounding theatrical environment, the on- and offstage cities.

Haemon: No city … belongs to one man.
Creon: Isn't the city considered to belong to its rulers?
Haemon: You would be an excellent monarch for a desert.

(737-39)

Sophocles signals Creon's final collapse as the playwright/director-within-the-play when he crumbles before the Chorus and asks “What must I do then? Tell me, and I will obey” … (1099). Even after Creon learns his mistake and rushes to undo his error, the polis-audience relationship is maintained. When Eurydice silently exits to commit suicide after the Messenger's speech, the Messenger reasons that she does not think it proper to utter laments before the city (1246-50). The last scene, when Creon bears Haemon's body into the theater, is charged with the language of revelation and visual presentation. Creon, the arch realist, has come to acknowledge the unseen forces that drove Antigone. His folly is manifested in the dead son he bears and the
dead wife revealed to him on the eccylema. He and the characters on stage with him regard him and the carnage surrounding him as spectatorial objects or theatrical symbols exemplifying a moral lesson (1263-64, 1270, 1279-80, 1293-95, 1297-99). 9

Twice during the course of the tragedy, the Chorus makes direct reference to the god of theater. 10 During the parodos celebrating the defeat of the Argive forces, the Chorus calls on Bacchus to be its leader in night-long celebratory dances at the gods' temples … (152-55). This passage is interesting not only for its references to the god but for the self-reflexive device of the Chorus discussing its primary performative function. … This image of Bacchus leading his dancing Theban countrymen is soon contrasted with Creon's first entrance and his proclamation. After Teiresias' warnings have finally prevailed upon Creon and he leaves to release Antigone, the Chorus bursts into an excited hymn to Dionysus (1115-52). As in comparable moments in Ajax, Trachiniae, and Oedipus Tyrannus, the Chorus prematurely predicts a happy resolution to the play's action. Dionysus, the “dance leader of the fire-breathing stars” ( … 1146-47) is urged to appear “with cleansing foot” (1144).

These two references to Dionysus are rich in suggestiveness. Each is placed at a deciding moment in the drama: before Creon proclaims his fateful edict and after he has renounced his stance against Antigone. The passages encourage the listener to look for the theater god's literal or figurative manifestation on stage. After the parodos, Creon symbolically renounces Dionysus in his insistence upon punishing the dead Polynoeics. Two of Dionysus' greatest attributes were as a dissolver of boundaries and as a god of ecstatic release. Creon's autocratic rule, with its insistence on male prerogative, stands opposed to any Dionysian impulse. Like Pentheus in the Bacchae, Creon refuses to be bested by a woman, lest he relinquish his masculine authority (484-85). Unlike the god who “makes no distinction of ages” (Bacchae 204-9), Creon refuses to learn from the ideas of the young (726-27). The god of role playing and masks forsakes the actor playing Creon, allowing him only the one role to play, while the other two actors are constantly changing characters.

By the time the Chorus pleads for Dionysus to appear as a redeemer (1115-54), it is already too late. The god's presence is felt in the closing scenes of Antigone, but it is in his role as destroyer and god of destructive madness. Dionysus, through his servant Sophocles, has attempted to teach Creon and the Athenian audience the limits of mortal power and masculine prerogative. By electing Sophocles to the generalship in 441/40, the Athenian audience signaled the playwright that, unlike Creon, it had grasped his lesson, at least for the moment.

OEDIPUS TYRANNUS

One can imagine the disturbing effect of Oedipus Tyrannus upon its original audience, if the consensus of scholarly opinion is correct in dating the play to the early or mid 420s. This period saw Athens, already enmeshed in the Peloponnesian War, undergoing bouts of plague that wiped out hundreds of citizens, including Sophocles' friend Pericles. Sophocles seems to have originated the plotting device of the Theban plague as the motivation behind Oedipus' fateful investigation. The Athenians wanted their tragic playwrights to create distance between the contemporary polis and the catastrophes represented in the theater. With their own plague fresh in the collective memory, the Theban plague would have reminded the Athenians of one of their worst civic calamities. Perhaps this is one of the reasons this play, so often regarded as the highest achievement of the ancient theater, only won second place.

In addition to its startling connection to contemporary events, the play harks back to the earlier Antigone. Jebb perceived an analogy between the first entrance of Creon in Antigone with the proclamation delivered by his ill-fated nephew near the beginning of Oedipus Tyrannus (216-75). "In each case a Theban king addresses Theban elders, announcing a stern decree, adopted in reliance on his own wisdom, and promulgated with haughty consciousness of power; the elders receive the decree with a submissive deference under which we can perceive traces of misgiving; and as the drama proceeds, the elders become spectators of calamities.
occasioned by the decree, while its author turns to them for comfort.” Both *tyrannoι* engage in similar arguments with Teiresias. Both learn harsh lessons concerning the limitations of human power and the unseen forces that move below the surface of nature. Like Creon in *Antigone*, Oedipus is a ruler described as a “*tyrannos,*” a word with associations of nonhereditary kingship and the pejorative sense of “tyranny.” Both tragedies seem to play with the double implications of this word. Like the Creon in *Antigone*, King Oedipus can be rash and destructive when opposed; and his stubborn determination forces the action of the play to its horrible conclusion. But Oedipus is a far more complex figure than the earlier tyrant. It is as if Sophocles had fused elements of Antigone's character, particularly her propensity to sacrifice herself for a higher cause, with that of her uncle.

Even more than the Creon of *Antigone*, the protagonist of *Oedipus Tyrannus* possesses qualities that are analogous to those of a theater artist. Oedipus is a dramatic figure obsessed with performing actions and speeches and revealing truths for the entire polis before his palace/skene. Oedipus promises his citizens and the theater audience that he “shall make manifest” (… 132) the mystery threatening his polis. Ironically, he himself becomes the object revealed (… 1184). His relentless search for the truth about the past ultimately exposes the searcher, much as a finished artwork reveals as much about its artificer as about its subject matter. Oedipus is presented as a master of action and deeds and a genius at the decipherment and manipulation of language. He attained his kingship after engaging in a deadly competition of quasi-literary and performative dimensions. Unaided by gods or men, Oedipus answered the riddle of the Sphinx, described as “the rhapsode hound” (… 391). This curious image of the Sphinx as “rhapsode” makes their encounter an *agon* not only between human being and monster but between two verbal and performative artists.

After his true parentage has been revealed, Oedipus asks the Shepherd why he had spared the crippled infant's life so many years before. The old man responds, “I pitied it, my lord” (… 1178). From the beginning, Oedipus has been an object of pity, either for the few who were aware of his cursed birth and subsequent mutilation or for the theater audience viewing a man who is blind to the horrid circumstances of his life. Pity, one of the cardinal tragic emotions in Aristotelian literary theory, is at the core of Oedipus' dramatic situation. The Shepherd's line at 1178 reveals that “pity” is, ironically enough, the reason Oedipus survived to experience the present catastrophe. Part of the irony rests in the self-reflexive nature of the Shepherd's “pity.” Oedipus is the ultimate subject for tragedy. He stimulates pity in the theater audience and owes his existence to the pity he generated in the Shepherd.

After the Shepherd's final revelations, the Chorus literally refers to Oedipus as possessing a fate that is a “paradigm” … of humanity's unhappiness (1193). The Second Messenger's first lines, which introduce the tragedy's final revelation, are striking for their explicitly metatheatrical language. “O you who are held in greatest honor in this land, / what deeds you shall hear of, what deeds you shall see, and what / grief you shall endure …, if you still have a kinsmen's regard for the house of Labdacus” (1223-25). These words prepare the audience to view Oedipus' imminent reentry, stumbling and blinded, as a *theatrical* experience. The Messenger will refer to him as a “sight” … the “beholding” … of which will lead to “pity” (… 1295-96).

Like *Antigone's* Creon, Oedipus is used to “doing and saying whatever he wants” which, as Antigone observed, is the prerogative of the *tyrannos* (*Ant.* 506-7). Like the earlier Creon, Oedipus is a play-wright/director-within-the-play who displays formidable powers in controlling the stage space and other characters' performative behavior, as well as correctly perceiving a challenge to his dramaturgical authority. But in this later, far more ironic work, Oedipus misinterprets the source of this metatheatrical challenge. Oedipus wrongly perceives his rival dramatist to be Creon, who, in Oedipus' view, is scripting and directing subordinates like Teiresias to set the groundwork for a political coup.

After the scene with Teiresias, Oedipus suspects an insurrection is underway. It is particularly ironic that Oedipus, now in Creon's position in *Antigone*, suspects Creon as the instigator of the alleged plot. Creon, Oedipus charges, is a man with a “daring face” (… 533). The theatrical nature of Creon's alleged duplicity
(his deceptive behavior and stage management of others) is registered by Oedipus' use of … a word that means both “face” and the actor's “mask.” Oedipus charges Creon with behaving like a malevolent dramatist. Unlike Antigone's direct challenge to Creon in her play, utilizing defiant words and actions to subvert her uncle's authority, Oedipus perceives a subtler metatheatrical game. Creon, according to Oedipus, is disguising his handiwork and scripting others to do his dirty work for him. Oedipus asks Creon, “Did you think that I would not recognize the act … as yours?” (538). Oedipus is accusing his brother-in-law of dramatist-like behavior, sending (… 705) the “actor” Teiresias into the theater after “persuading him by speeches to tell lying words” (… 526). Creon has allegedly used Teiresias as a mouthpiece for slanderous accusations, which would have tainted his own lips had he spoken them directly (706). Teiresias has served Creon much as an actor serves his playwright. Even the reverend prophet's elderly behavior is challenged as a sham or “seeming” by Oedipus. The prophet will not be physically harmed, Oedipus reasons, because he “seems old” (… 402). Oedipus' position is under threat, but the threat does not come from any of his fellow characters within the play, as Creon had experienced in Antigone. In Oedipus Tyrannus, the threat to the tyrannos's autonomy as playwright/director-within-the-play comes from outside the mimetic world of the tragedy. The challenge resides with the gods and with Sophocles.

Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Sophocles' Oedipus is a character who has rejected the role thrust upon him by divine (or authorial) prophecy. Oedipus has endeavored to ward off the disasters predicted for him and to script his life in his own way. Oedipus is a character who discovers himself trapped within a play he does not want to write or act in. For all his eagerness to solve Laius' murder and discover his own identity, Oedipus has been “found out, unwillingly, by time, the all seeing” (… 1214). The true metatheatrical rivalry is between Oedipus, the playwright-within-the-play, who fulfills his traditional role “unwillingly” … as incest and parricide, and Sophocles, who enjoys omniscient power over his creations who are striving within the orchestra circle. Something of this character-author conflict has been observed in the frustrating closure of Trachiniae. The idea of a character in conflict with his or her prescribed role has grown in complexity since Hyllus challenged the gods and the playwright for their treatment of their “children” on stage. Sophocles' metadramatic irony has deepened in the time since Trachiniae and Antigone.

As in Antigone, the part of the tyrannos serves as the protagonist's only role in the play, accenting Oedipus' position as the unambiguous focal point of the tragedy. A second actor played the Priest, Jocasta, and the Shepherd. The second actor's parts share interesting resonances. It is fitting that the “Jocasta” actor also plays the Shepherd who received the infant Oedipus from her so many years before (1173). The casting presents Oedipus with the missing link with his mysterious past. It is a piece of extraordinary performative irony that the Priest who represents religious orthodoxy within the play literally speaks with the same voice as Jocasta, the religious skeptic. The third actor played Creon and the Corinthian Messenger, a fitting arrangement since both characters bring misleading “good” news to Oedipus.

The role of Teiresias could have been played by either the second or the third actor. Either assignment contains interesting performative resonances. If Teiresias is played by the “Creon” actor, the irony of Oedipus' accusations against Creon would be intensified. Teiresias would literally be speaking from the same “mouth” (705-6) as Creon. This theatrical situation would give Oedipus' mistaken accusations a delightfully paradoxical dimension. The other possibility, that the “Priest/Jocasta/Shepherd” actor plays Teiresias, is more likely. It is equally attractive in terms of ironic implications and appears more aesthetically elegant in terms of theatrical applicability. If the “Priest” actor plays the prophet, the protagonist avoids having to rapidly change back and forth between Creon and Teiresias within a little over 350 lines (150-512), certainly a possible feat, but an awkward and unnecessary one, considering the availability of the deuteragonist, who has 480 lines between the Priest's exit and Jocasta's emergence from the skene (150-630). This latter schematic allows for a more equal allotment of acting responsibilities between deuteragonist and tritagonist in the first half of the play. In performative terms, it creates the effect of both the Priest and Teiresias, the two symbols of religious orthodoxy, inhabiting the body and voice of the “Jocasta” actor. Jocasta is the character whose disbelief in oracles and in any middlemen between humans and divinity will so scandalize the Chorus.

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The Second Messenger also could have been played by either the second or third actor. Assigning the role to the third actor is attractive for reasons of balance, making his responsibilities more equal to the second in amount of lines and stage time. It also allows one actor to handle all of the messenger roles, a configuration encountered in the tritagonist's doubling of both messenger parts in Euripides' Bacchae.

Oedipus' character suggests the poet's refining vision of the Creon-Antigone opposition of some dozen years earlier; the play also affords a second glimpse of Creon himself. The Creon of this play is hardly the bully of the Antigone, but much of his presence in this later play carries intertextual, metatheatrical associations with the earlier character. Creon's speech about the disadvantages of kingly power (583-602) contains strong irony in light of his royal performance in Antigone. Creon's argument with Oedipus recalls the agon between Creon and Haemon. Stichomythic exchanges like

Oedipus: I must be ruler.
Creon: Not if you rule badly.

(OT [Oedipus Tyrannus] 628-29)

or Creon's remark “I have a share in the city too, it's not yours alone” (630) could easily find a place in the agon scenes of Antigone. The audience member familiar with Antigone would appreciate the ironic role reversal in Creon's position. In Oedipus' tragedy, Creon seems to play Haemon's role by arguing with a tyrannical ruler. For all of Creon's protestations that kingship holds no attractions for him, he assumes kingly responsibility with great alacrity after Oedipus' downfall. Creon's newfound power is manifested by his stage management of his nephew and his children during the exodos. Creon readily tells the blinded Oedipus when and where he may exit the theater space (1429, 1515, 1521). “Do not desire to have power in everything,” Creon admonishes, “for power did not accompany you through all your life” (1522-23). When Oedipus blesses Creon for bringing Antigone and Ismene to their father, it is impossible not to register the irony of Oedipus' wish that better fortune may attend Creon than has overseen Oedipus' fate (1478-79). That wish resonates with the catastrophe of the Antigone play.

Oedipus Tyrannus borrows from situations and characters in Antigone but rephrases them into entirely new configurations. Both tragedies are concerned with the limitations of a ruler's vision. Oedipus Tyrannus, as Karl Reinhardt has written, is a play devoted to the “tragedy of human illusion.” In this play, “the danger to man lies not in the hubris of human self-assertion but in the hubris of seeming as opposed to being.”

Reinhardt's view, with its obvious analog to the conditions of theater itself, an art form created out of appearances and deception, has influenced many subsequent interpreters. Seale, admitting his debt to the German scholar, envisions “the very matter of the tragedy” resting upon the protagonist's perception of his world in the play.

Creon's “ship of state” speech in Antigone (162-90) gains ironic power only when viewed against his later actions. The Oedipus Tyrannus begins with the tacit assumption that the theater audience is thoroughly aware of the title character's genuine identity as incestuous parricide. The rich, obsessive irony of Oedipus' words is present from the play's opening speech (1-13). The play strips away the layers of illusion that surround the protagonist until he perceives his true identity, the identity the theater audience was aware of from the beginning.

Ajax and Trachiniae have already afforded examples of one of Sophocles' favorite metatheatrical devices, the phenomenon of the audience-within-the-play. With this strategy, the playwright focuses the spectators' attention on a character whom they watch in order to gauge their own responses to what they see and hear. Oedipus Tyrannus is structured so as to focus attention on how Oedipus receives and processes information. The audience is fascinated to watch how he reacts to the events occurring around him. Near the beginning of the play, Oedipus remarks that no one suffers as much as he does for his dying city (59-61). He insists that the
investigation be conducted before the suppliants (and theater audience) who have assembled before the palace door. “Speak before all” (… 93), Oedipus urges, engaging both the characters surrounding him before the skene and the theater audience. During much of the play's action, Oedipus self-consciously plays the part of the ideal monarch—a role he mistakenly believes he has won by merit rather than merely inherited. The suppliants, and, by extension, the theater audience, have come expecting him to act like a king, and his words and actions do not disappoint. He is an ideal audience and ideal actor, suffering with those he sees suffer and then offering himself as the agent and, ultimately, the scapegoat of his community. Throughout the play, the protagonist represents the ultimate actor, “the greatest in all men's eyes” (40).

When the final revelation occurs during the interrogation of the Shepherd, Oedipus turns from one who sees or reveals things for others (… 132) into the thing seen, the person revealed (… 1184). This new, terrible vision of himself as the most horrible of spectatorial objects paradoxically moves him out of the audience’s sight with his exit into the skene. Once inside the palace/skene building, Oedipus destroys his eyes, the organs of Apollo and the principal means of perceiving theater, at least in the Greek imagination. The blinded Oedipus will later remark that he would have destroyed his hearing had that been possible (1386-89). Oedipus rejects the senses of sight and hearing, the two “theatrical” senses,ironically transforming himself into the most shocking of theatrical revelations. His self-conscious display of his own degradation at the end of the play is one of the most harrowing sequences in Western drama. Reinhardt observes: “Now there are no biers, no eccyclema, no apparatus. … instead of being brought in, put on show so that men can point him out, the victim is eager to put himself on show, to display the monstrous discovery that he has made in his search for himself: the blinded man he has been all along.” Oedipus is perhaps the greatest of Sophocles' internal director/playwrights. His final transformation into a blind pariah is the supreme example of the duality of human life, its dangerous instability, its ability to turn one being into its apparent opposite. Oedipus becomes the image of Teiresias, his former nemesis. The blinded king, once rooted in power and wealth, is reduced to “a voice” that “floats on the wings of the air” (… 1310). Just as disaster has brought Oedipus closer to his earlier opponent, Teiresias, the haunting image of the blinded Oedipus' “floating voice” suggests he has attained a mysterious parity with an even earlier enemy, the demonic, flying “rhapsode” (391) called the Sphinx.

When Oedipus runs from the stage to confront Jocasta and blind himself, the Chorus sings its third stasimon, making Oedipus the “paradigm” of the tragedy of human “seeming.” ...

O race of mortals,
I count your life as no more than nothing.
For what man, what man has
more of happiness
than so much as a seeming
and after the seeming a falling away?
As an example, you,
your fate, you, o wretched Oedipus,
I deem no mortal happy.

(1186-96)

Illusion and seeming … are the bane and basis of existence. The horror of life may be seen in its parity with the theatrical experience, where seeming and representation are the foundation of perception. In Oedipus Tyrannus, theatrical seeming is employed to reveal all seeming. By analogy, the theatrical deception is yet another form of the “seeming” of human life. Human happiness, the very will to live, is portrayed as an illusion, as ephemeral as Oedipus' triumph and the present enactment that has recounted his story. The play exists as a means of revealing Oedipus. It is an illusion dependent on the destruction of Oedipus' illusion. Even after the apparent destruction of all “seeming” with Oedipus' self-discovery and blinding, the seeming-versus-reality dichotomy remains. The blinded Oedipus begs Creon to let him touch his children
again. “If I lay my hands on them I can seem … to have them with me, as when I could see” (1469-70).

Seeming and duality are at the core of the Oedipus world. When announcing to the citizens his investigation into Laius' death, Oedipus promises: “I shall speak these words as both a stranger to the story, / and as a stranger to the deed” (… 219-20). Oedipus' relationship with the Laius story is as paradoxical as the relationship between the actor playing Oedipus and his role. The actor is a “stranger” to the words and deeds Sophocles has directed him to perform. Nevertheless, the actor says and does these things as if they were his own speeches and actions. Oedipus is actorlike in his taking upon himself words and deeds on the behalf of other characters. … Oedipus' ambiguous relationship to his theatrical environment is analogous to the theater audience's relationship to tragedy. In order to enjoy tragedy as an aesthetic experience, members of the audience must perceive the subject matter of tragedy as something strange … or “other” than their personal lives or experiences. At the same time, tragedy must partake of the deepest fears and anxieties of its audience if it is to excite the pity, fear, and catharsis that Aristotle articulated as the primary results of the tragic experience in the theater. This implicit connection between the deception … of life and the medium of theater works to remove the distance between the play and its audience. Segal has suggested the ways in which “Oedipus' fate in the orchestra mirrors back to the members of the audience.” Their absorption in his tragedy causes them to “temporarily lose [their] identity, [their] secure definition by house, position, friends, and become, like Oedipus, nameless and placeless.”

Oedipus is in a dilemma similar to that of Ajax. Both characters perform disastrous acts while under a deluded notion of reality. Both men are destroyed by a hostile cosmos. In Ajax the audience actually sees the divine instigator of the hero's downfall in the character of Athena. But in Oedipus Tyrannus, the metatheatrical role of the god, a playwright-within-the-play, has been absorbed into the fabric of the tragedy with breathtaking subtlety. In Oedipus Tyrannus, Sophocles enjoys a parity with Apollo, the divine artificer of Oedipus' misfortunes. The human playwright's craft portrays the operation of the god's design. Both divine and human artificers are paradoxically omnipresent yet unseen. Apollo's inscrutability and distance from the human characters whose actions he has manipulated serve as metaphors of the playwright's art. Sophocles also maneuvers his subjects into the patterns he desires while remaining outside of his creation. The relationship of Apollo to the playwright and the art of tragedy is suggested by the Chorus in its second stasimon.

In order to calm her husband's mounting anxiety, Jocasta has cast doubt upon the truthfulness of oracles. After the exit of Jocasta and Oedipus, the Chorus sings an ode denouncing impiety. The second strophe of the stasimon must be quoted in full. …

If someone walks with haughtiness in deed or word, unafraid of Justice and without reverence for shrines of Gods, may an evil fate seize on him, for his unlucky pride, if he will not gain advantage justly and keep away from unholy things or rashly touches what should not be touched. Amid such things, what man shall contrive to defend his life against angry arrows? For if such deeds are honored why should I be in a chorus?

(883-96)

In the antistrophe following, the Chorus remarks that it will no longer regard the important shrines of Delphi, Abae, or Olympia “unless these [oracles] do fit together / so as to be pointed at by all mortals” (902-3). Unless the oracles of Apollo are made manifest, an open, public spectacle which may be “pointed to” (… 902), the
Chorus will lose its sense of religion and, as it intimates in the preceding strophe, will literally stop “being a chorus” (… 896). If god (or the tragic dramatist) does not bring his prophecies to fruition, the Chorus will give up its principal function in the tragedy being enacted. The words are a challenge both to Apollo and to the playwright.

These lines from the second stasimon are among the most controversial in Sophocles, due to their metatheatrical implications. Bernard Knox’s summary of the parabasis-like effect of 896 eloquently states the implications of Sophocles’ trompe l’oeil.

“Why should I dance?” With this phrase the situation is brought out of the past and the myth into the present moment in the Theatre of Dionysus. For these words of the Chorus were accompanied not only by music but, as the Chorus’s very name reminds us, by dancing: this is the choral dance and song from which tragedy developed, and which is still what it was in the beginning, an act of religious worship. If the oracles and the truth do not coincide the very performance of the tragedy has no meaning, for tragedy is itself a form of worship of the gods. The phrase “Why should I dance?” is a tour de force which makes the validity of the performance itself depend on the dénouement of the play.

The placement of the stasimon after Jocasta’s rejection of oracular power is telling. Her denunciation of the oracles and the religious beliefs surrounding them is tantamount to her rejecting her place as a character within the play. She and Oedipus have no more freedom from the prophecy than they have from the dramatic script of which they are a part. Neither script nor prophecy may exist without the validation of a higher, divine order. The members of the Chorus intimate that their lives within Thebes and as characters within the present play are in jeopardy. The passage jolts the audience’s perceptions by simultaneously calling attention to the Chorus and the play's double nature as story and performance of that story. The Sophoclean stasimon may be compared with an equally self-referential passage in twentieth-century drama. In Beckett’s Endgame, Clove threatens that play's continuance in a manner similar to the defiant actions of Oedipus and Jocasta.

Clove: I'll leave you.
Hamm: No!
Clove: What is there to keep me here?
Hamm: The dialogue.(21)

The Chorus will again draw attention to its performative function when singing the ode to Mount Cithaeron (1086-1109). As so often in Sophoclean tragedy, the poet heightens the impact of the final calamity by having the Chorus prematurely celebrate a happy resolution. The direct reference to dancing … at 1092 bestows a self-conscious artificiality upon the Chorus's merrymaking. The Chorus is following its dramatic function—it is “dancing”—but the audience may realize that it is celebrating only because it remains incapable of penetrating the illusion of Oedipus' identity. It is intriguing that the Chorus theorizes that the foundling Oedipus may be the child of Dionysus himself (1105). Earlier, during the parodos, the Chorus had called upon Dionysus to redeem his suffering homeland (211). The wine god's presence is discernible throughout this play. Apollo's brother, a god of role playing and reversal, the patron of the tragic competition itself, Dionysus may be a spiritual father of Oedipus, if not a biological one. A god who often wreaks havoc on the family, who revels in duality and contradiction, is the appropriate force compelling Oedipus to discover his true identity.

Somewhat earlier in the play, Oedipus discussed the claims made by the lone survivor of the attack on Laius at the place where three roads met. The man claimed a troop of robbers committed the crime. Oedipus takes comfort in the alleged plurality of the attackers. “I was not the killer,” he reasons, “for one [man] is not the same as many” (845). Oedipus finally learns how “one may equal many” (845). In the Theater of Dionysus, one man performing actions (… 847) may stand in for any or all of his fellow men. It is this “standing in” that
allows the performer and the spectators the scope and resonance that make Oedipus Tyrannus one of the masterpieces of metatheater.\textsuperscript{22}

**OEDIPUS AT COLONUS**

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the relationship of the play's world to the world of the audience has changed drastically. The title of the play suggests something of what is unique and different in this final work, written at the close of the fifth century. Athens and its immediate environs figure comparatively rarely as a setting for fifth-century tragedy.\textsuperscript{23} The Athenian tragedians preferred setting their plays in areas other than Athens to create a sense of distance and perspective for their audiences. Tragedy, with its malfunctioning families and governments, often carries by its very nature an implicit critique of the society in which its action is set. While much of Greek tragedy may be said to offer a critique of fifth-century Athens, it does so obliquely through the comfortably distant mirrors of places like Thebes, Trachis, and Troy. The festival presentation of tragedy, an important propaganda tool of the Athenian Empire, could ill afford to openly criticize its host city by using it as an example of a “tragic” society. It is also probable that Athenian audiences themselves enjoyed the aesthetic distance that a foreign setting brought with it.\textsuperscript{24} From this perspective we may begin to appreciate Sophocles' boldness in giving his final play an Athenian setting.

Throughout his career, Sophocles devoted careful attention to the physical environments in which he set his plays. We may remember Ajax' solitary tent on the shore. The Paedagogus' opening lines in *Electra* create a brief but significant entry point to that play. *Philoctetes*, written only a few years before *Oedipus at Colonus*, gives significant attention to the depiction of Lemnos, whose desolate landscape carries significance both for the play's action and the nature of the title character. Colonus, however, is given the most detailed and thorough place description in Greek tragedy.

Knowledge of fifth-century skenographia is virtually nonexistent. It will never be known how detailed or schematic the actual stage setting or decoration would have been for this or any fifth-century play in the Theater of Dionysus. Whatever the means of scenic representation, Sophocles is taking a great risk in compelling his audience to compare the stage space representing Colonus with the real model. As one scholar notes, the fifth-century actors and audience “shared the very daylight of the grove one mile away.”\textsuperscript{25} Antigone, in describing the place to which she and her father have arrived, remarks that “the towers that shield the city are, to judge by the eye, far off” (14-16). “The towers” are none other than the temples of the Athenian Acropolis, which stood behind the audience in the Theater of Dionysus.\textsuperscript{26} Sophocles' choice of setting, whatever its physical representation on the ancient stage, displays his confidence in the power of his theater to withstand the comparison of his created scene with the genuine article.

The deme of Colonus and the city of Athens almost constitute dramatic characters within the play. Sophocles' choice of setting was probably influenced by events during the closing years of the Peloponnesian War. A troop of Boeotians was repulsed by Athenian soldiers near the grove of Colonus Hippios in 407 B.C., an action that may well have reminded Athenians of Oedipus' legendary powers within the grove.\textsuperscript{27} Colonus, like the Theater of Dionysus, is a sacred place where humanity may intermingle with the gods. Both the theater and the grove are located near the very heart of Athenian society. Colonus was Sophocles' own deme. His use of Colonus represents an example of an ancient dramatist “staging” his home and polis, endeavoring to preserve it, through dramatic action and poetry, from the ravages of war and time.

Critics have remarked on the idealizing nature of Sophocles' praise of his homeland, particularly the sublime encomium for Colonus and Athens contained within the first stasimon (668-719). It has been noted that many of the physical and moral features held up for admiration by the poet were already nearing destruction when Sophocles was writing the play. Kirkwood has compared the play's use of Athens with other near-contemporary texts such as Thucydides' version of Pericles' funeral oration and later fourth-century authors who would nostalgically describe the city as a utopia. Sophocles' emphasis on the “justness” or
“fairness” … of Athens represents the playwright's attempt to restore this lost trait to his crippled society. Athens is the one place capable of receiving a hero such as Oedipus. While Thebes desires possession of his body as a powerful talisman, Athens can accept all of the hero with his strange mixture of blessings and curses. Athens is civilized enough to understand and accept the contradictions inherent in Oedipus, as the city has symbolically accepted so many other tragic heroes into its community during performances at the Theater of Dionysus.

Just as Sophocles shows great daring in his choice of scene, his dramaturgical structure puts unprecedented demands on his three actors. Virtually all fifth-century tragedy may be comfortably performed by three actors without the necessity of a single role being shared between actors. Before Oedipus at Colonus, only a late work by Euripides, the Phoenician Women (411-409 b.c.), required a role to be shared by two actors and this text may well have been substantially altered for performances during the fourth century. In Oedipus at Colonus, Sophocles requires his deuteragonist and tritagonist to share the role of Antigone, while all three actors share the part of Theseus. This doubling feat sustains Sophocles' extraordinarily fluid dramatic structure and stands as a testimony to the versatility of late fifth-century actors, as well as to the innovative courage of the octogenarian playwright. Sophocles obviously wanted his last play to stand as a repository of spiritual and poetic vision as well as a testament to his unsurpassed technical skill. As so often occurs, Sophocles' doubling of roles will carry thematic and structural resonances for the tragedy's performative meaning. The protagonist played Oedipus throughout the play, returning, appropriately enough, to narrate his previous character's death in the guise of the Messenger. As if this were not enough, Sophocles required the protagonist to be recycled as Theseus for that character's final entrance from line 1750 to the end of the play. The deuteragonist played Antigone from lines 1-847, Theseus in that character's second and third scenes (886-1210 and 1500-1555), Polyneices, and Antigone again, from line 1670 to the end. The tritagonist played the Citizen, Ismene, Theseus at that character's first appearance (551-667), Creon, Antigone (1099-1555), and resumed the role of Ismene from line 1670 to the end.

If this scheme of doubling seems wildly complex and challenging, even for a cast of accomplished actors, it is. Some scholars, including Jebb, have postulated that Sophocles must have composed the play with a fourth actor in mind, but there is no evidence of a fourth actor being used for fifth-century tragedy. No other tragedy requires it; and the availability of a fourth actor would obviate the play's carefully orchestrated patterns of entrances and exits. Furthermore, this remarkable pattern of role allocation strongly suggests performative meaning. All three actors are allowed to play members of the Theban royal family. The role of Antigone, already one of the most popular heroines of classical tragedy, journeys from the deuteragonist to the tritagonist and back again to the original actor. The role of Theseus undergoes a far more remarkable journey with the role being played by all three actors in succession from the third, to the second, to the first agonist. Brian Johnston has written that ‘Theseus' role gradually increases in mimetic authority” during the course of the tragedy until, with Oedipus' transfiguration, Theseus stands as the last living link with Oedipus' heroism and as the custodian of Oedipus' legacy for Athens. At this point, Oedipus' voice literally speaks through the mask of Theseus. Theseus, by the end of the play, “has earned the right, as it were, to be ‘performed’ by the Oedipus actor. He has become the closest to Oedipus, underscored by the fact that he alone, and not Antigone nor Ismene, is privileged to witness Oedipus' wonderful death. … [The protagonist's assumption of Theseus at 1750] is the theatrical manifestation of Oedipus' gift to Athens.”

Sophocles' virtuosity as a playwright and the virtuosity he demands of his cast illustrate the void separating modern, naturalistic acting and production styles from those of classical Athens. They also reveal a playwright capable of great technical daring, even at the end of an unusually long and successful career. Only Verdi's stylistic self-recreation in his late operas, Otello and Falstaff, seems a comparable example of octogenarian creativity. The doubling and tripling of roles also points to the self-consciousness of Sophocles' dramaturgy, the way dramatic convention becomes part of a play's very meaning.
Unlike the Oedipus character in the *Tyrannus* play, the aged Oedipus has had from the opening moments of *Oedipus at Colonus* a clear perception of his true status and relation to the stage world that surrounds him. The “Oedipus” actor has stood his ground while the deuteragonist and tritagonist have each played deceptive characters like Creon and Polyneices, figures whose crafty and duplicitous speeches serve to disguise their ulterior motives. In the play's concluding moments, Theseus replaces Oedipus in the body and voice of the protagonist, whose voice and stage presence have, through the roles of Oedipus and the Messenger, represented the spiritual “reality” and integrity that lie at the core of Sophocles' play.

Were intertextual reference to other dramatic texts the sole criterion of metatheatricality, *Oedipus at Colonus* would rank among the most metatheatrical of ancient tragedies. While tragedy frequently carries allusions to earlier texts, tragic or epic, *Oedipus at Colonus* is particularly “bookish.” Sophocles adopted the pattern of earlier tragedies based on the theme of the suppliant. These “suppliant” plays, Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, Euripides' *Children of Heracles* and *Suppliants*, and many lost examples, served as the models for *Oedipus at Colonus*. Suppliant dramas are made up of a fairly traditional set of encounters: the suppliant meets and pleads with the host; an enemy seriously challenges the suppliant's security; the host encounters and defeats the enemy in a military action, winning security for the suppliant. In addition to the suppliant play schematic, *Oedipus at Colonus* presupposes an audience familiar with the two earlier Sophoclean Theban tragedies as well as Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and Euripides' *Phoenician Women*. The wrangling between Eteocles and Polyneices, described by Ismene (OC 336, 365-81), and the chillingly prophetic scene where Polyneices begs Antigone to give him burial, should he die in his campaign (OC 1399-1446), all suggest these earlier plays, which were already very famous when *Oedipus at Colonus* was written. Echoes of the *Antigone* prologue are evident in the brief exchange between the two grieving sisters, when Ismene sensibly tries to restrain the impulsive Antigone from visiting her father's mysterious burial place (OC 1724-36). Creon's seizure of Oedipus' daughters and their eventual restoration by Theseus rephrases and resolves the wrenching exodos of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where the blind Oedipus is presented with his children and then is forcibly parted from them by Creon. Sophocles is compelling us to look not only beyond the closure of the present play into an uncertain future: he is compelling us to look into *other plays* as well; plays by himself and by other poets.

Sophocles devotes much important stage time in *Oedipus at Colonus* to debating issues raised by *Oedipus Tyrannus*, particularly Oedipus' speeches of self-defense before the ghoulishly inquisitive Chorus of Colonian elders and, later, his enemy Creon (510-48, 960-1000). The present play functions as a belated sequel to the earlier tragedy. Like the *Eumenides*, which closed Aeschylus' *Oresteia* by bringing the action to an Athenian setting, *Oedipus at Colonus* uses its Athenian locale as a site of final consummation both for Oedipus and, by extension, for Attic tragedy itself. By absorbing the contradictions inherent in Oedipus (and in tragedy), Athens reaps the benefit of a mysterious protective power.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles reverses the structure of dramatic irony that he used to such great effect in *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In those earlier plays the audience beheld the struggle of two rulers, Creon and Oedipus, who each attempt to maintain a vision of the world based either on misapprehension or illusion. By the end of each tragedy, the rulers meet their downfall after finally seeing the truth of their situation, a truth that the audience has either known all along or has realized long before the character. In *Oedipus at Colonus* the protagonist moves from the lowest fortune to a state of deification. This last Sophoclean tragedy serves as a kind of “antitragedy,” a work that self-consciously reverses the tragic pattern of earlier plays. The *Colonus* play begins with an Oedipus who seems in some ways similar to the figure who exits the stage at the end of the *Tyrannus*. Like the earlier rendering of the character, the aged Oedipus has a habit of blundering upon places that are not to be touched by ordinary humans. Soon after Oedipus' first entrance in the orchestra, the Chorus describes him as “Terrible to see, terrible to hear” (… 141). These theatrically charged words are reminiscent of the description given the newly blinded Oedipus by the Second Messenger in *Oedipus Tyrannus*: “what deeds you shall hear of, what deeds you shall see, and what / grief you shall endure” (… OT 1224-25). At the start of Sophocles' last play, Oedipus remains the paradigm of theatrical suffering and
misfortune. But this similarity to his earlier self is superficial. The Chorus is soon won over by the old man's suffering. Antigone pleads for the Chorus and, by extension, the theater audience, to view the aged wanderer with “pity” (… 242). This “pity” will move the Colonians to sympathize with Oedipus to the point that they accept him into their community. … Ismene will wonder “when will the gods take pity … on [Oedipus’] sorrows?” (383-84). By the end of the play, even these distant, mysterious beings, Oedipus' cosmic audience, “take pity” and accept the old man into their company.

In Sophocles' last tragedy, the spectators and the protagonist share a “conspiracy of knowledge” from the opening moments of the play.32 The audience is assured of the “reality” of Oedipus' ultimate destiny, and the assurance is maintained throughout all of the challenges that face the protagonist before his final apotheosis. As Peter Burian has shown, the play follows a pattern, discernible in other suppliant dramas, that helps to assure the audience of Oedipus' ultimate victory.

The protagonist now represents a kind of “truth,” while all the obstacles he faces (the initial rejection by the Chorus, the evil machinations of Creon, the pleas of Polyneices) almost seem illusory, since they “are waged against [the certain] knowledge” of Oedipus' redemption.34 Oedipus' security seems so assured that the numerous threats posed to his position in the grove have about them the air of dramaturgical contrivance. Reinhardt notes the “baroque” tendencies of this final Sophoclean play with its fascination for minute detail representing a “struggle to create drama within drama itself.” Reinhardt describes Ismene's arrival as “a whole recognition scene in miniature,” as Antigone painstakingly describes her sister's distant approach from the parodos (310-21).

Oedipus' certainty concerning his destiny and rightful place within the Eumenides' grove protects his character from the ironic separation of word and action that occurs so frequently in Sophoclean drama. Oedipus and Athens itself, as personified by Theseus and the Chorus, are incapable of subterfuge and are able to see through the hypocritical “performances” of outsiders such as Creon and the Theban government he represents. Oedipus, the last of the tragic protagonists of fifth-century drama, is accepted into a society where word and action go hand in hand. This helps to make Oedipus at Colonus into a “tragedy to end tragedy,” a deliberate resolution of the nagging ambiguities at the core of so much fifth-century drama. Both Creon and the polis he represents reveal a false, “theatricalized” nature, in which appearance is more important than essence and where human beings are exploited as empty material objects. This is exemplified by Creon's scheme to force Oedipus back to Thebes, where he will live a prisoner outside the city perimeter. This cruel plot will enable Thebes to reap the benefit of Oedipus' physical presence while protecting the city from actual contact with the pariah. It may now be seen why Sophocles gives Ismene the grand entrance, which Reinhardt described as a “miniature recognition scene.” Ismene reports the oracle, enabling Oedipus to unmask Creon even before he enters the stage and begins his elaborate “performance” of sympathy with his wretched cousin. This oracle will prove the final salvation for both Oedipus and Athens.

Eteocles and Polyneices share a good part of Creon's “theatrical” perfidy. For the sons of Oedipus, Reinhardt observes, “action has parted company with meaning,” as has “the appearance of justice with its reality.”36 Athens represents a place where word and action exist in harmony, a place that can accept the paradox of Oedipus and, by extension, the paradox of tragic drama itself, which uses masks to “unmask truth.” Segal has argued that the character of Oedipus in this last play may be equated symbolically with the entire genre of tragedy. “By returning to this figure whose life contains the most extreme of tragic reversals, Sophocles seems to be consciously reflecting upon and transcending the tragic pattern which he did so much to develop.”37

Just as Oedipus may be equated with the performative genre in which he appears, so too may the aged playwright be found reflected in his title character. In no other Greek tragedy is it so natural to speak of a personal identification between a character and a playwright. Like Oedipus and the Chorus, Sophocles was an old man by the time he wrote his last play. That Sophocles was held as a symbol of veneration during the latter stages of his life may be inferred by the fact that he was given the cult name of Dexion (“Receiver,” or
“Hospitable One”) after his death and was worshiped as a beneficent deity (Vita 17). This curious historical fact unavoidably reminds the reader of the more spectacular deification that Oedipus undergoes in Sophocles' final play.

Several Greek and Roman sources preserve an anecdote that the octogenarian Sophocles was brought before a lawcourt by his middle-aged sons, who hoped to have the old man declared senile so that they might take control of his property. By way of self-defense, Sophocles was said to have read the jury the first stasimon of the play he was currently writing, Oedipus at Colonus (668-719), comprising the ode to Colonus and Athens. Sophocles won his case and “was escorted from the court as if from the theater …, with the applause and shouts of those present.” While such a story cannot be verified, its very existence suggests something of the remarkable personal identification perceived in the ancient world between Oedipus at Colonus and its creator. Whatever the reality of Sophocles' domestic situation in his last years, Oedipus' expression of love for Athens and his terrifying revilement of his son have encouraged ancient as well as modern readers to read an autobiographical element into the character. While this is a dubious practice at best, it would be impossible as well as absurd to attempt it with any other character from Greek tragedy.

Sophocles did not live to see the final capitulation of Athens to Sparta. His final play allows the playwright, through the voice of his protagonist, to utter a lasting benediction for his homeland. A conspiracy of knowledge has been forged between Oedipus and the spectators from the very first moments of the drama. The audience has been allowed to share with the aging hero a sure knowledge of his destiny. Now with his daughters and Theseus at his side, Oedipus hears the sound of thunder that presages his passing from this world.

I will teach you, Aegeus' son, something which shall be a treasure for your city that age cannot hurt.

(1518-19)

Oedipus commands Theseus not to describe his final moments to anyone, neither “to these citizens” … (1528), nor “to my own children, though they are dear all the same” (1529). By “citizens” Oedipus is ostensibly referring to the Chorus, but his words must surely carry to the theater full of Athenian citizens who, until this moment, have enjoyed their position as Oedipus' passive confidant. Oedipus is now passing into a stage of his journey that may be neither seen nor spoken about. It is impossible not to hear in Oedipus' final lines, before his onstage audience, the aged poet's farewell to his theater audience and to his city.

Come, dearest of friends,
may you yourself and this land and your helpers be blessed, and in that prosperous state remember me, one of the dead, and be fortunate forever.

(1552-55)

Oedipus at Colonus was first performed in 401 B.C., some four years after the death of Sophocles (406/5) and three years after the capitulation of Athens (404). Contemporary audiences must have been keenly aware of the play's unique status as the author's posthumous farewell to his community. The play forms a deliberate closure to Sophocles' career as a tragedian. In telling the story of Oedipus' final moments, Sophocles has found a means of absorbing his own persona into the artifice of the play. In effect, he “stages” himself before the citizens in the Theater of Dionysus, fashioning a dramatic character that may stand in for himself as artistic creator and defender of Athenian society. By immortalizing himself in the stage figure of Oedipus, Sophocles also seeks to give a mythic, theatrical permanence to his city's greatness, just as that greatness may well have seemed about to slip into the realm of history and myth. Sophocles understood the paradox of theatrical illusion as well as he did the paradox of tragic heroism. When Oedipus, the aged pariah, learns that
his wretched body contains a beneficent power for whatever land may claim him, he asks incredulously, “When I am nothing, then am I a man?” (393). By transferring the image of a noble, stainless Athens into the seemingly fragile medium of a dramatic text, Sophocles bestows the gift of eternity upon his polis and himself as an artistic creator. Sophocles has learned the lessons of over sixty years in the service of Dionysus, that stage illusion may mirror spiritual truth. He knows that the craftsmen of Dionysus practice an art as magical as the deathless, self-renewing Athenian olive trees.

Notes

1. Lesky, *Greek Tragic Poetry*, pp. 133, 152. For a more recent examination on the *Antigone* date, see the edition of Brown, p. 2.

2. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, p. 444 n. 49. Both Segal and Seale have written about the play's inexorable revelation of truth. Rosevach, “The Two Worlds of the *Antigone,*” pp. 16-26, is also interesting for its interpretation of the play's structure and thematics.


6. See especially Niall Slater's view of the monologue from *Epidicus* (81-103), in *Plautus*, p. 21. A near contemporary parallel to Sophocles' Sentry may be found in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* when Dicaeopolis repeatedly addresses his “soul” (… 480, 483) and his “suffering heart” (… 485) in humorously melodramatic fashion. There is also an obvious similarity between the Sentry and a Shakespearean clown such as Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*. Sophocles' bold juxtaposition of low- and high-born characters gives *Antigone* an unusually varied social view, comparable with Shakespeare's combination of Cleopatra and the asp salesman.

7. See also Brown, who cites the “out of breath messenger” motif as it appears in Euripides' *Medea* (1119-20) and Aristophanes' *Birds* (1121-22). *Antigone* 223-24 (ed. Brown).

8. See also Damen, “Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy,” p. 322.


10. For the self-reflexive aspects of Dionysian allusion within this and other tragedies, see Bierl, “Was hat die Tragödie mit Dionysos zu tun? Rolle und Function des Dionysos am Beispiel der ‘Antigone’ des Sophokles,” pp. 43-58, and *Dionysos und die griechische Tragödie: Politische und ‘metatheatralische’ Aspekte im Text*. On choral self-reference in Sophocles, see also Heikkilä, “‘Now I have a Mind to Dance,’” and Henrichs, “Why Should I Dance?”


15. A similar drawing of the theater audience into the stage action occurs on Creon's second entrance when he speaks to the members of the Chorus and, over their heads, to the theater audience (… 513). The idea of the theater audience standing in for the Theban population is further reinforced by Jocasta's first lines, warning Oedipus and Creon not to quarrel publicly before the “house” (634-38). Segal detects a theatrical self-consciousness in operation throughout the play, particularly in Sophocles' "visual" language, the way characters and situations are described as spectatorial objects—or, as in the death of Jocasta or Oedipus' blinding, objects that must not or cannot “be seen.” “Time, Theatre, and Knowledge,” pp. 459-89.


17. The hidden similarity between Oedipus and Teiresias is the subject of an interesting article by Lattimore, “Oedipus and Teiresias,” pp. 105-11. The 1984 Greek National Theatre production directed by Minos Volanakis closed the play with Oedipus' ceremonial acceptance of a walking staff.
similar to the one used by Teiresias, allowing the audience to “see” Oedipus “become” Teiresias. For the comparison of Oedipus to the Sphinx, see Segal, “Time, Theatre, and Knowledge,” p. 466.

18. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, p. 247. Taplin has analyzed the frustrating, thwarted closure of the play. He describes Oedipus' futile plea to leave Thebes and his ignominious final exit into the skene as a deliberate disappointment of audience expectation and a subtle means of making the play continue unresolved within the spectator's consciousness (Taplin, “Sophocles in His Theatre,” p. 174).

19. … To Segal, the questions posed by the Chorus find no comforting answers in the protagonist's downfall. … Segal views the second stasimon as a self-conscious “ritual-within-ritual,” a passage that is “parallel and homologous with the larger, enfacing ritual structure of the festival in which the play itself has its own ceremonial function” (Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, p. 235). See also Henrichs, “Why Should I Dance?,” pp. 65-73.


22. For the idea of Oedipus as a character self-consciously “standing in” for others, see also Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*.

23. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* shifts its scene midway through its action from the temple at Delphi to the Areopagus in Athens. Euripides' *Children of Heracles* is set in Marathon, a district near to and ruled by Athens.

24. Herodotus (6.21) relates the famous… [story] concerning Aeschylus' rival, Phrynichus, who was fined a thousand drachmas for reminding his audience of the recent fall of Miletus in his tragedy, *The Capture of Miletus*. The play was banned due to its unpleasant emotional effect on its audience. Phrynichus seems to have destroyed the aesthetic distance necessary for the calamities of tragedy to bring pleasure instead of pain. Lesky, however, notes that the incident may have been a political ruse aimed at humiliating the archon, Themistocles. Lesky, *Greek Tragic Poetry*, p. 34.


30. One is reminded of Bruno Gentili's definition of metatheater as any play that is “constructed from previously existing plays.” *Theatrical Performances in the Ancient World*, p. 15.


36. Ibid., p. 204.


39. See also Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, pp. 220, 222.

**Oedipus Tyrannus, Sophocles: Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**


Examines the wordplay in Sophocles's choice of names for his characters.


Argues that the closing lines of King Oedipus, although often questioned by scholars, are, in fact, genuine.


Examines Freud's assertion that Oedipus Tyrannus moves modern audiences with as much intensity as it did ancient Greek audiences.


Includes religious and psychological studies of the play as well as several essays concerning the guilt or innocence of Oedipus. A selection from this work is printed above.


Includes nine essays covering assorted topics—among them the motives for Oedipus's self-blinding; the question of his guilt; the nature of illusion and truth; and the troublesome ambiguity of the play's language.


Discusses the use of metaphorical language in Ajax, Antigone, and Oedipus Tyrannus.


Provides an overview of the 1947 Guthrie production and offers reasons for its failure.


Analyzes Oedipus's speech concerning his parentage, his response to the oracle, and the killing of Laius.


Discusses the significance of crossroads in Greek literature.


Investigates Attic legal procedures to determine the process Sophocles used as a framework for the play.

Contrasts Greek accounts of the unconscious mind with those of Freud.


Includes nine essays, covering dramatic elements; typical misunderstandings of the play; interpretation of the last scene; and other topics. A selection from this work is printed above.


Compares the structure and function of three messenger scenes from Oedipus Tyrannus, Trachiniae, and Philoctetes.


Surveys some of the arguments concerning the significance of the crossroads, including possible sexual symbolism.


Provides an overview and analysis of the play.


Examines the nature of Oedipus's heroism and discusses the many ironic elements in the play.


Provides an overview of Athenian drama, including the circumstances surrounding its origins.

Additional coverage of Sophocles's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: Ancient Writers; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 176; DISCovering Authors; DISCovering Author Modules: British; DISCovering Aughtors: Canadian; DISCovering Authors: Dramatists and Most Studied Authors; and Drama Criticism, Vol. 1.

Critical Essays: Bibliography


Scodel, Ruth. Sophocles. Boston: Twayne, 1984. Provides synopses of the seven Sophoclean plays. Considers works that may have influenced Sophocles. Considers the works’ structure and the use of mythological gods and oracles. Includes a chronology of Sophocles, a bibliography, and an index.


**Quotes: Essential Quotes by Character: Oedipus**

**Essential Passage 1:** [Lines 410-418](#)

So tell me, when are you the wise seer? (410)

How is it that, when the singing hound was here,

you never said how the citizens might be freed?

Even though the riddle could not be solved by

the first man who met it, but required prophecy.

But you did not come forth with this, knowing some clue (415)

from birds or gods; instead I came along,

the idiot Oedipus! I stopped her,

working from intellect, not learning from birds.

**Summary**

As the plague ravages the city of Thebes, Oedipus asks the prophet Tiresias to identify the cause of the plague. Tiresias has very reluctantly placed the blame on Oedipus himself. In anger, Oedipus rages against Tiresias for this accusation. Oedipus even accuses Creon, his brother-in-law and co-ruler, of plotting to remove Oedipus from the throne and thus retain the crown for himself. Boasting, Oedipus recalls how he saved the city of Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx (the singing hound) that had held Thebes captive in the absence of its previous ruler, Laius. It was not by the prophecies of old, nor the priests’ reading of omens in the flights of birds, nor not even by the gods that Thebes was saved. Instead, it was by Oedipus using his own intellectual strength to rid the city of the threat of the Sphinx.

**Essential Passage 2:** [Lines 648-660](#)

CREON:
What do you want? To cast me from this land?

OEDIPUS:

Hardly—I want you to die, not flee.

CREON:

You are the form of jealousy. (650)

OEDIPUS:

You speak neither to concede nor to persuade?

CREON:

For I see well that you do not understand.

OEDIPUS:

I understand my own affairs well enough.

CREON:

You must know mine equally well.

OEDIPUS:

Not when they are false! (655)

CREON:

Do you understand nothing?

OEDIPUS:

Yet, there must be rule.

CREON:

Not if ruled badly!

OEDIPUS:

O city, city!

CREON:

The city is mine, too, not yours alone! (660)

Summary
Creon vehemently denies Oedipus’s charge of treason. At this point in the work, Creon holds the role of adviser, though he is one of the three named rulers of Thebes (along with Oedipus and Jocasta). Why would he want to be saddled with the pressures and burdens of ruling alone, he asks. His life is much easier, his sleep is much sounder, being in the shadows. Oedipus is the one who wants to rule alone, Creon states. When asked if he realizes he could be misjudging Creon, Oedipus in his pride says that being right is not important, just so long as he continues to rule. As Oedipus cries out to Thebes (“my city!”), Creon objects, stating that it is also his city, not Oedipus’s alone.

Essential Passage 3: Lines 1412-1435

Oh, Cithaeron! Why did you accept me? Why did you not kill me at once, so that I would never reveal to men my origins? O Polybus and Corinth and my old ancestral home—(1415) so-called—in what a pretty festering of evils you brought me up! For now I find myself evil and born from evil people. O three paths and hidden groves and the narrow oak coppice at the triple crossroads, (1420) which drank my own blood from my father from my own hands, do you still remember me? What deeds I performed in your presence, what deeds I was still to do! O marriage, marriage, you brought me forth, and afterwards again (1425) you harvested that same seed and revealed father-brothers, children of kin blood, brides who were wives and mothers, and all else counted the most shameful acts by men. But, since these matters are as foully said as done, (1430) by the gods, quickly hide me from the sight of men somehow, or kill me or cast me into the sea,
where you will never see me again.

Go, deem it worthy to touch a poor man!

Yield, do not fear; for my evils are (1435)
such that no one of men can bear but me.

Summary

Jocasta the queen is dead by her own hand. Oedipus—her son, her husband, and the father of her children—takes the pins that holds her gown and stabs out his eyes. He realizes that what Tiresias had said was true, despite his angry refusal and condemnation at the prophet and his words. He has lived his life considering himself blameless and the hero of Thebes. He thought, at the outset of the plague, to be the one to heal it. Instead, he discovers that he is not the physician but the disease. At last, he accepts responsibility, begging forgiveness for the people and places that have been affected by his downfall.

Analysis of Essential Passages

Oedipus is the original tragic hero, destined by fate and his own pride to fall from glory into infamy. Oedipus takes pride first of all in his brilliant mind. As he constantly reminds the people of Thebes, it was his intellectual powers that freed them from the control of the Sphinx by solving its riddle. Yet he is unaware that it was in fact a physical act of violence that made the throne available to him. By killing Laius, Oedipus makes a place for himself through wrath, unable or unwilling to control his emotions. In his encounter with both Tiresias and Creon, it is clear that anger is born of his pride, fear that he will be proved to be less than he has presented himself to be.

Oedipus resents having to reign with Creon, even though Creon has willingly taken the lesser role of an adviser. In the narrative, Creon is a foil by which the pride of Oedipus is displayed. Creon has no ambition for himself. He does not seek power; rather, he is content to let Oedipus be the high king of Thebes. Yet he insists that the law, in this case Oedipus’s own curse on the murderer of Laius, be carried out. The law is higher than the individual, even if that individual is the king. Oedipus does not dispute the law, but he disputes who is to be the dispenser of the law. The king is the king, no matter if he is right or wrong. Oedipus thus stops being a just ruler and becomes a tyrant.

Faced with unassailable proof of the charges against him, Oedipus bows before fate. Above the king, above the law, rules fate. He has pronounced the curse of banishment on the murderer of Laius. In the course of events, he finds that he is worse than just the murderer of his father: he is the ravisher of his mother and the curse of his children/siblings. In his pride, instigated at the moment of killing Laius for pushing him off the road, he has allowed his tragic flaw to bring about not only his own downfall, but that too of his wife, his children, his city, and his legacy.

Quotes: Essential Quotes by Theme: Fate

Essential Passage 1: Lines 1004-1010

JOCASTA:

Why should a person fear when the ways of fortune
are supreme, when there is no clear foresight? (1005)

It’s best to live at random, however one can.

Do not worry you will wed your mother,

for many mortals already have lain with

their mothers in dreams. Rather, the one for whom

these things are nothing bears life easiest. (1010)

**Summary**

Oedipus, having lived in fear of the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother, has avoided his boyhood home of Corinth and the people he believes to be his parents: Polybus and Merope. A messenger arrives with both bad and good news. The bad news is that Polybus has died after a short illness. The good news is that the people of Corinth want Oedipus to be their king. Despite the grief at his father’s death, he is overjoyed that the prophecy has proved false. Jocasta states that it is chance, not fate, that rules human lives. No one can see ahead, so all prophecies are false. It is best to live for today rather than in obedience to the oracles of some priest or prophet.

**Essential Passage 2: **[Lines 1376-1388](#)

**OEDIPUS:**

Let him die who took off the fierce fetters,

feeding off my feet, and rescued and saved

me from my death, no good deed for me!

For if I had died then,

I would not have brought (1380)

so much pain to my friends or me!

**CHORUS:**

It is my wish, too, that it have been thus.

**OEDIPUS:**

I’d not then be my father’s slayer,

nor called the groom of her whence I was born.

Abandoned by the gods, child of sacrilege, (1385)

sharing the source of those I myself sired.
Were some evil greater still than evil,
this, too, would be Oedipus’ lot.

Summary

Jocasta has committed suicide, hanging herself above her marriage bed. In horror at what he has unwittingly done, Oedipus takes the pins from Jocasta’s gown and gouges out his eyes. Led out to the people, he stands before them, blinded and destined for exile. Begging to be sent away from Thebes, he curses the shepherd who took off the pins that bound his ankles together as a baby, destined to die. Saving his life was not mercy. It condemned those he loved, including the people of Thebes, to fall under the punishment of the gods for his sin. The Chorus, speaking for the people, agrees. If he had died, as his father had intended, he would not have been the tool of fate by which his father would die. His wife/mother is now dead. His children are under the curse of Fate. He can blame no one else. He alone is guilty.

Essential Passage 3: Lines 1553-1559

CHORUS:

People of our country Thebes, behold this Oedipus,
who knew the famous riddle and was a most powerful man,
whose fortunes all the citizens watched with emulation, (1555)
how deep the sea of dire misfortune that has taken him!
Therefore, it is necessary to call no man blessed
as we await the final day, until he has reached
the limit of life and suffered nothing grievous.

Summary

The childhood prophecy about Oedipus, that he would kill his father and marry his mother, has been fulfilled, though with Oedipus’s full ignorance of the significance of his actions. In full honor, he exiled himself from Corinth so that he would not kill who turned out to be his foster father, Polybus. On his way, he unknowingly killed Laius, his true father, and after solving the riddle of the Sphinx and becoming the savior of Thebes, he married the widowed queen, who turned out to be his mother. He has sired four children by his mother, two grown sons and two young girls. He proclaims a curse on the girls, who can never marry because of their father’s sins. Creon, now the sole ruler, fulfills Oedipus’s decree that the murderer of Laius must be exiled. Although Oedipus at the end finds parting from his daughters too painful, the girls are nevertheless taken away, and Oedipus is forced out of Thebes. In closing, the Chorus addresses the audience, proclaiming that although Oedipus’s deeds were great, fate had the upper hand.

Analysis of Essential Passages

Fate plays a crucial part in Oedipus Rex, providing the vehicle by which Oedipus’s tragic flaw, hubris, leads to his downfall. Fate is presented as an impersonal force, beyond the mere whim of the gods. It is the progress of an individual’s life that has been set in stone from before his or her birth. Neither god nor man may escape
from it. In fact, it is the attempted escape by both Oedipus and Jocasta that brings about fate’s intended
design.

Jocasta is presented with her fate by an early prophecy: her son will kill his father. Laius starts off the chain of
events by trying to control fate: he sentences his son to death. Oedipus is instead taken by a shepherd to
Corinth, where he is reared by Polybus and Merope. Fate follows Oedipus there, with an additional prophecy
stating that not only will he kill his father, but he will marry his mother in his father’s place. The secret of his
birth has been kept from him, not intentionally but out of ignorance. Oedipus then flees Corinth, attempting to
avoid fate’s declarations. As he travels, fate puts him in the way of his father, Laius, thus allowing the first
part of the prophecy to be fulfilled as Oedipus kills Laius in a fit of rage. This leaves the way open for him to
enter Thebes, solve the riddle of the Sphinx, become the hero, and marrying the widow of the late king.

Jocasta is presented as a mocker of fate. She tells Oedipus that one must live for today. Her realization
(anagnorisis, the term created by Aristotle for the sudden enlightenment of the protagonist) that she has put
herself and Oedipus in the path of fate prompts her final act of suicide.

As the Chorus closes the drama, it tells the audience that there is no happiness as long as fate is in control. A
person’s courage, intelligence, power, and even reverence for the gods mean little if fate has determined a
different destiny.

Teaching Guide: Introduction

So you’re going to teach Oedipus Rex (in other translations, Oedipus the King). Whether it’s your first or
hundredth time, this classic text has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While it has its
challenging spots, teaching this text to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. It will give
them unique insight into Greek tragedy and the work of Sophocles, and important understanding surrounding
fate, free will, and the dangers of pursuing truth at all costs. This guide highlights the text's most salient
aspects to keep in mind before you begin teaching.

Facts at a Glance

- Publication Date: 429 BCE
- Author: Sophocles
- Country of Origin: Greece
- Genre: Drama, Tragedy
- Literary Period: Classical Greece
- Conflict: Person vs. Self, Fate vs. Free Will
- Setting: Thebes, Ancient Greece
- Dominant Literary Devices: Dramatic Irony
- Tone: Fatalistic, Defiant, Grim

History of the Text

Life in Classical Greece: Sophocles lived during the fifth century BCE. While little information about his life
remains, it is known that he was a frequent civil servant in Athens and participated in military life. Often at
war, the fifth century saw Athenians defending themselves from the Persians, becoming a center of
commerce, and fighting the Spartans for dominance in the region during the Peloponnesian War, a war Athens
would lose just one year after Sophocles’s death in 406 BCE. Though marked by military conflict, this period
also saw culture flourish. New ideas on the rise included city-wide architectural projects, symposia on theater
and poetry, and the early seeds of democracy and self-governance. Most importantly for its legacy, Athens
developed an oral and written literary tradition rich in philosophy, rhetoric, comedy, and tragedy.

- *Oedipus Rex* explores some of the cultural conflicts of Sophocles’s time. In particular, Athenian governments were questioning the validity of oracles and prophecy. During the Peloponnesian War, Athenians were skeptical about information from Delphi because Delphi was aligned with Sparta. More generally, Athenians were interested in democracy and self-governance. When Oedipus asserts his desire to govern over advice he receives from oracles, he is enacting a political consideration of Sophocles’s era, the desire of the citizens of Athens to govern themselves.

- Athenian citizens had the opportunity to participate actively in civic life. As well as a playwright, Sophocles served as a civic treasurer, an executive commander of the armed forces (an elected position), and a member of the board responsible for Athens’s recovery after its military defeat at Syracuse in 413 BCE. This interest in civic functionality can be seen in Oedipus’s genuine concern for the welfare of his people, who are suffering under a plague, and in the play’s engagement with themes of leadership.

**Modern Interpretations of *Oedipus Rex***: The contents of *Oedipus Rex* have had lasting impact on modern understanding of human psychology. A theory developed and popularized by Sigmund Freud in the 19th century suggests that *Oedipus Rex* explores an elemental nature of human psychology. In killing his father and marrying his mother, Freud argues, Oedipus enacts the latent envy human children feel toward their parent of the same sex and the desire they feel toward their parent of the opposite sex.

**Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points**

**Creon Returns from Delphi**: Having been sent to ask the oracle of Apollo for advice about the plague afflicting Thebes, Creon shares with Oedipus and the surrounding townspeople what he learned from the oracle: to end the suffering in Thebes, they must find Laius’s murderer. The former king of Thebes, Laius was killed allegedly by bandits while traveling away from Thebes years ago.

**Oedipus Questions Teiresias and Accuses Creon**: Committed to finding Laius’s killer, Oedipus questions a prophet of Apollo, Teiresias. Teiresias discourages his inquiry, and Oedipus grows angry, accusing Teiresias of plotting the crime. Teiresias tells Oedipus that he, Oedipus, killed Laius. Oedipus becomes suspicious that Creon and Teiresias are plotting against him, and Teiresias responds with a prophecy foretelling Oedipus’s downfall. Creon tries to convince Oedipus and the Chorus that he already has enough power in Thebes and doesn’t want to be king, but Oedipus threatens him with banishment and death, relenting only at the insistence of the queen and the Chorus.

**Jocasta Reassures Oedipus**: Jocasta tells Oedipus that sometimes oracles and prophets are wrong. She recounts the story of the son she had with Laius, who was prophesied to kill his father. To prevent this, Jocasta and Laius had the baby abandoned in the mountains by a shepherd; years later, Laius was killed at a crossroads while traveling. Oedipus reacts strongly to her tale, especially her description of the place where Laius was killed. He asks her to send for the sole survivor of Laius’s party, and tells Jocasta about his past: that while he was Prince of Corinth, he had heard a prophecy that he was to kill his father and marry his mother, and while traveling, he killed a fellow traveler in a place and manner similar to the circumstances of Laius’s death.

**Oedipus Questions the Herdsman**: When the King of Corinth dies of old age, a Messenger brings the news to Oedipus. The Messenger admits to having received an orphan from a Theban Herdsman years ago, taking that orphan to Corinth to be raised by the king and queen. Despite Jocasta’s warnings and grief-stricken departure, Oedipus insists that the Herdsman has revealed the truth: Oedipus is the child of Laius and Jocasta, raised by the King and Queen of Corinth.
**Oedipus Blinds Himself:** Distraught by the revelation about his identity, Oedipus flees to his chambers where he finds that Jocasta has hanged herself. He uses the pins from her robe to blind himself. Lamenting the tragedy and its consequences for his family, Oedipus exiles himself from Thebes, and Creon ascends to the throne.

**Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches**

**Fate vs. Free Will:** The thrust of the play centers around whether or not its characters have the power to change their fate. Laius and Jocasta try to avoid the prophecy about their son when they give their child to a shepherd to be killed; Oedipus tries to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother when he decides never to return to Corinth. Oedipus could be considered doomed because of his display of hubris, his prideful belief that he can defy his fate and the gods. The events of the play suggests that while humans are not able to control the events of their lives, employment of free will does grant them the ability to mitigate the suffering therein.

- *For discussion:* Describe the different attributes each character has. Are some characters better able to control their lives than others? How, why, and to what end?
- *For discussion:* How does Oedipus’s understanding of himself and his destiny change over the course of the play? How is he able to control his destiny?
- *For discussion:* What does the play suggest about the role of free will in an individual’s life? Does it align with your worldview? Why or why not?

**Knowledge vs. Ignorance:** Oedipus’s confidence in his own reasoning is a great virtue when he is in conflict with the Sphinx, but a great flaw when his prophecy plays out. The problem of knowledge is of great concern in the play. Discrepancies in knowledge and the revelation of fact drive its dramatic tension. Further, possessing knowledge and choosing whether or not to reveal it are sources of power. Some have argued that Oedipus’s excessive pride reveals itself not in his attempted defiance of fate, but when he ignores the advice of those around him and continues his search for knowledge at all costs.

- *For discussion:* What knowledge did Oedipus seek? Was he justified in doing so? Was his search for knowledge futile?
- *For discussion:* What would have happened if Oedipus had stopped pursuing the truths of Laius’s death and his own prophecy? Could Oedipus realistically have set aside his quest for knowledge? Why or why not?
- *For discussion:* In what ways do sight and blindness symbolize knowledge and/or wisdom in the play? How do sight and blindness reveal more about the characters?
- *For discussion:* Why do different characters want to withhold information? Are they justified in keeping their secrets? Why or why not?
- *For discussion:* Does Oedipus Rex distinguish between knowledge and wisdom? In terms of the play, what does it mean to be wise?
- *For discussion:* Is the ability to reason our savior, as it was with Oedipus’s Sphinx, or our ruin, as it was with Oedipus’s prophecy? In other words, is ignorance bliss? Why or why not?

**The Prince and the Body Politic:** As king of Thebes, Oedipus sees himself as on a public quest to find Laius’s killer and rid Thebes of its plague. As such, he is positioned to interact repeatedly with the public he governs. Unlike plays by his contemporaries, Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* features a chorus that takes an active role in the narrative, introducing the plague at the start of the play, expounding on errors the characters make, and even convincing Oedipus to spare Creon. In the play, the Chorus acts as the body politic and is in active dialogue with the ruler of the nation-state, Oedipus. In a different sphere as a private citizen, Oedipus is the recipient of a tragic prophecy. Creon, Teiresias, Jocasta, and the Herdsman all attempt to persuade him to
relinquish his pursuit, or at least discuss the matter privately. Through his status as a governor in the ancient world and the conflicting demands of his private and public obligations, Oedipus depicts the struggles facing even well-meaning individuals trying to work for the public good.

- *For discussion:* Why does Oedipus insist on questioning others in public? What end does it serve?
- *For discussion:* What crimes against the people has Oedipus committed? What purpose does Oedipus’s exile serve?
- *For discussion:* How does Oedipus’s political power shift over the course of the play? Where does he stand in relation do other characters? Does this change? How and why?
- *For discussion:* When does he gain power? When does he lose it? How does Oedipus respond to the changes in his power? Compare and contrast Oedipus at the beginning of the play with Oedipus at the end of the play.
- *For discussion:* Which character in the play would make the best political leader? Why?

**Additional discussion questions:**

- What are the conflicts in the plot? Who are they between and why do they occur?
- What dramatic function does the Chorus serve in the play?
- How does Sophocles use dramatic irony in *Oedipus Rex*? What are some examples?
- What does the Chorus's speech at the end of the play reveal about life?
- Discuss whether or not Oedipus is a victim of fate or his own actions.