

THE TRANSFORMATION OF OEDIPUS:
CHARACTERIZATION AND *ANAGNORISIS* IN THE
OEDIPUS TYRANNUS OF SOPHOCLES

by

CATHERINE ANNE MCANULTY MORI

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1974

T.T., The University of British Columbia, 1976

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Department of Classics

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

The Oedipus myth is a very ancient one in the Greek tradition. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Sophocles builds on the familiar theme to explore the mystery of human existence using Oedipus as a metaphor for the indomitable spirit of the human individual in face of the incomprehensible workings of the gods. Although Sophocles uses a generally well-known story, he brings originality to his drama in the way he develops the characters and stages the action.

The thesis is divided into four parts. In the Introduction, I shall give an overview of the story with reference to the historic and mythic background to the Oedipus legend. In this section I discuss the Sphinx, an important icon in art, as an underlying image and suggest that she is a catalyst for action at specific points in the play; she is also closely linked with the god Apollo. It is her riddle that is heard in echo throughout the dialogue, from the forbidding language of the oracles to the maddening riddles of Teiresias and to the seemingly innocent musings of the Chorus. I also show how Sophocles treats the characters to bring about the *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) and *anagnorisis* (self-recognition) of his protagonist, methods much admired by Aristotle. In this treatment Sophocles uses human as well as divine agents. And, lastly, I give a brief summary of the interpretation of the views of representative modern critics.

In Chapter One, I analyse the human agents of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, showing how these characters try to prevent the *anagnorisis*, yet to no avail. The main agents, the *dramatis personae*, are (in the order in which they appear in the play) the priest of Zeus, Creon, Teiresias, Jocasta and the Chorus.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the divine agents, Apollo and the Sphinx. Although neither of these agents appears in the drama, each has a profound effect on the action. Since the epithets used for Apollo vary throughout the dialogue, I suggest possible significance for the varying usage. And, finally, I detail what is known of the Sphinx in literature, myth and the plastic arts.

To summarize, in the self-blinding of Oedipus, we see not the defeat of human being but his transformation. The sufferings of a previously all-knowing yet ignorant Oedipus have changed him into a refined being, reduced to outer blindness yet opened to inner sight. The mysteries and riddles have become untangled and solved. Oedipus is a success story despite all appearance to the contrary.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Brian, ἐρίηρος ἐταῖρος, a man of great good humour and common sense.

INTRODUCTION

The myth of Oedipus has a long history¹ and the Sophoclean treatment was just one among several.² Although that of Sophocles is the only complete dramatic version to survive antiquity, there are fragments, passages from other poets and a mythographical tradition which give support to the existence of other variants.³ In addition, extant plays such as the *Septem* of Aeschylus and the *Phoenissae* of Euripides make reference to the Oedipus story.

One reason this play of Sophocles's survived the rest is generally agreed upon: it was his masterly treatment of the theme, not the originality of the plot, although there is certainly no lack of originality.⁴ Cameron's observation typifies the fascination which the play has evinced for many a reader throughout the centuries: "For myself, it is the courageous, passionate drive to the truth in Oedipus which I find the most moving and provocative thing about him."⁵ The primary aim of this thesis is, then, to show how Sophocles takes this familiar theme and turns it into a masterpiece of suspense and irony combined with self-discovery for the protagonist, Oedipus. Within this thesis I shall also examine how Sophocles takes the well-known elements in the story and handles⁶ them in such a way as to achieve that perfect combination of *peripeteia* (reversal of situation) and *anagnorisis* (recognition) so much admired by Aristotle.⁷ In this analysis, I shall look simultaneously at two important aspects of Sophocles's creative work. The first and

¹Hesiod makes mention of Oedipus and the seven-gated city of Thebes in the *Erga* (circa 740-700 B.C.), ll. 162 - 163. Homer has Odysseus tell the Phaeacians about seeing Jocasta in the underworld: μητέρα τ' Οἰδιπόδαο ἴδον, καλήν Ἐπικάστην (*Od.* 11.271-280). In the *Iliad*, 23.678ff. Oedipus is mentioned as a hero fallen in battle: Μηκιστῆος υἱός Ταλαϊονίδαο ἀνακτος, ὅς ποτε Θήβαςδ' ἦλθε δεδουπότος Οἰδιπόδαο ἐς τάφον.

²Edmunds (1985), p. 6.

³For example: Edmunds (*op. cit.*), pp. 6 - 7.

⁴Ahl (1991), p. 11, points out that the plague in the opening sequence is an innovation of Sophocles. Segal (1993), p. 49, notes also that the method of Oedipus's exposure by foot-piercing is Sophocles's invention; Aeschylus exposes Oedipus in a terra cotta pot. Segal (*op.cit.*), p. 48, also states that Sophocles was the first to make oracles a leitmotiv of the plot. Burkert (1994), p.10, finds that the "singularity -- indeed the audacity -- of Sophocles's play is that <the> whole family context has nearly become invisible."

⁵Cameron (1968), p. xx.

⁶Dawe, with whom I am not perfectly in accord, recognizes this fact in his very valuable Introduction to the text (p. 19) in writing that Jocasta "performs her by now familiar rôle of channelling all our thoughts in the direction that her creator, Sophocles, wishes us to take".

⁷καλλίστη δὲ ἀναγνώρισις, ὅταν ἅμα περιπέτεια γίνωνται, οἷον ἔχει ἢ ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι. (*Poetics* 1452a 32-33.).

paramount of these is the development of characterization, *viz.*, of the agents (human as well as divine) which Sophocles uses to bring about the recognition. The most remarkable aspects of the human agents are the degree to which these characters act to prevent the self-discovery of the protagonist, and the degree to which this action creates a polarizing tension which heightens suspense in the action of the drama. The second important aspect I shall examine is the playwright's use of language, of which the analysis will encompass the Sophoclean style. This style is most noteworthy for its vivid and exquisite imagery. Metaphor and illusion, paradox and prophecy, which may seem, at times, to be juxtaposed in bewildering confusion, are tools used by Sophocles to reconstruct the enigma of Oedipus the Tyrant with an aim to producing ultimately the self-discovery of this tragic hero. In this self-discovery Oedipus will appear as a metaphor for the indomitable spirit of the human person who tries to impose rational order on the irrational world around him, the teleonomic⁸ man of Peradotto. Kitto has remarked that "the real focus is not the Tragic Hero but the divine background,"⁹ yet Burkert finds that Oedipus "alone...dominates the stage, and remains the central character, however his situation may change."¹⁰ I think that we may reconcile these two positions by keeping in mind that although Sophocles creates in his audience a sympathy for and sense of identity with Oedipus, the focus for the ancient playwright is not only this tragic hero but also the mysterious workings of the gods, and in particular, Apollo.

The Sphinx as an Underlying Image

Amongst all the images in the play, arguably the most powerfully evocative is that of the Sphinx who is routinely linked, in the modern mind, with the character of Oedipus. And yet, we have no evidence for the linking of the riddle of the Sphinx with the Oedipus myth until

⁸Peradotto (1992), p 14. As F. L. Lucas (1953), pp. 56/57, remarks, "It is dangerous to generalise too precisely about the spirit of Tragedy; but we can say that there the problem of evil and suffering is set before us; often it is not answered, but always there is something that makes it endurable...it may be the consolation of perfect language...or...the consolation of the sheer integrity which faces life as it is."

⁹Kitto (1956), p. 231

¹⁰Burkert (1994), p. 10.

relatively late.¹¹ Our first textual evidence for the Sphinx herself is in Hesiod's *Theogony*, in connexion with the "people of Cadmus",

ἡ δ' ἄρα Φῑκ' ¹² ὀλοήν τέκε
Καδμείοισιν ὄλεθρον.

But <Echidna> bore the baneful Sphinx,
Death to the people of Cadmus.
(326 - 327)

As for a link with the specific "Cadmeian," Oedipus, none can be traced until around 525 B.C., when the Sphinx and Oedipus appear together in vase paintings.¹³ She usually sits on a stylized column while Oedipus stands on the ground, staff in hand, facing her. On one vase in particular, there has been found a fragment of the riddle generally associated with the Sphinx.¹⁴ Later, the complete riddle associated with the Oedipus legend is found in various authors, where it takes differing forms.¹⁵ Athenaeus (fl. c. A.D. 200) in his *Deipnosophistae* preserves one of the most famous versions in a quotation from a lost tragedy of Asclepiades (c. 350 B.C.):

ἔστι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπον (-ουν), οἷ μία φωνή,
καὶ τρίπον (-ουν), ἀλλάσσει δὲ φύσιν μόνον ὅσσ'
ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἔρπετ' ἄ γίνονται καὶ ἀν' αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον·
ἀλλ' ὅποταν πλείστοισιν ἔρειδόμενον ποσὶ βαίνει, ἔνθα
τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφανρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ.

(*Deipnosophistae*, 10.456b)

There walks on land a creature of two feet, of four feet, and of three;
it has one voice, but, sole among the animals that grow on land or in the
sky or beneath the sea, it can change its nature; nay, when it walks
propped on most feet, then is the speed in its limbs less than it has ever
been before.¹⁶

¹¹Beer (1990), p. 113 quoting Edmunds (1985) *passim*.

¹²A variant of Σφῑγκ', West (1966), p. 256.

¹³Moret (1984), vol. 1, p. 40; vol. 2, plate 23. The archaic language on one such vase, however, would indicate that the riddle and the Sphinx are of greater antiquity than this date (Segal (1993), p. 52).

¹⁴As Lloyd-Jones (1978), p. 60, notes, this is the famous cup in the Vatican where the Sphinx addresses Oedipus. All that remains of her address are the fragmentary words (κ)αὶ τρί(πον), suggestive of the famous riddle of the feet. Painted approximately 470 B.C., it is catalogued in Hartwig, *Meisterschalen* pl. 73 and Beazley, *ARV*, 2 ed. 451.

¹⁵Lloyd-Jones (*op. cit.*), pp. 60/61, discusses the variants and the problems they pose.

¹⁶Gulick (1961), p. 569.

The *Bibliotheca* of Apollodorus also presents a version of the riddle,¹⁷ as do the scholia to Euripides's *Phoenissae*, where it is also reported that Hera sent the Sphinx as a punishment to Thebes during the interregnum of Creon.¹⁸

Long before her connexion with Oedipus, however, the "generic" rather than strictly "Theban" Sphinx appears in artistic representations as a death-spirit or "*psychopompe*, *bienvieillante*."¹⁹ At the same time she is portrayed in picture carrying young men away in a "quasi-erotic embrace and devouring them."²⁰ The Sphinx is also considered a "*caractère prophylactique*"²¹ and as such is apotropaic. Therefore, even as early as the sixth century B.C., she is seen to be closely connected with death and with sex. Frequently the Sphinx is depicted seated either on top of the supine or prone body of a man, her left paw on his head or skull.²² It seems a possibility that this paw on the head, touching the intellectual seat of the human being, became linked with a contest of wits. Perhaps the riddle was an outcropping from this.²³

Given the multiplicity of Sphinx representations to which the evidence attests, it seems quite natural that Sophocles would choose to present an image such as this as an underlying one in his play. Indeed, Sophocles appears to make enough overt and covert references to the riddle to make it an intriguing thought to follow up. It would appear that the Sphinx acts as something of a "portal" and a catalyst for the action at significant points in the play as well as in the myth.²⁴

¹⁷*Bibliotheca*, 3.5.8

¹⁸ Scholia to lines 50, 1760.

¹⁹Renard (1950), p. 310.

²⁰Segal (1993), p. 52.

²¹Renard (*op. cit.*) p. 303.

²²Renard, (*loc. cit.*).

²³Cameron (*op. cit.*) p. 21, considers the Sphinx in the *O. T.* an "intellectual monster," viz., a monster which must be bested with the power of the mind rather than with brawn.

²⁴See Chapter Two of this thesis, *The Sphinx*.

The Sphinx, Apollo and a New Riddle

Within the first 150 lines of the play, there are two references to the Sphinx and her riddling (ll. 36, 130). The Sphinx is first and foremost ἡ σκληρὰ ἀοιδός, "the harsh songstress" (36), and later ἡ ποικιλωδὸς Σφίγξ (130), "the riddling Sphinx." The word ἀοιδός²⁵, interestingly, is elsewhere used both of a Muse and of a nightingale and, composed as it is from the cognate ἀείδω, suggests the song of the minstrel as well as that of a bird. In popular etymology, the name of Oedipus was understood to mean "Swollen foot." Possibly, in the word ποικιλωδός the audience would hear not only that the Sphinx sings "embroidered," "dappled" or "intricate" riddles, but also riddles of the "swelling." She also sings poetry, presumably in metrical feet.²⁶

There is, moreover, the apparent formulation of a new Apolline riddle²⁷ (ll. 110-111), reproduced by Creon who is responding to Oedipus's question about where he is to find the dim trace of this old, obscure crime, *viz.* the regicide:

ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ οἱ δ' εἰςὶ ποῦ γῆς; ποῦ τήδ' εὐρεθήσεται
ἵχνος παλαιᾶς δυστέχμαρτον αἰτίας;

ΚΡΕΩΝ ἐν τῇδ' ἔφασκε γῆ. τὸ δὲ ζητούμενον
ἄλωτόν, ἐκφεύγει δὲ τὰμελούμενον.

(108 - 111)

"In this land, <Apollo> said. 'What is sought, can be found, what is disregarded escapes.' " And, as is typical within this play, the language is already highly evocative, suggestive of paradox, riddle and prophecy still to come.

I would like to argue that the very moment Oedipus steps onto the stage is a defining one. Dawe says that "first impressions are of the highest importance."²⁸ Maddalena,²⁹ too, notes that

²⁵LSJ, *s.v.* ἀοιδός.

²⁶Ahl (1991), p. 51.

²⁷Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 20, has come to the same conclusion.

²⁸Dawe (1982), p. 7.

²⁹Maddalena (1963), p. 265, says that the action starts with the chorus already positioned on stage. The norm is for there to be no more than three characters on the stage within the prologue and then only after the entrance of the chorus.

this Sophoclean tragedy is unusual for its prologue. For the action starts with Oedipus: he is the first character to appear and he is the first to speak. From the very beginning his vocabulary is characterized by its significant utilization not only of contrasting images but also of *double entendre*: ὦ τέκνα, Κάδμου τοῦ πάλαι νέα τροφή, "Children, latest to be reared from the stock of Cadmus." (1). The juxtaposition of πάλαι and νέα serves to remind the audience immediately of the recent, but unspoken history,³⁰ of the city of Thebes. These initial utterances also remind the audience that the past and the present are inextricably linked. For the crop of woes being reaped by Thebes of the present can be linked to the evils of the past, just as the crop of children sown by Oedipus is uncannily related to the crop sown long ago by Cadmus and, even more recently, by Laius. At the same time, twin feelings of hope and despair are engendered in the religious songs and groans, ὁμοῦ δὲ παιάνων τε καὶ στεναγμάτων (5), as the contest is foreshadowed wherein Oedipus is tossed and buffeted by alternate waves of emotion which tighten and release, ebb and flow.

The Agents of *Peripeteia* and *Anagnorisis*

As Oedipus moves from ignorance to knowledge through different levels of understanding, we may be moved to ask, "What is the quest of Oedipus?" The ostensible quest revealed within the prologue is obvious: to discover why there is a plague and how to stop it. Following from the revelation that the plague is caused by a crime unatoned, comes the mandate to discover the regicide and punish him. The other unspoken quest, of course, is the quest of Oedipus to rediscover himself as the son of Jocasta and Laius. The "conflicting demands of these two themes"³¹ (*viz.* the search for the killer and the search for self) may be "responsible for inconsistencies in the plot"³² but, more to the point, they make for a very fine heightening of dramatic tension. As Oedipus makes the shift through the aforementioned levels of understanding until he perceives the reality of his situation, he is assisted by means of encounters with several

³⁰This history (probably related in the lost *Laius* of Aeschylus, Segal (1993), p. 46) includes the violent assault of Laius upon Chrysippus and the subsequent warning to Laius not to beget children on Jocasta.

³¹Dawe (*op. cit.*), p. 9.

³²Dawe (*ibid.*).

significant characters. These are: the priest of Zeus, Teiresias the seer, Creon his co-regent and Jocasta his mother-wife. The role which the Chorus play as an intermediary will also be seen to be essential in moving the action forward to its completion. For, as Aristotle remarked, "The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles."³³

Despite the importance of his interaction with these dramatic characters, equally important encounters for Oedipus occur outside the play: with the priestess at Delphi, with Laius at the crossroads, and with the Sphinx on the mountain. Aristotle's comments on the work seem to take on new significance in the light of hindsight: "Within the action there must be nothing irrational. If the irrational cannot be excluded, it should be outside the scope of the tragedy. Such is the irrational element in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles."³⁴ Looked at in a fresh way, Aristotle's remarks seem to have deeper significance. It is interesting to compare what happens inside this play with what is known to have happened (mythically) outside it. A creative tension might be said to exist between the rational events inside the drama and the irrational events outside, which act as a catalyst for those within. The irrational, moreover, is defined by the rational: one cannot exist without the other. And so Apollo, who is superficially the guarantor of λόγος, becomes a paradox. For Apollo in this play seems closely linked with τὸ ἄλογον, whose manifestation appears to be the Sphinx.

Modern Criticism

Modern commentators vary considerably in their interpretation of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Reinhardt, for instance, has argued for a scenario in which "man is bound" between the two opposing forces of "truth" and "illusion." He rejects categorically that the self-blinding of Oedipus is "atonement" in a larger thesis which rejects further the notion of a "decision...about

³³*Poetics*, 1456a, 25-27. All translations used are Butcher's.

³⁴*Poetics*, 1454b, 5-8. ἄλογον δὲ μὴδὲν εἶναι ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν, εἰ δὲ μή, ἔξω τῆς τραγωδίας, οἷον τὸ ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι τῷ Σοφοκλέους.

justice and atonement."³⁵ Maddalena finds a new slant on an old theme with the pious man of genius (Oedipus) replacing both the wholly rational person and the person whose piety is enlightened by reason, who featured in previous Sophoclean tragedies.³⁶ In Ahl's³⁷ novel interpretation of the play, Creon and Teiresias plot in sinister fashion against the honest Oedipus while Vellacott's³⁸ consciously incestuous Oedipus waits for someone to discover and "release" him from his sins. These last two interpretations, original though they may be, seem somewhat unsatisfactory and unappealing. One tends to want more from the protagonist than that he be shown to be the victim of petty human greed or that he prove a confidence man.

Peradotto argues that "Apollo not only predicts Oedipus' 'crimes,' and punishes him for them, but *causes* them to happen."³⁹ We could conclude, upon examination of the play, that nowhere does Apollo actually or directly "punish" Oedipus, nor does he "cause" things to happen to him. Apollo, who has the measure of this man, merely "predicts." In fact, we could argue that if anyone punishes Oedipus, it is he himself and that if unpleasant things transpire, these are caused by his own questing nature -- after all, he did not have to leave Corinth or consult the Oracle. Finally, at the end of the play, Oedipus is still indomitable. He may acknowledge that "Apollo brought these my woes to pass, my sore, sore woes (1329),"⁴⁰ but the hand that deprived him of sight was most assuredly his own:

Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,
ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐνὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα.
ἔπαισε δ' αὐτόχειρ νιν οὔτις ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τλάμων.
(1329 - 1331)

³⁵Reinhardt (1979), p. 134, observed, "So there is no decision about justice and atonement -- nothing would be more misguided than to regard Oedipus' blinding as an atonement -- or about freedom and necessity. What we have had to consider is illusion and truth as the opposing forces between which man is bound, in which he is entangled, and in whose shackles, as he strives towards the highest he can hope for, he is worn down and destroyed."

³⁶Maddalena (*op. cit.*), p. 264: "...nell'*Edipo Re*, <Sofocle> rinnova la tragedia dell'ingegno, ma insieme l'allarga, non più contrapponendo chi s'affida alla ragione disgiunta da pietà a chi s'affida alla pietà che illumina la ragione, ma ponendo sulla scena un uomo pio e insieme di forte ingegno cui né l'ingegno né la pietà sottraggono alla pena del mondo; che anzi ha da soffrire pene maggiori d'ogni empio e d'ogni stolto."

³⁷Ahl (1991).

³⁸Vellacott (1971).

³⁹Peradotto (1992), p. 10.

⁴⁰Jebb's translation.

It also seems clear that his act of self-blinding is not to *punish* himself but to *relieve* himself. The chorus seem to suggest this (1286): νῦν δ' ἐσθ' ὁ τλήμων ἐν τινι σχολῇ κακοῦ; "Does the wretch have some *respite*⁴¹ from his pain?" (The "pain" to which they refer cannot be a physical one, when one considers the recent self-mutilation of Oedipus, but rather the general misfortune he finds himself in.) In this sense, Apollo cannot be said to cause anything.⁴² And to borrow from Reinhardt's imagery, we would argue strongly that the play is as much about freedom and necessity as it is about illusion and truth. Oedipus is a free agent, determined to work his puzzles out for himself while he is very much bound by the religious conventions of the society with which he identifies.

One approach (of long standing) might be to take Oedipus as symbolic⁴³ of the Athenian quest for self-enlightenment. Continuing in that vein, we may also look at the rest of the characters in a similar light. If Oedipus represents self-knowledge, then Teiresias arguably could represent the religious establishment, Creon the *status quo* and Jocasta cynicism in face of religion. The function of the priest of Zeus, therefore, in the opening sequence, is to present the confident and rational Oedipus, conqueror of the irrational, and (almost) equal to the gods. Teiresias will be the reluctant conduit of the god's revelations and a source of unwelcome knowledge. He will push the king to the point of *hybris*. Creon has several parts to play (the pragmatic temporizer who survives the débâcle unscathed, the self-righteous and prosaic pious man, the cautious man who thinks before he acts etc.) but his main one, as the antithesis to Oedipus, is to represent an inflexible stability and predictability.⁴⁴ Jocasta is the touchstone, the continuance of the line and support of a good king, a believer in the self-sufficiency of the human

⁴¹Lloyd-Jones's (1994) translation.

⁴²Here I am at variance with Bowra (1945), p. 177, who affirms that "it is hard to find 'reconciliation' as 'the meaning of Oedipus' action in blinding himself" and that the "power behind <this> action is Apollo."

⁴³For Oedipus as a symbol, see Knox (1957), p. 116: "And the language of the play identifies Oedipus as the symbolic representative of the new critical and inventive spirit." Dawe (1982), p. 7: "...at the very beginning of the play he establishes in a handful of lines the leading characteristics of his hero. They are characteristics which an Athenian audience of the fifth century B. C. would admire as an embodiment of all that they believed was the best in their own corporate life."

⁴⁴Kirkwood (1958), p. 130, remarks: "...<Creon's> role is to stress, by his unfailing modesty and calm, the extravagance of speech and self-reliance displayed by Oedipus."

mind. The Chorus are society's judgment⁴⁵ on Oedipus. And finally, Oedipus personifies the human condition. He will represent the mystery and horror of what it means to be human. Is there significance to human existence, or are we the products and victims of mindless coincidence?

The concept of *hamartia* is a much-argued one in regard to the character of Oedipus. Once it was maintained that a hero, of necessity, possessed a "tragic flaw." However, not all tragic characters do suffer from *hamartia*.⁴⁶ It has been well established, moreover, by Bremer's analysis of the terminology of Aristotle's *Nicomachian Ethics* and *Poetics* that *hamartia* is not a "moral defect" as such but rather "an injurious act, committed because the agent is not aware of some vital circumstance (instrument, object effect of the action etc.)"⁴⁷ This interpretation would fit well with the circumstances in which Sophocles places Oedipus. Bremer argues, in addition, that Sophocles "spends no time talking about the moral quality of Oedipus' behaviour; his main concern is with the *terrible delusion which causes Oedipus' ruin*,⁴⁸ the misconception which lies behind all he does: ignorance is co-extensive with his life which may thus be seen as a single long drawn-out *hamartia*."⁴⁹ But, surely the play (written by Sophocles) *is* about the moral quality of Oedipus's behaviour both pre- and post-*anagnorisis*. A less moral man than Oedipus (like the Creon of the *Antigone*) would hasten to conform to the path which would offer him the least anguish, rather than take the higher (and less rewarding) road to truth. And, surely it is not the "terrible delusion" which causes the ruin of our hero but his awakened knowledge of "the facts."⁵⁰ As Teiresias observes, Oedipus does not know "how much evil" (367) he is in, and the playwright makes it clear that Oedipus has been in his ignorance for a very long time. If Oedipus is "ruined" by his "delusion", why is he not "ruined" from the moment he kills Laius? Why does the ruin come almost a generation after he has bested the Sphinx? Perhaps Oedipus did freely choose the

⁴⁵According to Longo (1990), "...the civic community (that is, the public that makes the chorus its delegate)..."

⁴⁶Griffith (1992), p 195.

⁴⁷Bremer (1969), p.23.

⁴⁸My italics.

⁴⁹Bremer (*op. cit.*), p. 158.

⁵⁰Griffith (*loc. cit.*), asserts that, in any case, it is actions not character-traits which cause things to happen in Greek tragedy.

actions that led to his "downfall" (*i.e.* self-discovery), as the critics have said, but he would never have set on this course of action without the (Apolline) plague as a catalyst which leads to a natural chain of events. Bremer concludes his argument with the observation that "perhaps it is preferable to formulate it thus: in this tragedy, Oedipus is engaged unwittingly upon his own destruction and this course of action may properly be called his *hamartia*."⁵¹ The sense of the word "destruction" must also be clarified. We contend that this is synonymous with his *anagnorisis* and the subsequent *peripeteia*.

⁵¹Bremer (*op. cit.*), p. 160.

Chapter One

The Human Agents

a) Oedipus and the Priest of Zeus (1 -150)

ἱερεὺς ἐγὼ μὲν Ζηνός... (18)

Sophocles starts the action *in mediis rebus*⁵² with the first significant encounter. Here Oedipus meets the priest of Zeus, the representative of his beleaguered, beplagued people. In his address to this priest, Oedipus wants to know if the suppliants are gathered *δείσαντες ἢ στέρξαντες*, out of fear or out of love (11). Although on the surface Oedipus may appear to be self-assured, he seems already to subscribe to the underlying current of uncertainty expressed by his people. This is an Oedipus who can afford to be gentle as he declares complete willingness to assist his grieving subjects (11 - 12). Later a stark contrast will be seen in his brutal reaction towards the herdsman (1153). In this initial moment, however, Oedipus is fatherly, even godlike, towards the suppliants. In his words of address, the priest acknowledges the supremacy of Oedipus, *ὦ κρατύνων Οἰδίπους* (14), and notes that they are gathered at <his> altars, *βωμοῖσι τοῖς σοῖς* (16). This ambiguous reference to altars that are Apollo's by right but Oedipus's by virtue of their location (and also, presumably, supervision and tendance) suggests that this priest is conferring a godlike status upon the king. That Oedipus does not clarify whose altars they really are and that he does not reject this "idolatry" would appear significant.⁵³

The old priest stresses the differences amongst the people waiting in front of the palace: "those not strong enough to fly" and "those heavy with age" (16 - 17). We thus learn that Oedipus has diverse support from his community. The city in microcosm are seeking succour from the one man who they think can help all, Oedipus. And the man leading this group has the sanction of Zeus, *ἱερεὺς ἐγὼ μὲν Ζηνός* (18). At this point both Apollo and Zeus seem to be on

⁵²Cf. footnote 29. This Sophoclean tragedy is unusual for its prologue.

⁵³Maddalena (*op. cit.*), pp. 266, 268, argues against seeing Oedipus as "un uomo superbo," even in light of this passage, although he does concede him "orgoglio."

their side -- the side of the city and, by extension, of Oedipus. And yet a question remains: are both really "on their side"? Who is the πυρφόρος θεός (27), if not the Apollo⁵⁴ of the first book of the *Iliad*? Perhaps destruction is coming from this god in the form of a plague which is also a guaranteed destruction for the δῶμα Καδμεῖον, as Hades is enriched (πλουτίζειν) by their groans and wailing (29 - 30). The word-play here is evident: Pluto is the god of wealth and he is rich in his harvest of death.

It is possible that the god, who lent his aid in the contest of wits with "the harsh songstress," ἡ σκληρὰ ἀοιδός (36), may be content no longer to take second place to the "first among men," ἀνδρῶν δὲ πρῶτος (33). The priest makes it clear that he does not consider Oedipus "equal to the gods," θεοῖσι μὲν νυν οὐκ ἰσοούμενόν⁵⁵ σ' ἐγώ but, rather, best at dealing with them, (31). Oedipus thus appears to be the Homeric ἰσόθεος φῶς. The proof of his capability is ample: the city was delivered in previous times from the Sphinx by Oedipus's untutored wit, or so it is said and thought to have been done (39). We also note that public perception has Oedipus move from merely κρατύνων to κράτιστος (40). At this point, Oedipus appears to be showing identifiable symptoms of *hybris*. No human being "who wields power" (κρατύνων) can be "all-powerful" (κράτιστος); this is the quality of a god. The king's confidence is building into an over-confidence or *hybris* which will obscure his vision (literally and figuratively) until the complete reversal of his circumstances by the end of the drama. In retrospect this result (*peripeteia*) will seem inevitable. *Hybris* is already well and truly laying the foundations for an overbearing, arrogant tyrant (cf. 873: ὕβρις φυτεύει τύραννον).

Once more the priest reminds Oedipus of their suppliant stance. The king is their "bulwark," ἀλκή (42), and as such he might have heard a "message," φήμη, from the gods or

⁵⁴Knox's argument is that the plague is *not* sent by Apollo. He says, pp. 9/10, in part, "...but Sophocles has repeatedly and emphatically indicated that this is not the case." It is my impression that it is not "Sophocles" who believes this but the *priest* (a creation of Sophocles), who will turn out to be mistaken.

⁵⁵Dawe reads ἰσοούμενός following Stanley. I follow the MSS with Jebb. Knox makes the note (1957, p. 147) that this term is a mathematical one. Later on, I shall discuss what Beer (1990), p. 110, refers to as the "mathematical paradox."

"from some man," ἀνδρὸς...του⁵⁶ (43). As the priest draws near to his conclusion, he calls Oedipus "a saviour for <his> former zeal on the city's behalf,"

ὥς σὲ νῦν μὲν ἦδε γῆ
σωτῆρα κλήζει τῆς πάρος προθυμίας.
(47 - 48)

He begs that they not be left with a contradictory memory of Oedipus's reign: that "once they were restored only later to fall," στάντες τ' ἐς ὀρθὸν καὶ πεσόντες ὕστερον (50). He asks what may be impossible, a "lasting stability," ἀσφαλεία τήνδ' ἀνόρθωσον πόλιν (51). Oedipus did provide the city with "good fortune," or τύχη, through an "auspicious omen," ὄρνιθι...αἰσίῳ (52). This ambiguous reference to a bird recalls the winged Sphinx, who was a bad omen for the city. In any case, comments the priest, a city is not a city, a ship not a ship when it is empty of its inhabitants. It is a courteous reminder that if Oedipus does not act soon, he will no longer be the ruler of anything at all. In the end, Oedipus will ask to be allowed to dwell in the hills of Cithaeron (...ἔα με ναίειν ὄρεσιν, ἔνθα κλήζεται οὐμὸς Κιθαिरῶν οὗτος...1451 - 1452), an existence presumably bereft of human companionship, an entombed existence "chosen by his parents long ago" (ὄν μήτηρ τέ μοι πάτηρ τ' ἐθέσθην ζῶντε κύριον τάφον, 1452 - 1453).

Oedipus's second speech opens with the words, ὦ παῖδες, which recall the initial words of the prologue, ὦ τέκνα. Whereas the first speech appears to serve a simple narrative purpose, this second one is laden with ambiguities and ironies. Oedipus calls on his "pitiable children" thus:

ὦ παῖδες οἰκτροί, γνωτὰ κοῦκ ἀγνωτὰ μοι
προσήλθεθ' ἰμείροντες· εἶ γὰρ οἶδ' ὅτι
νοσεῖτε πάντες, καὶ νοσοῦντες, ὥς ἐγὼ
οὐκ ἔστιν ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐξ ἴσου νοσεῖ.
(58-61)

The magnanimous king speaks words from which the audience cannot help but draw hidden meanings. Oedipus sees and accepts the sickness experienced by the Cadmeians. Since Oedipus is aware that his people are sick, νοσεῖτε, he, too, is sick, ὥς ἐγώ, just like them, out of sympathy

⁵⁶Both Dawe and Jebb reject the older manuscript reading of του and replace it with πον. It makes just as good, if not better, sense to chose the older reading, which Bollack does.

and worry. In fact no-one is as sick as he is, οὐκ ἔστιν ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐξ ἴσου⁵⁷ νοσεῖ (61). Oedipus's assessment of the situation is unwittingly accurate: he is the one who is the pollution of the city and he states it clearly when he claims to be as sick as they. His sickness is a moral one (μίασμα) whereas theirs is a physical one (λοιμός). But he is only aware that he is suffering in regal sympathy with his people. Here Oedipus "knows the <facts of the story> only too well," εὖ γὰρ οἶδ' ὅτι νοσεῖτε πάντες (59 - 60), but adds them up wrong.

He goes on to claim that this pain of theirs is suffered by each one as an individual alone,

τὸ μὲν γὰρ ὑμῶν ἄλγος εἰς ἓν ἔρχεται
μόνον καθ' αὐτόν κοῦδέν' ἄλλον.
(62 - 63)

Whereas each citizen suffers his own individual burden of grief, Oedipus bears a tripled pain. The great ψυχή of the man encompasses the whole city, himself *and* them (ἡ δ' ἐμὴ ψυχὴ πόλιν τε κάμει καὶ σ' ὁμοῦ στένει, 63 - 64). In accepting this magnified responsibility, he is also accepting to be the scapegoat, the sacrificial victim for their ills. This action is almost hybristic. He is going beyond what is humanly possible in suggesting that the sum of one great man (himself) is equal to the three constituencies outlined above. The Apolline maxim γνῶθι σαυτόν reminds a human being that his first duty is to learn his limitations and to acknowledge the superiority of the gods. If he errs in his comprehension of these points, he starts from a false premise and his subsequent "theorem" will also be in error. The priest with his words of homage initiated the idea that Oedipus alone was equal to more than just "one," when he suggested that Oedipus might be equal to the gods (31). In this way, the priest has been Oedipus's first foil and the insalubrious notion of his omniscience has been planted in the mind of the king.

Oedipus finds that his sleep is troubled: he is moved to tears, he is "exploring every avenue of thought," πολλὰς δ' ὁδοὺς ἐλθόντα φροντίδος πλάνοις (67). This key phrase, πολλὰς δ' ὁδοὺς, is suggestive of the several roads he has taken to reach Corinth, Delphi and

⁵⁷Once more the mathematical equation. See Knox (1957) p. 149.

Thebes; it was also at a place where three roads met that Laius was killed. But none of these "roads" are those Oedipus intends at this point. These lines have ironic significance in the mouth of Oedipus:

τηνικαὐτ' ἐγὼ κακὸς
μὴ δρῶν ἄν εἶην πάνθ' ὅσ' ἄν δηλοῖ θεός.
(76 - 77)

A pious Oedipus asserts that "not to do what the god reveals to be right" would prove him κακός, an evil man. On the other hand, Oedipus does not realise that by doing "what the god reveals to be right" he will inadvertently reveal his own impious actions for what they are. Unaware of his guilt, Oedipus affirms his devotion to his city and its inhabitants,

τῶνδε γὰρ πλέον φέρω
τὸ πένθος ἢ καὶ τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς πέρι.

The sorrow I bear for these is more
than for my own life.

(93 - 94)

In this sentiment, he will be proven steadfast. At no point in the play does Oedipus show regret for having found out the truth, though this self-same truth destroyed him in the eyes of his people. Just as he fights for his city, he will fight for the god and his father:

ἐγὼ μέν οἶν τοιόσδε τῷ τε δαίμονι
τῷ τ' ἀνδρὶ τῷ θανόντι σύμμαχος πέλω.

So I am become such as an ally of the god
and the man who died.

(244 - 245)

Unlike Laius, who sired his son in defiance of Apollo's oracle, Oedipus acquiesces in the plan of the god, even when it does not turn out as he expects or desires. What Oedipus does not know is that he cannot be the ally of both god and father in the way he seems to intend. He willingly agrees to root out the evil in the city, to find the ἀνόσιος μιάστωρ. It is the furthest thought from his mind, however, that *he* is this "scourge." Eventually Oedipus becomes the ally of Apollo in a different sense: in his going into exile and purifying the city by this act.

b) Oedipus and Creon

ἄ μὴ φρονῶ γὰρ οὐ φιλῶ λέγειν μάτην... (1520)

Oedipus has three significant encounters with Creon who, at all times, appears conservative and inflexible. In the first scene with Creon (87-150), Oedipus looks to Creon to help clarify the reasons for the plague. The answer comes from the oracle: the regicide of Laius has gone unatoned. The contrast between the two rulers is highlighted in their exchange. Creon shows himself to be the epitome of moderation and circumspection while Oedipus is revealed as an overconfident and precipitate individual. Though blind in his understanding of himself, Oedipus determines to find the absolute truth nonetheless.

The next encounter (531-677) between Creon and Oedipus occurs after the revelations of Teiresias, when Oedipus has leapt to the conclusion that there is a plot between his co-regent and the seer. Creon, in turn, expresses publicly his doubts about the sanity of Oedipus before Oedipus makes his entrance. Affronted by the Oedipus's accusations, Creon makes no attempt to conciliate while neither does Oedipus. The apparent inflexibility of Creon in this regard is aptly explained by the helpful chorus:

καλῶς ἔλεξεν εὐλαβούμενοι πεσεῖν,
ἄναξ· φρονεῖν γὰρ οἱ ταχεῖς οὐκ ἀσφαλεῖς.
(616 - 617)

Creon has spoken well because he "has taken care not to fall": he thinks "safely" not "quickly."

In their final encounter (1422-1523), Creon is more cold and distant than ever. He becomes Oedipus's replacement in kingship as previously Oedipus was for Laius, but Creon, in contrast, is a replacement *manqué*. Whereas Oedipus actively won the kingship, Creon is the passive recipient of the throne and Oedipus is still trying to exert control. Creon has now

replaced the oracle as a source of revelation for an apparently chastened Oedipus. Over these three encounters, it is not Creon who has changed substantially but Oedipus.⁵⁸

The First Encounter of Oedipus and Creon (87 - 150)

Creon's first words to Oedipus are couched in ambiguity. What he has to report from the oracle is "good," ἐσθλή (87), but his news also contains unsettling information which is "hard to bear," τὰ δύσφορα. Oedipus himself does not know whether to be "emboldened," θρασύς (89), or "frightened," προδείσας (90). These words convey, on his part, almost exactly the same emotions he anticipated from the citizens (11), and he is reduced to childlike anxiety before Creon. Though Creon suggests that Oedipus hear the news from the oracle privately, the latter has nothing to hide and wishes his people to be privy to everything.⁵⁹ Oedipus shows a candour here which contrasts with his later secretiveness when his suspicions are aroused by Jocasta's reminiscence (744 - 745).

In the course of the exchange between Oedipus and Creon, we learn that Apollo has clearly commanded that the pollution being harboured in the land be cast out before it becomes impossible to cure (97 - 98). The punishments for the one responsible are either banishment or death.⁶⁰ Upon being prodded, Creon reveals the story of Laius, the previous ruler. Oedipus asserts that he has heard tell of him but never seen him, ἔξοιδ' ἀκούων· οὐ γὰρ εἰσεῖδόν γέ πω (105). The irony of this line will not be lost on the listener. Oedipus has certainly seen Laius on the road to the oracle but did not recognize him either as his father or as the king of Thebes. If Oedipus does not hear aright and does not always see clearly what he ought to, perhaps it is because he is already swollen with notions of omniscience. After all, he has reason to be

⁵⁸Knox (1957), p. 21, comments on this "...adaptability <of Oedipus>, the proof of the superiority of intelligence whenever and in whatever circumstances it may operate."

⁵⁹Vellacott (1971), p. 140, reads an obsession with his own guilt so strong, that Oedipus is expecting a condemnation and punishment from the oracle in the next words!

⁶⁰Those who see Apollo punishing Oedipus cause us to wonder that, at the end of the play, Oedipus is neither banished nor dead though most assuredly mutilated. Perhaps Apollo would have been content with mere banishment or death. Oedipus, however, continues to live, and on his own terms.

confident in his past ability to solve riddles. This confidence is translated into magnanimity towards his inferiors.

Creon reports what Apollo has told him (110), and Oedipus eagerly leaps to action. He discovers the first apparent clue to the slaying of Laius in the supposed words of the herdsman that "many hands" killed Laius, definitely not one (122 - 123). As a result of this piece of information, Oedipus is thrown completely off the scent, and ultimately he looks further afield than he should.⁶¹ In fact, the solution Oedipus seeks is right "at his feet," πρὸς ποσί⁶² (130), to borrow Creon's phrase. And his question as to what was in their way or "at their feet," ἐμποδών (128), to prevent a thorough investigation into the murder of Laius draws our attention to his own feet.

It has been noticed by previous commentators that the name of Oedipus could be understood to mean either one who has swollen feet or one who knows feet.⁶³ These feet which he knows, as we have previously mentioned, may also be metrical ones, and possibly there is an allusion here to his knowing the metrical feet of the Sphinx's riddle⁶⁴ or even the *tripod* at Delphi.⁶⁵ Bernadete links the "biped" (δίπους) in the Sphinx riddle with the name "Oedipus" (Οἰ - δίπους).⁶⁶ Dawe, however, in distaste for what he appears to consider inappropriate punning, points out that the foot metaphor is a commonplace in Greek tragedy.⁶⁷ Fragmentary evidence from Aeschylus and lines in Aristophanes *Frogs* (892 - 895) provide us with additional insight. Both these sources reveal that Oedipus was exposed in a pot, not pierced in the feet. We might

⁶¹That the herdsman lies out of fear for his own skin is the usual conjecture. But possibly this kind-hearted man who saved Oedipus as an infant had recognized Laius's son and had realised his own part in the fulfilment of the oracle. How could he have interfered at this point?

⁶²Bernadete (1966), p. 110: "Oedipus solved what was at their feet and he is now called upon to solve the invisible", viz., his own hidden crimes.

⁶³For other references, see Jebb, p. xix, n. 2; Knox (1957), p. 183/184; Segal, p. 56; Griffith, p. 98.

⁶⁴Ahl (1991), p. 51.

⁶⁵Ahl, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁶⁶Bernadete (1964), p. 119: "The difference between man as two-footed and man as three- or four-footed does not consist in his being literally a biped--the δίπους in Oedipus' name--and only metaphorically three- and four-footed, but in his thinking."

⁶⁷Note to line 878.

hazard a guess that Sophocles invented the story of the wounding of the feet of our hero in order to capitalize on the symbolic possibilities of his odd name. After all, Oedipus (swollen foot) is an appropriate name for a Labdacid (lame one).⁶⁸ His life's journey is bound to be a difficult one, his inherited handicap considered. Jameson states that "the theme of lameness in the Theban...<story> signals and reinforces the ambivalent destinies of the <hero>. The deformed and handicapped are at the least extraordinary, at the worst monstrous and ominous. At their most benign they are well suited to be the heroes of reversals of fortune."⁶⁹ It is also evident that anthropologists have been unable to find a satisfactory explanation for such foot-mutilation as that suffered by Sophocles's infant Oedipus.⁷⁰ It would, therefore, appear that for the purposes of this play, the name of Oedipus is most likely a significant one.

Oedipus, therefore, decides to clarify matters by starting "right from the beginning," ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς αὐθις αὐτ' ἐγὼ φανῶ (132). With this statement begins an irreversible chain of startling but logical revelations. As Aristotle says "...the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities. The tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts."⁷¹ And so, everything that now follows is inherently logical, given the parameters that Sophocles sets. Whether or not these events are probable in a non-dramatic situation is irrelevant. Suffice it to say that Sophocles makes them appear logical to a willing audience.

⁶⁸As to the name of Laius (Λαῖος), tempting though it may be to translate this as "left-handed/footed" (λαϊός) as seems common, I think the diaeresis precludes this. Delcourt (1942), p. 102, suggests another more plausible meaning for the father's name: "Oedipe est exposé en qualité de *bouc émissaire* par un père qui s'appelle *Laïos* c'est-à-dire *Publius*, le (représentant) du peuple."

⁶⁹Jameson (1986), p. 9.

⁷⁰Vellacott's observation, p. 132, that "<He has> been unable to gain any further information on foot-piercing from anthropologists", is a representative comment in the literature I have read. So Segal (1993) in a note to page 161: "The feet piercing has never been fully explained." I reject Pucci's (1988), p. 151, contention that the foot-piercing is "a form of castration." A rose by any other name may be a rose but the foot=penis symbolism in *this* context escapes me. The ancient sources are forthright on the subject of castration: Cronos emasculates Uranus; he does not prick his ankles. Yet, perhaps Delcourt (1942), p. 43, sheds some (inadvertent) light on the foot-mutilation when she states: "Plus un homme a été puissant, plus son *âme* a chance de l'être aussi. C'est pourquoi on mutile le corps de l'ennemi que l'on vient de tuer, espérant ainsi désarmer son revenant." The mutilation of Oedipus may be a prophylactic action on the part of the parents, who have reason to fear their child's power as a ghost, once he has perished.

⁷¹*Poetics* 1460a26-29.

In looking out for the dead king's interest, Oedipus avows that he is looking out for his own (141), which is both true and untrue. When Aristotelian reversal ultimately coincides with recognition, the appalling irony is overwhelming. The final words in the prologue ring ominously in light of what the audience undoubtedly know, as Oedipus quite truthfully declares that his success or ruin depends on the god of the oracle:

σὺν τῷ θεῷ φανούμεθ', ἢ γὰρ εὐτυχεῖς
 ἢ πεπτωκότες.⁷²
 (145 - 146)

The Second Encounter of Oedipus and Creon (lines 531 - 677)

This second meeting occurs after the astounding revelations and predictions of Teiresias. Before Oedipus makes an entrance, Creon shares his doubts about Oedipus's sanity in an aside to the chorus: "Can he see straight, is he in his right mind," ἐξ ὁμμάτων δ' ὀρθῶν τε καὶ ὀρθῆς φρενὸς (528)? Oedipus, in turn, wonders at the effrontery, τόλμης πρόσωπον (533), of Creon's daring to turn up as he does. Tension is heightened by the polar extremes of the two characters. Whenever they confront each other, they appear to be speaking at cross purposes. And at this point in the drama Sophocles makes it perfectly plausible that Oedipus should not yet know that he is the murderer of Laius despite the fact that he has been told this very clearly by Teiresias. Oedipus seems to have misinterpreted Teiresias's initial reluctance (329) to explain the oracle brought by Creon as collusion in a plot with his brother-in-law. If Creon and Teiresias do not seem to be co-operating with Oedipus in his attempts to solve the mystery, then the king's subsequent suspicion and outrage seem reasonably justified. Even though the seer came willingly to reveal the oracle's meaning, he had become very evasive and vituperative when pressed for this very meaning. One cannot help but join Oedipus in his wonder at messages from Creon and Teiresias which appear contradictory. There are two obvious reasons why Oedipus does not believe Teiresias. Firstly, *he* could not solve the Sphinx's riddle whereas Oedipus could. Secondly, the priest is unwilling to interpret the latest prophecy from Delphi, though he claims to understand it. When he is reluctant to reveal who the murderer is, this reluctance has all the

⁷²This participle ("falling") also suggests the feet.

appearance of a conspiracy. This situational, rather than verbal, irony is just one of the many devices in the arsenal of Sophocles.

The audience may be moved to consider some questions. How does Teiresias know that other part of the oracle? Has Creon deliberately omitted to reveal the second part of it to Oedipus? Did Creon and the prophet go to Delphi together? These two appear to be working *in* concert and, in turn, *on* Oedipus. The effect of Creon's half-oracle and Teiresias's apparently reluctant revelations is to make Oedipus think that they have conspired and are responsible for the death of Laius. He makes no connexion whatsoever with himself and the old man he killed on the way to Thebes. And why should he? It has been understood for almost a generation in Thebes that *foreigners* had committed the murder. And now, it seems, Creon is planning to murder Oedipus too, says Oedipus in his counter-accusation against Creon: φονεὺς ὦν τοῦδε τάνδρως ἐμφανῶς (534).

Creon seems to be inconsistent when he says they certainly made attempts to find the murderer (567). This conflicts with his previous assertion that the Sphinx side-tracked them from an investigation (130 - 131). But then, perhaps the killing of Laius had been a convenient opportunity for Creon to assume power without a struggle and perhaps there was no sorrow in Thebes at the death of Laius. Neither is there an answer for Oedipus when he questions why Teiresias did not mention Oedipus's name at that time of enquiry into Laius's murder (566 - 568). Creon takes refuge in these words: ἐφ' οἷς γὰρ μὴ φρονῶ σιγᾶν φιλῶ (569). When he does not know something, he keeps (provocatively) silent about it. One thousand lines later (cf. 1520), he still has nothing of significance to say about the incredibly harrowing events of the day: ἃ μὴ φρονῶ γὰρ οὐ φιλῶ λέγειν μάτην, I do not like to speculate about what I do not know.⁷³ Perhaps he also keeps silence about the things he knows as well. There is a point to playing it

⁷³Vellacott translates, "It is not my practice to speak words *I do not mean*." whereas Jebb has, " 'Tis not my wont to speak idly what *I do not mean*." Yet these translations of μὴ φρονῶ differ substantially from their translations of 569 where Vellacott reads, "In matters that *I don't understand* I prefer to say nothing" and Jebb says, "Where *I lack light*, 'tis my wont to stay silent."

safe. The stakes are high in the contest for the "tyrannocracy" of Thebes, whatever Creon may say about his reluctance to rule (585 ff.). The contrast between him and Oedipus is stark. Oedipus will take risks to find out the truth; Creon is a conservative in such matters. In this respect, perhaps, Oedipus reflects the spirit of enquiry of fifth-century Athens. At all times, this conservative Creon is careful not to volunteer information. His replies to Oedipus tend to be noncommittal and deferential reflexions of what Oedipus has just said: εἰ μὲν λέγει τάδε, αὐτὸς οἶσθ' (575 - 576). And yet they seem calculated to enrage him at every turn. Oedipus, understandably, sees him as a κακὸς...φίλος (582).

In vain Creon will protest that he has no need to plot against the king. Jocasta, Creon and Oedipus are a triumvirate, equal in status (581). Yet, though Creon has the status of a tyrant, he is not the one in charge (590). He claims not to envy Oedipus his "fear-fraught rule," ἀρχεῖν ξὺν φοβοῖσι (585); he himself prefers to "sleep untroubled," ἄτρεστος εὖδων (585). He cannot fathom Oedipus, who counts friends as enemies and *vice versa* (609 - 610). He muses that it takes a lifetime to "prove an upright man but that an evil one is shown in the space of a day,"

χρόνος δίκαιον ἄνδρα δείκνυσιν μόνος
κακὸν δὲ καὶ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ γνούς μιν.

(615).

But Creon will not say explicitly that he considers Oedipus this evil man.

Oedipus is now on the verge of losing a "supporter," but he seems to feel constrained to rationalize everything. A fairly accurate judge of his own character, he concedes that he is quick-tempered and that for this reason he counterplots (619). He must "anticipate the one who plots in secret," οὐπιβουλεύων λάθρα (618). Not to react gives one's enemies the advantage (620). Creon finally loses *his* temper and claims that Oedipus is "definitely not sane," οὐ γὰρ φρονοῦντα σ' εἶ βλέπω (626). With this choice of words, he indicts both Oedipus's mental acuity and his physical sense of sight. In sum, Creon claims he does not need or want to plot.

Eventually, all things come to Creon, the man⁷⁴ who is willing to wait. Since Oedipus is not a patient man, he has no grasp of this.

Oedipus and Creon Meet for the Third and Last Time (lines 1422 - 1523)

The last meeting between Oedipus and Creon comes after Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus's self-mutilation. The Creon we see here is a cold and distant man. Although he comes not to mock or reproach Oedipus for his past injustices towards him, he is now ready to dispose of the king by handing him over to attendants who will deal with the unpleasant aftermath:

οὐχ ὥς γελαστής, Οἰδίπους, ἐλήλυθα,
οὐδ' ὥς ὀνειδῶν τι τῶν πάρος κακῶν.
(1422 - 1423)

This uncle of Oedipus's, who never acknowledges this relationship with him, insists that Oedipus be sent into the house (1429). His pollution must not defile the outdoors, where it can be seen by the sun's light:

...τὴν γοῦν πάντα βόσκουσιν φλόγα
αἰδεῖσθ' ἄνακτος Ἥλιου...
(1425 - 1426)

The *ecclesia* is an outdoor gathering "under the sun" but the sun is also a metaphor for Apollo.⁷⁵ While Oedipus is an affront to Apollo in the sun's light, in the *ecclesia*, Oedipus is also an embarrassment to Creon, who likes sententious aphorisms and tidy endings (εἰ μὲν λέγει τάδε, αὐτὸς οἶσθ', "If he said that, you must know," 574; and, as already noted, 569 and 1520: ἐφ' οἷς γὰρ μὴ φρονῶ σιγᾶν φιλῶ, "when I don't understand, I say nothing"; ἃ μὴ φρονῶ γὰρ οὐ φιλῶ λέγειν μάτην, "I am not accustomed to say frivolously things I do not mean," and the like). Creon would rather hurry Oedipus off the stage than let him try to vocalize his interpretation of

⁷⁴Peradotto (*op. cit.*), p. 12, comments that it is this "shirker" of responsibility who is left in charge of the ship of state at the end.

⁷⁵Burkert (1985), p. 149 on Apollo: "Even the all-too-human receives light and form from that distance <i.e. "the God of Afar">. It made manifest sense, although it was also a constriction, when, from the fifth century onwards, Apollo began to be understood as a sun god."

what has transpired ("Take him at once into the house!" 1429 "Go inside the house!" 1515 "Go now and let go of your children!" 1521).

As Creon distances himself physically and mentally, he is no kinsman of Oedipus:

τοῖς ἐν γένει γὰρ τὰ γγενῇ μάλισθ' ὀρᾶν
μόνοις τ' ἀκούειν εὐσεβῶς ἔχει κακά.
(1430 - 1431)

"Piety demands that kinsmen alone should see and alone should hear the sorrows of their kin."⁷⁶

And so he sends Oedipus back inside to these same kin, away from himself.

Oedipus continues to interfere with Creon's plans for he wishes still to "command"; he suggests that Creon exile him (1436), preferably in a place where he can be "addressed by none", μηδενὸς προσήγορος (1437). He now craves to be removed from his sensory contact with the world. Creon had wanted time to consider the god's will (1439). Oedipus persists: Creon already knows what to do with a parricide like himself. He should be destroyed (1440 - 1441). In fact, both Apollo with this initial commands (95 - 96) and Oedipus with his subsequent curse (234-275) have settled the matter already. Creon resists being forced into a hasty decision, reiterating that it is better to find out what to do (1443) before acting. This seems to be the ultimate irony. Every other time they have gone to the oracle, the messages have been ambiguous and disastrous! Surely, by this point, someone can act without its guidance? This exchange seems crafted to highlight the extreme differences between the two characters.

Now when Oedipus asks Creon to seek another oracle from Apollo, Creon responds that Oedipus will have to believe the god's utterances *this* time -- as he did *not* twice before (1444 - 1445). Earlier it was Oedipus who sent Creon on the fateful quest for the god's help. Despite this dependence on Creon, he is anxious, as ever, to direct events. He makes a "living will." He needs to know that his wife whom he cannot name (1447) -- for what would he call her properly? mother? wife? -- will be properly honoured in death and not suffer because of him (1447 - 1448).

⁷⁶Lloyd-Jones's (1994) translation.

We contrast lines 1449 - 1450 with 222: now he withdraws his membership in the city (1450) where he was formerly so proud to count himself among the taxpayers⁷⁷ (222). The tomb *he* has (1453) differs from hers (1447). His was chosen for him by his parents while still alive, and that is where he desires to live an "entombed" existence on his mountain (1452 - 1454). He had not been saved from dying originally "except for some strange purpose," μή 'πι τῷ δεινῷ κακῷ (1457). That purpose, obviously, has now been fulfilled.

As Oedipus assigns the care of his sons to themselves, their being of age, he assigns his young daughters to Creon, a most poignant moment in the play (1459-1465). He grieves for these little children who will no longer know his touch, while at the same time he seems to crave their touch in return. At a moment when he has lost his wife and his family has been bitterly destroyed, he still needs this most intimate of reassurances.

Oedipus's Eulogy

The last monologue of Oedipus is a parody of self-eulogy and predictions of the future. As he is not a god, not even "godlike" as before, we could expect that they will not be fulfilled. The high hopes of the prologue, where everyone -- citizens, priest and Oedipus himself -- felt assurance of salvation, have dissipated. Oedipus first thanks Creon and says farewell to his girls. He bids them come into "his hands of a brother," ὡς τὰς ἀδελφὰς τάσδε τὰς ἐμὰς χέρας (1481) and predicts for them a sorry life from which they will derive no marriage and little happiness (1487-1495). He cannot look upon his children but only weep (1486).

He summarizes his failings and admits his guilt as a patricide who committed incest (1496-1497). He entrusts his daughters to Creon, saying that Creon is the "only father left to them," μόνος πατήρ τούτοις (1503-1504): Oedipus and Jocasta are both dead, the former figuratively, the latter literally. These children must not suffer along with him in his misfortunes (1507). He wants a better life for them than their father's (1514 - 1515). Since he cannot see the "nod" of

⁷⁷In his note to this line, Dawe remarks that the expression εἰς ὅστούς τελεῶ means to "pay taxes".

Creon's head (ξύννευσον 1510), he asks for the "touch of his hand" (σῆ ψαύσας χερί 1510) in agreement. From the curt response Creon gives him, it could be inferred that Creon neither touches him nor agrees to carry out his wishes. He orders Oedipus to stop the tears and to go inside (1515). Oedipus persists in assuming the rôle of anxious inquisitor, alternately demanding advice from the god and yet eager to make the terms of his own departure. His own choice is exile (1518), which choice Creon concedes him with no little touch of irony: "You will tell me, and when I have heard you I shall know" (1517). While Oedipus is still capable of arguing his own case right down to establishing the sentence for his crimes, Creon is reluctant to take either the rôle of the god (a rôle in which Oedipus had revelled and which he appears still to be usurping) or the mantle of the ruler. Creon's approach seems cautious and measured. Pressed again to say whether he means what he says, Creon's response is ἄ μὴ φρονῶ γὰρ οὐ φιλῶ λέγειν μάτην (1520), "what <he does> not intend, <he does> not speak idly about." Oedipus demands punishment, namely, exile (1521), but cries when Creon tells him to let go the children. Creon's patience finally breaks as he demands an end to Oedipus's tyranny: πάντα μὴ βούλου κρατεῖν, "stop wanting to be in charge of everything" (1522). Creon's last command to him is a summation of the character of Oedipus: he has been domineering and controlling throughout. Misfortune may have toppled Oedipus from temporal power but he has by no means relinquished command of his destiny. As Oedipus leaves the scene, he leaves not as a criminal but as the scapegoat he chose to be in lines 63 - 64, for he feels no guilt. This is a man who has done everything feasible to satisfy the demands of piety. Yet, despite his good intentions "all ills that can be named" (1285) are now his.

c) Oedipus and Teiresias (316 - 462)

τυφλὸς τὰ τ' ὦτα τὸν τε νοῦν τὰ τ' ὄμματ' εἶ... (371)

Undoubtedly, it is in the exchange between Teiresias and Oedipus that the most riddling and paradox are found. When Oedipus returns in the first epeisodion to propose a course of

action, his first act is to exculpate himself by reminding the citizens that he is a relative stranger to both the report of the deed and to the deed itself, ξένος μὲν τοῦ λογοῦ...ξένος δὲ τοῦ πραχθέντος (221). This claim could be a problematic one. Oedipus, therefore, must be assumed to have been absent when the report of the killing was current in the city. As for the deed itself, he has no idea that he is in any way connected to it. Some commentators find this point a perplexing one. How could Oedipus have been ignorant of the news? How could he not have consulted Jocasta? Equally, one could not say with any degree of certainty how long a time elapsed between the killing of Laius and the Sphinx's ravages. Does it, however, matter? Once more, Aristotle did not find this "problematic." He gave solid approbation to Sophocles for the very ignorance of Oedipus in this regard: τοὺς τε λόγους μὴ συνίστασθαι ἐκ μερῶν ἀλόγων, ἀλλὰ μάλιστα μὲν μηδὲν ἔχειν ἄλογον, εἰ δὲ μή, ἔξω τοῦ μυθεύματος, ὥσπερ Οἰδίπους τό μὴ εἰδέναι πῶς ὁ Λαῖος ἀπέθανεν, "everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded; or, at all events, it should lie outside the action of the play (as, in the *Oedipus*, the hero's ignorance as to the manner of Laius' death)."⁷⁸

Next Oedipus enjoins his people to deny any sort of refuge to the regicide, banning him from their hearths and denying him fellowship (239-241). He intensifies the curse by urging that it falls even upon himself if he should knowingly assist the polluter, ἐμοῦ συνειδότος (250). Belatedly, Oedipus acknowledges that even if a god had not urged the matter on (255), he would have succeeded in investigating eventually (256). This claim seems difficult to understand.⁷⁹ There is a suggestion here that Oedipus was perhaps reluctant to delve into this unsolved death. He may have considered the death fortuitous and Sophocles does not care to enlighten us. Then Oedipus lays claim to the king's wife, whom he calls ὁμόσπορος -- and while he means he shared her with Laius as a spouse, we know this other hidden "meaning" that he and Jocasta share a direct filial-maternal bond! Laius, he thinks, suffered from being childless, εἰ κείνῳ γένος μὴ ὀδυστύχησεν (261 - 262), when in reality he suffered from *having* a child who survived to kill

⁷⁸*Poetics* 1460a28-30.

⁷⁹His sons must be at least sixteen years old by now according to line 1460.

him. Oedipus swears to replace that child he thinks Laius never had by his own efforts to track the killer: he will fight for this dead king as though for his very own father, ὥσπερ εἰ τοῦ μοῦ πατρός (264).⁸⁰ The reality is, of course, fantastical. Oedipus is, in truth, the brother-in-law of his own father, spouse of his own mother, brother of his own children. What better champion of Laius could there be, who has replaced his father's children fourfold? He is the "homospore" *par excellence*. And finally, as a vicious circle of destiny draws in upon him, Oedipus invokes his own yet unknown lineage, τῷ Λαβδακείῳ... Πολυδώρου... Κάδμου... Ἀγήνορος (267 - 268) calling down the curses which ironically must have already been fulfilled as a result of himself, the unwitting source of the pollution.

Since neither Creon nor the chorus have been of any concrete help in determining the individual responsible for the plague, Oedipus reveals that he has already sent for Teiresias in anticipation of the chorus. Upon the chorus's remark that the story of Laius is now κωφά and παλαία (290), Oedipus says that he is interested in "every story," πάντα...λόγον (291). He claims, however, that no-one has seen "the one who saw the murder," ἰδόντα⁸¹ (293). This is where Oedipus could settle the story once and for all with a speedy interview. The interview, however, does not take place till the messenger from Corinth has delivered his message about the death of Polybus. As we shall see, Sophocles arranges that Oedipus is distracted yet again with other pieces of the puzzles of "who killed Laius?" and "who am I?" For he, too, is a man "who shrinks not from a deed nor is scared by a word," μή ᾽στι δρῶντι τάρβος, οὐδ' ἔπος φοβεῖ (296). Any word or any deed has the potentiality for leading Oedipus to explore another avenue.

⁸⁰Pucci, *op. cit.*, p. 135, reminds us that Oedipus means Polybus here.

⁸¹The manuscripts say ἰδόντα (the "witness"). Jebb and Bollack follow these whereas τόν δὲ δρῶντ' ("the perpetrator") is used in the OCT; Nigel Wilson, H. Lloyd-Jones and Dawe accept this emendation. I have chosen to follow Jebb and Bollack. The chorus have just stated (292) that "he was said to have died at the hands of some wayfarers". If "no-one has seen the 'perpetrator'," the number of the participle is just not consistent with the previous noun. The suggestion that this remark may be a "Freudian slip" seems to me far-fetched.

Oedipus Meets Teiresias

The scene with Teiresias can be read on different levels. On one level, this scene depicts Oedipus's apparent admiration for Teiresias as it shifts by increasing degrees through impatience and anger to outright contempt. On another, the scene is strikingly reminiscent of the *prologos* (especially lines 300-315): a seemingly sarcastic reworking of the dignified interchange between priest and king (1-64). Teiresias is a saviour (305), so is Oedipus (48); Teiresias *knows* what is wrong (303), Oedipus *sees* what is wrong (15 - 16); Teiresias should not grudge the use of bird-omens (303), Oedipus needed no teaching (39); Teiresias should save them all (313), so should Oedipus (51); Teiresias should save himself, the city and Oedipus (312), Oedipus groans for the city, himself and the suppliants (64). Teiresias has been made a parody of Oedipus by Oedipus.

Pleading initially for the impossible, Oedipus asks that Teiresias save himself, the city and Oedipus, and that he release them from the pollution caused by the death. This the prophet cannot do. While saving himself comes at the expense of the city, in saving the city Teiresias must destroy Oedipus. Hence, Teiresias is at first reluctant to reveal what he knows and regrets his power to see with the mind,

φεῦ φεῦ, φρονεῖν ὥς δεινὸν ἔνθα μὴ τέλη
λύη φρονοῦντι.

Alas, alas, how dreadful it is to know when the
knowledge does not benefit the knower!⁸²

(317).

These first words are apparently directed at himself but they are double-edged and directed at Oedipus too. To reveal the oracle's true meaning will benefit neither seer nor ruler. And so, Teiresias must be made to appear a study in contradiction and inconstancy. He claims a lapse of memory: he would not have come, but he had "let it slip from his knowledge" (εἰδὼς διώλεσα, 319) what a dilemma there is for a seer who knows only what is destructive for his client. So, in his apparent giftedness for knowing, there is a flaw. Oedipus seems exasperated by the

⁸²Lloyd-Jones, (*op cit.*).

equivocation of Teiresias. The prophet, he claims, knows something which he will not reveal, something which will betray Oedipus and destroy the city (330 - 331). It is of no consolation that Teiresias is acting out of consideration: he does not want to harm Oedipus or himself by revealing their "troubles" (328 - 329). This apparent teasing sits ill with Oedipus. Although Teiresias claims in line 341 that he will not reveal the future nor change it, by line 353 he has been provoked so far by the outraged king that he charges him with being the ἀνόσιος μιάστωρ of the city (353). Next he tells him pointblank that he *is* the actual murderer he seeks (362), that he "does not see that he is living shamefully with his nearest kin and cannot see the plight he is in" (λεληθέναι σέ φημι σὺν τοῖς φιλτάτοις αἴσχισθ' ὁμιλοῦντ' οὐδ' ὄραν ἰν' εἰ κακοῦ 366 - 367).⁸³ Oedipus, in return, considers Teiresias blind in all his senses (371), while the seer retorts that eventually the scorn that has been heaped upon Teiresias will rebound on Oedipus himself (373). But Oedipus believes that no man who sees the sun can hurt him and that Teiresias lives in an unbroken night (374). Ironically, Oedipus himself is the man who does *not* see the sun, *i.e.*, "the one who can hurt him." (*Cf.* lines 1425 - 1426 where Oedipus can no longer see the sun and where the sun does not want to look on him.) Teiresias, however, knows that Apollo will work out his ruin (377), and we know that Oedipus has already agreed to assist this god (76 - 77).

Finally, Teiresias accuses Oedipus of moral blindness, καὶ δέδορκας κοῦ βλέπεις ἰν' εἰ κακοῦ (413), of "being blind to his antecedents despite his sightedness," and of being "an unwitting enemy to his own family," ἐχθρὸς...τοῖς σοῖσιν (415 - 416). But all of this is to no avail. By now, kingly anger has engendered kingly contempt.

Oedipus's response must be a sarcastic one. Who, after all, saved the city when the "rhapsodic dog",⁸⁴ ῥάψωδος κύων (391), was terrorizing it? Of what use was Teiresias's prophetic power then? "A know-nothing Oedipus," ὁ μηδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπους (397), solved the

⁸³Vellacott thinks that Oedipus is fully aware that he is committing incest all along and is trying to find a way to let the Thebans know it! Some commentators automatically translate these words into "incest." I think this is hyperbolic. Sophocles makes Teiresias much more subtle than this.

⁸⁴Beer (*op. cit.*), p. 110.

riddle. Obviously Oedipus is not the only know-nothing; Teiresias is not the only blind one (389). Oedipus, too was a prophet (394). He used his mind and his wit to stop the Sphinx:

ὁ μὴδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπους, ἔπαυσά νιν,
γνώμη κυρήσας οὐδ' ἄπ' οἰωνῶν μαθὼν.

I, a know-nothing Oedipus, I came and stopped her
with my intelligence, having learned nothing from birds.⁸⁵
(397 - 398)

In return, Teiresias warns that "the curse is a double-striking one":

καὶ σ' ἀμφιπλήξῃ μητρός τε καὶ τοῦ σοῦ πατρὸς
ἔλῃ ποτ' ἐκ γῆς τῆσδε δεινόπους ἄρά.
(417 - 418)

The curse which hounds Oedipus moves with terrible foot and is seen in his own dreadful foot, the ὄνειδος (1035), "the brand of shame," which he mentions later.

Oedipus may consider Teiresias a fool, but the king's mysterious parents consider the prophet a wise man (436), claims the seer. Thus we may correctly infer that it was by Teiresias's warning that the infant Oedipus was exposed. The same day will engender and destroy him: it will give him new parents and yet be his undoing (438). This is altogether too much riddling for Oedipus to bear: ὥς πάντ' ἄγαν αἰνικτὰ κάσαφῇ λέγεις (439). The tables have turned on Oedipus as Teiresias, affronted and enraged, begins in earnest to taunt him with his vaunted abilities to solve riddles (440). If we wonder why the previously consummate puzzle-solver cannot now unravel this riddle,⁸⁶ we may grant that there are now too many and disparate questions to answer. Stretched to the limits, tantalized by first one piece of information and then another, yet swelling with self-pride and arrogance, Oedipus cannot see or hear. *His* ears are stopped and *his* eyes are blinded (*cf.* 371). His "luck" at riddles has destroyed him, αὕτη γὰρ μέντοι σ' ἢ τύχη⁸⁷ διώλεσεν (442), and the seer claims that the child of chance (1080) is killed

⁸⁵He *did* learn something from the Sphinx, who is birdlike in some ways.

⁸⁶This is discussed further in the section "The Mythic Sphinx," p. 72.

⁸⁷The codices have the reading *τύχη* while Dawe has chosen to follow Bentley's emendation of *τέχνη*. *τύχη* seems to me to be the better choice here. A series of "chances" or "happenings" (Lloyd-Jones) had brought Oedipus to the Sphinx. But *τύχη* can also be used in the sense of one's "fate" or "destiny."

by an unlucky chance. Was it a lucky stroke of genius that allowed him to solve the Sphinx's enigmatic utterance? Was it bad luck or fate that Oedipus happened upon this city, *viz.* Thebes, in his wanderings? First, Oedipus has been confronted with the mystery of the killer, surely a mundane mystery. But now an older mystery has returned: the mystery of his birth. Of a sudden, his self-confidence is being undermined and the question (*re* parentage) that started his wanderings from Corinth returns to haunt him. His last words to the prophet are blustering, dismissive ones which accuse Teiresias of being "in his feet," ἐμποδών (445), just like the Sphinx when previously it terrorized the Thebans (128). As he made the Sphinx leave, Oedipus makes Teiresias leave too, thinking to have put an end to his seemingly endless riddles. A routine interview between ruler and prophet has become an unholy confrontation which has neither clarified the murder investigation nor bolstered the king's prestige to any extent. It is enough that the audience are aware that the seed of doubt has been planted in the mind of Oedipus.

Teiresias's Prophecies

Teiresias has one of the smallest parts in the play, some seventy-seven lines. A great deal of information, however, is compressed into these few lines and what Teiresias has to say is of no little significance. Teiresias is blind but the gift he has been given has caused him to rise above his physical defect in such a way as to have certain advantages over the sighted in general and over Oedipus in particular. Teiresias is an "equal" to Oedipus "despite the fact that he is the ruler," εἰ καὶ τυραννεῖς, ἐξισωτέον τὸ γούν ἴσ' ἀντιλέξει (408 - 409), "slave not to him but to Apollo,"⁸⁸ οὐ γάρ τι σοὶ ζῶ δοῦλος, ἀλλὰ Λοξία (410), and as such owes Oedipus no allegiance. Although he does not have answers for Oedipus's taunts (380 - 404), taunts which challenge his prophetic abilities, he does have questions for him. If Oedipus has "sight", why can he not *see* how wretched his own situation is (423 - 414)? If he has "wit", why does he not *know* (415) from whom he has sprung? And what Oedipus has no "hearing" for, he will *hear*, at last, in his own agonized shrieking throughout Cithaeron (420 - 421). This is Teiresias's response to the

⁸⁸The epithet Teiresias uses for Apollo (Λοξίας) is one that Jocasta will use later (853). The word suggests "obtuse" and "not straightforward".

cutting insult from Oedipus: τυφλὸς τά τ' ὦτα τὸν τε νοῦν τά τ' ὄμματ' εἶ,⁸⁹ "you are blind in your ears, mind and eyes!" (371). The vast amount of cryptic information appears to have produced in Oedipus a type of sensory overload which interferes with his ability to solve his own problems. Despite this interference, though, he seems superendowed with an ability to solve those of others, (ὁ μὴδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπους, ἔπαυσά νιν, 397). This "superendowed" Oedipus has a look, πρόσωπον (448), which may cause terror in others but, since he is blind, Teiresias has no cause to fear this look. Oedipus has hypnotized all the Thebans, has impressed them with his *persona*. Only Teiresias can, and will, *see* past it: he is the only objective participant in the drama. The prophecies he utters are all eventually proven true, but that Oedipus is the accused regicide (362) has been forgotten by the ruler in the heat of his anger. Teiresias reiterates: the murderer is in their midst, ἐνθάδε (451); in theory he is a stranger living with them, ξένος λόγῳ μέτοικος (452), yet he will soon be seen to be a native Theban, ἐγγενὴς...Θηβαῖος (453). He will go from being sighted to blind, from riches to beggary, and he will end up in exile, tapping his way with a stick. He will be shown to be son and spouse of his mother, of the same seed as his father -- and he will also prove to have been his killer (459 - 460).

Teiresias's last words are to tell Oedipus to go inside and think about what he has just said. If Oedipus finds that Teiresias was wrong, then he may say that Teiresias is not a prophet, μαντικῇ μὴδὲν φρονεῖν (462). We hear the echo of Creon's pompous lines (ἄ μὴ φρονῶ..etc.) and the ironic contrast with Oedipus's lack of φρόνησις. Instead, Oedipus has δεινότης, the decidedly inferior quality.⁹⁰ Naturally, the horror that all these prophecies imply is too monstrous ever to be countenanced by Oedipus. Either because he knows he is not capable of these acts or perhaps because he unconsciously⁹¹ realizes he is guilty, Oedipus will not and cannot accept this

⁸⁹Dawe's pedestrian comment on this powerful and beautiful line is disappointing: "A line famous not so much for the accusatives of respect which it enshrines as for its repeated τ sounds. These *may* be purely fortuitous, because the definite article and τε can hardly help having them. In any case the intellectual weight of such words is negligible, and any effect achieved seems to bear no relation to the underlying sense. Certainly there is nothing inherent in the letter τ to make it especially redolent of anger and contempt." I highly doubt the sounds are "fortuitous." The line is a finely crafted one and is as evocative as it is alliterative.

⁹⁰Aristotle's *Ethics* 6.

⁹¹Kirkwood (1958), p. 129.

new version of the old predictions. Indeed, the last time he heard them, he fled Corinth to prevent their fulfilment. What does Teiresias expect Oedipus to do inside? Possibly Oedipus could find answers to his own questions as well as the prophecies of Teiresias "inside," since this is where Jocasta is. Clearly, the chorus are of no help. They look to Oedipus for direction and will not believe anything against him without proof. Perhaps it was anger and not reasoned judgment that forced his accusations from him, they temporize, ἀλλ' ἦλθε μὲν δὴ τοῦτο τοῦναιδος τάχ' ἄν' ὀργῇ βιασθὲν μᾶλλον ἢ γνώμῃ φρενῶν (523 - 524). And yet, they are also ambivalent (οὔτε δοκοῦντ' οὔτ' ἀποφάσκονθ' 485 - 486).

iv) Oedipus and Jocasta

εἶθε μήποτε γνοίης ὅς εἰ... (1068)

Jocasta's first appearance (634 - 862)

The action of the drama is over one third finished by the time Jocasta appears on the scene (634). A reference in the prologue to τόκοισί τε ἀγόνοις γυναικῶν, "the barren labour pangs of women" (26 - 27), is the first mention of the calamity afflicting Thebes. The plague is like a negative-image response to the fecundity of Jocasta: when she should have been barren, she was not. Her superfecundity (Oedipus, to start, and then her inbred children) is an affront to the natural order. The natural course of things has been subverted by this refusal to comply with the original oracle to Laius not to engender offspring. And so, the barrenness of the city reflects the barrenness that should have been Jocasta's.

In this scene, Jocasta plays the maternal rôle of conciliator, and a world-weary one at that. In contrast, the men are like squabbling children. Her words cut into the quarrel with a reminder of the gravity of the city's situation. This woman has learned to her cost how fruitless and how pernicious words can be. We are reminded that apparent truths can ruin whole lives (*viz.*, the prophecy which led to her exposure of Oedipus). The quarrel Creon and Oedipus are engaged in

is petty, τὸ μηδὲν ἄλγος (638), compared to the national calamity and the private burden of past grief which Jocasta bears.

Oedipus tells Jocasta about the quarrel: Creon has accused him of murdering Laius (703). Strictly speaking, not Creon but Teiresias has said this (362, 573), but as far as Oedipus is concerned, these two are co-conspirators and the latter is merely the former's mouthpiece. Here Sophocles shows us a man who has become so enraged at the insult to his integrity that he has lost all sense of perspective. Neither one of the "conspirators" is worth distinguishing from the other. Nevertheless, Jocasta comes right to the point: did Creon know this for a certainty or did he learn it from someone else (704)? Jocasta has reason to enquire. When she learns that a seer (705) has been responsible for these words, she does not hesitate to disabuse Oedipus of the notion that seers possess prophetic knowledge (709). Apollo is a different matter. Jocasta dare not go as far as deny a god his power, but his lackeys are contemptible. The prophecy regarding Laius was certainly not fulfilled. He ought to have died at the hands of their son. But, instead, he died at the hands of foreign robbers at the crossroads (715 - 716). The painful story of her child she disposes of in three terse lines (716 - 719). So great is the trauma of remembrance that she apparently "forgets" that the baby was not handed by Laius to others, ἔρριψεν ἄλλων χερσίν (719), but by herself (1171), as the herdsman later testifies. But in her zeal to soothe Oedipus, she has gone too far in remembering -- right down to the detail of the crossroads. This is typically Sophoclean: in the sweeping generalities made by the characters, insignificant, sometimes contradictory, details are tossed in, almost like afterthoughts (e.g., "But you made no search for *the killer*," says Oedipus (567) although in 291, the chorus have reported, "He was said to have been killed by *people* on the road."; "His appearance was not far from *yours*," (743) says Jocasta when Oedipus's physique truly is his father's.). It is in these details that an excruciating sense of anxiety is heightened in Oedipus and that suspense is maintained in the audience.

Oedipus's suspicions are roused and he is compelled to give voice to them (727). And the audience wonder how Oedipus has never heard it before, if, as Jocasta says, the story is common

knowledge and there is a standard version of it still current (731). In the space of twenty-two lines (716-738), Oedipus has been taken from the empyrean heights of certainty to the most dismal depths of gnawing suspicion:

ὦ Ζεῦ, τί μου δρᾶσαι βεβούλευσαι πέρι;

O Zeus! What have you planned to do with me?
(738)

This dreadful cry reminds us that Oedipus himself never chose to do what was wrong but always sought to do what was right in the eyes of gods and men. It also suggests an awoken remembrance of the ultimate powerlessness of mortals in the grasp of a fate dealt out dispassionately by the father of the gods. In this line Oedipus is reduced and humbled, no longer the κρατύνων or κράτιστος ruler when faced with the might of the ruler of the gods. At this mid-point in the drama, the confidence of Oedipus begins to falter. In Jocasta's innocent description of Laius, it is possible to recall the reaction of Helen and Menelaus when they see Telemachus for the first time: he looks very much like the father he has never seen.⁹² So does Oedipus look like *his*, according to Jocasta: μορφῆς τῆς σῆς, "he looked like you" (743).

The full horror of Oedipus's situation is not yet manifest. He thinks only that he may be a regicide and now believes he has thrown himself unwittingly under a curse because of it (745). He is dreadfully afraid, moreover, that Teiresias "could see after all," ἄθυμῶ μὴ βλέπων (747). The circumstantial evidence is mounting up: the "three roads," ἐν τριπλαῖς ἀμαξιτοῖς (716), the "one four-wheeled waggon," ἀπήνη...μία (753), the "five companions," πέντ'...οἱ ξύμπαντες (752), are all indicators significant enough to indict him.⁹³ His unthinking and precipitate behaviour has undone him. Oedipus is aware of his own propensity for rash behaviour, yet seems unable to help himself:

δέδοικ' ἐμαυτόν, ὦ γύναι, μὴ πόλλ' ἄγαν
εἰρημέν' ἦ μοι.

⁹²*Odyssey* 4.142-150.

⁹³The numbers here are so specific that in contrast the number of the killers is made to appear tantalizingly vague.

I fear, O wife, that I have said too much.
(767 - 768).

The Delphic μη(δὲν) ἄγαν is woven into his cry of regret. Whatever the precipitate Oedipus does is either "excessive," ἄγαν, like his speech, or lacking in understanding of self. He violates the prime dicta of Delphi over and over (cf. 1068).⁹⁴ When he should ponder carefully, he reacts instead: reflexion is not his forte. What he hears at a banquet one day is "something that should have given him pause," θαυμάσαι μὲν ἀξία (777). Even he sees that he should not have overreacted: σπουδῆς...τῆς ἐμῆς οὐκ ἀξία, "it was not deserving of my rash behaviour" (778). Being called a supposititious child (780), he shows the spirit of enquiry which is to be the unravelling of his life's riddle. He is never satisfied with the answers he gets (unless they are from Jocasta), whether from his supposed parents or Creon or Teiresias, and though he accepts those from the oracle's mouth, he tries to circumvent them.⁹⁵ He recognizes his own impetuosity (778) and capacity for violence (807). He is a man who clings to hope till the very last stone has been turned: τοσοῦτόν γ' ἐστὶ μοι τῆς ἐλπίδος, "I have this much hope" (836).

The powerful predictions reiterated in 791 - 793 (that Oedipus would sleep with his mother, produce an unholy brood⁹⁶ and slay his father) had been long forgotten: his sons are of an age to take care of themselves: ἄνδρες εἰσὶν (1460). He has been a successful ruler for almost a generation. The prophecy must have seemed like a distant nightmare.⁹⁷ Even Jocasta

⁹⁴Jocasta cries, ὦ δούποτμ', εἴθε μήποτε γνοίης ὅς εἰ, "O wretch, may you never know who you are!" We remember that the mother of Narcissus was warned that her son would be safe as long as he did not "get to know himself" (Ovid, *Met.*, iii.348).

⁹⁵Burkert (1991), p. 11: "The investigation takes four moves, separated by choral odes; three times a move ends with a deceptive stalemate, with a new stage of illusion; and then an unimpeachable truth comes out in the end. In the process the poet makes use of linguistic ambivalence in a most sophisticated manner, so that again and again the words of Oedipus are true, too true in a sense of which he is unaware, a sense which is devastating for himself."

⁹⁶Perhaps the "whole brood" was not unholy. Ismene seems to escape unscathed while Antigone will hang herself and their brothers will kill each other.

⁹⁷I must disagree with Ahl (1991), p. 42, who states that "Oedipus has spent much of his life trying in vain to discover who he is." He thinks he knows who he is for most of his life and has not yet come to suspect that he may be the son of Jocasta and the man he slew.

says a little later that many mortals have had *dreams* of "sleeping with their mother"⁹⁸ (981 - 982) but, of course, no-one takes these dreams seriously.

As Oedipus retells the story of his trip to and from Delphi, he is vivid and honest. Oedipus, who is scrupulously specific on the details (διπλοῖς κέντροισί etc., 809), has killed "the whole lot of them" (τοὺς ξύμπαντας, 813), or so he thinks. He says παίω δι' ὀργῆς (807), unabashedly admitting that his temper blinded him in this outburst of (justifiable) violence. For the playwright makes it clear that it is Laius who sees Oedipus first (καί μ' ὁ πρέσβυς ὡς ὀρᾶ) and waits for a chance to "strike from the carriage" (ὄχους παραστέιχοντα τηρήσας, 808).

Recalling that he has cursed the regicide, Oedipus gives voice to the fear that he has actually cursed himself. He is preparing to go into exile once more unless the witness can prove him innocent and support what Jocasta has said. Jocasta, however, does not know that she has said anything significant or "odd" (περισσόν⁹⁹ 841). But for Oedipus, there is special significance to be derived from the "number" of killers (844). If more than one are the killers, then Oedipus is free of guilt in the regicide, for one cannot be equal to many: οὐ γὰρ γένοιτ' ἂν εἷς γε τοῖς πολλοῖς ἴσος (845). Why are the numbers which were so specific in 747 - 752 so tantalizingly vague on the subject of the "killers"? It almost appears that Oedipus thinks the puzzle of the killing can be solved like a mathematical equation. The weight of evidence will necessarily "shift in favour of a guilty verdict" for him, τοῦργον εἰς ἐμὲ ῥέπον (847). But for now, the story does not *add* up.

Jocasta wants to believe that what has been said and done must stand. Once something is stated, it achieves a sort of oracular status: what the herdsman has said cannot be repudiated

⁹⁸Burkert (*op. cit.*), p. 8, quoting M. Delcourt, says that mother-incest is regularly associated with a king's or tyrant's grasp for power. If we believe that Oedipus has become the "tyrant" (in a pejorative sense) of Thebes, then in this view he has "slept with his mother."

⁹⁹Note the mathematical possibility of the word (LSJ, *s.v.*).

(849). It seems strange that she should consider that oracles may lie¹⁰⁰ but not ordinary folk. She persists stubbornly: if the whole city has heard the evidence, why, it must be true (850)! The murder of Laius was, necessarily, to have come from his son. Previously, she was cautious not to indict Apollo but only his attendants (711 - 712). But by now (853), all caution to the winds, she contemptuously flings the words δικαίως ὀρθόν ("straight") and the epithet Λοξίας ("oblique") in contemptuous juxtaposition (853). Apollo is well-named. Throughout this story, his prophecies appear to have been abstruse. Jocasta finds that they miss the mark or she takes them out of proper context. Bushnell¹⁰¹ observes: "Like the sphinx's riddle, which brings together the ages of man, *Oedipus the King* merges Oedipus's many encounters with Apollo and his prophet, which are all encounters with silence." That is, Oedipus cannot get full or appropriate answers. Rejecting prophecy outright, οὐχὶ μαντείας (857), Jocasta swears she "would never do Oedipus an unfriendly act," οὐδὲν γὰρ ἂν πράξαιμι' ἂν ὦν οὗ σοι φίλον (862). Little does she know that every action she performs, every word she utters at this point, by way of explication, is calculated to destroy him piece by piece. And now, Jocasta goes inside, leaving the chorus to comment on the previous action.

Jocasta's Second Appearance (911 - 1072)

In her next entrance (911), Jocasta announces her intention to go to the shrines of the gods as a suppliant. She muses on the character of Oedipus: he is an easily excitable and suggestible individual, incapable of judging new occurrences by the standards of the past and easily distressed by anyone who seeks to distress him,

ὕψου γὰρ αἶρει θυμὸν Οἰδίπους ἄγαν
 λύπαισι παντοίαισιν· οὐδ' ὅποι' ἀνὴρ
 ἔννους τὰ καινὰ τοῖς πάλαι τεκμαίρεται
 ἀλλ' ἔστι τοῦ λέγοντος, ἣν φόβους λέγει.
 (914-917)

¹⁰⁰The corruption of the oracle at Delphi was apparently generally accepted at the time Sophocles was composing this work.

¹⁰¹Bushnell (1988), p. 67.

As a last resort, she comes to Apollo who is the "nearest," ἄγγιστος (919), in more ways than one, though she does not yet know it: it was he who gave the oracle to Laius and it was he who caused the plague. She worries that the passion in Oedipus is catching and "they all shrink from contact with him in his madness," ὡς νῦν ὀκνοῦμεν πάντες ἐκπεπληγμένον (922).

Before Jocasta can perform her rites, she is interrupted by a messenger (911). This is a recurrent theme in the play: when things appear to move towards some kind of resolution, there is an interruption or distraction (*cf.* Oedipus's visit to Pytho, 788 - 790; Teiresias and Oedipus, 435 - 437; the messenger's arrival, 924). In the first instance, Pytho denounces Oedipus's future crimes, when he is asking about his identity. In the second, Teiresias's introduction of information regarding the "wisdom" of Oedipus's parents is a deliberate move by the prophet to retaliate for Oedipus's insults and stir his anger. In the third, Sophocles arranges the "fortuitous" entrance of the messenger. But, at base, each of these occurrences serves the purpose of "distracting" Oedipus from the issue under discussion. The messenger, upon asking, is told by the chorus where the house of Oedipus is situated. He is also told that "his wife is mother," γυνὴ δὲ μήτηρ ἦδε (928) -- mother "of his children," τῶν κείνου τέκνων, to be specific. This juxtaposition of the two nouns, "mother" and "wife" is curious, at the least.

The message is a "two-edged one, both of joy and of sorrow" (938), just like the earlier message of Creon (87). Polybus¹⁰² has died, which is sad, but this means happiness of another sort for Oedipus who fled Corinth for fear of killing his father (947 - 948). Thus, Jocasta's suppliant prayer to Apollo (920) appears to have been fulfilled and the prophecies negated: Polybus has been killed "at the hand of chance," πρὸς τῆς τύχης (949), she says, not by Oedipus. Chance, too, rules over men's fates and humans are powerless, according to Jocasta, as they have "no clear foreknowledge of anything," πρόνοια...οὐδενὸς σαφῆς (978). Mortals have no choice but to live "however they can or at random," εἰκῇ κράτιστον ζῆν, ὅπως δύναιτό τις (979), as

¹⁰²Ahl (1991), p. 43, claims that "from then on, the search for his identity obsesses Oedipus to the exclusion of all else." Again, I find that this is clearly not the case. It is not till line 1016 that Oedipus learns Polybus was not his father.

though an irregular pattern of life would be more likely to escape the all-encompassing notice of Tyche. Jocasta has been confirmed in her fatalism. In the struggle between Oedipus and Tyche, the latter is sure to win out. If Oedipus fears marrying his mother, he may take comfort in the knowledge that many¹⁰³ men have, in dreams as well as in oracles, bedded their mothers,

πολλοὶ γὰρ ἤδη κὰν ὀνείρασιν βροτῶν
μητρὶ ξυνευνάσθησαν.

(981)

Her implication is that oracles no less than dreams are without meaning.

The following interchange between the messenger and Oedipus reveals that Oedipus left Corinth for fear of harming his parents. He has, in fact, gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure their safety from him, at great emotional cost to himself, since it is very sweet to look upon the faces of one's parents,

ἄλλ' ὅμως
τὰ τῶν τεκόντων ὄμμαθ' ἡδιστον βλέπειν
(998 - 999).

Polybus, it turns out, though, is no more related by blood to Oedipus than the messenger was, but yet he is equal to him, οὐ μᾶλλον οὐδὲν τοῦδε τάνδρός, ἀλλ' ἴσον (1018). In this case "equal" means "nothing" (cf. 845).

The balance has been shifted slightly again (cf. 961: σμικρὰ παλαιὰ σώματ' εὐνάζει ῥοπή). This time it does not "put an old man to a gentle rest," but provokes anxiety in the breast of Oedipus. The "lucky chance," τυχών (1025), which gave Oedipus to the messenger occurred in the πτυχαῖς of Cithaeron. Is this "chance"? "Chance" or what "happened" to him also gave him his name (1036). The person who "chanced upon" him when he was exposed knows the

¹⁰³Burkert (1991) notes that Herodotus (6.107), Livy (1.56.10-12) and Plutarch (*Caesar*, 32.9) all have stories which involve sleeping with or kissing one's mother. The usual interpretation is that "mother" equals "motherland," and that "sleeping" with this mother implies rulership over it.

secret of his name (1039). And this person is one whom Oedipus and Jocasta have already summoned in another matter (769), as the Chorus point out (1051 - 1052).

At 987, Jocasta has considered the death of Oedipus's putative father as a "great source of joy," μέγας γ' ὀφθαλμός, . The next time she speaks (1056), it is clear by her balbutience that she has finally understood the truth and is vainly fumbling to prevent its revelation. Yet it is unreasonable to expect Oedipus, who is nothing if not thorough, to cease his enquiry at this point (1060 - 1061). The inevitable "bursts out as it must," ὅποῖα χρήζει ῥηγνύτω (1076). But once again Oedipus is deflected from a truth that is impossible to bear. The worst he can imagine now is that he is base-born (1062 - 1063). He has even forgotten that he is searching for the previous king's killer, so intent is he now on finding his true parentage. Although he is assuredly headed straight on the path to self-destruction, Jocasta wishes one thing only, that he never know himself, εἴθε μήποτε γνοίης ὅς εἰ (1068), another impossibility. Fantastical though it may be, she seems to be willing to continue as his wife if he will play the husband. Ironically, Jocasta will never say a word to him again (1072), while Oedipus goes out of the third epeisodion in a blaze of determination to find out the truth no matter the cost. It is not possible for him to be other than he is, παῖδα τῆς τύχης (1080), a child of whatever chance comes his way, and its vagaries. He waxes and wanes along with his "kinsmen" months, οἱ δὲ συγγενεῖς μῆνές με μικρὸν καὶ μέγαν διώρισαν (1082 - 1083). He has no more control over his destiny than the oceans have over their tides. Like a child of nature, he bends to the cycle of the seasons. Meanwhile, he thinks that Jocasta, like the "typical woman," is worried about Oedipus's social status (1078). Can we not see that Jocasta and Oedipus are like the carriage and traveller meeting on the narrow road to Delphi? Only one can survive this encounter.

e) Oedipus, the Messenger and the Herdsman (1110-1185)

τὰ πάντ' ἄν ἐξήκοι σαφῆ... (1182)

Now that Jocasta is gone and the chorus have performed the third stasimon, the messenger remains to remind the herdsman of the nursling he took from him so many years ago. This messenger recalls the days when both were herdsmen and knew each other very well over three six-month periods in pasturage with their flocks (1133 ff). The herdsman is chary, and there is a desperate humour in the interchange between him and the messenger as the former tries to dodge the questions of the latter. He reluctantly admits remembering but seems unwilling to co-operate. The herdsman is the last hurdle that Oedipus has to vault before all the information is laid before him. "Ruin seize you! Won't you keep quiet?" (οὐκ εἰς ὄλεθρον; οὐ σιωπήσας ἔσει; 1146), the herdsman shouts at the messenger from Corinth as he attempts vainly to prevent the crucial knowledge from being revealed. Just as first Teiresias (331) and then Jocasta (1056, 1064) tried to prevent Oedipus's self-knowledge, so does this Theban herdsman: prophet, queen and slave, each in his own way, have an amazing loyalty and devotion to this tyrant.

Oedipus, impatient as usual, threatens to make him "sing" if he does not speak as desired (1152). It is difficult for the old man to believe Oedipus would injure him, but regardless, Oedipus orders his hands pinned behind him (1154). The echo of Jocasta (1071) is heard in the pitying δούστηνος (1155) of the herdsman, who finds himself on the horns of a dilemma: it were better he had died the day he saved Oedipus, while Oedipus tells him it will happen this day if he does not tell the truth. Yet the herdsman thinks he is destroyed even if he does. In desperation to delay the horrible truth, he plays with words. Oedipus's rage swells again (1160), and the herdsman is pushed to repeat that it was indeed he who rescued the child long ago.

Although Oedipus has prised an ambiguous admission regarding his parentage from the unwilling lips of the herdsman, he has not yet grasped the significance of the statement. For while the herdsman shrinks from the horror of speaking, Oedipus also feels the same horror of hearing

(1169 - 1170). The fateful revelation: κείνου γέ τοι δὴ παῖς ἐκλήζεθ', "the child was called his" (1171) is a pared down report of the truth. The unfortunate herdsman is quick to pass the burden of responsibility on to Jocasta as she previously passed on her burden (of infant Oedipus) to him (1173). But Oedipus insists on hearing from this independent source. Hence every detail is exposed: he learns that Jocasta was responsible for handing her own infant over to Laius to be destroyed (1173), through her terror of the evil prophecy predicting that he would kill his father (1176). Oedipus thus learns that he was born doomed, δύσποτμος γεγώς (1181). With this choice of words, Sophocles lets us know that this truly is a "tragedy of fate."¹⁰⁴

A cry of grief comes from Oedipus, ἰὸν ἰού (1182), as he accepts that all has come to pass as promised. In foreshadowing of his self-blinding, he asks that he may look on his last light. He has been discovered "born" from parents he should not have been, "married" to one to whom he should not be married, and "killing" yet another he should not have: φύς...ὀμιλῶν...κτανών (1184 - 1185), the participles fall like hammer blows, reinforcing the unpalatable message which he should have learned long ago. Despite his apparent anguish, his mission is now accomplished, the puzzle solved. He is a wild success. The accusations of Teiresias are proven (353, 362, 366-367) and the prophecies of Teiresias (373, 418 - 428, 451 - 459) are being fulfilled. Oedipus rushes into the palace to find Jocasta, intending presumably to kill her (1255) before taking his own life.

f) Oedipus "Exposed" for the Second Time (1223 - 1421)

ὦ δεινὰ δράσας... (1327)

The Sixth Epeisodion

The fourth stasimon of the chorus completed, the exangelos relates what has transpired in the palace. Some of the most beautiful phraseology in the play is found in the testimony of this

¹⁰⁴Pace Burkert (1991), p. 17.

obviously sympathetic retainer. First he describes Jocasta's mad dash into her bedchamber and her ravings. Her summation of her marriage in its alliterative poetry strikes to the heart: ἐξ ἀνδρὸς ἄνδρα καὶ τέκν' ἐκ τέκνων τέκοι (1250). The messenger cannot describe how she perished: Oedipus prevented the spectacle from being seen (1252 - 1253).

As Oedipus now "ranges," (φοιτᾷ, 1255) in a "maddened frenzy," (λυσσῶντι, 1258), it is some higher power which directs him in this sixth epeisodion, λυσσῶντι δ' αὐτῷ δαιμόνων δείκνυσί τις (1258). The pace of the messenger's narrative is rapid, the events which till now have unfolded slowly and in riddling fashion are told bluntly yet tearfully. The frenzy of Oedipus is reflected in this gripping re-enactment of the final horrors. We learn that no mortal had a hand in directing Oedipus to Jocasta but that he is now being led swiftly and unerringly by "some <mysterious> guide" to a resolution, ὡς ὑφ' ἡγητοῦ τινος (1260). The identity of the guide as Oedipus has already inferred (994 ff.) is Apollo/Loxias. As the raging comes to a climax, Oedipus becomes other than human. No longer godlike (31) now but like a dumb animal, δεινὰ βρυχηθεὶς τάλας (1265), he bellows his grief. The audience are almost left behind by the breakneck speed at which Oedipus's world collapses and is rearranged by the non-human agent who started it all with the lop-sided (Λοξίας)¹⁰⁵ prophecy to Laius.

From line 1265, the references to eyes, sight and related concepts multiply. When Oedipus sees Jocasta, ὅπως ὀρᾷ νιν (1265), he loses control. The sight within the house is terrible, δεινὰ δ' ἦν τὰνθένδ' ὀρᾶν (1267). He strikes the sockets of his own orbs with the brooches he has picked up, ἔπαισεν ἄρθρα τῶν αὐτοῦ κύκλων (1270). In trying to escape the "hand" of the killer in line 140 (τοιιάυτη χειρί), Oedipus has now ironically become its victim. The very fate that befell Laius has befallen him: damage by the hand of Oedipus. He wills that those eyes never see what evils he has committed (1271 - 1272). He craves darkness for the remainder <of his life>, since his eyes "should see in darkness those they never should have seen,

¹⁰⁵This epithet for Apollo appears four times in the *O. T.*, once in the *Electra*, but nowhere else in Sophocles.

and fail to recognise those he wished to know."¹⁰⁶ The scene is deeply pathetic: a hysterical king literally beside himself with the horror which comes from excessive knowledge and sight. We might argue that the blinding comes as a relief to a surfeit of enlightenment and not as an atonement¹⁰⁷ for the impious actions of Oedipus. Whitman observes that Oedipus seeks to "know his true self by shutting out the deception of the outer world which <he> has completely seen through."¹⁰⁸ Yet, all the deceptions have been revealed as such and Oedipus has already rediscovered his "true self" by means of the various characters. There must be a limit to further revelations; the blindness imposed on Oedipus by his own hand comes down like a curtain on the dramatic action. From that point on, a mutilated and anguished Oedipus dictates the rather disjointed and desultory dialogue which follows. He pours forth a veritable fountain of verbal self-analysis of the "deceptions" of the outer world rather than seeking to exclude them. Ironically, he seems to use the blinding to focus his mental energies on the act of self-understanding. Atonement would seem to be the last thing Oedipus deals with and, ultimately, whatever atonement he offers appears unsatisfyingly ambiguous.

The simplistic moralizing of the messenger seems too much and too late: as Teiresias had promised (430), the day has proven the undoing of Oedipus. The double helping of woe (1249) is now a quadrupled one: στεναγμός, ἄτη, θάνατος, αἰσχύνη (1284). Anything that could go wrong has gone wrong (1285). A great man's reversal is tritely summed up in 1282 - 1285: Oedipus was happy once and "rightly" so, δικάϊως. But this very day, every misery is his.

The chorus gently draw us back to the mental state of Oedipus: ὁ τλήμων ἔν τινι σχολῇ κακοῦ; (1286), "Does the wretched man have some surcease from his misfortune?" But Oedipus needs to wallow in his guilt, shouting out that he be allowed to expose his act of parricide to his people (1288) and worse, the unspeakable acts with his mother. The messenger seems almost coy as he shies away from these acts. Teiresias never suffered from this excess of

¹⁰⁶Lloyd-Jones (*op. cit.*).

¹⁰⁷Reinhardt (*loc. cit.*)

¹⁰⁸Whitman (1966), p. 43.

prudery (367)! And, in regard to the more practical details, Oedipus has neither the strength to cast himself out of his home nor a guide to lead him away.

Second Kommos and Exodos

The chorus appear finally to understand the horror of Oedipus: it seems he has been the victim of a divinity. The mysterious madness which "has come upon him," προσέβη (1300), is now identified with a god "leaping upon" him, πηδήσας (1300), as before it leapt upon (263) the unfortunate Laius. The chorus are transfixed by their fascination with Oedipus. They want to "question," "find out from" and, most of all, "look upon" Oedipus, πόλλ' ἀνερέσθαι, πολλὰ πυθέσθαι, πολλὰ δ' ἀθρήσαι (1304 - 1305), "so great a horror does he inspire in them," τοίαν φρίκην παρέχεις μοι (1306). Ironically, they cannot get enough of Oedipus at the very moment that he has decided he has had too much of himself.

As Oedipus wonders where he can go and where he can be heard (1309 - 1310), he seems to have forgotten that Teiresias has already told him, at least as far as his cries are concerned, viz. Cithaeron (421). And as he says that the "god has leaped too far," ἰὼ δαῖμον, ἰν' ἐξήλου (1311), we wonder how far would have been "just enough" to bear. The chorus tell Oedipus that he should go where he cannot be heard or seen, where the sensory overload on *them* can be relieved. He bears "a twofold pain," of "physical" and of "psychic" scarring: διπλᾶ σε πενθεῖν καὶ διπλᾶ φρονεῖν κακά (1320).

The chorus gentle Oedipus with their solicitude (1319 - 1320), and he begins to respond: the chorus are "steadfast" in their loyalty, μόνιμος (1321), and care for him even in his blindness (1322). And so, they have the courage to ask why he has dared to blind himself and which divinity was responsible:

ὦ δεινὰ δράσας, πῶς ἔτλης τοιαῦτα σὰς
ὄψεις μαρᾶναι; τίς σ' ἐπῆρε δαιμόνων;
(1327 - 1328).

Oedipus now indicts Apollo as the author of his misfortunes but he recognizes himself as the god's agent:

Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,
ὁ κακὰ, κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα.
ἔπαισε δ' αὐτόχειρ νιν οὐτις, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τλάμων.
(1329 - 1331)

Depriving himself of his eyes is a natural consequence of realizing that "sight" is only worthwhile if there is something "sweet" to look upon:

τί γὰρ ἔδει μ' ὁρᾶν,
ὅτῳ γ' ὁρῶντι μηδὲν ἦν ἰδεῖν γλυκύ;
(1334 - 1335)

It is an Oedipus deprived who begs to be led from his land. There is nothing left to see, love or hear (1337 - 1338). But even in his ruin (1341) he is superlative: καταρατότατος and ἐχθρότατος to gods and mortals both. These superlative abilities damn him at a nadir of accursedness and hatefulness, for he is not an Oedipus of half-measures.

The chorus recognize that Oedipus is "equal both in his misfortune and in his understanding thereof," τοῦ νοῦ τῆς τε συμφορᾶς ἴσον (1346). A balance of sorts has finally been achieved: the equation is truly an equation. He has done a thorough job. The chorus remark that had he died as an infant, he would not have shed a father's blood or ended up the spouse of his own mother (1358 - 1359). Their opinion is that he would have been better off dead than blind, κρείσσων γὰρ ἦσθα μηκέτ' ὢν ἢ ζῶν τυφλός (1368). If this is so, why has Oedipus chosen to blind rather than kill himself? Even in this action, Oedipus has fulfilled the wish of the god as prophesied by Teiresias (454). He has not been able to choose the manner of his birth or the type of his marriage. A man cannot force the gods to do what they do not wish to:

ἀλλ' ἀναγκάσαι θεοὺς
ἂν μὴ θέλωσιν οὐδ' ἂν εἴς δύναιτ' ἀνὴρ.

But one man could not force gods to do what
they do not wish to.

(280 - 281)

It would seem wise to remember that Oedipus never intended to commit the acts which fate decreed him. In all respects, he wished to be the ally of the god (*cf.* 244), not his enemy. In order to satisfy Apollo, Oedipus has had to commit the ultimate in blasphemies (parricide and incest); but in satisfying the Apolline oracles, Oedipus has become, paradoxically, both the god's ally *and* his enemy. Forcing a god is not, after all, possible. Compliance with a god may result in destruction for a mortal but it serves the divine purpose nonetheless.

At a point in the drama, where we would expect finally a humbled, even chastened Oedipus, this person does not exist. Oedipus takes charge once more: μή μ' ἐκδίδασκε, μηδὲ συμβούλευ' ἔτι, "do not instruct me, do not advise me even now," he tells the chorus (1370). He explains the horrific choice¹⁰⁹ he has made in blinding himself: his deeds were "too bad for the hanging" (κρείσσον' ἀγχόνης εἰργασμένα, 1374) and he could not have looked upon his parents (in Hades) when he died,

ἐγὼ γὰρ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅμμασιν ποίοις βλέπων
πατέρα ποτ' ἂν προσεῖδον εἰς Ἅϊδου μολών.
(1371 - 1372)

It was not possible for the noblest man in Thebes to have to look upon the children and the symbols of the city either (1375 - 1379). In truth, he would rather be blind, deaf and witless (1389 - 1390), all of which he previously attributed to Teiresias (371). He would rather lock himself up in his wretched body (1388) and have done with human society.

In fact, he now understands the benefits of removing his sensory perceptions. What the messenger was unable to put into words (οὐδὲ ῥητά μοι, 1289), Oedipus spits out like a perverse litany: the three paths τρεῖς κέλευθοι (1398), the crossing of the three roads, τριπλαῖς ὁδοῖς, (1399), the shedding of his own blood in his father's, τοῦμόν αἷμα τῶν ἐμῶν χειρῶν ἄπο / ...πατρός (1400 - 1401), the marriage that produced him, γάμοι ἐφύσαθ' ἡμᾶς (1403 - 1404),

¹⁰⁹Although this "choice" is predicted by Teiresias, Oedipus has considered killing himself as lines 1370 - 1374 suggest.

the one who in turn produced the incongruous and monstrous relationships, πατέρας ἀδελφούς, παῖδας, αἱμ' ἐμφύλιον, νόμφας, γυναικας μητέρας τε, χῶπόσα αἴσχιστ' ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἔργα (1406 - 1408).

He reaches a crescendo and then stops. He knows he should not verbalize actions which should not have been actualized (1409). Creon, in contrast, does not verbalize unless he knows for certain (*cf.* 1520). They must, perforce, cast him out or kill him, hide him, anything, as long as they, too, never see him again (1411 - 1412), although they should not fear to touch him. The evils he carries are not contagious: they are for no mortal to carry but him. What a grim reminder of the confident Oedipus of line 63, who had no idea then of the nature of the burden for which he so magnanimously volunteered!

g) The Chorus

ἐκτέταμαι φοβερὰν φρένα δείματι πάλλων... (153)

The Parodos (151 -215)

At first the chorus are trustingly naïve. They beseech the oracle for a voice which is a child of golden hope, a voice which is immortal (ὦ χρυσέας τέκνον Ἑλπίδος, ἄμβροτε Φάμα, 157), words which belie their preliminary utterance (ἐκτέταμαι φοβερὰν φρένα δείματι πάλλων, 153), and it is hard to believe this contention of theirs that they are "stretched taut and shaking with terror in their soul." The gods whom they confidently invoke are τρισσοὶ ἀλεξιμποροί, a trinity of averters of fate (163), the natural children of Zeus: Athene the goddess of wisdom, Artemis goddess of the hunt and Phoebus, god of light and music. His unvoiced name, however, is Apollo, the Destroyer. These three are styled θύγατηρ Διὸς ἄμβροτος (immortal daughter of Zeus), γαῖόχορος (protector of our country) and ἐκαβόλος (farshooter). This triad of gods seems most appropriate, as it was the wisdom (Athene) of Oedipus which installed him in Thebes; it is a prophecy which will engage Oedipus in a hunt (Artemis) for justice;

and it is Oedipus's fate to meet with enlightenment (Phoebus) which is also his "destruction"¹¹⁰ (Apollo).

The chorus bear innumerable sorrows (167 - 168), and can find no weapon of thought, οὐδ' ἐνι φροντίδος ἔγχος (170). It is beyond *their* capabilities to find an intellectual solution to the problem, for this is the realm of Oedipus. They are helpless in the face of the many deaths they see as the souls of Thebans, like birds, wing their way to the shore of the "western (evening) god"¹¹¹:

ἄλλον δ' ἂν ἄλλω προσίδοις ἅπερ εὐπτερον ὄρνιν
κρεῖσσον ἀμαιμακέτου πυρὸς ὄρμενον
ἄκταν πρὸς ἑσπέρου θεοῦ.

(175 - 177)

The image of thought as a weapon¹¹² is unusual and exact. The one for whom "thought" is a weapon of defence is, of course, Oedipus, the Sphinx-killer. The chorus, indeed, will not themselves be trenchant or overly swift in thought. Slow but not slow-witted, they have the duty to ponder or weigh the evidence as it is presented them, like jurors in a difficult case. They must also call, with deference due, upon the gods to succour them in their dilemma. Hope, it is reiterated, must come to their aid (187 - 188). The chorus equate the pestilence which ravages them to a war even though "there is not a brazen shield in evidence" (ὅς νῦν ἄχαλκος ἀσπίδων, 190). The chorus make a prediction which later is fulfilled in Oedipus. Darkness (ignorance) is vanquished by light (knowledge), and one day uncovers the long night of his error (*cf.* 438):

εἴ τι νύξ ἀφῇ
τοῦτ' ἐπ' ἡμᾶρ ἔρχεται,

If night lets something escape,
Daytime revisits it.

(198 - 199)

¹¹⁰I say "destruction" here for I do not believe that Oedipus is literally "destroyed" in this play.

¹¹¹Hades is the western god here named (Dawe).

¹¹²Later (1255), Oedipus will ask for an actual weapon, presumably to kill Jocasta.

In their last antistrophe (204 - 215), they call upon Apollo again. This time he is the Lycean lord, Λύκειος ἄναξ (204), not Φοῖβος (163) and both times they have neatly side-stepped his real name, Ἄπολλων (Destroyer, *q.v.* ἀπόλλυται, 1251). The epithets are "light" and "shining". After all, this is an ode to hope and resolution of conflict. Their confidence is reflected in the images of light, fire, gold and brightness: Artemis's flashing torches, πυφόρους...αἴγλας (206 - 207) as she bounces about the Lycian (or light-filled?) hills, Bacchus with his gold head-band, χρυσομίτρων, <our ally> with the bright flaming torch, φλέγοντ' ἀγλαῶπι < >¹¹³ πεύκῳ (213 - 215). These are the allies, these the weapons in the armamentarium against the god who is ἀπότιμος ἐν θεοῖς, not honoured among the gods (215). The chorus which seeks *enlightenment* from the golden child of hope is hopelessly optimistic, even deceived. Confused in their identification of the "enemy" god (Ares, popularly understood to be the most hated¹¹⁴), they have, ironically, called upon the perpetrator of the plague (Apollo) to solve the visitation of sickness upon the populace. As we have already learned, they are not the only ones mistaken in their understanding of events or the causation of such events. They join Oedipus, Jocasta and the lesser characters in this ignorance. As we leave the parodos, we also note that nowhere has the actual name of Oedipus been used.

The First Stasimon (lines 463 - 512)

This stasimon comes straight after Teiresias's prophecies, which have been scorned and rejected by Oedipus. The chorus seem not to react to Teiresias's interpretation of the oracle. Instead, they continue in their "ignorance" of the perpetrator of the regicide. At this point, the *incest* and *parricide* are not obviously at issue, though the chorus make a veiled reference to ἄρρητ' ἀρρήτων¹¹⁵(465), the unspeakable of unspeakables. Is there some deeper significance? Similar sentiments are voiced by the second messenger when he is documenting the relationship between Oedipus and his mother (*cf.* αὐδῶν ἀνόσι' οὐδὲ ῥητά μοι, 1289). Perhaps they are already accepting the fact that Oedipus has committed these two outrageous crimes.

¹¹³The line is corrupt. Wolff postulated σύμμαχον which Jebb accepts.

¹¹⁴ἐχθιστος δέ μοί ἐσσι θεῶν," says Zeus, *Iliad*, 5.890.

¹¹⁵LSJ, *s.v.*: "deeds without a name" but also "shameful to be spoken".

The colours of the parodos have changed: now φοινίαισι χερσίν, bloodied hands (465), contrast with τοῦ νιφόεντος...Παρνασοῦ (474 - 475), the snowy-whiteness of Parnassus. The metre seems to reflect its animal imagery: ἀελλάδες ἵπποι (466/467), *ισόταυρος¹¹⁶ (478). Apollo is armed with the arms of his father's violence, πυρὶ καὶ στεροπαῖς (470), and the terrible unerring goddesses of doom, δειναὶ...Κῆρες ἀναπλάκητοι (471 - 472), are hot-footed on the track. The man being tracked is reduced to an uncivilized or inhuman status. He roams (φοιτᾷ, 476) in the wild wood (ὕπ' ἀγρίαν ὕλαν, (476 - 477) living in caves and rocks (ἄντρα καὶ πέτρας,¹¹⁷ 477 - 478). Clearly Oedipus is the one who fits this description: wretched with wretched foot (μέλεος μελέω ποδὶ, 479), living alone (χηρεύων, 480). The irony of this last does not go unnoticed: χηρεύειν can also mean "to be a widower". Jocasta will have killed herself by the end of the play, and Oedipus will be left spouseless thereby. Whatever the chorus say has "meaning" but it is not always a meaning appropriate to the time and place. There is anachrony in their speech. They reflect the future, the past and present from a privileged vantage point. The prophecies from the mid-navel shrine that the unknown man (Oedipus) tries vainly to put from him still flit around him (480), a situation reminiscent of the twittering shades of the underworld as described by Homer.

While the chorus are troubled, they are adamant: they are neither moved to approve nor to dispute Teiresias, the σοφὸς οἰωνοθέτας (483). A fact which troubles them is the lack of evidence for a dispute between the houses of Labdacus and Polybus. The chorus even shore up the popular support (ἐπίδαμος φάτις, 496) which Oedipus enjoys. Here Oedipus is mentioned specifically by name. They grant that Zeus and Apollo know the truth (499), but between seer and chorus there is equal possibility of judging the truth correctly (κρίσις οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθείας, 501). The chorus would more easily back Oedipus since he was actually seen to be wise (σοφὸς

¹¹⁶This line is corrupt. Jebb reads πέτρας *ισόταυρος while Dawe reads †πέτρας ὡς ταῦρος†. Dawe is most dry in his commentary on this line: "...Blumenthal's courageous assertion that ταῦρος is a pre-Greek word for man. Unhappily Sophocles did not write pre-Greek."

¹¹⁷πετραῖος is one of several conjectures here in this aforementioned corrupt line.

ᾠφθη, 509) when the winged maiden came (πτερόεσσ' ἦλθε κόρα, 508). Twice now (494, 511), Oedipus has been "scored to the core" as in the manner of a metal on the touchstone. Each time his mettle has been proved. How can the audience fail to be moved by this simple oath of loyalty to Oedipus from the citizens? Though they may vacillate, they cannot condemn him (512). The jury is not convinced.

The Second Stasimon (863 - 910)

Jocasta has just agreed to send to find the sole surviving witness to the murder of Laius (861). She has also contemptuously rejected divine prophecy:

ὥστε οὐχὶ μαντείας γ' ἂν οὔτε τῇδ' ἐγὼ
βλέψαιμι' ἂν οὔνεκ' οὔτε τῇδ' ἂν ὕστερον
(857 - 858)

Is it any wonder then, that the chorus start this stasimon with a prayer designed to counteract the blasphemy of the queen? They exhort destiny to find them pure in all speech and deeds before they start:

εἴ μοι ξυνεΐη φέροντι
μοῖρα τὰν εὔσεπτον ἀγνείαν λόγων
ἔργων τε πάντων
(863 - 865)

They defer to the "high-footed" laws of Zeus (866 - 867) and acknowledge him alone as their creator. These laws of Zeus are eternal and unchanging. The chorus would never go against them. The chorus realise that it is time to take sides and choose the Olympian over the mortal (867 - 869). It is the arrogance of Oedipus that has turned him into a tyrant (ὑβρις φυτεύει τύραννον, 873).¹¹⁸ Such a "tyrant" has Oedipus become that he is beyond acceding to the law of Zeus or any other higher power. Though the name of Oedipus has not been used in this stasimon (as in 495 previously), there have been two references to the "foot." First the high-footed laws

¹¹⁸I disagree with Dawe's rewriting of this line (ὑβριν φυτεύει τυραννίς, 873). It seems to me that a great liberty is taken when he states in his note for this line: "But what Sophocles actually wrote was 'Tyranny begets Hybris', as printed in our text..." He goes on to defend this claim, wrongly I believe, in entering in evidence Lord Acton's famous commonplace, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely".

(866) and now the lack of foothold (878) for the one who contravenes these former.¹¹⁹ *Hybris* here may not be simply, aggressive violence of emotion or sexual lewdness or wantonness, but absence of purity and respect for religion.¹²⁰ The rash carelessness and lack of restraint that led to the barbaric killing of Laius have also led to an unholy coupling with Jocasta. The situation Oedipus now finds himself in is likened to that of a climber. Once at the top of the gable, where does one expect to find the next foothold? The only possible course is a downward one, the course of doom where there will be no toehold for the one who was previously so good at "podiatric" exercises!

In the struggle (likened to a wrestling match) for control of the city (πόλει πάλαισμα, 880), the chorus show a mercenary (cf. 889) readiness to back the winner. No longer is Oedipus their king who can do no wrong. Anyone who has passed that threshold of commonsense and attempts to "touch the untouchable" or "inviolable" (897) areas that are the gods' is foolishly (ματάζων, 891) courting disaster. The chorus are ready to yield to "the god's" (Zeus's) judgment.. Their own rôle as chorus would be called into question if any person were to succeed in dishonouring the gods: τί δεῖ με χορεύειν; what use would be the sacred dance? (895). Lines 897 to 902 serve to reinforce the chorus's devotion to the god (Zeus) first and foremost. When they call upon ὦ κρατύνων...Ζεῦ, πάντ' ἀνάσσων (903 - 904), we cannot help but recall that this epithet (κρατύνων) was first used of Oedipus (14) when there was still hope that he could work the miracles of a god. As this stasimon ends, the chorus lament that the prophecies of Laius appear to be fading from memory, losing their force,

φθίνοντα γὰρ Λαΐου <παλαίφατα>
θέσφατα.

(906 - 907).

¹¹⁹Once more, I differ with Dawe in his note to this line (878): "There is no thematic connection with ὑψίποδες." Surely, it is no coincidence that these two words formed on the word "ποῦς" are so closely juxtaposed. Without actually naming Oedipus, Sophocles has cleverly reminded us who is indeed the object of the chorus's concern.

¹²⁰Bollack (1990), pp. 552/553 writes that "Le sens attendu, présenté dans presque tous les commentaires, fait voir dans l'insolence le terme opposé de la pureté (ἀγνείαν, v. 864), illustrée dans la strophe, l'absence de la religion dans la cité, qui engendre le pouvoir arbitraire...ou bien les excès du mauvais roi entraîné par la simple possession du pouvoir..."

Yet obviously they are wrong: those prophecies, and reverence for Apollo, still have the power to move one person at least. Jocasta is, at this very moment, on her way to seek advice from the shrines of the gods (912). At issue is the status of the prophecies to do with the house of Laius.

The Third Stasimon (1088 - 1109)

This brief ecstatic interlude comes on the heels of Jocasta's desperate grief-stricken flight: *she* knows that Oedipus is her child while Oedipus, in his arrogance, believes she is shamed by his possible low birth. It is on this note that the chorus joyfully and inappropriately assume the rôle of prophet (εἴπερ ἐγὼ μάντις εἰμι καὶ κατὰ γνώμαν ἴδρις, 1088): Oedipus is probably a native son of Cithaeron (Thebes). They seem not to have heard the same message as Jocasta. They anticipate the reunion of the child of chance (Oedipus) with the motherland that gave him birth (Thebes) and no other possibility is conceivable to them. They call upon Phoebus the healer (ἰήϊε Φοῖβε, 1097) to find pleasure in the reunification of child and parent. The irony is not lost on the audience as Phoebus's predictions come to a ripe fruition and we anticipate the gloating satisfaction of a god who has had his desires fulfilled at the expense of a human being's happiness. The unfounded optimism of the chorus furnishes widely disparate paternities for Oedipus: is his father Pan, Loxias, Hermes or Bacchus? In a way, Oedipus is the natural son of Loxias. It was his prophecy (an oblique one at that) which brought him into being and also brought him along the path to his doom. The chorus speculate: is his mother one of the nymphs? One might accuse the chorus of willful blindness or sheer stupidity in the face of all the evidence. Yet one person only, so far, has been able to piece together the whole truth and she, Jocasta, has left in a suicidal anguish. The audience are left with one vain hope that the chorus are right, that there is another piece of the puzzle waiting to be turned up to complete a different picture from the one we are dreading will emerge.

The Fourth Stasimon (1186 - 1221)

Now all hope is lost and the chorus have been disappointed in their expectations. All the pieces of the puzzle have been found and matched. There is a deep, fatalistic sorrow in the chorus: they intersperse the personal pronoun and related adjective (σε, σον) intermittently with more formal phrases as the "generations of mortals" are likened to "ones living lives fruitless and pointless,"

ἰὼ γενεαὶ βροτῶν
ὥς ὑμᾶς ἴσα καὶ τὸ μηδὲν ζώσας ἐναριθμῶ
(1186 - 1187)

Oedipus's tribulations fit a predictable pattern (τὸν σὸν τὸ παράδειγμ' ἔχων, 1193, *cf.* Jocasta's call for randomness in living, 979). As Jocasta knew, no mortal can share in the art of the seer (*cf.* 709 and the chorus, 1088), nor can Oedipus have any share in happiness (1195). A man can only have the fleeting semblance of good fortune (1189 - 1192) and the perfect example (1193-1194) can be summed up in the fate, δαίμονα (1194), of Oedipus. Lines 1197 to 1203 read like the epitaph of Oedipus. His name is not spoken but his successes are enumerated: he destroyed the crook-taloned maiden with her prophecies (1198 - 1200) and was called king (1202). He ruled with much honour in Thebes (1203), there being "none to match him" (καθ' ὑπερβολάν, 1196).

In spite of his past glory, there is no-one more wretched in torments than this noble Oedipus who has lived with a reversal in fortune. The chorus are at a loss: both father and son have shared the same "harbour" (Jocasta), but Oedipus has gone one step further than Laius has done. He has played both paternal and filial rôles. Reversal has occurred, ἀλλαγῆ βίου (1206). How could the "furrows belonging to his father" have borne this outrage so long in silence (1210 - 1211)? How not, we might ask, with the doom of Apollo biding its time to manifest itself in the most dreadful fashion possible?

Time has finally found Oedipus out, "unwilling" though he may have been. The unwillingness, presumably, refers not to Oedipus's co-operation in seeking out the regicide but rather his unwillingness to commit, and his desperation to avoid, the predicted incest and parricide. Oedipus did not consciously will any of this. His monstrous marriage of "passive" and "active" contradictions (τὸν ἄγαμον γάμον πάλαι τεκνοῦντα καὶ τεκνούμενον, 1214 -1215) lies exposed. And though the chorus think that only time uncovered the situation *against* the will of Oedipus (1212), it was, also, ironically *with* the complete co-operation of Oedipus that the mystery was solved and the enigma resolved. He was, after all, considered the consummate puzzle-solver. Furthermore, the answer to the play's riddles was indeed Oedipus on all counts. A personal delusion is at an end: the one from whom the people of Thebes drew their life and the one who lulled them in security (1221) has been destroyed.

Childlike, the chorus weep their love nonetheless: "If only I had never seen you, child of Laius" (1216). The rôles are finally reversed: Oedipus is now the child to be comforted by the citizens (*cf.* 1, 58), but the other rôle he served as their life and breath (1220) cannot be served by anyone else. The one who solved the Sphinx's riddle and caused her destruction too, is the same one rising to great height; the bulwark against death is himself not proof against fate. As the chorus intimate, no man can evade his own destiny and yet how that man lives out his destiny may be more important than that destiny itself.

CHAPTER TWO**The Divine Agents****a) Apollo**

τίς γάρ, τίς ἀνὴρ πλέον τᾶς εὐδαιμονίας φέρει ἢ τοσοῦτον ὅσον δοκεῖν;
(1189 - 1191)

The part which Apollo plays in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is integral to the plot but the god does not himself have even the tiniest of cameos in it. Apollo is an *éminence grise*, more noticeable for his effect at long range than at close; his deadly darts come through the media of others (*viz.* the Priestess, Teiresias, Laius and even the unknown drunkard). It is clear that the god is the one responsible, at root, for the travesty that is the life of Oedipus. Apollo gave an oracle (through Teiresias, 435 - 436 and 711 - 712) to Oedipus's parents that Laius would die at the hands of his son. The god put no conditions on this uncircumventable prophecy. When Oedipus left on his quest for self-identity and arrived at Delphi, the priestess of Apollo evaded his honest question, clearly on the authority of the god. Where an immoral or opportunistic man would have accepted that it was impossible to avoid his destiny, Oedipus, true child of his true parents, attempted to take the moral course and chose self-exile from parents he obviously loved. As the chorus remark, with evident sorrow and mystification, Oedipus was a perfect paradigm (1193 ff.): first he won the prize of happiness and then he was reduced to naught. How, then, did Apollo "bring these things to pass" (1330)? Part of the answer may be reflected in the significant epithets used for the god throughout the drama.

At the beginning of the play, both the suppliants (3, 38, 42) and Oedipus (70) display confidence and trust in Apollo. When the plague strikes, the suppliants crowd around his altar (3) and Oedipus sends immediately to this god's oracle for advice (70). Oedipus asserts that he will do whatever the god reveals to be the correct thing to do (76). Oedipus prays reverently to Apollo for good news (80) and he is eager to hear the god's word (86). Through an intermediary, Creon, Oedipus learns that the god, Lord Phoebus, wants the pollution cleared from the land, that

it should "not be cherished till it is past cure" (95 - 98). The god does not disclose which man's τύχη (102) or "fate" this involves. Oedipus asks, but is not told. Instead, Creon shifts in oblique fashion to the deed which has caused the plague, the murder of Laius which must be atoned. There is no mention of incest though the gods' displeasure is evinced by the typical signs: the barrenness of the labour pangs of the women and the unusual lack of fertility in the croplands. The god says, according to Creon, that the "murderers"¹²¹ (107) dwell "in this land" (110) and that the fact is going "unnoticed," "unheeded" (111). If Creon is giving a true report -- and why should we doubt this? -- then Apollo is working some sort of mischief in playing with the "number" of the killers. But "Phoebus," as Oedipus styles him, has rightly shown concern about this dead man (133). Oedipus, piously, will work for his country and the god, equating the one with the other (135). Oedipus has made a covenant with "Apollo" on behalf of the country. The god, therefore, will be the arbiter of their fate, deciding whether they survive or fall to ruin (145). The priest, however, is confident of nothing but a positive outcome: the god will rescue them (149).

The chorus (parodos) defer to the shrine of Pytho. The "sweet-speaking message of Zeus" (151), which is invoked in the very first words of the chorus, is Apollo the prophet of Zeus. Thus the play can be seen in the context of the justice of Zeus whose mouthpiece is this prophet. Apollo is both the "Delian Healer" (154) and Phoebus¹²² the "Farshooter" (163). They delight in their Lycian¹²³ lord's invincible weaponry (204). He is both their salvation and their avenger. Oedipus, too, aligns himself with Apollo: he is the god's ally (244 - 245). Oedipus works for the god and, he repeats, his country (253 - 254; cf. 135). A god did not have to drive the agenda here (255); Oedipus would have willingly undertaken the task and he does. "Phoebus" must be the one to tell who is the man who wrought the deed <of murder> (279), but gods cannot be forced (280 - 281). Oedipus respects this and agrees to use intermediaries. Since Teiresias is most like

¹²¹The word used is αὐτοέντας, one which is associated with murders within the family (Dawe's note to this line).

¹²²Ahl, *op. cit.* pp. 249/250, sees a connexion between the words Φοῖβος and φόβος. Tempting though it may be to accept these conjectures, they do not appear to fit the context here.

¹²³Ahl (1991), p. 49, suggests that "Sophocles may be emphasizing the "wolf" etymology of the god's epithet." Plato (*Republic* 8.565D - 566B), he reminds us, likened a tyrant to a wolf in nature.

Apollo in his ability to "see" (285), he is summoned to interpret the signs. A little further on, Oedipus state that Phoebus (306) has sent an oracle because Oedipus asked. After all, Oedipus and the god are allies (*cf.* 245). Oedipus cannot accept that he is the culprit when Teiresias names him as such (353). Would the god have accepted their alliance otherwise? The insult to his pride is enormous. Teiresias knows that Oedipus will not fall through *his*¹²⁴ agency (376) though fall he will. Teiresias is convinced, however, that Apollo will work it all out (377), even though Oedipus refuses to acknowledge his guilt at this point. Teiresias calls himself the "slave of Loxias" (410) now. No longer is the god called "Phoebus" (Bright One), "Delian Healer" or "Apollo" (Destroyer), but "Loxias" (Oblique One). Although the name suggests that uncertainty has entered the drama, it must also be remembered that Apollo, in his incarnation of "Loxias," is "the prophet of his father Zeus."¹²⁵ What exactly will be the rôle of this god, Apollo, and his father, Zeus? The chorus are certain that Zeus and Apollo (499) are all-wise. Even Creon says to Oedipus, "Go to the Pythoness's oracle!" (603). There he can find out first-hand what Apollo has said. If we recall that the last king of Thebes was killed on an expedition to the Oracle, it does not seem surprising that Oedipus does not entertain the notion for an instant.

Although Jocasta supports both her brother and Oedipus, she tells the king that the servants of "Phoebus" (711) cannot be trusted. "Apollo" (720) did not fulfil his oracle (*re* the child she bore Laius) and, if the god wants to, he will reveal whatever is necessary (724 - 725). She appears to be asking for divine intervention while Oedipus begins to suspect that Zeus is up to something: "What is it that weighs upon your mind, Oedipus?" asks Jocasta (τί δ' ἐστὶ σοι τοῦτ', Οἰδίπους, ἐνθύμιον; 739). Three times his suspicions come to the fore. "What have you decided to do with me, Zeus?" (738), Oedipus asks himself, as he thinks he may have cursed himself unwittingly (744 - 745), and concedes that Teiresias was probably right in his accusations (747).

¹²⁴Knox (1957), p. 7, says that this line is a "comparatively modern creation", dating from Brunck's emendation of 1786. The manuscripts actually say: οὐ γάρ σε μοῖρα πρὸς γε σοῖ.

¹²⁵Burkert (1985), p. 148, is quoting from Aesch. *Eum.* 19.

Oedipus recalls his long-ago visit to the Pythoness, who did not answer his question (789), but told him horrible things (790 ff.). He has the suspicion (828 - 829) that a god has instigated this regicide (which he has probably already committed) by instilling in him the morbid fear of killing his father and bedding his mother. But he cannot accept that gods (830 - 833) could do this. Jocasta shores up his belief as she reminds him: ὄν γε Λοξίας διεῖπε χρῆναι παιδὸς ἐξ ἐμοῦ θανεῖν "Loxias did plainly state that <my husband> had to die through the agency of my own son" (853). Apollo was wrong; therefore he is "Loxias," playing his ambiguous rôle. Yet very soon afterwards, Jocasta is attempting to placate Loxias and appeals to him as "Lycian¹²⁶ Apollo" (919), adopting the same subservient and supplicating posture as the citizens. Her subsequent words suggest that she is very pleased by the apparent outcome of her pleadings: the oracles of the gods have been disproved, she crows triumphantly (ἄκουε τάνδρὸς τοῦδε, καὶ σκόπει κλύων τὰ σέμν' ἔν' ἥκει τοῦ θεοῦ μαντεύματα, 953 - 954). This is a turning point for Oedipus. He now rejects the "Pythian hearth" (965) and thus Apollo. He will not be persuaded by any oracles: for Polybus has died of natural causes. Suddenly, he remembers the oracle about his mother (992). "Loxias" said he would lie with his mother and kill his father (994 ff.). Then he is afraid that "Phoebus"¹²⁷ might be right (1011). And now, "Phoebus" (1097) is invoked by a chorus which is thrilled by the notion that the king might truly be a "native son" (1091). Was Oedipus's mother a bride of "Loxias" (1103), they speculate? In a perverse way, she was. Apollo was determined to fructify a marriage (which he had also condemned to sterility) to assert his ascendancy over the house of Laius and to wreak a multi-generational vengeance.

In the reporting of Jocasta's death, there is no mention of the gods. The next time a god is mentioned, he is called a δαίμων (1301) who has leapt on Oedipus. Oedipus identifies this god with Apollo (1329). He now knows that he is most accursed, and hated by all the gods. Finally, Oedipus is ἄθεος (1360), an epithet which is curious for its possible double meaning: godless and sightless.¹²⁸ Without the gods on his side, he is a cypher; to be without the gods is to be without

¹²⁶Here Ahl's conjectures as to the wolfish nature of Apollo seem very apt.

¹²⁷Again, Ahl's theory *re φόβος* seems apt.

¹²⁸LSJ has two separate entries for ἄθεος the second of which is a variant of ἄθεάτος.

life, without vision. Dead is better than blind (1368), say the chorus. But to Oedipus, the self-inflicted limbo of not-dead not-alive which is his blindness gives him immunity, a surcease from pain. No longer does he have to face the triple menace of gods, parents and city.

There is one last appeal to the godhead: Creon wants direction (1438). But Oedipus believes the god has been clear. Did not the god (Ἀπόλλων) command destruction (ἀπολλύναι, 1441)? The last reference to any god is Oedipus's. He wishes that Creon has a better guardian spirit along the road of life than he had (1479). In the end, Oedipus appears to have washed his hands, so to speak, of the god.

b) The Sphinx

καίτοι τό γ' αἶνιγμ' οὐχὶ τοῦπιόντος ἦν... (393)

The Dramatic Sphinx

The Sphinx is mentioned only five times in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Each time she is mentioned, however, it is important to examine the context. In the prologue, the priest of Zeus says that Oedipus arrived and released the Thebans from the "cruel singer" (σκληρᾶς ἀοιδοῦ, 36). It is, therefore, plausible that at the start of the drama Oedipus represents the replacement of the harsh tyranny of the homicidal singer with a benevolent and loving rule. The juxtaposition of this previous régime of terror to the one of Oedipus sets the stage for what one hopes is another blessed release from another terror, this time the plague. The priest says that Oedipus must have been instructed by a god since he himself (*i.e.*, the servant of Zeus) did not assist him in answering the riddle. Here, in these lines, Oedipus is the Thebans's much beloved deliverer from a nightmare. In the priest's opinion Oedipus must also be an agent of a god for he learned nothing from *them* (the Thebans) but relied on a god's assistance: καὶ ταῦθ' ὑφ' ἡμῶν οὐδὲν ἐξειδῶς πλέον οὐδ' ἐκδιδαχθεῖς, ἀλλὰ προσθήκη θεοῦ (37 - 38). Since the priest is a priest of Zeus, we could presume that the assistance did not come from Zeus but from Apollo.

The next time the Sphinx is mentioned (by Creon), she is the "riddle-singing"¹²⁹ Sphinx" (ποικιλωδὸς Σφίγξ, 130), who prevented Creon and the Thebans from investigating the regicide. She is mentioned only once by the name, Σφίγξ, the "Strangler"¹³⁰ or "Throttler." This name is suggestive of the riddle set like a snare to catch and choke her victims. As Oedipus initiates his "criminal investigation," we are perhaps reminded by Sophocles that the fascination which the Thebans had with the riddler allowed something unusual to happen. Oedipus "slipped into the rôle" of βασιλεύς without proper scrutiny. In actual fact, the Thebans have not investigated thoroughly the provenance of Oedipus. Their deliverance had come to them like a gift from the gods, just as the royal power of Oedipus came to him from them as a gift unasked for (384). And so, their gratitude has allowed them to let a "usurper,"¹³¹ who is actually the legitimate heir, take the throne.

The next time the Sphinx is mentioned (by Oedipus) she is the "versifying hound"¹³² (ῥαψωδὸς κύων, 391). The word κύων is used because "she is the servant of the god who sent her."¹³³ At this point, Oedipus is interrogating Teiresias, servant of Apollo. If he could accept that the Sphinx had a truth, of sorts, to tell in her riddle, if he believed it was important enough to answer *her* question, why is he impervious to Teiresias in his function as soothsayer and interpreter? Typifying the monster as a "hound" may be a subtle reference to the Sphinx's and Teiresias's significance as representatives of the gods. In Apollodorus,¹³⁴ the Sphinx was sent by Hera to Thebes as a punishment. In the *Phoenissae* and in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, she appears to be Apollo's servant. By destroying the Sphinx, Oedipus has interfered with a punishment sent by the god. When Oedipus recalls the riddle two lines later he typifies it as "one which was not for *just any* comer to explain" (τό γ' αἴνιγμ' οὐχὶ τοῦπιόντος ἦν, 393). This leads us to conjecture

¹²⁹And, possibly, "singer of the swelling." Cf. page 7 of this thesis.

¹³⁰West (1966) in the note to line 326 of the *Theogony* says that the word Σφίγξ is connected in popular etymology with the verb σφίγγω, to strangle.

¹³¹Knox (1957), pp. 102/103, interprets the word τύραννος as "usurper."

¹³²Lloyd-Jones (1994), p. 363.

¹³³Lloyd-Jones (*loc. cit.*).

¹³⁴Apollodorus 3.5.7-8.

that it was predestined that the riddle be solved by a *certain* comer. Perhaps it was no natural intelligence which helped Oedipus, who actually calls himself a "know-nothing" (397), to solve the enigma, but instead destiny spurred on by a god.¹³⁵ Lines 439 - 440, an exchange between Oedipus and Teiresias suggest this as well:

Oedipus: How riddling and obscure in excess are all your words!
Teiresias: Do you not excel in answering riddles?¹³⁶

Teiresias presses on to remind Oedipus that his ability to solve the riddle is his ruin, αὕτη γε μέντοι σ' ἡ τύχη διώλεσεν (442). Oedipus responds that he does not care, if it means he has saved the city (443). This frank disclosure shows an Oedipus courageous (or even foolhardy) and honest. He has, however, missed a basic fact: his solving of the enigma was an aberration. Until the plague came, Oedipus showed none of the ingenuity one would expect of the solver of intellectual puzzles. Laius's murder had gone unsolved and the Pythia's oracle had gone unplumbed, for example. The Sphinx had acted like an "irresistible magnet" drawing Oedipus back to his place of birth and to his nemesis. From there, Apollo bided his time.

Next to mention the Sphinx are the chorus. Despite the fact that Teiresias has undeniably denounced Oedipus, they sing an optimistic paean to their saviour. His success with the rather quaintly styled "winged maiden" (περόεσσα...κόρα, 510) is enough proof for them that he is "wise" and "dear to the city" (510). They have all confidence in Oedipus since he has passed the βάσανος. The βάσανος was also an Athenian legal term for the practice of submitting a binding contract for torture of slaves to discover evidence before trial. In truth, the Sphinx put the Thebans to the test and they failed it; Oedipus, on the contrary, passed it with great ease. This success of his clinches their support for him. But, to this timely assertion of confidence is appended the acrimonious confrontation between Oedipus and Creon.

¹³⁵Certainly Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, 9.26.2 - 4) states that only a legitimate child of Laius would know the right answer.

¹³⁶Lloyd-Jones (*op. cit.*), p. 369.

The last time the Sphinx is heard of is in the fourth stasimon. Oedipus has uncovered all the mysteries and is rushing off to find Jocasta and to blind himself. Now the Sphinx is styled "the prophesying virgin with crooked talons" (τὰν γαμψώνυχα παρθένον χρησμῶδον, 1199 - 1200). This adjective γαμψώνυξ is an epithet reserved for great birds of prey,¹³⁷ and here Sophocles is likening her to a raptor and predator. The adjective χρησμῶδος is one which is used for those who deliver oracular responses. The two epithets combined suggest that the Sphinx is a prophetess who may destroy as she predicts. We therefore find ourselves back at the beginning of the story of the monster. As Moret comments, the Thebans had assembled daily to find a solution to the riddle of the Sphinx,¹³⁸ but were daily compelled to relinquish one of their number to her rapacious appetite until the arrival of Oedipus. Oedipus escaped this fate, presumably because of his superior skills of rationalization, yet in the end it seems that Oedipus has been reserved for the "strange purpose" (1457), previously discussed. Now, Oedipus himself has finally been "enraptured" and caught in another snare set by the god. The characterization of the Sphinx as a "virgin" may possibly remind the audience of the frightening and sometimes vindictive virgins of the Greek pantheon: Artemis and Athene. The last epithet "prophecy-singer" reminds us that the story has come full swing: all prophecies given by Apollo have been fulfilled. Perhaps, then, the Sphinx may be seen as a manifestation of Apollo's destructive and violent nature as well.

The Sphinx as a Theme

Despite the existence of the "Aristarchan axiom that what is not mentioned in the play does not exist,"¹³⁹ and although it is true that the text of the Sphinx's riddle is found nowhere in the play, an image that we moderns commonly associate with the myth of Oedipus is the Sphinx. And surely the ancients made this link as well.¹⁴⁰ Delcourt¹⁴¹ believes that although there were

¹³⁷LSJ, s.v.

¹³⁸Moret (*op. cit.*), p. 17: "Les Thébains à en croire Asclépiade se réunissaient chaque jour εἰς ἐκκλησίαν pour tenter de trouver une solution à l'énigme."

¹³⁹Griffith (1990), p. 98.

¹⁴⁰OCD, s.v. Oedipus.

¹⁴¹Delcourt (1942), p. 107.

originally many Sphinxes, in the fifth century no Sphinx was known but the "one which haunted the roads of Boeotia." She also likens the myth behind the tragedy to the "halo" of the tragedy since the public listening to the tragedy thought of the myth behind it. It is no wonder, then, that the play seems almost to resonate with the echo of this powerful and enigmatic being. The twistings and turnings of the plot seem to reflect the beast in her incomprehensible shape and utterances. Indeed, her appearance is just as mysterious as her riddle: σκληρᾶς ἀοιδοῦ (36); ποικιλωδὸς Σφίγξ (130); ῥαψωδὸς κύων (391); πετρόεσσα...κορα (510); τὰν γαμψώνυχα παρθένον χρησμῶδον (1199). She is a personified enigma, with her harsh, riddling voice and patchwork construction. For she has animal features: a leonine or canine¹⁴² body yet wings and talons. But her face is that of a human maiden. All in all she is a complete study in contradiction and irrationality. Oedipus, a rational man, thought he knew himself well enough to tackle this obstacle of irrationality on the way to Thebes. And so he responded to the Sphinx's question about "the feet" with an answer which was, traditionally, supposed to be "Man."¹⁴³ Segal would like us to believe¹⁴⁴ that Oedipus understood this "Man" to be, in reality, himself and, if this was really so, then the symmetry is appealing. The riddle, which only *seemed* irrational and unanswerable, was answered fully by Oedipus (answerer and answer), the only one able to make sense of it, rearrange it and interpret it in a fully rational way. Once he had overcome it, he believed he had conquered the irrational and restored a semblance of order. But he did not realise that the actions of gods do not conform to "Man's" notion of rationality. Thinking, thereby, to have solved the problem of his mother, father and the Sphinx, to have found safe harbour in Thebes, he learned to his sorrow that it was all illusion.

The Sphinx is as incomprehensible to the human mind as the oracular sayings of Apollo. Being an unnatural combination of female and animal parts, she may presage the predicted unnatural union of Oedipus with Jocasta. Yet just as the Sphinx caused the Thebans to forget matters unclear, μεθέντας ἡμᾶς τ' ἀφανῇ προσήγετο (131), so it is that Oedipus suffers from a

¹⁴²Hoffman, *q.v.*

¹⁴³Apollodorus (*loc. cit.*)

¹⁴⁴Segal (1993), p. 57.

kind of self-inflicted blindness¹⁴⁵ towards the mystery of himself. Whenever he asks one question he seems to get the answer to another. In 787 ff, his enquiry of the Pythoness in regard to his parentage is deflected by a warning of his impending parricide and incest. But he does not pursue the question! When he answers certain questions, such as that posed by the Sphinx, the answers to others go begging, *e.g.*, the identity of the murderer.

Oedipus had left his supposed home firstly, because "some man" (43) had told him he was not his parents' child and secondly, because the "message" (43) from the god was a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother (790-793). But there was a twofold irony for Oedipus: he could not see that he was not really *their* child and he could not hear that he would commit terrible impieties. He did not believe the former and thought that he had escaped the latter. In his conquest of the Sphinx, he had closed a puzzling chapter in his life. He never expected to revisit it.

It is possible to look at the story of Oedipus from a figurative angle. We can see that when Oedipus first came to Thebes, there was a monster plaguing the city with an unanswerable question. (Ahl¹⁴⁶ refers to this "musical plague" which blights the city and is replaced by the "Platonic plague of the state: tyranny."¹⁴⁷) It was the fate of Oedipus to replace this monster (and her riddle) with another monster and riddle,¹⁴⁸ *i.e.*, himself. (For he will be shown to be a monster in the horrific liaison he makes with Jocasta and in the production of children with her. He will learn that his parentage is a mystery and try to solve this riddle.) As Oedipus replaces the Sphinx, it appears that "real time" or "normal time" is suspended and a parody of family life is being re-enacted while Oedipus's fate is slowly building to an outrageous climax of revelation.

¹⁴⁵This symbolic, almost wilful, blindness foreshadows the actual self-blinding.

¹⁴⁶Ahl (1991), p. 53.

¹⁴⁷Delcourt (1942), p. 112, reiterates that, "pour Platon, on épouse la mère parce qu'on est un tyran (*Rép.* IX, p. 571)."

¹⁴⁸Beer (1990), p. 110, too sees Oedipus as a riddle.

During this "unreal time" another plague comes, like an unholy third¹⁴⁹ in a series of "plagues", to displace the second one, and to restore "real time". It was at this point that Sophocles chose to start his play, just as the fantasy-world was collapsing and rearranging itself or, rather, being rearranged by an outside agency, Apollo. The killing of Laius, the father of the monster, is a necessary step in this progression of Oedipus, and is in no way a trivial act as it first appears to him. It must be done in order for Oedipus to reach the Sphinx and conquer her, thereby becoming her replacement in the hierarchy of monstrosities.

The historicity of the Sphinx

As we look outside the action of the drama, it may be of importance to consider more fully what Sophocles's contemporaries knew or understood about the Sphinx.

The Plastic Arts

In the plastic arts, the Sphinx¹⁵⁰ is sculpted with "the head of a beautiful woman, the taut and sinewy body of a dog or a young lioness and the avian sickle-wings with which the vase painter characterised certain supernatural females such as sirens and gorgons." Her eyes have an inscrutable expression achieved by "dot-in-circle pupil, an iconographic convention denoting demonic beings. The eyes themselves are framed by lashes in dilute glaze, creating an appearance of wide-eyed, harmless innocence. Her hair is covered by a patterned cloth (*sakkos*) except for a gilt hair roll worn like a diadem over the forehead. Her lips are slightly parted as though she were singing her oracular song (Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 48, 1507). On her breast she wears three gilded gorgon medallions strung on a cord."¹⁵¹ Here in Hoffman's study of the Sotadean sphinx, we have a description of the Theban sphinx. Hoffman notes that since Freud, "the focus

¹⁴⁹As I shall show, "three" is significant.

¹⁵⁰Hoffman (1994), p. 72. This paper is an extract from a forthcoming book and is a chapter in *Classical Greece: Ancient Histories and Modern Archaeologies*.

¹⁵¹Hoffman (*ibid.*). The one being described is attributed to the Athenian artist Sotades, middle of the fifth century B.C.

of scholarly attention to the Sphinx has been its connection with Oedipus and the myth."¹⁵² However, the connexion appears much more primal. The generic "sphinx" appears frequently in or on tombs or painted on vases made for these tombs. In anthropological terms sphinxes acted as mediators for crossing boundaries in rites of passage for the ancients.¹⁵³ These include such events as births, initiations, marriages and funerals. The "mythologising imagery with its fantasmal products" commonly "straddles and joins categories of animal, human and divine."¹⁵⁴ These creations (*i.e.*, Sphinxes) are eminently suited to be between-world mediators. When one is in the midst of passage, one is in a "no-man's land" or "no-man's time" as Hoffman styles it.

The number three, moreover, is a magical number (as we all know from reading fairy tales) and it is a significant number in many cultures -- including the ancient Greek one in regard to funeral rites. Typically the dead received burial on the third day, for example. The καὶ τρία on the Vatican kylix is not only a quotation from the riddle, then, but also a *memento mori*.¹⁵⁵ In the Sphinx's riddle, we could suggest that the catalogue of footedness which goes from four to two to three, reminds us of the final transition to death and the no-man's time and land which Oedipus enters upon solving the riddle.

If we take these socio-archaeological "findings" into consideration, the symbolic complexity of the number is far greater than we see at first glance. In the background of the myth is the *tripod* at Delphi where Oedipus undergoes a death/separation from his family. In the text, there is a *triplai* (or crossroads), the no-man's land where normal laws do not operate: a father is killed by his own son. Again, outside the text, Oedipus encounters the Sphinx, that epitome of the ἄλογον. Her riddle is an initiation rite that all have failed. The third part of the riddle is a *double-entendre* in itself. By the time the riddle has ended on the note of three, the victim has reached his demise. And finally, the Sphinx is all things in one: a rite of passage, a portal from

¹⁵²Hoffman (*op. cit.*), p. 73.

¹⁵³Here Hoffman draws on the ideas of another anthropologist, Leach (1976), whose ideas he summarizes in this section.

¹⁵⁴Hoffman (*op. cit.*), p. 74.

¹⁵⁵Hoffman (*op. cit.*), p. 75.

one age to another and a symbol of the finality of death. She proffers immortality and death at the same time as initiation and rebirth. The symbolism is extremely subtle and complex.

The Mythic Sphinx

Pausanias is another source for the anecdotal evidence of the Sphinx. Here follows a synopsis¹⁵⁶ of his report on the tradition of the riddle-singing Sphinx: She came, like a pirate, to Anthedon with a naval force for the purpose of brigandage, seizing the mountain which she used for plundering raids. Oedipus put a stop to her with the army he brought from Corinth. Another tradition has it that she was the bastard daughter of Laius. Apparently Laius was so fond of this daughter that he gave her the "riddle of Cadmus" which he had received at Delphi. This oracle was unknown to all but kings. Therefore when any but the sons of Epicaste (not Jocasta, in Pausanias) applied to the Sphinx, they were bound to fail. For Laius had many illegitimate children from his many concubines and only a legitimate child of Laius would know the correct answer. And so, Oedipus, by virtue of being the legitimate heir to the Theban power (not by virtue of his genius), is bound to be successful in answering the riddle tailor-made for kings.¹⁵⁷ Ahl¹⁵⁸ reminds us that the scholiast to the *Theogony* comments that the Sphinx is a γυνή ληστρίς or "woman brigand" while in Sophocles, Laius is killed by a band of λησται, "brigands," and that the Sphinx is still at large at this time. Obviously the tradition from which Sophocles could draw was woven from many strands. It would seem, therefore, unwise to adhere too closely to the "Aristarchan axiom," and yet profitable to reconsider influences external to the play

¹⁵⁶Frazer (1965), p. 475.

¹⁵⁷Pausanias notes that "it appears <Oedipus> had learnt the oracle in a dream." (Frazer, *loc. cit.*)

¹⁵⁸Ahl (*op. cit.*), p. 11

CONCLUSION

It seems that the story of Oedipus was so well-known to the ancients that, according to a certain ancient author, one had only to mention the name "Oedipus" and everyone would "know the rest: his father's name was Laios, his mother was Jocasta, these were his daughters, these his sons, this is what will happen to him, this is what he did."¹⁵⁹ But what Oedipus said and did varied according to the poet. Hence, although Sophocles's version of the myth is probably the most commonly known and accepted, it was not the only one.¹⁶⁰ We find, for instance, that Oedipus's mother is named "Epicaste" in Homer and Pausanias, but "Jocasta" in Sophocles and Euripides. And in the latter's play, Jocasta is still alive after the self-blinding of Oedipus. In the *Oedipodia*, Oedipus remarried, with Euryganeia as his second wife. These details are not the only differences amongst the versions¹⁶¹ that have come down to us but despite these variations, the basic premise still existed. Somehow, Oedipus killed his father, married his mother and then had to deal with these facts upon discovering them. And although we may derive *some* symbolic solace from the character and his situation, Oedipus is not in himself a symbol.¹⁶² It is probable that this tale, so familiar to the ancient audience, was an invention of an individual "who imagined the worst possible situation an individual could find himself in"¹⁶³ -- a situation in which the most primal of familial taboos were broken -- and speculated on divine and human reaction to that situation.

There are several innovations¹⁶⁴ in Sophocles's version of the famous story. One of these is the use of the plague as a starting point for the action and another is the way he handles the characterization. But it does not seem apt to suggest (as does Ahl quoting Plato) that this plague is a metaphor for injustice or tyranny. None of the evidence in the play points to either of these

¹⁵⁹Ahl (*op. cit.*), p. 4, quotes from a fragment of Antiphanes, a comic writer from *circa* 386 B.C.

¹⁶⁰The ancient commentators also discussed these variants on the received tradition as is indicated by the famous fragment of the *Poiesis* of Antiphanes (Kock 191), in which the tasks of tragic and comic poets are compared and Lucan's comments on Ar. *Poet.* [1968] 1451b26.

¹⁶¹See the Introduction.

¹⁶²W. G. Arnott, from a conversation June 16, 1995.

¹⁶³Arnott, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴Again, see my Introduction.

"cancers" in the ship of state during the rule of Oedipus, his wife and her brother. What is more remarkable to note of these two innovations is that, in Sophocles's retelling of this famous story, all the characters try to some degree to prevent Oedipus's *anagnorisis* and sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to do so. The herdsman who rescued Oedipus and saw him kill his father has taken to the hills upon seeing Oedipus installed as king. Creon has deliberately neglected investigating Laius's death. Teiresias has refused to prophesy except under duress. Jocasta has refrained from discussing the previous ruler and even tries to prevent Oedipus from finding out who he is when it becomes clear that she is his true mother.

There is great tension produced by the playwright between the inexorable but seemingly arbitrary workings of Apollo and the vain but human attempts by the persons of the drama to intervene. The two machinations are inherently irreconcilable. No matter how the human participants attempt to draw and redraw the boundaries or reinterpret the patterns they see, the god will not relent. And although the battle which is being fought in this play is one between "freedom and necessity," it is also a battle between "illusion and truth."¹⁶⁵

Analysing the beginning of the play, we find that the priest and suppliants start off on the wrong foot, so to speak, with a delusion. Their interpretation of the plague's meaning is entirely different from the reality. Mistaking the source of the plague (Ares), they come to its perpetrators (Apollo and Oedipus) for relief. This plague and its resultant barrenness are the second warning to the people of Thebes, the Sphinx having been the first. For each torment has its specific cause. On the one hand, the Sphinx is possibly the punishment for Laius's defilement of Chrysippus (an event which happens outside the drama). On the other, the plague and barrenness are punishment for the murder of Laius and engenderment by Oedipus of half-siblings on Jocasta. Each time, it is possible to remove the Theban scourge: the Sphinx is dispatched by the wit of Oedipus, the plague is ended (we presume) by the self-blinding of Oedipus.

¹⁶⁵Reinhardt (*loc. cit.*).

Creon's interpretation of the oracle from Delphi is also flawed (illusion *versus* truth). Although he can see both good and bad in the message he brings (that the murderer is living with them), he somehow misses a crucial piece of information: the fact that Oedipus is also living incestuously. Teiresias tries not to deliver the piece that is missing but is led, out of rage, to provide it in such a way that it will not be accepted. Jocasta has regularly tried to subvert the godly plans since her unwilling exposure of Oedipus. She mocks oracles and distrusts seers. Oedipus assumes that he is in control and will solve the murder mystery in routine fashion. In the final analysis, Oedipus and the other characters, in spite of themselves, conform exactly to a predestined plan of the god but do this while apparently exercising their own free will (freedom *versus* necessity). The plan of the god, however, may take many mortal years in the coming to fruition. The audience know that when this drama ends, the human wrestling match with the god is not yet finished. Oedipus, Antigone, Ismene, Polyneices and Eteocles all have their own struggles with destiny and the contest continues into the third generation.

Some critics,¹⁶⁶ have argued the case for the "innocence" of Oedipus, just as others¹⁶⁷ have argued his "guilt." Some critics, as we have already seen, find the crucial aspect of the play is in determining what the *hamartia* of Oedipus consisted in, while still others search for counterplots and intrigues.¹⁶⁸ Plutarch¹⁶⁹ even indicts the "curiosity" of Oedipus. In some sense, it seems fruitless to argue these points when it will always be impossible to determine their validity to the satisfaction of all the critics; yet this drama continues to engage the intellect of Hellenists and non-Hellenists alike, in the way of no other play, over the centuries it has formed part of the corpus of western literature. We want to suggest reasons why Teiresias is reluctant to reveal his prophecies or why Creon does not avenge the death of Laius.¹⁷⁰ We want to argue the strange purpose of the gods and also to find that Oedipus is a "free agent." Yet it does no harm to

¹⁶⁶Gould, Fisher.

¹⁶⁷Vellacott, Weil.

¹⁶⁸Ahl.

¹⁶⁹*De curiositate*, 522bf.

¹⁷⁰I am at variance with Walcock (1951), p. 161, who feels that "neither Sophocles nor the reader wishes to dally over expository details". These are precisely the points which intrigue readers to this day!

reiterate the main reason audiences both ancient and modern have identified with, and still do identify with, the character of Oedipus. It is that he is *neither* wholly innocent *nor* wholly guilty while remaining in many respects a truly heroic figure. Our hero is a man both impure and unlucky.¹⁷¹ And as this hero, Oedipus stands out from the rest not only in his wisdom, courage or virtue but also in his "vita più dolorosa."¹⁷² In a famous essay, Dodds has said that the ἁμαρτία of Oedipus is "an offense committed in ignorance of some material fact and therefore free from πονηρία [wickedness] or κακία [vice]."¹⁷³ Perhaps Oedipus can claim this "freedom" in regard to his marriage contracted in ignorance. It seems harder to defend his violence against the old man (Laius) and his escort. As Griffith points out, "Laius wanted only to drive him from the road (805)."¹⁷⁴ Uncontrollable rage leads Oedipus to kill five people on the provocation of this one old man. Surely, in the light of this homicidally precipitate behaviour, Oedipus is "wicked," in some sense, though perhaps not completely so. We see one facet only of his character in this vignette. On the one hand, he is but an ordinary human being with that being's ordinary flaws and strengths: he is quick-tempered yet thoughtful, he is violent yet sensitive, a true study in contrasts as any intelligent human person is likely to be. But where he is different, or "heroic" is in his outstanding honesty, loyalty and determination to seek the truth. He is a more believable hero than most because he captures our imagination like quite no other. An enraptured audience is moved to aspire to those qualities which make him at once tragic *and* heroic. If only they were he, trapped in the same tight corner, they imagine that they would stand up to irrational Tyche and her consort θεοί.¹⁷⁵ Or, being better and previously informed, they would evade the snare of the god. Oedipus makes heroism seem like a simple act. We are allowed to imagine ourselves as heroes of the same stature as we watch the drama unfold in all its majesty and pathos. We, too, could face our worst nightmares and survive them as purified and better people. We, too, could have the

¹⁷¹Maddalena (*op. cit.*), p. 266, n.4: "Edipo era per Sofocle il più impuro e il più infelice degli uomini, e tuttavia anche un eroe..."

¹⁷²Maddalena (*loc. cit.*).

¹⁷³Dodds (1968), p. 24.

¹⁷⁴Griffith (1992), p. 197.

¹⁷⁵Kitto (1958), p. 44, explains these "theoi" as "not the universe's creators but rather the controlling forces within it, those which cause things to happen, like rain or earthquake."

courage of our convictions in the face of "irrational evil."¹⁷⁶ Certainly, in the Sophoclean world, there is no room for justice tempered by mercy -- only for an unrelenting, blind and objective kind of *dikê*, which Kitto has defined as "the general balance of things."¹⁷⁷ If this justice of the gods gives Man no comfort, he must learn to make his own kind of justice and create a life on his own terms. Where a Christian can live in the hope that there is a point to human suffering and misery, the pagan Oedipus must find his own. He must supersede the justice of the gods, and free himself thereby, from their cruel, pervasive influence. Their pernicious disinterest in human well-being is one of the most unappealing characteristics of the Greek pantheon.

Since to be "tragic" means to suffer undeservedly, what, then, does it mean to be "heroic"? Perhaps it means standing up to the gods, daring to go past the Delphic maxims and ultimately, in some perverse way, pleasing the gods. Even though it is predetermined that he will commit impieties, this is not what matters. Perhaps Oedipus has pleased the gods because he showed integrity in the face of great suffering. To paraphrase the maddened Cassandra (of Euripides's *Troades*, line 402), "to <live> well is not a crown of shame."¹⁷⁸ Ultimately, it is the character, the motivation behind the man which matters, not whether he *appears* to have divine approbation and so, the chorus seem to have "got it wrong." Sophocles reflects the contemporaneous Jewish sentiment when faced with the same conundrum and anticipates the later Christian view. What is the point of human existence when an apparently righteous man (Job, in Jewish tradition) is afflicted with "irrational evil"? Whereas Job is restored to a fortune equal to his former, Oedipus is not. He is, however, *not* "destroyed." He may be changed forever, but he is not destroyed: in his *anagnorisis*, he has chosen to live without the gods in a limbo of his own making.

¹⁷⁶Whitman (1966), 122 ff.

¹⁷⁷Kitto, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁸Marshall's (1995) translation.

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