Title: Oedipus crux: reasonable doubt in Oedipus the King

Author(s): [Kurt Fosso](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Kurt+Fosso%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)

Source: [***College Literature***](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/aboutJournal.do?pubDate=120120622&rcDocId=GALE%7CA298752185&actionString=DO_DISPLAY_ABOUT_PAGE&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&resultClickType=AboutThisPublication&contentModuleId=EAIM&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=GALE%7C2035)***.*** 39.3 (Summer 2012): p26.

Document Type: Critical essay

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2012 West Chester University

<http://www.wcupa.edu/>

Full Text:

Oedipus didn't do it, at least not in Oedipus the King. Given all of the tragedy's conflicting testimony and unclear facts, there is little to prove the hero unwittingly murdered his father and married his mother, aside from his own self-conviction. [Sophocles](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R1&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=2&contentSet=GALE%7CA298752185&&docId=GALE%7CA298752185&docType=GALE&role=)'s drama indeed suggests that two traveling parties were massacred at the crossroads: one a royal entourage and the other a rustic band, one assailed by multiple killers and the other by a solitary traveler, Oedipus, who killed not King Laius but another elderly man. As for the charge of incest, Oedipus may not be Jocasta's offspring. The play further implies that the prophet Teiresias could have concocted his accusations of parricide and incest from inside intelligence, local tropes, and common fears. To thus question the facts of Oedipus's guilt is to bring to task tenets incorporated in Western tradition as a near gospel of guilt, judgment, and fate.

 Whatever is true ... is neither one nor even reducible to one.

 --Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power

It was fate, really, that led me to question Oedipus's guilt. Time after time, my main obstacle in teaching Sophocles's Oedipus the King was my students' pre-packaged conviction that the play was only a drama of fate with perhaps a dash of hubris. They believed that what happened to Oedipus happened because it was cruelly fated, and that in the end the play could mean little more than what Oedipus himself reckons about his destined lot: "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo, / that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion." (1)

There was little reason, in these students' minds, to read the text all that carefully, and certainly not much cause to fuss over details. After all, it was "obvious" that Oedipus unwittingly murdered his father, King Laius of Thebes, at a crossroads. And because he married the king's widow, Oedipus also wed his own mother, fulfilling the double fate of parricide and incest foretold to him at Apollonian Delphi. At the drama's climax, convinced of his guilt Oedipus blinds himself; his queen, ocasta, already persuaded of the awful truth, has hanged herself in despair. In short, the evidence "convinces every character in the play--not to mention virtually every reader or viewer since it was first produced--that Oedipus did indeed kill his father and marry his mother" (Blundell 1992, 300-1) Destiny won.

Resisting fate, a teacher could argue that Oedipus's present actions in the play are free rather than determined and therefore worth scrutinizing in themselves. (2) Yet some students will not unreasonably respond that undiscovered crimes are no less crimes, and that Oedipus's actions simply amount to discovering what fate (as Apollo) already held in store. Yes, they'll say, he perhaps could have chosen not to investigate the old king's murder, probable source of Thebes's plague, and have lived on in happy albeit plague-ridden ignorance. But then, they'll predictably conclude, his happiness would simply be that of not knowing that he had fulfilled his horrible destiny. The instructor might then try, as I did, to challenge such predetermined reading by linking the play to the Oedipus complex, (3) or by historicizing the tragedy's expressions of religious doubt and sacred vs. secular struggles. For that matter, a teacher could shift the focus to the myth's moral, literary, or cultural functions, enlisting [Aristotle](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R1&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=2&contentSet=GALE%7CA298752185&&docId=GALE%7CA298752185&docType=GALE&role=)'s Poetics or Claude Levi-Strauss's prismatic Structural Anthropology to illuminate the play's genre, structure, or purpose. But it nonetheless proved impossible for me to unsettle my students' steadfast convictions about the tragedy's too-simple meaning of wretched destiny and resigned forbearance. Sphinx-like, fate blocked the way, posing no riddle other than how a teacher like me could guide or goad students to read the play more closely and invite the unexpected.

In a sense, then, it was fate that prompted me to try to erode the foundations of such facile interpretations of Oedipus the King. And I did so by raising doubts about Oedipus's actual guilt. I don't mean that I generated doubt merely by calling attention to his ignorance of his own actions or to the divinely stacked deck of cards dealt him at birth. Rather, I tried to get students to raise doubts about whether Oedipus had murdered his father at all. Perhaps I had in the back of my mind Voltaire's pointed criticisms about the play's flaws of verisimilitude. I certainly was prodded along by J. Hillis Miller's observation that "Oedipus convicts himself by putting the somewhat ambiguous evidence together in a way that convicts him" (1990, 78). Before I'd discovered several other skeptical studies, including Frederic Ahl's conspiracy-inflected Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction, I had only an inkling about how much of the evidence for Oedipus's guilt was in fact ambiguous. (4) But those first steps led me all the same to discover a way for my students to undermine their firm convictions about Oedipus's guilt and its fatal cause: by requiring them to vigorously defend their ancient client, mirroring the play's own emphasis upon evidence, testimony, and judgment. Indeed, as Oedipus the King's representative Chorus opines, to justly "find fault with the king" one must first "see the word / proved right beyond doubt" (OT 11. 506-8), not accepting, as another voice pleads, "obscure opinion / without some proof to back it" (609-10).

Not surprisingly, many of my students initially viewed this task as perverse or just plain impossible. They felt especially vexed by my prohibition against arguing that Oedipus was innocent simply because he either didn't know what he was doing or else was a helpless pawn of the gods (the very reasons he himself offers in Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus). Setting aside all such extenuating arguments, students instead were to gather evidence from the text to raise reasonable doubt against the allegation of parricide or, if they preferred what seemed even more of a challenge, the charge of incest. And they were to present their findings in an essay geared to persuade the incredulous, and capped by a conclusion about the implications of Oedipus's uncovered innocence or at least uncertain guilt. What could be more "against the grain" after all than to argue that Oedipus didn't do it? Students became advocates with something really at stake, and for many of them Oedipus the King's meaning suddenly became strangely undecided and, over twenty-four centuries after the play's festival debut, up for grabs. Sophocles's drama now positively beckoned for weighing the evidence for innocence, much of it hidden in plain view. Fate proved stoppable.

I. Grizzled Old King or No One in Particular?

One of the places my students and I began searching for evidence is the very spot where Oedipus himself first becomes "full of fears" that he may have killed the former king (OT 768). Thebes's "rascal prophet" (705), Teiresias, has just accused him of being the king's murderer, and Oedipus is explaining to Jocasta that he suspects her brother, Creon, of colluding with the blind seer. Seeking to allay her husband's fears and suspicions, Jocasta argues that prophecies--and by extension prophets--aren't to be trusted. For long ago, she and Laius had learned from Apollo's oracle that "it was fate that he should die a victim / at the hands of his own son, a son to be born / of Laius and me" (713-15). To avoid the predicted outcome, the King had "pierced" their three-thy-old infant's ankles "and by the hands of others cast him forth / upon a pathless hillside" (718-20). As for the father's fate, Laius was murdered in Phocis "by foreign highway robbers / at a place where three roads meet" (715-16). Apollo therefore "failed to fulfill his oracle to the son," she coneludes, and "also proved false in that the thing he [Laius] feared ... never came to pass" (720-24).

Yet Jocasta's report does nothing to console Oedipus, who finds in its details about the king's death several disturbing similarities to his own past encounter with an elderly man at a crossroads. "I have a deadly fear / that the old seer had eyes," he cries (OT 746-47). As Oedipus anxiously relates, years ago he had received a similar prophecy and fled down the highway from Delphi, away from his presumed birthparents in Corinth. Aiming to find "somewhere where I should not see fulfilled / the infamies [of parricide and incest] told in that dreadful oracle" (797-98), he recalls:

 near the branching of the crossroads,

 going on foot, I was encountered by

 a herald and a carriage with a man in it,

 just as you tell me. He that led the way

 and the old man himself wanted to thrust me

 out of the road by force. I became angry

 and struck the coachman who was pushing me.

 When the old man saw this he watched his moment,

 and as I passed he struck me from his carriage,

 full on the head with his two pointed goad.

 But he was paid in full and presently

 my stick had struck him backwards from the car

 and he rolled out of it. And then I killed them

 all. (OT 801-13)

In terms of the evidence, it certainly seems clear that Oedipus killed "all" in the party. Also clear, for most readers, is that by doing so he ignorantly killed his true father, King Laius of Thebes. And yet, as many of my students argue in Oedipus's defense, a good deal could be clearer both about how many men died at the crossroads and who those men were. According to his firsthand but somewhat murky account, Oedipus was met by three travelers: a herald (kerux) and an elderly man riding in a carriage driven by a coachman. (5) So far so good. But in answer to Oedipus's question about how many attendants went "with" Laius on his "journey," Jocasta says that "In all there were but five, and among them / a herald; and one carriage for the king" (730, 753-54). Oedipus recalls an old man and two companions, but by no means five or even six persons--assuming Jocasta's "five" tallies those who went with the king. (6) So did a few attendants wander down another road, or is the queen mistaken? In short, how can three persons also have been as many as six?

To solve this riddle of the massacre--including the conundrum that, according to both Jocasta and Creon, there was also a survivor of the attack Sir Richard Jebb, in his well-known commentary on the play, reconciles the king's and queen's conflicting accounts. As Jebb deduces, after the herald had ordered Oedipus out of the way and Laius had similarly commanded, the carriage driver "did his lord's bidding by actually jostling the wayfarer." With his staff Oedipus then

 struck the driver; in another moment, while passing the carriage, he

 was himself struck on the head by Laius. He dashed Laius from the

 carriage; the herald, turning back, came to the rescue; and Oedipus

 slew Laius, herald, driver, and one of two servants who had been

 walking by or behind the carriage; the other servant (unperceived by

 Oedipus) escaped to Thebes with the news. (Jebb 1897, 1.804) (7)

Jebb neatly balances the divergent narrative accounts but, as he would doubtless concede, in order to accomplish this feat he must fill in a few key details. (8) Most notable among these additions are the cameos by the two missing servants, one of whom Jebb reasons was far enough behind the assailed carriage to enable him to escape "unperceived." But even if we grant that Oedipus might have overlooked a stray attendant's clandestine flight, why would he not mention the other servant as an additional victim? Jebb's artful inference is that this fourth attendant would not initially have shoved or struck Oedipus, and so presumably was either missed in the final tally or discounted as collateral damage. Along similar lines, R. Drew Griffith reasons that Oedipus was "too busy manslaughtering to concern himself with making an accurate count" (1993, 105). (9)

But there is room aplenty here for doubt about the play's details of this crime scene, as Jebb's creative reading attests. Granted, the manslaughter of multiple victims on a highway could distract anyone, yet the "Cleft road to Phocis" (Pausanias 1975, 9.2.4) nevertheless would seem to provide a fairly open murder scene, with a clear view of any trailing or fleeing men. (10) Indeed Philip Vellacott finds Jebb's hypothesis to be "quite groundless, and incredible considering the nature of the place, and the danger Oedipus was in, which would make him take care to ascertain whether he had dealt with all his enemies" (1971, 193). Given the text at hand, then, it seems more reasonable to conclude that Oedipus is silent about the presence of these two entourage members because neither servant was there to be killed or to escape. Moreover, although one attendant appears to have survived the royal massacre, that escapee's eyewitness testimony utterly contradicts Jebb's and others' reconciling hypotheses (see below). For Jebb and company, joining together what the play leaves asunder underscores this wide evidentiary gap, over which Oedipus's and Jocasta's narrated histories do not meet. Three are not six or even five, and "all" does not jibe with most or all save one.

In addition to questioning this numerical difference, readers may also ask why a king would apparently travel so incognito, especially on what Laius is said himself to have described as an "embassy" (OT 114)--possibly to Delphi, although Sophocles leaves the journey's destination and purpose unspecified. (11) The elderly man whom Oedipus killed seems to have had no royal markings at all on his nondescript person and "plain" carriage (755). Would not a king? Readers might also reasonably inquire why a monarch would carry not a regal staff but instead a "two-pointed goad" (dipla keutra) commonly used for driving cattle or oxen. (12) Even if he were driving his own horse-drawn wagon via the crossroads to Delphi or elsewhere, a herdsman's prod still seems an unsuitable implement. After all, in far-off Troy the Iliad's Achilles and Odysseus both hold fine wooden staffs "studded with golden nails," and Agamemnon bears a "royal staff ancestral" of Vulcan's handiwork (Homer 1961, 1.246, 279). Against his highway foes Oedipus himself wields a staff (skeptron). One may well wonder, then, which of the two travelers, the old man or Oedipus, had more the measure of a king. (13) In an unmarked carriage, the pugnacious elder rode along in plain clothes, brandishing a herdsman's tool, yet with a "herald" leading the way.

But in fact we cannot be certain from Oedipus's account that the man walking in front was really a herald. For one thing, Oedipus could have identified him solely by the man's lead position, and for another, the man seems to have heralded nothing (e.g., no order to move aside, which Jebb nonetheless infers). Of course, the Iliad's heralds have many practical as well as ceremonial functions, from quieting comrades to bringing lambs for sacrifice and arranging truces. But those heralds are notably "clear-voiced"--their main epithet--and have the special role of announcing proclamations and making summons. In short, their principal function is to speak, as heralds so noticeably do in Aeschylus's Agamemnon and Persians. Contrastingly, the elderly man's putative herald apparently heralded riot a word to Oedipus, leading to what Justina Gregory rightly describes as "a mute contest of wills" on the highway (1995, 145). Further complicating his later identification of the lead man, Oedipus never mentions seeing even a herald's trademark staff (topped with a caduceus-like emblem) or any staff at all. (14)

Also worth noting is that Jocasta, after speaking with Oedipus about the king's murder, laments to the Chorus that he typically "excites himself too much / at every sort of trouble" (OT 914-15). Rather than conjecture "like a man of sense," Oedipus instead "is always at the speaker's mercy, when he [the speaker] speaks terrors" (916-18). In this case, too, fearing he might be proved a regicide, Oedipus may have fretfully inferred that the company's lead traveler was a "herald" because Jocasta had herself specifically recalled one in Laius's entourage. Along these same lines, even the recollected crossroads location might result from speaker interference. Oedipus could simply have localized his crime scene's dimly remembered locale to Jocasta's specific narrated site "at a place where three roads meet--so goes the story" (716). Accordingly, Oedipus nervously recalls killing the old man "near the branching of the crossroads," his imprecise description perhaps betraying this rough joinery of narratives, insofar as traveling "near" is not quite the same as traveling "at." Gregory similarly speculates that Oedipus's "imprecision" here might "derive from an attempt to integrate the details newly provided by Jocasta with his own memory of the incident" (1995, 144). Identified with the specified herald in Jocasta's story, Oedipus's lead man retrospectively becomes a "herald." In these divergent details, the play thus presents a puzzle of two differently numbered companies, one of them noticeably unregal in size and character, with only a rustic senior, his driver, and a lead man, and no indication of anyone's royal status. We uncover a riddle of what should, in terms of the Oedipus myth, be plain as day, but which in Sophocles's rendering decidedly is not.

Although Oedipus for his part ignores these potentially exculpatory discrepancies, he does take stock of another, even more obvious, difference between his recollection and the other accounts of Laius's murder. For starters, his brother-in-law Creon's recent report from Delphi's oracle specifies not one assailant but a plurality of killers of the old king: "The God commanded clearly," he states, "let some one / punish with force this dead man's murderers" (OT 106-7; emphasis added). To this revelation Creon adds the old corroborating testimony of the royal massacre's sole survivor. That attendant (oikeus, house slave) had fled "in terror," but upon returning could tell the Thebans:



 nothing in clear terms

 of what he knew, nothing, but one thing only. ...

 ... that the robbers they encountered

 were many and the hands that did the murder

 were many; it was no man's single power.

 (OT 118-20, 1.22-24)

Recollecting me same witness's statement, Jocasta repeats the very same detail that the king "was killed by foreign highway robbers" (715), and the Chorus, too, recalls the "old faint story" that "wayfarers" killed King Laius (291-93). As William Chase Greene observes, in these various accounts Oedipus "recognizes ... what may be termed the vulgate version of the story. And that version includes several persons" (1929, 78).

Sensibly enough, this forensic issue of the number of assassins becomes a central concern for Oedipus, who knows all too well that he was the sole killer of the highway trio. With some irony, given his famous answer to the Sphinx, Oedipus reasons that "One man / cannot be the same as many" (OT 844-45). If the lone witness attested to a plurality of assailants of the king, and were he now to report that "same number," then, Oedipus concludes, "It was not I who killed him" (843). Even if we were to discount the eyewitness's testimony by attacking his reliability (e.g., by speculating that he lied to hide his cowardice), (15) the awkward matter of the oracle's similar plurality of killers stubbornly remains. (16) As Sandor Goodhart states, all the various sources in the play, save Oedipus's recollection, agree on this "one crucial detail" about the "multiplicity of murderers" (1978, 59). (17)

The reader or viewer may justifiably pause to consider how a solitary traveler could have killed Laius when the two other accounts of the assassination both stipulate multiple murderers. Not one killer but many--"many ... hands" and many feet--must be discovered. Setting aside the dramaturgical escape clause that, pace Voltaire, casts these discrepancies as unmasterful devices of deferral, to be discounted or ignored, (18) is it possible that Laius was killed by a band of robbers, as the eyewitness and the oracle state? Given the text of the play, this reading in fact seems the only way truly to square the differing accounts of the crime: everyone is right. By this rendering the highway killers were one and many because there was more than one elderly man, and more than one company of travelers murdered near the Phocal crossroads. (19) The age-old philosophical question of "the one versus the many" (20) here becomes a singular evidentiary issue, whose resolution is essential, within the narrative, to solving Thebes's cold case of regicide. We need therefore to consider when these different elderly men and their companions were killed, which in turn requires analyzing other evidence, including the curious timing of news.

Early in the play, Creon informs Oedipus that Laius's death had not been investigated because at the time an even more pressing and immediate civic concern demanded attention: the "riddling Sphinx induced us to neglect / mysterious crimes and rather seek solution / of troubles at our feet" (OT 130-33). For answering the Sphinx's riddle--"What is four-footed and two-footed and three-footed though it has but one voice?" (21)--and to replace Thebes's dead king, Oedipus was awarded the crown. The sequence of past events was thus set: Oedipus heard the oracle at Delphi, fled down the highway, committed a triple homicide near the crossroads, solved the Sphinx's riddle, and entered Thebes. On the Theban side, the Sphinx set up shop near the city, the citizens tried but failed to solve her riddle of feet, King Laius departed on an embassy (probably related to the "troubles"), word of his death reached Thebes, Oedipus the Sphinx-killer arrived and was crowned the new king, and, finally, the massacre's eyewitness returned. We can then unite the latter parts of both chronologies in an approximate timeline:

I II III IV

Laius's death oedipus's homicides Oedipus crowied Witness arrives

(Witness wanders) (Rumor of Laius's death)

Creon's explanation about the lack of an investigation into the king's "mysterious" death makes sense only if a period of time elapsed between the initial word or inference of Laius's death and Oedipus's victorious arrival, after which the eyewitness belatedly returned with his specific but tardy news. In turn, Oedipus's arrival had to occur soon after he answered the riddle, since the Sphinx was haunting Thebes's vicinity (some versions of the myth even perch her atop the city gate).

Apollodorus's later rendition instructively describes the beleaguered Thebans "gather[ing] together often to search for ... the answer" to the riddle. Only after many men had died in the attempt did Creon pledge to "give both the kingdom and Laius' wife to the man who solved the riddle" (2007, 3.5). Thereafter, Oedipus correctly answered the riddle and was duly awarded Thebes's crown and queen. Similarly, in Oedipus the King the Sphinx-conqueror could not have been hailed the savior of Thebes had that danger not lasted long enough to make Thebans so grateful for its end that they would crown the victor--and a foreigner at that. In other words, the Sphinx can only have been so exclusive a concern if its menace had persisted, surely for more than a day or two. It thus appears that Laius had either journeyed in response to unsolved Sphinxian "troubles" or else had departed prior to their advent, with initial word of his death delayed until the solving of the riddle had become the city's paramount concern.

According to this presumptive timeline, Oedipus could only have arrived in Thebes as he did, bearing happy news to citizens mourning their king's death--and, according to Creon, having "searched, indeed, but never learned anything" (OT 567)--if he had dispatched the old man well after Laius had been assassinated. Otherwise, limping gait or no, Oedipus would have reached Thebes ahead of the first reports or rumors about Laius, (22) and Thebes would have had no job opening for a king. For that matter, Oedipus's glad tidings would have eliminated any reason for Thebans to "neglect" their monarch's death, the news of which wasn't received from the lone witness, according to Jocasta, until "just before" Oedipus's coronation (736). It was then that the survivor at last returned, reported the assassination, and, beholding a new man crowned king, "begged," Jocasta recalls, "that I should send him to the fields to be / my shepherd ... so he might see the city / as far off as he might" (736, 760-63). (23)

To presume that Oedipus killed Laius is therefore to encounter an improbable, if not an impossible, sequence of events: in which Oedipus murdered the king, traveled to the Sphinx and thence to a city that not only already knew of the death but had already "neglect[ed]" its investigation. One cannot suppress or ignore what has not been discovered, nor blame a monster already known to have been slain. Under the traditional mythic scenario, then, initial word of the dead king arrives too soon and the eyewitness's news too late. To reject the hypothesis of twin homicides is to envision Oedipus wandering for several days or weeks or else to enlist a rumor-like force able to hasten word, vague yet quick as wind, to Thebes of its king's death. But Oedipus makes no mention of any wanderings: no travels, for instance, back up the highway to Delphi or along the crossroad fork Jocasta traces to "Dahlia" (OT 734).

More than a century ago, Sir George Young argued that, for the drama's crossroads site to be significant (tragic), Oedipus must have been heading not to 'Thebes but to Daulia or greater Thessaly when he encountered Laius's Delphi-bound embassy at the branching of the roads (1901, 50). Thereafter, Oedipus's precise route is unknown, Young concedes, but the prospect of him heading "straight to Thebes, after slaying Laius, seems ... improbable" (51), no doubt in part owing to the various temporal discrepancies. But as with Jebb's refashioning of the massacre narrative, Young's post-homicide scenario interpolates details the play notably omits. In the latter, in place of Daulia or some other destination, Oedipus flees from Delphi (24) only toward an unspecified "somewhere" (entha), with no word of travels anywhere, "in the days that followed" (OT 794-95), other than away from Corinth and, it would seem, down the highway to the Sphinx and nearby Thebes. What's more, this Daulia scenario serves only to exacerbate the nagging problem of the eyewitness's own post-massacre whereabouts. The longer Oedipus may have dwelt or journeyed in Daulia or vicinity, the longer the witness also must have tarried some place and by some unknown means, withholding his news of the regicide. Hence, although the eyewitness may, under this scheme, conveniently go missing long enough for rumor to arrive of Laius's death, his extended absence-without-leave raises its own problems. Tidy as a Daulia tour or detour may at first seem, then, it leaves its own forensic mess, in a play where messes are piling up. (25) After all, even if we overlook these chronological conundrums, the homicide scene's conspicuous numerical problems remain: one is not the same as many, nor can three victims equal five or six.

The contemporary philosopher Philolaus aptly proclaimed, "Everything that can be known has number." John Kerrigan similarly points to the fact that in the Athens of Sophocles "Euclidean demonstration, to the sureness of which [Sherlock] Holmes aspires, was the paradigm of reliable discovery" (1996, 74). When readers resolve away Oedipus the King's "one and many bandits," for Kerrigan such "quasi-demonstrative confidence should make the Dr. Watson in us protest." Like Oedipus, these readers are too easily "lured towards the necessary in a field of probability" away from the play's proto-Aristotelian domain where "everything has a cause" and "events follow exceptionless regularity"--a domain in keeping with the emergent practices of medicine, astronomy, and mathematics (74-76). But why should Sophocles construct such irony and so deface the Oedipus myth, a myth he had treated in a fairly orthodox manner in Antigone? Why use Oedipus the King to defame the myth, and by extension raise doubts about prophecies, prophets, and the gods?

In answer, although Sophocles may have been a religious conservative of some stripe, as tradition bids, he could still have shared his fellow citizens' skepticism about oracles and their ministers. For as Cedric Whitman argues, at the time of Oedipus the King's circa 429 BCE performance "Athens was far too full of fraudulent, beggarly oracle-mongers for any educated man to be utterly naive in the matter" (1951, 133). If the dramatist's intention was nonetheless to pitch in a plague year for the old-time oracles and gods (and, one should add, for the clarity of divine judgment and punishment), he "could scarcely have chosen a worse way than by preaching the careless power of the gods and the nothingness of man--the very beliefs, in fact, which were themselves the concomitants of the Athenians' lawlessness and moral decay" (1951, 133-34). It may be as a sign of such skepticism that in Oedipus the King we "never sec gods or divine beings on stage, but only hear of them from oracles and soothsayers" (Ahrensdorf 2004, 782): from those very sources, in other words, that many Athenians, including Socrates, had come to suspect. At the Dionysia, where the play reportedly earned only second prize, Oedipus the King provided a sly forum for interrogating the era's structures of certitude and conviction: as an unsettling of myth and even as a timely Socratic drama of perplexed unknowing. (26)

After all, one murderer is not the same as many, and although Oedipus fails, as Ahl points out, to distinguish in the same way "between five [or six] and three, or between one [survivor] and zero," that does not mean readers or viewers should do so (1991, 140). Likewise, a herding goad does not a scepter make, nor is every lead man a herald. Taken together, Creon's, Jocasta's, and Oedipus's statements, combined with the eyewitness's testimony, suggest that Oedipus killed another elderly traveler than Laius, and that he murdered him well after Laius's assassination. If the oracle and witness are therefore both to be believed, and if Oedipus is to be trusted about his own details of the crossroads encounter, the only conclusion reasonably (and arithmetically) available is that there were two traveling parties. One group was a royal entourage and the other a rustic band; one was assailed by multiple highway robbers and the other by a solitary traveler. Outlandish as this double scenario may seem, for John Peradotto "the hypothesis that Oedipus might have killed somebody else at the crossroads, around the same time, is certainly no more preposterous a coincidence to assume" than others in the tragedy, "especially in view of the question raised by the play itself, and never resolved, about the number of assailants" (1994, 96).

Granted, Sophocles's play would not be the first or last literary work to have improbable sequences, loopholes, red herrings, or loose ends. The sun can stand still for Joshua, so why can't the witness head directly to Thebes but arrive after Oedipus has been crowned? Cannot Oedipus's guilt, and the play's fidelity to the myth, rise above such textual lapses, say along the lines sketched by Charles Segal, who resolves the one-versus-many puzzle by holding that the "basic law of noncontradiction" which Oedipus employs "gives way to a fantastic, irrational 'logic' of paradoxes in which opposites can in fact be equal and 'one' simultaneously be 'many'" (1981, 216)? Yet such anti-logic seems a desperate measure. One cannot throw out a "basic law" when it proves interpretively inconvenient but resume its logic to establish Oedipus's incestuous relations and parricide. For that matter, Oedipus did not solve the Sphinx's riddle by envisioning some "fantastic" monstrosity, but rather by reconciling how a many-footed creature could, without contradiction, be one.

Pondering the dubious basis for Oedipus's guilt of patricide in this most ironic of plays, with ironies that so often point toward rather than away from the hero's guilt, Karl Harshbarger rightly asks, "If the play is built upon ironies, cannot there be irony in this, too?" (1965, 123). And yet, irony or no, despite all of this tragedy's inconclusive and exculpatory evidence for parricide, the ironclad matter of Oedipus's guilt of incest still remains.

II. The Game's a Foot: or, Who is Whose in Thebes

Near the play's finale of self-recognition and self-mutilation, Oedipus questions a herdsman, perhaps the very attendant said to have witnessed the royal massacre. "Are you that same servant who witnessed the murder of King Laius?" Oedipus the detective could ask. But oddly he does not ask this of the herdsman, despite having instructed Jocasta "to bring him" to be questioned about the murders and despite thinking him, upon the man's arrival, likely to be "the herdsman, / whom we were seeking" (OT 860, 1111).The Chorus also believes this man to be "none other than the peasant" in question, but defers to Jocasta's better knowledge (1052).Yet she never identifies him, and the herdsman states only that he was one of Laius's servants (it would be surprising were he not), "reared in his [Laius's] own house" but spending most of his life "among the flocks" at "Cithaeron and the places near to it" (1123-27). So there the man stands, poised, if he is that eyewitness turned shepherd, to answer questions about the king's murder, including the question concerning the accuracy of his testimony long ago about "many" assassins. But Oedipus asks him nothing about it. This curious failure to question a witness about such important matters--matters Oedipus surely deems vital to ending the plague--struck Voltaire, for one, as exceedingly improbable and a glaring defect (2001, 338). (27) After all, Sophocles could have written the scene so that the elderly herdsman resolved the contradiction of the one and many murderers. Despite the play's other factual discrepancies, the shepherd would simply confess that, in truth, Laius was killed by just one assassin, who strikingly resembled a younger Oedipus, no less. But he does not do so.

Instead other, more immediate and more personal questions overtake the investigation, sparked by the arrival of a stranger from Corinth. This unofficial messenger bears "news" of the recent death of that city's monarch, Oedipus's father, Polybus, as well as the happier "rumour" that the Corinthians "will choose Oedipus to be their king" (OT 934, 940-41). After first heartlessly rejoicing that the fateful oracle has been proved wrong--"[it's] dead as he [Polybus] himself is, / and worthless" (972-73)--Oedipus laments that he nonetheless still has cause to fear his mother, Merope's "bed," for that second part of the prophecy remains unfoiled. Hearing these details of the old oracle and of Oedipus's reasons for staying away from Corinth, the messenger seeks "to earn" his potential new monarch's "thanks" by releasing him from these baseless fears (1006). So the favor-seeker now unwittingly drops a familial bombshell: "Polybus was no kin to you in blood" (1016). And this messenger appears to know whereof he speaks. Many years before, he explains, while "in charge of mountain flocks" he "found" the abandoned infant Oedipus upon "Cithaeron's slopes / in the twisting thickets" (1026-27), "loosed" his "pierced and fettered" feet (1034), and carried him to the childless Polybus and Merope in Corinth as a "gift ... from these hands of mine" (1022). The happy new parents apparently then named their adopted son for his conspicuous swollen feet: Oedi-pus, "Swell-foot." As Odysseus's scar revealed his secret identity, so the marks on Oedipus's feet identify him as that foundling of the thicket.

But in fact much could be clearer about this crucial identification, as an overview of this scene attests. I find less cause to doubt the anonymous Corinthian than does Ahl, who sees in him a rumor-mongering "opportunist" conniving Oedipus's return to Corinth. But it certainly is the case that the messenger has come to seek his reward ("to earn ... thanks") by winning the king's favor with desirable rumors and newly allayed fears. And to do so this "unknown man simply announces that he gave Oedipus to Polybus," and the credulous Oedipus believes him (AM, 1991, 177).Yet much doubt can be raised about Oedipus's paternity without necessarily shooting the messenger. Regarding the discovery of that baby on Cithaeron, the Corinthian immediately (and perhaps suspiciously) clarifies one significant point of his custodial narrative: that although he described Oedipus as having been "found," it was not he who found the foundling. "You took me from someone else?" (OT 1039), Oedipus anxiously asks, and the messenger replies that actually he had been handed the infant by another shepherd, "called Lulls' man" (1042). "With such clues" about this chain of custody, Oedipus surmises, "I could not fail to bring my birth to light" (1058-59).The investigation now becomes focused not on the previous king's death but on the present king's birth and infancy. And Jocasta will have none of it, presumably fearing by this point that the foundling will prove to be her and Laius's own abandoned child. "God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!" she cries, exiting the stage (1068). Undeterred, Oedipus chalks up her fears to a queen's concern that he, a self-described "child of Fortune" (1080), might be proved of low birth.

At this critical moment the herdsman arrives and, although his identity as the eyewitness to the massacre is never confirmed, the Corinthian messenger identifies him as none other than the shepherd who handed him the foundling. Under pain of torture, the herdsman reluctantly confirms this point, admitting that he gave the Corinthian shepherd (now messenger) "one of the children / of Laius" (OT 1167). (28) Here the reader should be permitted a classic double take: "Children?! Laius had more than one child?" What, one wonders, became of the other children? Might any of them also have been abandoned owing to what the herdsman recalls as the "evil oracles" that a child "should kill his parents" (1176-77)? Earlier in the play, Oedipus noted that Laius's "line" (genos) had left no progeny (261), but that fact does not preclude children having been born and "cast away." Of course, whether Laius and Jocasta had one child or many children, and whether they had abandoned one, many, or all of them, Oedipus would still be their "blood" offspring and, therefore, regardless of whether or not he killed his father, he'd still have married his mother.Yet there are other problematical details in this custodial narrative--details that call into question precisely Oedipus's "blood" parentage. We need not hypothesize how one ankle-pierced foundling might be mistaken for another, nor scrutinize the messenger's motivation for quelling as well as for stirring up Oedipal fears by forcing the herdsman, disconcertingly, to "remember what he / does not know [agnotos]" (1133-34). Instead, we can begin by pondering the matter of oracles, before proceeding to the question of just who it was who gave birth to that foundling of the "twisting thickets."

As mentioned, the herdsman refers to a plurality of "evil oracles," adding that the "fear" of them led the infant's mother to abandon the child (OT 1175). Sophocles's play thus presents three variations of child/parent prophecy: 1) the herdsman's recollection of multiple oracles predicting a child would "kill his parents," 2) Jocasta's patricide prophecy that the king would "die a victim / at the hands of his own son ... born / of Laius and me," and 3) Oedipus's Pythian forecast of patricide as well as of incest--a double prophecy seconded in the recent accusations by Teiresias.The Chorus therefore quite rightly refers to a plurality of "oracles concerning Laius" (906). At this point, we might then reasonably ask once more why this play so muddies the mythic waters. Why many prophecies rather than just one? For that matter, why make the last repeated prophecy be that of the "parents" oracle, which is at most only half fulfilled at the tragedy's end, given that Oedipus will not have killed his mother, whether she turns out to be Merope, Jocasta, or nobody in particular? (29) More important for the narrative, the plurality of "oracles" suggests that the house of Laius received more than one parricide prophecy: perhaps, this line of reasoning suggests, for more than one ill-fated, potentially parricidal child.

Even more significantly, it is not at all certain that the foster child in question, putatively named for his swollen feet, is Jocasta's offspring. Oedipus pointedly asks the herdsman if the spared child of Laius was "A slave? Or born in wedlock?" (OT 1168), the implication being that Laius could have fathered children with servants, and perhaps that such demi-royal, bastard offspring would have been similarly disposed of in the thickets. An infant left on a hillside might have been born outside rather than inside wedlock, given birth by a house slave rather than by a freeborn wife.The point here is basically Oedipus's own: that he could be the offspring not of a queen but of a servant (cf. e.g., Odyssey 14.200-3). Oedipus will cast off this slave-child scenario, but he nonetheless pinpoints it for the play's audience. "The child was called his child," the herdsman confesses, "but she within, / your wife would tell you best how all this was" (OT 1171-72; emphasis added). Although the shepherd attests that it was Jocasta who gave him the child to "make away with" (1775), he in fact never says that she was herself the child's mother. When asked if that mother (tekousa, "she who gave birth") could have been so "hard" (tlemon, "wretched," "miserable") as to do such a thing, he merely affirms Oedipus's query and explains the hardness's cause: "through fear / of evil oracles" (1175-76). But was "she," whoever she was, hard-hearted from her own fear of oracles or from others' Laius's and Jocasta's--dominating fears? In this important scene, Sophocles seems to have exercised particular care to instill rather than to resolve doubts about this royal paternity test. By the herdsman's account, Laius fathered more than one child; hence it is altogether uncertain whether the foundling was a slave or freeborn child, a bastard or a legitimate heir. And if Oedipus is the son of Laius and a slave, he is no child of Jocasta, whether or not she helped dispose of the bastard infant, and hence is no husband of his mother and father to his siblings.

Of course one may still point to Oedipus's feet for physical evidence of his identity as the foundling given to Polybus. "[Y]our ankles should be witnesses," the messenger proclaims, and Oedipus acknowledges the poignancy of this reference to what he calls an "old pain" (OT 1032-33). For Griffith this classic "recognition-token" thus "dovetails perfectly with Jocasta's story of having exposed an infant with pierced ankles" (1993, 106). The putative foot-marks lend much-needed credence to the identification of Oedipus as that foundling child by explaining not only the cause of Oedipus's scarred or sore ankles but also the origin of his peculiar name.Yet it is worth pausing before this last threshold, for although it is likely that Oedipus would be aware that his name can be derogatorily construed as "Swell-foot," he could and in fact seems to prefer more flattering etymologies, including such Cratylan renderings as "Know-where" (oidi-pou) and, especially, "Know-all" (oidi-pas). (30) Indeed, at one point Oedipus appears to pun upon his name's apposite know-it-all etymology to Teiresias: "I came, / Oedipus ['Know-all'], who knew nothing" (OT 397-98). Two other etymologies, "Two-foot" (oidipous) (31) and "Know-foot" (oidi-pous), might also he valued by a man renowned for having solved a riddle of feet. In this light, Oedipus's reference to an "old pain" (archaion ... kakon) related to his feet need not signify ankle scars, of which there is no evidence, nor podiatric ailments. Instead it could refer to the youthful "pain" of teasing (kakos, "evil" or "pain" but also "reproach") suffered because of an uncommon, malleable name all too easily debased as "Swell-foot." (32)

In addition, the Corinthian messenger's initial inquiry "Might I learn ... where is the house of Oedipus? Or / best of all, if you know, where is the king himself?" (OT 925-26; emphasis added)--curiously and conspicuously features, even more obviously in the Greek, "violent puns, suggesting a fantastic conjugation of the verb 'to know where' formed from the name of the hero" (Knox 1957, 184). (33) That the messenger formidably puns, unwittingly or not, upon his would-be patron's know-where-man name further establishes the potential for just such wordplay, here and elsewhere in the scene, including upon other pseudo-etymologies of oedi-pus. It is therefore less surprising that the messenger should later link Oedipus's swell name to the swollen ankles of the foundling tale's featured child. "Swell-foot" is but one semantic twist in a game and history of puns, and whether by fate, chance, or rhetorical legerdemain, this nominal "old pain" forges a strong link in the narrated custodial chain as well as between the Corinthian favor-seeker and his new-found, foster-childlike "son" and potential, grateful king (OT 1031).

However, the messenger's efforts backfire. Believing all his proffered terrors and Cratylan turns, Oedipus rushes headlong into convincing himself of his Theban paternity and related incest and parricide. As Greene rightly states, Oedipus's guilt of patricide in fact is only "inferred from the discovery of his origin and from the discovery that he has fulfilled the half of the Delphic oracle that prophesied incest; ergo, his inference would run, presumably the other half that foretold parricide has been fulfilled" (1929, 81). Yet Oedipus convinces himself of his paternity without knowing, as we do, about the Corinthian's proclivity for punning upon his multivalent name, and without considering the anonymous stranger's motives, evidence, and reasoning. Oedipus also convinces and convicts himself without ever acknowledging the doubts raised by the herdsman's account of multiple children, mothers, and oracles. Instead, Oedipus the investigator careens toward the realization of his worst fears, which is to say toward seeing as fulfilled Delphi's narrative of parricide, incest, and, not least, fate.

Why does Oedipus the riddle-solver turned investigator not question this testimony, or at least delay reaching so damning a conclusion about his guilt? No doubt he rushes as he does in part because of his well-known impulsiveness, which first led him to consult the oracle and then to flee down the highway. But he also appears to dash headlong because the explanatory narrative he has helped to compose obliges him to do so: as the lead actor of sorts in a centripetal drama of fate. It is what Jonathan Culler aptly describes as "the convergence of meaning in the narrative discourse," a convergence that arguably leads Oedipus, ever at the mercy of tellers and ceilings, "to posit this deed" (1981, 174) and judge accordingly. As Holderlin observed, it is Oedipus's self-focused, masterful "interpreting of everything" that leads "his spirit [to be] defeated by the rough and simple language of his servants" (2001, 67). Put differently, everything is "made to begin with Oedipus, by means of explanations, with all the more certainty as one has reduced everything to Oedipus by means of application" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 101).The drama's "child of Fortune" avoids a world of chance and undetermined identity by claiming his meted, necessary, self-damning portion of fate and punishment. Along these very lines, Gilles Deleuze roundly condemns Sophoclean tragedy's typifying "disease of judgment," whereby "gods and men together raise themselves to the activity of judging--for better or worse" (1997, 128). (34) But might the play's dramatic "disease" be, more ironically, of Oedipus's own making? The hero's forensic inquiry casts himself as fate's victim and, despite his expressions of doubt, evinces his insistent belief in prophecy as well as in divine judgment. He thus doggedly applies the oracular narrative to forge a unitary myth of "Swell-foot," despite the many doubts that linger.

Indeed, too many babies, too many oracles, too many names, and even too many mothers make any conviction about Oedipus's guilt of incest as problematical as the conclusion about his guilt of parricide. So if Oedipus might not be Jocasta's child, and if he may not have murdered his father, of what is he guilty besides having long ago killed a thuggish band on the highway? (35) It seems a reasonable enough question given the evidence at hand or at least given the ambiguity of that evidence. And yet one key forensic puzzle-piece still remains: the prophet Teiresias's accusations concerning Oedipus's guilt of patricide and incest. Even if all the play's other evidence is at best tenuous, how can Oedipus not be guilty if Apollo's seer so clearly says he is? To borrow from The Waste Lind, does the renowned prophet not perceive the scene and foretell the rest?

III. "A Prophet's Task"

Near the play's opening, Oedipus has summoned Teiresias "[o]n Creon's word" to help solve the king's murder, and thereby "redeem the debt of our pollution / that lies on us because of this dead man" (OT 287, 312-13). But Apollo's seer arrives in an uncooperative mood, bemoaning that he came at all, and Oedipus chastises him for his reluctance: "You'd rob us / of this your gift of prophecy?" (323-24). Their bickering escalates until it prompts the soothsayer's blistering, jaw-dropping accusations: "I say you are the murderer of the king / whose murderer you seek" (363-64), and "with those you love best / you live in foulest shame unconsciously" (366-67). Oedipus is guilty of incest and patricide: "a fellow sower in his father's bed / with that same father that he murdered," as Teiresias decries (458-59). For good measure the seer even adds a new prophecy: that this "double striking curse, / from father and mother both," shall drive Oedipus "forth / out of this land, with darkness on [his] eyes. ... to a foreign country tapping his way before him with a stick" (418-19, 456-57). And to the prophet's credit, at the tragedy's conclusion Oedipus does end up blind and pleading for exile. A reader might well ask, then, how it is possible to discount the seer's seemingly valid pronouncements, beyond simply insisting that enough exculpatory evidence exists elsewhere to render them moot.

Predictably enough, Sophocles's play insinuates considerable doubt about the prophet's allegations, beginning with Oedipus's own aforementioned suspicions of soothsayer trickery. In response to Teiresias's j'accuse, the incredulous king questions the seer's skill, on the one hand charging him with conspiring in a coup d'etat with Creon, and on the other hand chiding him for having failed, long ago, to solve the Sphinx's riddle. "And who has taught you truth?" the king suspiciously asks. "Not your profession [techne] surely!" (OT 358-59). The seer, he surmises, employs not genuine Apollonian insight but crafted, mundane defamation. To this charge the prophet testily replies, "You have taught me, / for you have made me speak against my will" (356-57). Teiresias thereby ducks the implicit indictment (that someone merely "taught" him these things) by turning the tables on his opponent. Here, as in the murder investigation, Oedipus is the very one he seeks: "you ... taught me." The seer's defensive words thus imply that because Oedipus has compelled him (akonta prontrepho, "prodded along") to speak, he has responded, blow for blow and dart for dart (cf. akon, "dart"), with what would teach the ruler a lesson.

Teiresias moreover contends that he has as much legal "right" as his king to speak in his own "defence," and to do so by speaking "against" his powerful adversary: "Of that much I am master" (OT 408-10; emphasis added). "Called" as a witness and now "taught" by Oedipus's supreme power, (36) the soothsayer retaliates with angry lessons of his own, possibly seeing that the quickest and surest way to conclude the interview is to declare Oedipus himself the regicide, deftly transforming the royal investigator into the investigated, the "master" into the "slave" ("I am no slave / of yours, but Loxias'," Teiresias proclaims [410-11]). As often occurred in Athens's courts, the accused man's defense takes the form of a hostile attack, and despite this defendant's special "mantic invective," one nonetheless discerns "the forensic tone" (Knox 1957, 84-85). The best legal defense is here a strong (and certainly offensive) offense, employing vaticination as rhetorical power. It could be owed to their status as courtroom retorts that Teiresias's words carry so little weight with the play's characters. Apollo's prophet is, Lowell Edmunds observes, curiously "ineffectual" in his revelations, all but forgotten later in the drama (1985, 15).

Oedipus levies his counter-accusations before a Chorus of elders and, at the play's wartime debut, before an Athenian audience attuned not only to charges of political conspiracy but also to expressions of religious skepticism and doubt. Chance (tyche) rather than fate was regarded by many as the true ruler in human affairs, to the point of being itself deified. (37) Within this agnostic cultural climate, and given especially Athenian suspicions about Delphi's pro-Spartan ministers, distrust of the oracle ran high. (38) The sophist Antiphon's reputed judgment of prophets and prophecies serves as an apt motto for this age of rationalism, anthropocentrism, and religious doubt: prophecy, he claimed, was but the "conjecture [eikasmos, 'guessing] of an intelligent man" (2002, Test. 9). (39) Like many a member of the play's festival audience, Oedipus too riot unreasonably wonders why he should put stock in a prophet's revelations, especially given a dubious record of accurate prediction.

"Tell me," the king retorts, "where have you seen clear ... with your prophetic eyes?" (OT 390-91). To answer the Sphinx's riddle was, Oedipus says, "a prophet's task" (manteia, "prophesying power" or "skill"), and for that all-important work Teiresias had "no gift of prophecy / from birds nor other/vise from any God," Apollo included (394-97). And whereas the blind seer came up empty-handed in that important civic act, Oedipus did not. Who, then, was the real know-nothing? For that matter, if the mantic did know beforehand of the misdeeds he reveals, then he must have concealed the facts, if indeed he is not now simply guessing at what will most disturb the tyrant who berates him. Certainly it wouldn't require second sight to single out a foreign interloper whose arrival roughly coincided with the old king's death and who alone can be said to have benefited from it. Moreover, to add to the prophet's poor record of prognostication, he has now apparently failed even to foresee his own regret at heeding Oedipus's royal summons. But had track records, questionable ethics, and religious skepticism aside, the seer still knows what he knows. How does one explain away that?

How but by pointing to the most contrary evidence of all: the disparity between Creon's Delphic report, declaiming multiple murderers of the king, and the prophet's charge that Oedipus alone is "the murderer of the king / whose murderer you seek." (40) If Teiresias's revelation is correct, then Creon's oracular testimony must be wrong. Sophocles's play thereby deftly sets one Apollonian fount against another, leaving readers and viewers the task of choosing which dueling pronouncement to believe, Apollo's oracle (via Creon) or Apollo's seer. Both sources cannot be true, which means that at least one of them has to be wrong. And given all of the exculpatory evidence on Oedipus's behalf, it makes as much if not more sense for it to be Apollo's prophet who is in error: he who sees, the Chorus avers, "most often," but implicitly not always, "what the Lord Apollo sees" (OT 285-86). After all, the oracle's account of the regicide accords with the details offered by the eyewitness, whereas Teiresias's revelation does not. But if the prophet did not learn his accusations from a god, the question remains what other source could have informed him.

For his part, as mentioned, Oedipus suspects his brother-in-law of this intrigue. "Creon ... secretly attacks me," he charges, by "suborn[ing] this juggling, trick-devising quack" (OT 386, 388). According to this conspiratorial reckoning, the soothsayers (41) would have learned from Creon of Delphi's recent pronouncement and plotted with him to lay the blame on the hated upstart from Corinth. But there is a hitch: Creon's report fingers a plurality of murderers, not just one killer, and the prophet proclaims Oedipus to be guilty not only of regicide but also of incest. So from whom could the seer have learned of the incest if not from his patron god? Neither Jocasta nor the herdsman mentions incest as a part of their recollected family prophecies. Only Oedipus's Delphic prophecy fully squares with Teiresias's dual revelations. And there's the rub. Goodhart in fact holds that "Unless we privilege Teiresias a priori as spokesman for the mythic pattern, we may have no confidence that the knowledge of the practicing mantic is other than professional" (1978, 60). In other words, the seer could have received intelligence from his confederates at Delphi, as one (distrusted) minister to another. It would be all too easy to accuse Oedipus of what the seer's fellow Apollonians had already foretold.

Even without such insider knowledge, Oedipus's recent self-presentations could supply a crafty soothsayer with ample rhetorical ammunition, acquired not in secret but in public. For just prior to the seer's arrival at court, in commencing his inquiry Oedipus had depicted himself as a son to the dead king:

 Since I am now the holder of his office,

 and have his bed and wife that once was his,

 and had his line not been unfortunate

 we would have common children (fortune leaped

 upon his head)--because of all these things,

 I fight in his defence as for my father. ...

 (OT 259-64; emphasis added)

Often read as an instance of Sophoclean irony, this passage underlines a simple but important point: that the son-father connection between Oedipus and Laius was an available trope when Teiresias arrived to literalize (and Oedipalize) its figurative hierarchy. One king, especially one who had thus inherited his throne, becomes a son to his predecessor and structural progenitor. Oedipus's description of himself as the king's son of course also bespeaks its familial-dynastic corollary: if Laius is the "father" (patros) then Laius's wife becomes Oedipus's mother. In turn, Oedipus would more than just figuratively stand as parens in loco parentis had Laius left behind any children. Parricide and incest here figure as rhetorical fruit ripe for the picking, certainly by any dexterous, "trick-devising quack" (OT 388). If Oedipus can style himself a son to the former king, it is not so formidable, let alone so prophetic, a "task" for a soothsayer to do so, in what amounts to an ancient version of playing the dozens. Even the less sophisticated Corinthian messenger found much to play upon simply in his potential new patron's curious name.

As for the broader cultural availability of a charge of incest, beyond its being bandied about as an insult, Jocasta attests to the frequency of such incestuous fears and desires: "Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles, / many a man has lain with his own mother" (OT 981-82). (42) Certainly a trick of the soothsayer trade is to play upon common and often intermingled fears and desires, familial and otherwise. Whether Jocasta's dismissive explanation amounts to special pleading or, avant Freud, a statement of psychological fact, she characterizes Oedipus's incest fears, and any man's incestuous desires, as common rather than rare: experienced by "many," not just by one.

Even when it conies to Teiresias's prophecy of blindness there is cause for at least a little uncertainty and even incredulity. Specifically, the seer predicts that Oedipus, his crimes at last revealed, will go "out of this land, with darkness on [his] eyes. ... to a foreign country[,] tapping his way before him with a stick" (418, 456-57).Yet although Oedipus ends up blind and begging to be exiled, and although there is every reason to presume that Creon will grant his request for banishment, Oedipus holds no such stick (skeptron) to tap along his way. Perhaps "tapping" (gaian, more literally "feeling") is but an emblem for blindness, or possibly the real stick still remains to be handed him, maybe the very one he wielded long ago on the highway. For now, though, there is no indication that Oedipus has a staff; nor is there any suggestion, apart from Teiresias's prediction, that he will even need one. It would be such a simple thing for Sophocles to depict Oedipus using a walking stick to reenter the scene or else to have one of the hero's two daughters bring him a staff for support. (43) But these things do not happen, and whether or not they will is left for the audience, then as now, to consider. Hence, in this one detail teiresias may be proved wrong, and certainly has not been proved right. Even regarding Oedipus's blindness, the soothsayer foresees only that he will become blind, not that it will, significantly, be wrought by the hero's own handiwork. "Apollo ... brought this bitter bitterness," Oedipus will explain, "But the hand that struck me / was none but my own" (OT 1332-33).

Oedipus nevertheless ends up blind.Yet recall again Jocasta's observation about her husband's peculiar vulnerability: "always at the speaker's mercy, / when he speaks terrors." Here, too, Oedipus leaps to believe the worst. It is no great leap on our own part to surmise that Teiresias, wittingly or not, has bequeathed his adversary both a worst-case scenario (first foretold to him at Delphi) and the fated response. From this vantage, Oedipus does not so much fulfill a prophecy as act out a script for how fatefully to proceed--a script he himself has helped write. The play thereby holds open the possibility either that Teiresias foresaw the terrible events or that he has prophesied nothing, concocting revelations from a mixture of inside intelligence, guesses, tropes, coincidences, and common fears all within a contemporary context of mantic failure and looming doubt. The Teiresias of Oedipus the King declines from the far-seeing prophet of old to the more dubious and ironic, more modern figure depicted in [Euripides](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R1&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=2&contentSet=GALE%7CA298752185&&docId=GALE%7CA298752185&docType=GALE&role=)'s Phoenissae and Bacchae. (44)

"O oracles of the / Gods," Jocasta skeptically proclaimed, "where are you now?" (OT 945-46). Sophocles's drama forges uncertainty at most every turn, suggesting that its author deftly and intentionally laid a weak rather than strong foundation for Oedipus's guilt and fate, and thereby for the myth's own certitude and unity "Our sorrows defy number," the Chorus laments (168).

IV. Conclusion

The Chorus's timely complaint serves here as a fitting conclusion, for Sophocles's work uncannily takes on a Sphinxian shape of many to which there seems no one solution. As Seth Benardete remarks, Oedipus the King's complex of "knots" leads us to wonder if the drama's deeper irony in fact consists less in our greater knowledge and Oedipus's ignorance than "in our own ignorance of which we never become aware" (2000, 126)--or, one could add, of which we become partly aware, with the humbling sense that our knowing, like the Oedipus tradition's many interpretations, must ever be partial and subject to stumbling. Oedipus the King presents a world in which resolving the many into one seems ineluctably to precipitate a change from the one back into many: from the Sphinx's riddle of four, two, and three feet to Oedipus's answer of "Man," and back again to "many ... hands" and feet, many oracles, and many names.

For an Athenian playwright to have intricately constructed such dramatic riddles and epistemological ironies would place him in the Periclean modernist camp of those who found good reason to question oracular and other traditional forms of authority and truth and the political powers closely associated with them. Such cultural tensions were soon dramatized to grotesque comic effect in [Aristophanes](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R1&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=2&contentSet=GALE%7CA298752185&&docId=GALE%7CA298752185&docType=GALE&role=)'s Clouds, with its sophistical and heretical Socrates. Segal rightly holds that Oedipus shares with Parmenides and other contemporary philosophers the concern "with finding truth in a world of appearances," a world newly marked by the sophists' theories about language, which at bottom "pose the problem of the relation of words to reality and emphasize the power of words to deceive, to win unjust causes, and to confuse moral issues" (2001, 10). Indeed, in Oedipus the King it is language, in the form of narrative, that leads storied Oedipus to convict himself, suggesting to Miller that "the perennial success of the story of Oedipus may lie more in its powerful narrative presentation of the problem of narration than in any solution it presents to the question of man's origin and nature" (1990, 74). Narrative is revealed as the bearer of nature, which is to say as that which intercedes between knowledge (oida) and origin: pons as footing.

The play lifts the veil that, in the parlance of Roland Barthes's Mythologies, transforms history's chance events into nature, removing from things their changeable "human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance" (1972, 142-43): that of essence and fate, of a nature without history, accident, or politics. Similarly, Peradotto argues that "sophistical" semiotic readings of Sophocles's play usefully serve to make "ideology explicit," principally by "unmaskungl the process, to which language is ever open, of making what is merely arbitrary seem natural, of turning the merely accidental into the necessary" (1994, 94). To read the play thus is to encounter the internal tyranny of orthodoxy, mythic and otherwise, and perhaps to return the forensic problem of evidence to the social imbrications that ushered it into being. (45) More generally, it is to approach the problem that all perceived facts are, a priori, always viewed from a particular vantage and within the context of some theory or narrative. In other words, the meaning of any fact or concept is, to borrow a Quinean phrase, theory laden; which is to say situated, embedded in a (Procrustean) narrative frame. As Timothy Clark likewise holds, facts and concepts are "not derived from experience but (already) from some theoretical framework, through which alone the selective observation of any discrete thing or characteristic becomes possible" (1991, 3).

In Oedipus the King, fate-filled Delphic determinism both colors detail and requires a complicit filling-in to make mythically one what is disparate, indeterminate, and "many," defying number. Much like Oedipus, readers who concur with his predetermined guilt "restore the myth, it would seem, only from the outside and only at the expense of the play Sophocles has given us" (Goodhart 1978, 61). In the early years of a misguided and isolating war, amid mercenary voices, jingoism, and pro-war alliances satirized a few years later in Aristophanes's Acharnians (circa 426 BCE), Sophocles's gadfly play dramatizes the tragic costs of forging (in both senses) a coherent master narrative: of what must be overlooked, filled in, gerrymandered, and duly reconciled. (46) The most terrifying yet mundane knowledge in Oedipus the King may well be that knowledge is never unbiased or undetermined, nor ever unimpeded.

"Sophocles's myth of Oedipus may still amount to a tragedy," a student of mine writes, "for the story of a man who wrongly convicts himself of regicide is certainly tragic" (Dierschow 2007, 7). Read in this way, the play shifts from being a drama about divine fate to being one about questioning the validity of all sources of truth, from oracles and prophets to custodial, etiological, and other tales. If people cannot place their trust in such traditional sources, the play implies, then the "golden thread of reason" followed by Socrates and company may be what's left. Yet Oedipus himself is largely a negative example, losing his reasoned way by accepting inadequate evidence of his guilt of incest and, via that charge, of parricide. He assembles his self-convicting narrative from a patchwork of prophecies, rumors, testimony, and interpretation. Oedipus is shone in this light to be the first mis-reader of his own myth (and complex), and to be complicit in slavishly imposing Delphi's master narrative upon himself, his family, and city. (47)

In reading this tragedy about seeing and not seeing, what some students come to see is that nothing should be taken for granted, neither fact nor theory, not least what is at one's feet. (48) Protagoras's proclamation, "Man is the measure of all things," takes on an Oedipal complexity beyond the dramatic ironies invoked by traditional readings of the play. Indeed "to suggest that Oedipus may not have killed Laius is to play havoc with a legend that for twenty-eight hundred years has remained curiously intact" (Goodhart 1978, 61). It is also to call into question, and to bring to task, the myth's fundamental tenets, long ago incorporated in Western tradition as a near gospel of guilt, judgment, and fate. (49) Such renewed reasoning about Oedipus's innocence can lead in turn to a reconsideration of the narrative foundations for psychoanalysis (50) as well as for "anti-Oedipal" theories, and of Oedipus the King's place in Sophoclean drama, literary history, and, not least, the class-room. Where "one" was, let "many" be. Yet given these findings and their implications, do not myth, prophecy, deductive reasoning, and other measures of language, including literary interpretation, emerge as deterministic vehicles in themselves? Do they become another kind of fate, governing origins and causes, evidence and identity? What then of that fateful riddle? "But it's in riddle answering you are strongest," Teiresias still taunts.

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Fosso, Kurt. "Oedipus crux: reasonable doubt in Oedipus the King." *College Literature* 39.3 (2012): 26+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 27 Oct. 2014.

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA298752185&v=2.1&u=lom\_accessmich&it=r&p=EAIM&sw=w&asid=d04ad64bb2957409f6d064bd4fe14416

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A298752185

Title: The plague of Thebes, a historical epidemic in Sphocles' Oedipus Rex

Author(s): [George Androutsos](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22George+Androutsos%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm), [Konstantinos P. Economopoulos](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Konstantinos+P.+Economopoulos%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm), [Antonis A. Kousoulis](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Antonis+A.+Kousoulis%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm), [Effie Poulakou-Rebelakou](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Effie+Poulakou-Rebelakou%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm) and [Sotirios Tsiodras](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Sotirios+Tsiodras%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)

Source: [***Emerging Infectious Diseases***](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/aboutJournal.do?pubDate=120120101&rcDocId=GALE%7CA277344818&actionString=DO_DISPLAY_ABOUT_PAGE&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&resultClickType=AboutThisPublication&contentModuleId=EAIM&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=GALE%7C0GVK)***.*** 18.1 (Jan. 2012): p153.

Document Type: Article

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid1801.AD1801>

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2012 U.S. National Center for Infectious Diseases

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/index.htm>

[Sophocles](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=), one of the most noted [playwrights](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=) of the ancient world, wrote the tragedy Oedipus Rex in the first half of the decade 430-420 BC. A lethal [plague](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=) is described in this drama. We adopted a critical approach to Oedipus Rex in analyzing the literary description of the disease, unraveling its clinical features, and defining a possible underlying cause. Our goals were to clarify whether the plague described in Oedipus Rex reflects an actual historical event; to compare it with the plague of Athens, which was described by Thucydides as occurring around the same time Sophocles wrote; and to propose a likely causative pathogen. A critical reading of Oedipus Rex and a comparison with Thucydides' history, as well as a systematic review of historical data, strongly suggests that this epidemic was an actual event, possibly caused by Brucella abortus.

Full Text:

"Wailing on the altar stair, wives and grandams rend the air, long-drawn moans and piercing cries blent with prayers and litanies"--Sophocles, Oedipus Rex, lines 184-186

Sophocles is one of the most noted playwrights of the ancient world and, along with Aeschylus and [Euripides](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=), belongs to the trinity of the Attic tragedians who flourished during the golden century of Pericles in Athens (Figure 1). Sophocles lived between 496 and 406 BC; although he seems to have written 123 plays, only 7 have survived in a complete form (1). He lived his entire life in Athens and introduced many innovations in the dramatic arts (1).

The writing of the tragedy Oedipus the King (original Greek title [TEXT NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII] most commonly known as Oedipus Rex) is placed in the first half of the decade 430-420 BC. The play has been labeled an analytical tragedy, meaning that the crucial events which dominate the play have happened in the past (2,3).

Oedipus Rex, apart from the undeniable literary and historic value, also presents significant medical interest because the play mentions a plague, an epidemic, which was devastating Thebes, the town of Oedipus' hegemony. Several sections, primarily in the first third of the play, refer to the aforementioned plague; the epidemic, however, is not the primary topic of the tragedy. The epidemic, in fact, is mostly a matter that serves the theatrical economy by forming a background for the evolution of the plot.

Given the potential medical interest of Oedipus Rex, we decided to adopt a critical perspective by analyzing the literary descriptions of the plague, unraveling its clinical features, defining the underlying cause, and discussing possible therapeutic options. The ultimate goals of our study were to clarify whether the plague described in Oedipus Rex could reflect an actual historical event, compare it with the plague of Athens, which was described by the historian Thucydides as occurring not long before the time that Sophocles' work appeared (4), and propose the most likely causative pathogen.

[FIGURE 1 OMITTED]

An Epidemic in Oedipus Rex

In the first scene of the play, Sophocles presents the basic social and historical axes around which he will unfold the plot. The devastating plague that dominates Thebes is presented to the audience through the dialogue between Oedipus and the Priest (lines 1-67) (2,3). The king has already taken some action to deal with this harm by sending his brother-in-law, Creon, to the oracle at Delphi to ask for a salvation plan (lines 68-72). The oracle announces that the plague is a result of religious pollution and that the god Apollo requests that the people of Thebes exile the previously unknown "miasma" (a word of Greek origin with a sense of moral noxious pollution) away from the town (lines 96-98) (2,3). Oedipus asks the citizens to stop praying and focus on finding the cure (lines 142-146) (2,3). In lines 167-215, the Chorus stays on stage to summarize the situation and beg for salvation (2,3).

Searching for the miasma, Oedipus summons the blind prophet Tiresias to reveal who is responsible for this evil (lines 300-313) (2,3). At the moment that Tiresias reveals to Oedipus that the king himself is the cause of the plague (lines 350-353), the epidemic becomes a secondary issue, and, as a result, there are only occasional references to the plague during the remainder of the play (lines 665-666, 685-686, 1380-1383, 1424-1428) (2,3).

[FIGURE 2 OMITTED]

Therefore, although the first part of the play is rife with references to the plague and its consequences, in the second part there are only sporadic referrals to the epidemic. The fate of Oedipus emerges as a truly tragic one, not so much because he caused the plague, but because of the character's own personal tragedy (Figure 2).

A Medical Critical Approach to Oedipus Rex

From the start of the drama, the plague in Thebes is a serious matter, as in line 23 where it is referred to as "weltering surge of blood" [TEXT NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII]. In line 28 the word plague [TEXT NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII] appears for the first time, with the Greek word for disease [TEXT NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII] being used in lines 150, 217, and 303 (2,3).

Sophocles describes the main characteristics of the epidemic through sporadic sentences. Early in the play it is clarified that the disease is a cattle zoonosis of high [mortality](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=) rate ("a blight upon the grazing flocks and herds," line 26, with the herds being cattle,) (2,3). The lethality of this epidemic is particularly terrifying for the protagonists of the play, and the disease's severity is evinced by the first sentences of the tragedy ("reek of incense everywhere," line 4). Oedipus fears mass destruction of the city of Thebes ("with the god's good help success is sure; 'tis ruin if we fail," line 146), while the words "weltering surge of blood" (line 24), "fiery plague" (line 166), "the land is sore distressed" (line 685), and "wailing on the altar stair, wives and grandams rend the air, long-drawn moans and piercing cries blent with prayers and litanies" (lines 184-186) (2,3) all illustrate vividly the severity of the situation.

The references to the decline of land and fields could be an example of poetic exaggeration or a suggestion that the fruits or ears may participate in the transmission route of the plague ("a blight is on our harvest in the ear," line 25) (2,3). Regarding the specific clinical features of the disease, it is clear that the causative pathogen leads to miscarriages or stillbirths ("a blight on wives in travail," lines 26-27, meaning women give birth to dead babies) (2,3). The plague's effects are also pointed out by the Chorus: "earth her gracious fruits denies" and "women wail in barren throes" (lines 151, 215) (2,3).

Lines 179-181 turn out to be of high interest: "wasted thus by death on death all our city perishes; corpses spread infection round" (2,3). A word with a meaning of something that brings death is used in the original Greek [TEXT NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII] to refer to the plague, which suggests that at the time of Sophocles his fellow Greeks were aware of the threat posed by infectious disease. The knowledge of the existence of a highly contagious and fatal disease is phrased clearly in these rhymes, strongly suggesting that Thebans were aware of the oncoming--most possibly from the adjacent city of Athens--danger (2-4). This hypothesis regarding the source of the disease seems the most reasonable in medical terms, contrary to the philological approach, which declares that the epidemic derived from the gods.

In addition, the Chorus provides us with a major social aspect, as they put the blame on god of war, Ares ("Ares whose hot breath I feel, though without targe or steel he stalks, whose voice is as the battle shout," lines 190-191) (2,3). It is not quite clear why Ares is being called responsible for this plague, since there is no other such reference in the play. In fact, it is noteworthy that there is no other historic or poetic reference that links Ares to the spreading of a disease (4). However, Thucydides' correlation of the plague of Athens with the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) (5) gives us the opportunity to state that Sophocles connects this epidemic of Thebes with the plague of Athens and attempts to point out the disastrous effects wars always have.

Regarding the play's approach to treatment of the disease, reading through the drama we once again come across with the theocratic perceptions of ancient Greece. The citizens have become suppliants to the monuments of the gods, asking for mercy ("Why sit ye here as suppliants, in your hands branches of olive filleted with wool?," lines 2-3; "the common folk, with wreathed boughs crowd our two market-places, or before both shrines of Pallas congregate, or where Ismenus gives his oracles by fire," lines 19-21) (2,3). Consequently, a solution for the situation is requested from the oracle at Delphi (lines 68-72), while the Chorus plead for Athena, Zeus, Artemis, and Apollo to save the town from the disaster (lines 160-165) (2,3). The aforementioned aspects strongly support the notion that the disease was incurable at this time.

Possible Pathogens Responsible for the Plague in Thebes

The pathogen of the plague described in Oedipus Rex reflects the complexity of every historically emerging zoonosis. Any proposed pathogen should be a highly contagious, zoonotic disease of cattle that causes stillbirth, miscarriages, and infertility, is characterized by high mortality rates, and has the potential to have caused an epidemic in the 5th century bc. The characteristics of pathogens that might be responsible for the plague on the basis of Sophocles' descriptions in Oedipus Rex are summarized in the online Technical Appendix (wwwnc. cdc.gov/EID/pdfs/11-0449-Techapp.pdf).

After a close inspection of the characteristics, the pathogens that include most (5 of 7) of the features described by Sophocles in Oedipus Rex are Leishmanial spp., Leptospira spp., Brucella abortus, Orthopoxviridae, and Francisella tularensis. Among the [diseases](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=) caused by these pathogens that can affect humans are the following: 1) tularemia, which is a disease mainly transmitted through rabbits; 2) smallpox, which is not a cattle zoonosis; 3) leishmaniasis, which is not a highly contagious disease; and 4) leptospirosis, which has been associated with [epidemics](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=) after rainfall and flooding in relation to rodent infestation. Thus, the most probable cause of the plague in Thebes is B. abortus. Brucellosis is a highly contagious zoonosis caused by ingestion of unsterilized milk or meat from infected cows or close contact with their secretions. The mortality rate for untreated brucellosis is difficult to determine from the literature of the preantibiotic era (6); nevertheless, an 80% rate has been reported in situations of comorbidity with endocarditis (7). Epidemics, stillbirths, and miscarriages caused by B. abortus have been reported since the time of Hippocrates, which is when this disease was initially described.

However, taking into account that in modern times brucellosis in humans is a severe granulomatous disease characterized by extremely rare direct transmission from person-to-person, insidious onset in sporadic cases (mainly among veterinarians), and low mortality rates, it may be difficult for 21st century physicians and veterinarians to accept B. abortus as the causative agent of the plague of Thebes. Alternatively, the plague of Thebes could be a composite of [greater than or equal to] 2 causative agents, as it has been suggested for the contemporary plague of Athens (6,7). In this case scenario, we could assume that cattle in Thebes may have been having brucellosis, leptospirosis, or listeriosis, while humans could have been affected by a different pathogen such as Salmonella enterica serovar Typhi (8,9). It should be noted that exploring the diseases of history requires examining the social, economic, and demographic aspects of each era because this is the only way to better understand how diseases work over centuries (10). Finally, we cannot reject the possibility of dealing with a Brucella strain that has evolved to become less deadly than a more lethal ancestor (6).

Thucydides' Plague of Athens and Sophocles' Epidemic

The plague that is described in Oedipus Rex could possibly be related to the plague that struck Athens in 430-429 BC (11), the primary source for which is the papers of historian Thucydides (where he refers to an epidemic that has been named the plague of Athens) (5). The following 5 points support this correlation.

Proximate Eras

The first writing of Oedipus Rex most probably took place during the time of the plague of Athens. Sophocles' epidemic seems to have enough strength to appear as a historical base on which the theatrical economy of the play is evolving (12). The opening of the drama, with the city of Thebes in the midst of plague has often been, historically, taken as a reference to the plague that devastated Athens in the opening years of the Peloponnesian War and has been used to assist in the dating of this play (13).

Similar Descriptions by Thucydides and Sophocles

Thucydides and Sophocles use similar terms when describing attempts to deal with the epidemic. In the historical case (Athens) and the dramatic case (Thebes), the populace turned to the temples looking for a divine solution to the disaster.

Correlation with Recent Warfare

As mentioned above, in Sophocles' drama, god of war Ares gets the blame for the plague (lines 190-191). The particularity of this reference (4), it seems that Sophocles correlates the epidemic that strikes Thebes with the plague of Athens, which, according to Thucydides, came about as a result of the Peloponnesian War (5).

Similarities Regarding the Nature of the Diseases

It is difficult to compare a historical record to a poetic drama, but, keeping that in mind, both Sophocles and Thucydides refer to animal illness and death (2,8). In addition, the realistic descriptions of the historian and the nightmarish lyrical rhymes of the poet, talk about a disease with a high mortality rate (2,10). As for the clinical features, although Thucydides does not mention the pregnancy or labor pains as described in Sophocles' text, he does refer to abdominal and vulvovaginal symptoms (5).

Common Assumptions about the Possible Causative Pathogen

Historical medical literature has suggested many infectious diseases over time, but few have lasted as the most probable. These diseases mainly include typhoid fever, epidemic typhus, smallpox, plague, measles, and [influenza](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=), all of which could be initial candidates for the plague in Oedipus Rex and have been taken into account in this study (online Technical Appendix) (9,10).

Although the above points are of great relevance, they lack the possibility of historical verification and are mainly based on the comparative and critical assessment of Sophocles' and Thucydides' work. Historical certainty can be added by studying the alliances and the warfare involving Thebes during the era of Sophocles (e.g., Boeotian prefecture, Athenian dynasty, Spartan alliance, Persian wars) (14). Bearing in mind the aforementioned observations and the fact no other epidemics were reported in the eastern Mediterranean during the 5th century BC, we posit that the plague described by Sophocles in the tragedy Oedipus Rex has an actual basis in the plague of Athens described by Thucydides in his histories.

Discussion

A severe plague is described in Sophocles' drama Oedipus Rex. According to the World [Health](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=3&contentSet=GALE%7CA277344818&&docId=GALE%7CA277344818&docType=GALE&role=) Organization, an epidemic is defined as a disease outbreak and, therefore, the occurrence of cases of disease in excess of what would normally be expected in a defined community, geographic area, or season (15). Thus, according to the tragedy's rhymes and with respect to literary talk, this plague should be treated as an epidemic.

It would not be irrational to trust the historical credibility of a literary text. Literature usually reflects the echo of the past. A somewhat similar example is that of archeologist Heinrich Schlieman; before Schlieman, the writings of Homer had been considered a collection of mythological poems. However, with his excavations in Troy, which used the Iliad as a guide, Schlieman provided a perfect example of how literary work can have a factual base (16).

Moreover, we could not overlook that Sophocles is the most realist of the Greek tragedians (1), and ancient tragedies were often placed into a historical frame strongly influenced by major contemporary events (13). Finally, although many of the features of the plot and passages have been interpreted as historical allusions, the plague seems to be recognized as the most critical element that reflects a historical event, with enough strength and clarity to be used even for the dating of the tragedy (12).

Conclusions

The critical reading of Oedipus Rex, its comparison with Thucydides' history, as well as the systematic review of the existing historical data, lead us to strongly suggest that this epidemic, for which the name Plague of Thebes may be used, was an actual historical fact, likely caused by B. abortus. With the deadly plague, which struck one of the most historic Greek cities, on the one hand and the tragic fate of a character who has become among the most recognizable in world theater on the other, Sophocles masterminded a dramatic frame and offered a lyrical, literary description of a lethal disease. As the protagonist approached his tragic catharsis, the moral order much desired by the ancient Greeks was restored with the end of the epidemic.

Dr Kousoulis is a research assistant in the History of Medicine Department of the University of Athens and the general secretary of the Society of Junior Doctors. His primary research interests include history of medicine, medical sociology, and epidemiology.

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Androutsos, George, et al. "The plague of Thebes, a historical epidemic in Sphocles' Oedipus Rex." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 18.1 (2012): 153+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 27 Oct. 2014.

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA277344818&v=2.1&u=lom\_accessmich&it=r&p=EAIM&sw=w&asid=f17b2446cab10568e89626707a71825b

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A277344818

Title: Dangerous fracture: undermining the order of the law in Sophocles's Antigone

Author(s): [Katrin Beushausen](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Katrin+Beushausen%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)

Source: [***Mosaic (Winnipeg)***](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/aboutJournal.do?pubDate=120080901&rcDocId=GALE%7CA187012499&actionString=DO_DISPLAY_ABOUT_PAGE&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&resultClickType=AboutThisPublication&contentModuleId=EAIM&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=GALE%7C2109)***.*** 41.3 (Sept. 2008): p15.

Document Type: Critical essay

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2008 University of Manitoba, Mosaic

<http://www.umanitoba.ca/mosaic/>

Full Text:

If the law employs the exception--that is the

suspension of law itself--as its original means of

referring to and encompassing life, then a theory

of the state of exception is the preliminary condition

for any definition of the relation that binds and,

at the same time, abandons the living being to law.

--Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception

In Mythe et Tragedie en Grece Ancienne, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet acknowledge the question of the law as "la matiere veritable de la tragedie" (15). The new idea of the law in an emerging democratic society, in which it was not yet clearly separated from the spheres of morality and religion, would have been a subject of constant and continued scrutiny in [Greek tragedy](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=8&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012499&&docId=GALE%7CA187012499&docType=GALE&role=)--an understanding of tragedy explicitly realized in [Sophocles](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=8&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012499&&docId=GALE%7CA187012499&docType=GALE&role=)'s Antigone. Not only is the question of law at the heart of the conflict between Creon and Antigone, it also permeates the positions of all other characters and surfaces again and again in the language of the play.(1) This tragedy, as Hans-Thies Lehmann states, "transforms the articles and foundation of law into questions, certainty into risky hypothesis" (23, trans. mine).

What is it that Antigone can tell us about the law? Hegel, in his influential reading of Antigone in the Phenomenology of Spirit, saw the tragedy as a paradigmatic example of the conflict between two different legal systems: through a process of historical evolution, the order of the law of the state--represented by Creon--supersedes the older system of family law and the death cult personified by Antigone. The Hegelian Enlightenment model of history sets up the succession of systems of law as the precondition for the constant improvement of human society; Antigone thus comes to represent a general mechanism of teleological historical progress for Hegel and, despite its fatal outcome, possesses an almost reassuring quality. Yet, while quite instructive on Hegel's philosophy of history, this reading offers few insights for a critical audience today for two main reasons: not only must the discredited idea of teleological historical progress itself seem highly suspect to any contemporary approach to Sophocles's play, it also suggests a reading that smoothes out the intricate and insoluble conflict at the heart of the tragedy--a conflict that I will argue is not located in the clash of two different systems of law but in law itself, as a fracture that is constitutive of the law and that undermines its claim to validity from the very beginning. My reading of Antigone is informed by Judith Butler's recent engagement with the play (Anitgone's), but while Butler focuses on the problematic laws of kinship (and their political implications for representation), I regard Antigone as a theatrical laboratory in which judicial law and its inherent fractures are examined and analyzed. Pursuing a different train of thought, this essay's interest in the law nevertheless runs parallel to Butler's work and will turn to it later on. I hope to show that Antigone may provide a valuable point of reference for a discussion of the law at a time witnessing a "Rule of Law Revival" (Carothers) in Western policy--and during which, at the same time, the fatal fraction at the heart of the law resurfaces.

I will begin my reading of Antigone by considering the premise upon which Sophocles's understanding of law is based, namely the political situation of the Athenian polis in the fifth century BCE. (2) This brief overview of the political context in which he speaks will then provide the background for my engagement with his questioning of the law. At the time Antigone was first staged around 442 BCE, the Athenian polis was enjoying a period of relative peace: only a few years before the ongoing conflict with Sparta had been put to an end with the Kallias treaty of 446-45 BCE, and it would not be for another ten years that it would furiously break out again in the Peloponnesian War. During this quiet period, Athens consolidated its position in the Attic Sea League and secured a dominant position towards its allies. The expansion and consolidation of Athenian influence largely owed to exporting the Athenian political system of democracy; the succession of tyranny or oligarchy by a newly installed democratic system in the allied cities ensured their entanglement with Athens. It is important to realize that, at this point, democracy was not only an ambitious political system under which the life of the Athenian citizens was organized according to the idea of equality (isonomia), but also represented an ideological instrument of power in Athens's pursuit of hegemony. Although the order of democracy served the interests of the polis--both as an instrument of hegemonic power and as a framework to secure isonomia--this relatively young system of political organization was subjected to a constant critique from within the polis itself. The theatre in particular provided a realm for rethinking and questioning the organizing principles of democracy, the tension between its ideals and its reality, and fostered a constant critical negotiation of the polis and its order. In the period of relative peace in which Antigone was written and performed, Athens flourished, and with its power grew the belief in the success and superiority of its political system.

It is at this point of heightened belief in the superiority of Athenian order that Sophocles voiced a fundamental doubt in the possibility of a superior, just order altogether. Even if the Thebes of his play appears as a tyrannis ruled by Creon alone, whose reign Haemon opposes with the argument that "that is no city, which belongs to one man" (67), the conflict articulated in Antigone is a conflict of sovereignty itself and thus a conflict that haunts both tyrannis and democracy. These two systems actually seem less distinct in the play than one might think at first glance: Creon is not simply a self-righteous tyrant but the highest representative of a state, recognized as such and affirmed in his legitimacy. The chorus confirms his status as the "new ruler by the new fortunes that the gods have given" (17), and accordingly, he can be sure of his people's support when claiming that "whomsoever the city may appoint, that man must be obeyed" (61). When he forbids the burial of Polyneices, Creon uses his authority beyond the sphere of the ostensibly political, covering a delicate area of religion, the death cult. But even in this sphere the chorus affirms the legitimacy of Creon's claim: "thou hast power, I ween, to take what order thou wilt, both for the dead, and for all us who live" (21). The blending of the political and the religious sphere is not considered scandalous within the tragedy; nor would it have been perceived as such by its contemporary audience. In the Athenian polis there existed no clear distinction between politics and religion, as both were governed by the authority of the state: the tasks of the polis's institutions spanned not only legislation and governing the state but the organization of the cult as well. In this light, Creon's decree appears less as an act of transgression into a sphere beyond his authority than a legitimate act of legislation in accordance with the authority granted to him. But if Creon's use of power is legitimate, what constitutes the fatal conflict in the tragedy that is triggered by his decree? What is the fracture within the law that lies at the core of Antigone?

Antigone herself articulates her position regarding Creon's law in the first scene, denying legitimacy to his decree by stating that "he has no right to keep me from mine own" (7). Condemning Creon's decree as unlawful with regard to the laws of death cult, she points out the paradox around which the tragedy is built: in accordance with Theban law, Creon is given authority within the realm of the existing order (both political and religious) to exert influence on that order by setting up new laws. By granting the sovereign the authority to enforce laws and norms (nomoi), he is assigned the protection of the existing order (eunomia). In its last consequence, however, this authority enables the sovereign to override the existing order or several of its constitutive nomoi. In the body of the sovereign, the law sanctions its own suspension--and accordingly the suspension of the order on which the sovereign's authority is based. (3) The moment Creon invokes the legitimacy of his act and suspends the laws of the death cult, a conflict within the order of the law is revealed that weighs heavier than an ethical condemnation of his decree. The fracture that is performed here is not initiated externally, springing from the clash of two different systems of law; it is a fracture immanent in the idea of law itself insofar as it allows for the possibility of its own suspension. When Antigone rejects the legitimacy of Creon's law, more is at stake than her brother's burial. With her resistance to his decree, she marks the paradox embedded in the law, revealing its fragility. Once this denouement is performed, the law loses its stability--any reference to the law as the legitimizing basis for action collapses in the face of this instability of the law itself laid open.

It is important to note that this questioning of the law is not undertaken in terms of opposing it to another, superior law in whose integrity one can believe--when Creon accuses Antigone of doing "violence to the laws" (61), he is only right insofar as Antigone openly voices a fundamental doubt in the system of law that he represents. But the violence of which he accuses her, the destruction of the law's stability and unambiguousness, is performed by Creon himself, who by act of law suspends its order. Yet, despite his stubbornness, Creon is not a malicious or negligent representative of the state; it is by no means his intention to shatter the order on which his authority is based. He issues his decree with the security and welfare of the town in mind, and he is sure of its public and divine approval. By suspending a traditional norm, he intends to protect the whole system of norms (eunomia), and thus the order of law as a whole. So how can a power eager to protect the order end up destroying it? At which crucial point does this benign power flip to reveal its destructive potential?

In his essay "Critique of Violence," (4) published in 1921, Walter Benjamin discusses the relationship between violence and the law ("Recht") on the one hand and justice ("Gerechtigkeit") on the other. Like Sophocles in Antigone, he addresses the problematic nature of the law to ask how the law can provide the means to realize an ideal of justice. The sphere of law, he argues, is always founded or sustained through violence, a violence located by Benjamin in the sphere of means, insofar as violence is used to found or protect an order of law. Accordingly, Benjamin indicates two kinds of violence-as-means, which are intricately linked: the violence of law-making character and that of law-preserving character. These types of violence can be understood in terms of the democratic system to be embodied by the legislative and executive bodies of the law respectively; the dynamic at work between them will inform my reading of Antigone.

As Werner Hamacher convincingly argues in "Afformativ, Streik," the occurrence of violence as laid down by Benjamin can be understood in terms of an evolutionary process. The moment a system of law has been erected by violence of law-making character in an act of autarchy (often on the precondition of doing away with an earlier, established order, as in the erection of a democratic society), that violence must, by its nature, lose its lawmaking character: it is transformed into a law-preserving violence employed by the newly established order to secure its existence. With this transformation of its character from law-making to law-preserving, violence comes to oppose its own revolutionary capacity for law-making, which would now threaten the order it is assigned to protect. It is this double bind of violence that contains it within the realm of means, instrumentalized for revolution or serving the status quo. But even if the opposition between law-making and law-preserving power leads to a drain of momentum and a deterioration of the institutional order it once founded (Benjamin, in 1921, writes with the parliaments of the early Weimar republic in mind that, to him, have left behind their revolutionary legacy and only seek apathetic compromises), their separation is nevertheless constitutive of a democratic system. The danger of a suspension of that separation becomes clear when Benjamin speaks of the "spectral mixture" of the two kinds of violence with regard to the police; by setting up laws (in the form of decrees) and simultaneously enforcing them, the police, he argues, comes to resemble an autonomous order of law largely eluding control and limitation: "Its power is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive ghostly presence in the life of civilised states" ("Critique" 242). Benjamin regards the state's need for security as the reason for allowing this ghostly, unfathomable duplicity of violence to manifest itself in the police: to protect the existing order and its interests, democracy's division of powers is suspended, and the law-preserving violence that the police stands for is granted the authority of law-making, thus itself creating the ends to which it should only have been the means. The same mechanism is put on stage in Antigone when Creon, in order to fulfill his task of preserving the law, decides to exercise the law-making violence at his disposal.

But where law-making and law-preserving violence are merged into one authority, the existing order is already undermined as the violence used to protect that order is infiltrated by the violence that poses a threat to the existing order. Nothing else is realized in the sovereign's authority, in whose body law-preserving and law-making violence, and thus a fundamental threat to the order he is to represent, enter into a dangerous "spectral mixture." In the sovereign, the distinction of powers collapses; he himself constitutes a state of exception, a sphere in which the preservation and suspension of the law coincide. It is this exceptional position of the sovereign that is summed up by Giorgio Agamben in Homo Sacer as the aporetic paradox of the sovereign, who at once belongs to the sphere of law (which he is assigned to protect) and stands outside it (as he can suspend and violate that sphere). Agamben concludes that from this paradoxical position, it is the sovereign who "marks the limit (in the double sense of end and principle) of the judicial order" (Homo 15). The sovereign is the constituting limit of law; but as his position inevitably constitutes a violent paradox, the paradoxical fracture is pre-inscribed into the order of law. If the merging of the two kinds of violence in the paradoxical figure of the sovereign as boundary inevitably creates a fracture in the law, the order founded on the law is potentially both violent and fragile from the beginning. In the face of this fragile law, an uncompromising power of resistance manifests itself in the character of Antigone, countering and threatening Creon's authority. As we have seen, the fracture from which it springs is inherent in the law itself. But what mechanism produces the gesture of resistance that makes the fracture visible? And must we consider its emergence as inevitable?

In Antigone, it is the suspension of certain constitutive norms--the proper rites for burial--that challenges the stability of the polis as it deprives people inside the order of the security of stable orienting principles. By using his authority to throw into question basic principles of the order he represents, Creon himself challenges that order, and thus his own authority, opening it up to a fundamental doubt. Not only oppositional systems of law, but the people within the system itself, inevitably come to doubt or even oppose the order, once its instability has been revealed. The possibilities for acting on this realization are indicated in the first scene by Antigone and Ismene: while Ismene decides to subordinate herself to a law whose legitimacy she doubts, Antigone will rebel against Creon's law, openly voicing her protest. The other characters of the play opt for a less radical position from the beginning, but, as shown above, they tentatively express critique and doubts and sympathize with Antigone's rebellion.

To the extent that she publicly opposes Creon's law, Antigone, as a symptom of the law's inherent fracture, poses a threat to his order. Creon seeks to avert the danger she poses by banning her to a sphere beyond life and death: "Nay, speak not of her 'presence'; she lives no more" (53), he rebukes Ismene, attempting to completely eradicate the resistance to his order and even the memory of it. Creon will take Antigone "where the path is loneliest and hide her, living, in a rocky vault" (71) so that she can no longer be perceived or understood in the realm of the living. But neither is she allowed to enter the realm of the dead to be mourned and remembered: in her living death, she is denied humanity, even mere existence--in a sense, she is no more. With the sovereign act of banning a living being to a sphere neither inside nor outside the life of the polis, Creon seems not only to neutralize Antigone's rebellion, but also to affirm his sovereign power. Antigone, in this light, resembles the intriguing Roman figure of the homo sacer rediscovered by Giorgio Agamben as a paradigm for sovereignty and Western biopolitics. (5) Like the homo sacer, who can be killed, but not sacrificed, and is thus outside both human and divine law, Antigone (and before her, Polyneices) is expelled from the sphere of law. The sovereign's power to ban someone to that state not only neutralizes the threat any disturber of the peace might pose to the order, it also reaffirms the sovereign power itself in this act of its execution: "homosacer presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted" (Agamben, Homo 83). Agamben accordingly insists that occidental politics are founded not on the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy, but between exclusion and inclusion; and yet Antigone and Polyneices, as emblematic figures of that inclusion/exclusion, nevertheless indicate that the distinction between friend and foe is an effective and sometimes necessary instrument in accomplishing that exclusion: it is the logic of friend and foe that serves as a legitimization of the ban.

As early as in his first speech, Creon announces that distinction as guideline for his policy and justifies the suspension of the right of burial for Polyneices with this logic: the enemy is not entitled to call upon the laws of the order he is attacking. Later in the play, Antigone turns against this logic: "Tis not my nature to join in hating, but in loving" (47). She refuses to adhere to a polarization between friend and foe that allows Creon to perform the sovereign act of exclusion and suspend the law for single individuals, thus undermining isonomia, the principle of equality before the law. Through her resistance to the logic of friend and foe, Antigone becomes a massive threat to Creon's authority. By transgressing his law and publicly avowing her protest, she doubly rebels against his order, questioning its validity. Because of her rebellion, she is subjected to a ban that reaffirms Creon's sovereignty; yet in her resistance to a law revealed as violent and fractured, she gains tentative support from others within the polis. She thus turns into the figure described by Benjamin as "the 'great' criminal," who, in his resistance to a violent order, "however repellent his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public" ("Critique" 139). I would argue that the two figures of homo sacer and of the 'great' criminal constitute the two aspects of exclusion in Antigone: while the emergence of one reaffirms a sovereign power, the emergence of the other carries that power to excess, revealing its violent and repressive nature. This is what Antigone accomplishes: her public resistance appeals to a latent sense of the injustice of the law amongst those who are governed by its order and who are compelled to support the act of opposition to an unjust law regardless of its ends. The possibility of resistance is thus embedded in the sovereign's rule of law, springing from the fracture within it. But what happens when sovereign power is divided, as in democracy, to prevent the "spectral mixture" of violence? Under what conditions does the potential for excessive violence endure?

The suspension of the law in modern democracies is sanctioned only in a state of exception (6). The possibility of its proclamation is provided for in numerous modern constitutions, thus establishing a legitimizing foundation for the suspension of the law under special circumstances. Giorgio Agamben, in his work on the state of exception, describes its evolution in connection with a state of war or siege, a context from which the state of exception has continually emancipated itself. But, while during a state of exception a visible sovereign power with virtually boundless powers is created (albeit temporarily), contemporary politics foster the evolution of sovereign authorities independent of a state of emergency, and thus far less visible and much harder to locate. Agamben closes his "brief history of the state of emergency" with the observation that as "a continuing tendency in all of the Western democracies, the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government" (State 14). He thus indicates a phenomenon already elaborated on by Benjamin in his characterization of the police as a "spectral mixture" of the two forms of violence, namely the fact that the state's need for security and the felt need for protection allows for the transformation of law-preserving violence by investing it with the competence of law-making.

Even before the events of September 11, such an extension of the security paradigm could be witnessed among the Western democracies, especially in the United States. Initially proclaimed as a strategy of containment by the United States after World War II, it survived the Cold War and has since been manifested in politics such as in the build-up of a national system of defensive missiles or the revocation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia. Significantly, the extension of the security paradigm was accompanied by a radical rhetoric of polarization between friend and foe: first the Communist threat, and later, global networks of terror and rogue states, provided a concept of the enemy that was used to legitimize the first breaches of international law or violations against the sovereignty of other states, such as United States' sanctions against Cuba and Libya in 1997. (7) With reference to a terrorist threat, the sovereign power to declare a state of national emergency was evoked in Bill Clinton's Executive Order 12947 to prohibit economic transactions with designated terrorists on 23 January 1995--a declaration that has been modified and expanded several times, so that the United States has effectively been in a state of national emergency since then.

After the attacks of September 11, the logic of sharply distinguishing between friend and foe was extensively employed in American policy. On an international level, the distinction "either with us or against us" divided the world in two main camps--the "coalition of the willing" and an "axis of evil"--while in the domestic sphere, the Patriot Act provided the means for legal action against companies and individuals suspected of posing a threat to national security. With the United States' swift attack on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, a new status was created for "adversarial combatants", who were no longer considered prisoners of war (a status endowed with invulnerable rights by international conventions), but "detainees," a newly created status depriving them of any rights granted by international agreements. At the time of this essay's publication, before the eyes of an international public, they are being held in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for an indefinite period of time, without any formal accusation being brought forth. Deprived of any legal status, the detainees are beyond the law; in a sense, they are no more. The distinction between friend and foe (and the self-endowed competence to make that distinction) was used by the United States to legitimize not only the suspension of the rights of individuals, but also the disregard for the sovereignty of states. As the extension of the state's authority works both inwards and outwards, a crack running through the democratic order is shown, one that resurfaces today to undermine any democratic ideal of justice: it is the re-emergence of sovereignty in the possibility of suspending the law that has become "the normal technique of government."

Sovereignty has always been fashionable in American politics, and the participation in international organizations that puts limits on national sovereignty increasingly seems to constitute a nuisance and obstacle to be cynically overcome in the pursuit of national interests. In a post-9/11 world, sovereignty is acknowledged as "a central pillar--and arguably the central pillar--of world order" by American policy planning staff (Haas)--yet there are fewer visible forms of sovereignty emerging within contemporary political structures that are of an even more disquieting nature. In ''Indefinite Detention'', an essay on the detainees of Guantanamo, Judith Butler attempts to locate the new manifestations of sovereignty in American society. To do so, she draws on Foucault's concept of ''governmentality'', which describes the organization and control of a modern (that is, non-absolutist) state and its population, a mechanism that Butler argues no longer functions in terms of transparent processes of legislation: "Governmentality operates through policies and departments, through managerial and bureaucratic institutions, through the law, when law is understood as 'a set of tactics,' and through forms of state power, although not exclusively" ("Indefinite" 52, emph. mine).

In Butler's reading of Foucault, the concept of governmentality historically succeeded the deteriorating rule of the sovereign and, as such, marks a modern development. It is characterized by the creation of bureaucratic institutions that are granted power of decision and governance, but that are not legitimated by public vote; but furthermore, governmentality uses the law as an instrument (a law of means, you could say with Benjamin) to sustain control of a society. For Butler, governmentality thus creates a diffuse body of institutions that continually extends its power and control and remains beyond representation and accountability. She argues that, with the extension of the security paradigm and with the corresponding extension of power in the realm of governmentality, new forms of sovereignty--impossible to locate, unrepresentable and unaccountable, and thus highly illegitimate--are created. She describes this new sovereignty with regard to the military officials deciding on the fates of the Guantanamo detainees:

Petty sovereigns abound, reigning in the midst of bureaucratic army institutions mobilized by aims and tactics of power they do not inaugurate or fully control. And yet such figures are delegated with the power to render unilateral decisions, accountable to no law and without any legitimate authority. The resurrected sovereignty is thus not the sovereignty of unified power under the conditions of legitimacy, the form of power that guarantees the representative status of political institutions. It is, rather, a lawless and prerogative power, a 'rogue' power par excellence. ("Indefinite" 56)

Hence, at the centre of the democratic order there evolves an apparatus seemingly indispensable to uphold the order (Butler reminds us that Foucault also thought of governmentality as reviving and sustaining the modern state), but that undermines it at the same time by creating new forms of sovereignty. When Butler calls this power "lawless," though, it is not to say that it operates in a sphere beyond the law; again, it is from a position both inside and outside the law that the law itself is bent, changed, and cynically employed to foster a sphere of unaccountability. The division of powers that forms the basis for democratic society is suspended in its diffuse institutions, and this "spectral mixture" of law-making and law-preserving violence in an area that cannot be located exposes the fragility of the law and of the order it founds: "At the very moment when it would like to give lessons in democracy to different traditions and cultures, the political culture of the West does not realize that it has entirely lost its canon" (Agamben, State 18). Democratic ideals such as equality and accountability are undermined at the very moment when Western democracy is presented as a superior political system and safeguard of justice and equality: the order that is exported to Afghanistan and Iraq to protect the West and benefit the East has already lost its integrity, undermined from within. Subjected to the logic of friend and foe, the democratic system has become ideologized and is violently safeguarded against criticism. It seems to have reached what Jacques Derrida, in his engagement with the concept of democracy, has called "autoimmunity," a term used to mark the limits of democracy, those moments when democratic principles are violated in the name of democracy and seem unable to resist that violation (Voyous 64-65). The mechanism here seems to resemble the state of emergency, when law turns on itself, violating itself in its own name. If the law and democracy today have indeed reached a state of continuous autoimmunity, it is because they have been moved into a sphere of unaccountability through the ideologization of democracy and the rule of law. This suppression of critique happens at a time when a re-emerging sovereignty cynically employs the ideas of law and democracy only to violate them, hiding itself behind their supposed autoimmunity. And yet the autoimmunity is not complete: what the order cannot be safeguarded against is the fracture at its core, a fracture that violently opens at the point when autoimmunity occurs, when law or democracy turn upon themselves.

How then can Antigone be read from this contemporary perspective? Can its examination of the fracture inside the law provide some orientation at what must be considered a state of crisis (rather than exception)? First and foremost, Sophocles articulates a fundamental doubt in the law and the idea of justice in Antigone. Exactly because it is legitimated by the law, Creon's sovereign act of suspension reveals the fatal duplicity of violence within law that always already creates its fracture. The moment the law allows for its own suspension, it forfeits its claim to integrity and stability, as does the order that is founded upon it. Insofar as it has an interest in founding and preserving its reign, the law suspends itself and vanishes through the fracture. There seems to be no way out of this cycle. Benjamin appears to concede to the insolvable duplicity of violence when he describes historical progress as a history of violence, and thus a constant "dialectical rising and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving forms of violence. The law governing their oscillation rests on the circumstance that all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence it represents, by suppressing hostile counterviolence [...]. This lasts until either new forces or those earlier suppressed triumph over the hitherto lawmaking violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay" ("Critique" 251).

In its constant transformation, the law cannot escape decay by again and again breaking open its inherent fracture. Other than for Hegel, historical progress for Benjamin is not a teleological succession of different, constantly improving systems of law; it is rather law endlessly turning on itself in a violent circle. When Creon proclaims what appears like deeper insight into his actions at the end of Antigone--"My heart misgives me, 'tis best to keep the established laws, even to life's end" (99)--he in fact remains bound to a belief in the possibility of a just and right law, even though he has experienced law's immanent fracture, which precludes any possibility of a truly just law. But precisely this painful insight makes Antigone a powerful and inspiring statement: by exposing the fragility of the law, Sophocles's tragedy disrupts the comfortable authority with which today's self-proclaimed defenders of democracy legitimize their actions. It shows that it is precisely at the moment in which, invoking the law, a sovereign power exceeds the law and banishes people from its sphere, that it destroys its own legitimacy and the stability of its order. Jacques Derrida, in his reading of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," observes the fatal double bind of law-making and law-preserving violence and concludes that "violence is not exterior to the order of law. It menaces the law from its inside" (Force 86, trans. mine). Accordingly, he argues in his more recent book Rogues that "the moment sovereignty [i.e. the merging of the two powers] exists, there is abuse of power and rogue states [...]. There are only rogue states, potential or actual. The state is roguish" (Voyous 146, trans. mine). Derrida stresses the impossibility of separating violence and sovereignty--and, indeed, drawing on Benjamin, violence, and law. Even if a state manages to keep within the boundaries of law, respecting the sovereignty of others, the dangerous potential of sovereignty's excessive violence remains at the core of its order. What comes to light in the existence of Guantanamo, in the invasion of Iraq, is the potential violence of sovereignty that will not vanish with the closing of the camp or the withdrawal of troops.

But where do we go from here? What does it mean to realize the inherent fracture of the law, the violence at its core? The authors that have guided us in our reading so far have taken care to oppose to the violence of sovereign law an idea of the law that promises a healing of its own fracture--be it Benjamin's "divine violence" ("Critique" 252) or his "real state of emergency" ("Concept" 392) that both promise a break with the "dialectical rising and falling" of violence; Agamben's "pure law" (State 88), which draws on Benjamin's idea of a "pure" violence beyond the sphere of means; or Derrida's "Politiques de l'amitie," which is based on inclusion and hospitality rather than exclusion. But these ideas tend to retain a utopian character that remains abstract or entangled with an eschatological concept of history, as in Benjamin's case. How then can the realization of law's fracture, the idea of healing, be put into political practice? We can, at this point, return to Judith Butler, who concludes her analysis of the aporias of the law of kinship with regard to Antigone, as follows:

But to establish the structural necessity of perversion to the law is to posit a static relation between the two in which each entails the other and, in that sense, is nothing without the other. This form of negative dialectics produces the satisfaction that the law is invested in perversion and that the law is not what it seems to be. It does not help to make possible, however, other forms of social life [...]. What happens when the perverse or the impossible emerges in the language of the law and makes its claim precisely there in the sphere of legitimate kinship that depends on its exclusion or pathologization? (Antigone's 68)

Butler's point here is the maybe all-too-obvious, but ultimately radical, conclusion that the deficiencies of the law laid open call not for the abandonment of the law but for its reworking, its concrete social transformation. The emergence of the unintelligible demands a rethinking of intelligibility; the fracture of the law, too, demands that we rethink it. The answers to the questions posed remain to be found but it is the act of questioning that carries the promise of healing, not in the sense of autoimmunity, but of cure. The idea of promise is one on which Derrida's concept of a "democracy to come" is based, around which his political theory circles: that democracy will "remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient" (Politiques 339, trans. mine), and thus continually demands that its paradoxes and its inner contradictions are worked out, in a persistent striving for an ideal that remains a promise. Antigone marks one of the central paradoxes on which our order is based, as well as the possibility of critique--even if her resistance is fatal to her, her act carries the potential of change. By virtue of being a play, Antigone also bears the legacy of theatre as an institution of critique, as a social realm of debate. The play itself is a promise of an art that engages in public discourse from a unique perspective, described by Lehmann as a potential "to bring the certainties that support the order of a "polis" into an uncanny suspension, without negating them in the sense of an antithesis and thus indirectly affirming their position in the act of negation. Theatre neither supports nor collapses the order: it makes it appear problematic" (34, trans. mine).

Today's orders evidently are problematic and need to appear as such. The atrocities that a continued policy of exception spawns are visible to us today in the detainees of Guantanamo or in the devastating outcome of a pre-emptive war violating international law in the name of democracy. The development seems to support Benjamin's observation that, in a circular history of violence, "the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" ("Concept" 392). At this moment of crisis, Antigone might serve not only as a model for the fragility of law itself, but also as an appeal to the theatre to again reveal the decayed basis of what has become the "normal technique of government" and to open a sphere of critique, working against the ideologization of the law. Reading Antigone today provides us with the ideal of a public discourse on the political system that we live in, of a society benefiting from self-criticism, and of a theatre employing what Derrida calls a "strategie de rupture," a "radical contestation of the order of the law, of judicial authority and finally of the legitimate authority of the state that makes its people disappear before the law" (Force 84, trans. mine). It is this call for a strategy of rupture, a contestation that carries the promise of change, that today makes the theatre and this most political of tragedies so valuable as a realm of debate--the point from which a "democracy to come" might embark.

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Beushausen, Katrin. "Dangerous fracture: undermining the order of the law in Sophocles's Antigone." *Mosaic* [Winnipeg] 41.3 (2008): 15+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 27 Oct. 2014.

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA187012499&v=2.1&u=lom\_accessmich&it=r&p=EAIM&sw=w&asid=fa140f2e6f9ec06862e45b11437d42a2

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A187012499

Title: The Other Is Dead: Mourning, Justice, and the Politics of Burial

Author(s): [Bonnie Honig](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Bonnie+Honig%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)

Source: [***TriQuarterly***](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/aboutJournal.do?pubDate=120071222&rcDocId=GALE%7CA186314229&actionString=DO_DISPLAY_ABOUT_PAGE&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&resultClickType=AboutThisPublication&contentModuleId=EAIM&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=GALE%7C0418)***.*** .131 (Winter 2007): p89.

Document Type: Critical essay

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2007 TriQuarterly

<http://triquarterly.org/about-triquarterly>

Full Text:

In political theory, the problem of the other is usually taken to be the problem of the foreigner, the immigrant, the refugee, perhaps the problem of sexual difference. In response to the problem so conceived, political theorists write books about the ethics and politics of multiculturalism, alien suffrage, the conflicting claims of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, internationalism and democracy, the politics of gender or sexuality in patriarchal societies. These are important, ongoing areas of inquiry.

But what if the other is dead?

That is, how should democratic societies relate to those others who are no longer around to make claims that need to be adjudicated, to those killed in the process of settlement or colonization, to the victims of civil wars, conflicts or genocide? In this essay, I look at two texts that deal with this question, a film and a play written over 2000 years apart but which speak to each other across that temporal chasm. The film, *Sophie's Choice* , movingly explores the tragic outcome of the divergent pulls of mourning and justice in the aftermath of genocide. The play, *Antigone* , stages a reflection on the politics of mourning and justice, two conflicting political responses to the dead.

In "The Dead Body and Human Rights," historian Thomas Laqueur says there is "a tension" between mourning and justice, "between on the one hand truth for the purposes of remembering [or] communal therapy and medico-juridical truth, which grounds legal or political action." The bodies of the dead can serve either purpose but not both at the same time: "[i]t is not clear that the named bodies of the dead will serve us as both a corpus delecti [enabling justice] ... and as the balm of closure" enabling mourning. Indeed, "the rhetoric of memory is manifestly different from the rhetoric of justice; the question is whether the one might serve as a substitute, an excuse, for not pursuing the other" (92).

Faced with this conflict between mourning and justice, Laqueur searches for a bridge between them: the "bridge between the two functions of the dead body" is "that these are not the bodies of beasts; they did not 'die like [dogs](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=14&contentSet=GALE%7CA186314229&&docId=GALE%7CA186314229&docType=GALE&role=)' outside of law and culture." But, as Laqueur immediately realizes, this bridge will not support him, for the people in question here precisely did die like dogs. That is the very problem to which Laqueur's essay, which focuses on murders, massacres and genocides, is itself addressed. And so Laqueur corrects himself: "Or rather, they did 'die like dogs' despite the fact that they were human ..." This corrected claim is more accurate but it now fails to provide the sought after bridge. Instead it plunges us right back into the divide Laqueur sought to escape, as becomes clear when he adds: "which is why it is so important subsequently to determine their identities and their histories," so that "the named bodies of the dead" can serve as either "a corpus delecti" or "as the balm of closure." But not both. Justice and mourning are again at odds: "The will to prosecute may well be blunted by whatever peace remembering brings." (1) And the peace of remembering may well be disturbed by calls for justice. Neither justice nor mourning alone can offer the dead and those who survive them all they need and deserve. Laqueuer does not offer a solution but he captures the problem that divides and unites the protagonists of *Sophie's Choice* and *Antigone* .

In *Sophie's Choice* and *Antigone* , the conflict between mourning and justice is explored by way of characters deprived of the opportunity to bury their dead. Might it be that the apparent incommensurability between mourning and justice explored in these texts is in some way connected to that deprivation? The question seems simple and yet it is also vexed. Recovering the dead enables those who survive them to believe they have passed on; [death](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=14&contentSet=GALE%7CA186314229&&docId=GALE%7CA186314229&docType=GALE&role=) makes hyper-empiricists of us all. The recovered body enables the survivors to mourn those lost, sometimes to reconcile themselves with those who have done the harm or, other times, call for justice for those responsible. (2) At the same time, however, the focus on the dead named body, whether for purposes of justice or mourning, can be a distraction from, rather than a fulfillment of, ethical or political obligations. This last point is made forcefully by political scientist Thomas Hawley in a recent book about American POW/MIA recovery movements after the Vietnam War. [Burial](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=14&contentSet=GALE%7CA186314229&&docId=GALE%7CA186314229&docType=GALE&role=), dealing with the body of the dead, thus seems to trouble or unsettle the familiar opposition between mourning and justice. Before troubling that opposition, however, let us explore its workings in detail, as they are staged in *Sophie's Choice* and *Antigone* . OMMITTED SOPHIES PART

**Sophocles's *Antigone***

In Greek tragedy, all rivers are murky: *no one* is innocent, though many are blind to that fact. Everyone is known by the audience to be implicated in a history that precedes them and in a fate that is foretold yet is somehow not determinative. In Sophocles' great play, *Antigone* , Nathan's stuck, raging, impotent commitment to justice (or something like it) is represented by Creon. (7) Sophie's infinite, melancholic mourning (or something like it) is represented by Antigone (though the latter pair is importantly different: Antigone calls for her brother's death to be avenged and curses those responsible. (8) Sophie, perhaps because she feels responsible for her children's fate, does no such thing. (The call for justice or vengeance is made by Nathan and could in fact implicate Sophie.) Other readers of the play see *Antigone* as staging a struggle between conflicting principles yet to be worked out in the classical setting: between family and city, divine and human law, the bonds of kinship and citizenship, oral and written law, the city's [gods](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=14&contentSet=GALE%7CA186314229&&docId=GALE%7CA186314229&docType=GALE&role=) and the gods of the [underworld](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=14&contentSet=GALE%7CA186314229&&docId=GALE%7CA186314229&docType=GALE&role=), or between authoritarian and democratic rule. But the text opens up to us in new ways when we approach it through the lens of a conflict between justice (Creon's principle of giving each his due as a matter of political and civic responsibility) and mourning (Antigone's principle of lamenting the loss of a life in order to usher the dead along to the next life, where the question of just desserts--a separate issue--will be decided by gods, not men).

The play is set in Thebes, in the Bronze Age. With its spatial and temporal distance from fifth-century Athens, Bronze Age Thebes provided a way for Athenians to work through issues that might have been too close to home to be worked out safely in an Athenian setting. (9) The play's distant setting might have allowed Sophocles to broach for public consideration issues that would otherwise be dangerous to consider. It may be for this reason that, as Jean-Pierre Vernant points out, the hero of Greek tragedy is almost always alien and from a distant past. (10)

The play begins in the aftermath of near civil war. The conflict occurs in the wake of the rule of Oedipus who ruled Thebes wisely and well but who also, with his acts of patricide and incest (unintended, unknowing, but still *his* acts), polluted the polity and brought it to near ruin. As the Greek audience would have known, Oedipus's reign ends with his wife's/mother's suicide and his own exile. Left behind are the four children of his incestuous marriage to Jocasta: Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene. The sons, Eteocles and Polynices both claim the throne after their father leaves. Some versions of the story suggest they agree to rule by turns. Eteocles takes power first but refuses to hand the throne to Polynices when the time comes to do so. Polynices raises an army at Argos and besieges the city to claim what is his. The brothers do battle and each dies by the other's hand.

The play opens with Antigone telling her sister Ismene awful news; Ismene has not yet heard it: their brother Eteocles has been buried with full military honors by Thebes's new leader, their uncle Creon. But Polynices, their other brother, it has been decreed by Creon, is "to be left," as Antigone puts it "unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure for birds that scan the field and feast to their heart's content" (35). Creon, Antigone rightly perceives, has "graced one with all the rites and disgraced the other."

In so doing, Creon means to do justice. Although the chorus welcomes Creon as "the new man for the new day" (174), Creon does not begin anew. He begins by orienting Thebes toward the past, to prepare it for a better future. The city must pass judgment over the events it has witnessed. It cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that one brother besieged the city ("he thirsted to drink his kinsmen's blood and sell the rest to slavery," says Creon of Polynices [225-6]), while the other sought to defend it. One brother is a friend of Thebes, a patriot, the other an enemy, a traitor (233; cf. 325). Creon means to stabilize Thebes in the aftermath of the brothers' conflict. To do justice, to give each brother his due, is also to broadcast the regime's determination to prevent the brothers' rift from permeating the regime and giving rise to ongoing sectarian conflicts between Eteocleans and Polyniceans. Thus, Creon promotes one as an honored son and denigrates the other as a traitor. In order to have the clarity that, in his view, a stable regime requires (this one more than most, perhaps, since it suffered from the lack of clarity that Oedipal incest introduced and symbolized), Creon does not inquire too deeply into the rights and wrongs of the situation. Had he done so, he might have found Eteocles in the wrong as well, for refusing to hand power to Polynices as promised. Even so, however, Creon might have said, we can acknowledge both wrongs while insisting that not all wrongs are equal. Eteocles may have been wrong to usurp power, but that does not rise to the same level of wrong as Polynices' action in attacking Thebes with a foreign army.

Most modern readers of the play consider Creon its villain and Antigone, who takes it upon herself to resist his edict and bury her brother, its heroine (Elshtain, Dietz, Butler, Irigiaray, Euben). Most also see Creon as a representative of authoritarian power and Antigone as a democratic actor. But neither character lives up to these labels. Creon's authoritarianism is put in question from the beginning; he issues an important edict but he seems to lack the power to publicize or enforce it: news of it does not reach Ismene, until Antigone tells her about it, and the edict is violated, not once but twice. (11) For her part, Antigone may stand up to authority and so is in some way necessary to democracy, but she is not herself a democratic actor. Rather than mobilize a collectivity and inspire people to join together in common action, she alienates all potential supporters and allies in the course of the play. (12)

To pick either of the main characters as hero is to dilute the play's tragic quality. Tragedy, after all, is the form in which there is no right thing to do because whichever course is chosen, another, equally compelling, is left undone (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* , Williams, *Shame and Necessity* ). Besides, things are not so clear when it comes to heroes and villains in this play. Taking into account the brothers' destabilization of Thebes and the recent troubles under Oedipus, the reader may well begin the play with a certain appreciation for Creon's alertness to the politics of friendship and enmity. Rather than being blind to the importance of mourning and burial, Creon is highly aware of the implications of the practice. That is why he seeks to appropriate it for political purposes. He wants mourning to serve the cause of justice and justice to provide Thebes with stability. This is what leads him to prohibit the mourning and burial of Polynices, who after all went too far. Polynices pursued justice too far (it *was* his turn) and slipped into enmity.

In the end, Creon will pursue justice too far as well. He is not unlike Polynices. Creon too is immoderate. Dishonoring the dead is prohibited by conventional rules of warfare, themselves increasingly attenuated in this period and immediately after in the Peloponnesian Wars. (13) Creon seeks justice without measure (an irony, since justice for the Greeks is about measure: giving each his due). Creon slides therefore from being a potentially worthy captain of the "ship of state" into being an irresponsible navigator who will run it aground. (14) That Creon and Polynices share this same flaw is suggested by the fact that they suffer the same or similar fates. The play opens with Polynices who, deprived of burial rites, is unable to move from this world to the next, and it closes with Creon longing for death but stuck among the living, unable to move from this world to the next. The parallels continue. Just as Creon sought to prohibit anyone from clustering at Polynices' altar, so Creon finds at the play's end that no one is left to cluster at his, and it is this isolation that tortures him, though it is fit punishment: as Haemon earlier pointed out, Creon, who at that point would listen to no counsel, would be happiest ruling over a deserted island. Alone and bereft at the end of the play, Creon receives his just desserts. There is irony in this, too, since just desserts is what Creon and Polynices both told themselves they stood for.

Creon becomes, over the course of the play, a tyrant, but that need not be seen as his essence. In the end he learns his lesson, something that cannot be said of Antigone. Antigone mirrors Creon, but imperfectly. She represents the absolute imperative of mourning in opposition to Creon's principle of justice. In the absolutism of the imperative, we see her immoderation. She does not deliberate or equivocate any more than Creon does. Both are sure of themselves; too sure. She stands opposed to Creon's edict, but unlike Creon, she ends where she begins, staunchly supporting her cause. Her character does not change, though her cause does shift subtly. She begins speaking on behalf of the gods of the underworld. The dead must be buried regardless of their deeds in the human world. She ends claiming a particular devotion to her brother, Polynices, son of her mother. No child or husband, she says, could move her to the same self-sacrifice. (15) Antigone's position shifts, perhaps as a result of her clash with Creon which may harden her, perhaps as a result of her disappointment with Ismene, who does not join her cause and offers only later to share her fate. While Antigone begins the play with the passionate declaration that the dead must be buried, and proclaims that all the dead are seen as equal by the gods of the underworld and must be so treated, she ends with a different claim, one that extols the singular importance to her of Polynices, to whom she refers as "son of my mother." (16)

These shifts and ambiguities notwithstanding, in her fundamental devotion to the cause of mourning, perhaps even stuck in melancholic yearning, Antigone does not waiver. Creon, by contrast, represents an absolute principle too, but his character changes: He begins in the voice of a measured lawgiver, then becomes a tyrant, and then learns to regret and tries to undo what he has done. There is no such curvature in Antigone, who dies unrepentant, albeit with some regret for her inability to claim entry into the kinship structure (which she, as a daughter of incest, surely troubles [Steiner, Butler]) by way of marriage and motherhood.

Most commentators comment upon the worth of antigone's cause--the dead must be buried; the gods of the underworld must not be denied, the oral law must be respected; at the very least, she is said to help illustrate the idea that, as the blind seer Tiresias says later in the play, there must be a balance between human (Creon) and divine (Antigone) law (though Creon claims the gods too, for his side, and Antigone as the daughter and sister of previous kings is also identified to some extent with human law) (Gellrich 48-52). That the play calls for balance is clearly right; but this message does not by itself argue only against Creon. Antigone herself seeks not balance but rather fulfillment of her duty to her brother, no matter the cost. The point of the play as a tragedy surely must be that disaster would have followed as well had Antigone had her way, had mourning triumphed over justice. Mourning Polynices would fulfill an obligation, but to grace him with such rites would have left justice (giving each his due) undone. And this is no small matter. Leaving justice undone was the omission of which Oedipus was accused, after all. It is only when Thebes is visited by a plague, after many years of Oedipus' rule, that Oedipus is finally led to open an inquiry into the death of Laius, the king whom Oedipus succeeded. Laius' murderer had never been found, had not even been actively sought, and had never been brought to justice. The plague is a sign: although the Thebans had mourned their king, they had not ever done him justice and, for this failure, Thebes is punished. It is as a result of the ensuing inquiry that Oedipus discovers a series of awful truths: the stranger he killed on the road to Thebes was in fact King Laius. Laius was Oedipus' true father. And Jocasta, the widowed queen whom Oedipus married upon his arrival in Thebes (the prize given to him for liberating Thebes from the terror of the Sphinx by solving her riddle), was none other than his own mother.

In sum, the play cannot be read as siding with either of its protagonists nor with either one's cause or principles. Instead, the play insists on the simultaneous necessity of justice and mourning. The play stages their conflict in a circumstance that renders the two incommensurable: In the context of treason, the two principles--the dead must be mourned; justice must be done--are incommensurable. The dead Polynices is left to die like an animal because he is a traitor. He is not left outside the city, like a true traitor, but rather inside its bounds. He is inside the city but not buried like a true member; rather he is left out to rot and to be fed upon by wildlife. Simon Goldhill points out: "the tensions of the play are emphasized by having Polynices' body left on the land of the city." (17) Indeed. It is Polynices' liminality as both member of and traitor to Thebes that positions him in death as so deeply and troublingly productive of a non-negotiable incommensurability. Thus, the play calls the audience to interrogate the incommensurability that Laqueuer reports on, to reflect on the circumstances in which incommensurability is produced, the circumstances in which people die like dogs, and their aftermath.

**Burial Rites**

For some readers, Antigone's inflexibile commitment to her cause is a shortcoming, but it is clearly also the source of her great power. Perhaps, however, we should read her inflexibility not as cause but rather as effect. What so many take to be a sign of backbone, or principle--Antigone's inflexibility--may be a sign of melancholic stuckness, an effect of her inability, given Creon's prohibition, to mourn Polynices properly, ritually. What Antigone may point us to, in other words, is not only the importance of mourning, and justice, but also their insufficiency. She may point us beyond that pairing to ritual burial. Burial is named as the second of the pair of acts forbidden by Creon: Recall Antigone says early in the play, that it has been decreed that Polynices must be left "unwept, unburied." Unwept, unburied is the condition as well of Sophie's children, whose mourning is not forbidden by a sovereign ruler but is rather disabled by the circumstances of genocide and by Sophie's own quest for some sort of life after the crime of infanticide in which she is horribly implicated. Both characters, deprived of the rituals of death, are stuck in melancholy and live out a death-identified existence. Neither really belongs among the living. Antigone's name, which means against generation, makes the point, as does her identification with the gods of the underworld. After Auschwitz, Sophie walks the line between life and death. Seduced into the English language by Dickenson's thanato-erotic poetry, Sophie does not care about living; she just does not want Nathan to die alone: "I don't care that I'll die. I'm afraid that he'll die without me" (as her children did).

Alongside the decree of justice and the edict against mourning, next to truth and reconciliation, rights and loss, lies--burial: those rites and rituals by way of which we *inter* the dead. Inter? The word comes from Middle English meaning, to put into the ground--in terra. For the nineteenth-century philosopher, G.W.E Hegel, however, the function of burial, is not just to inter but also to interrupt the processes whereby the interred dead might become merely part of the mere organicism of nature. We, the living, put ourselves in the way, to interrupt the mere decomposition of death. With the word and deed of ritual, we insert ourselves into nature's processes and claim even the dead for the human community. In so doing, we, humans, (specifically the sister in the family unit who is obligated in Hegel's ideal state to bury the brother), in so doing we, (though Hegel does not note it), take on the role of the gods in Homeric Greece, who were said to have warded off the decomposition and disfigurement of Greek heroes by way of active intervention. As Jean-Pierre Vernant explains, drawing on three episodes reported in the *Iliad* and elsewhere,

 In all three cases, the scenario is about the same. The gods miraculously

 save the hero from the shame of abuse that--by disfiguring, denaturing

 his body until it is no longer recognizable as his own, or even as a

 human body, or even as a body at all--would reduce him to a state of

 nonbeing. To preserve him as he was, the gods perform the human rituals

 of cleansing and beautification but use divine unguents: these elixirs of

 immortality preserve "intact," despite all the abuse, that youth and

 beauty which can only fade on the body of a living man [because, as this

 statement implies but does not aver, not only death but also life itself

 involves decomposition]. [D]eath in battle fixes forever on the hero's

 form [his youth and beauty], just as a stele remains erect forever to

 mark a tomb. (18)

What was then true for Greek heroes, that they would not be allowed to die like dogs, is true in Hegel's ideal state for all humans, and it generates an obligation to grant to all the right to have rites. We do not let humans die like dogs. (Of course, we ought not to let dogs do so, either.) We, the community, interrupt the decomposition of nature, (if not literally, with embalming, then figuratively with funerary practice), inserting the community into nature's process to mark the end of a *life* . (19)

The service we provide to the dead when we oblige their right to have rites is always also self-serving. Beth Knox, founder of a non-profit resource center for after-death care alternatives, says that "During a time of mourning, especially after a sudden, unexpected death, people want to feel useful. But all too often, the expression of condolence--'Is there anything I can do?'--has no response. In this country, where 99 percent of all deaths are handled by funeral directors, there's rarely anything of substance for friends and family to do. But ... giving people a task--picking up the death certificate, buying more dry ice, building the coffin or digging the grave--provides *a physical way to work through* [*grief*](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=14&contentSet=GALE%7CA186314229&&docId=GALE%7CA186314229&docType=GALE&role=) ." (20) Service to the dead provides survivors with the work needed to work through the death. This gives a literal and insightful cast to the current favored expression for grief: *working through* .

Burial, cremation, tending to the body, the rites of death are, as Antigone must have in some sense known, a way to work through, by *working* through (with physical labor), the loss of the other and the otherness of loss. If Antigone is stuck in melancholic mourning, that may be not because she is mourning a transgressive relation to her mother or the forbidden feminine (though these suppositions generate sharp readings of the text from Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler). (21) If Antigone is melancholic, stuck in her [bereavement](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=14&contentSet=GALE%7CA186314229&&docId=GALE%7CA186314229&docType=GALE&role=), that may be because the *work* that would allow her to *work (physically) through* grief is specifically denied to her.

The work of mourning and burial is increasingly the subject of various, sometimes conflicting political struggles in the U.S. and Europe. Some (consumer groups or advocates of green burial, for example) seek to resist the takeover of death rites by funeral homes and state institutions; others call on state institutions to enable death rituals to occur (as when family members demand that the government seek the return of lost soldiers' bodies from the battlefield). As the historian of Ancient Greece, Robert Garland, notes, dying practices have changed over the last one hundred years, from home deaths to hospitals, from death, in "the presence of one's closest kin [clustered] around a death-bed [which was] general in all ranks of society" to mid-twentieth century practices in which "the majority of people die alone in a hospital bed with only medical attendants for company." (22) Garland also notes that death rites are "the one ceremony in a person's passage through life invariably attended by a minister [and this] indicates that scruples and uncertainties continue to exist regarding death itself." It may. Or it may signal the existence of monopoly power in the death market.

When Garland concludes "I know of no popular reform movement to challenge the church's undisputed authority in this area," he unwittingly issues an invitation for further research. As it turns out, the politics of which he was unaware (in 1985, the year of the first edition of his book) has come into existence, albeit directed more toward the state than the church. Whether for reasons having to do with ignorance, indifference, or the power of the undertakers' lobby, misinformation about burial rites is rife, and some groups have arisen to address the problem. U.S. activists publicize the little known permissibility in most states of burying the dead on private property and keeping the body at home before burial. Some seek to educate "the family to act as funeral director--legal in almost all states in the United States." (23) The *Funeral Consumers Alliance* warns that state officials routinely give out false information. In Vermont, for example, families are erroneously told that they *may not* transport their own dead for burial, that caskets are *required* for burial, (an "unsupported interpretation of Vermont statutes"), and that bodies crossing the Vermont border must be embalmed. (24) The errors regarding caskets and embalming are particularly egregious because they conflict with the religious tenets of Muslims and Jews who often bury their dead in direct contact with the earth and without embalming. (25) Proponents of green burial advocate similar practices for environmental rather than religious reasons.

Focusing on the body and burial can also be a way to avoid political engagement rather than stage it, however. This is the argument made by Thomas Hawley who analyzes the political consequences of demands of U.S. families that Vietnam war casualties, the bodies of their dead or missing family members, U.S. soldiers and personnel, be accounted for and returned to the U.S. by the U.S. and Vietnamese governments after 1975. The focus on burial and the victorious retrieval of the body from (previously) enemy soil was, Hawley argues, a displaced way to experience victory in that already lost conflict. Moreover, it enabled the U.S. to avoid confrontation with the political aftermath of that war and its losses. (26) Hawley is right to ask after the effects of the national focus on repatriation, but that focus sometimes leads him to sound like he fails to appreciate the importance of the body to survivors. A political analysis of the nationalist and nationalizing effects of the POW/MIA movement can also at the same time affirm rather than undermine familial demands for the return of loved ones. Or better, such familial demands can be made otherwise.

In the realm of tragedy, Dickens and Dickinson meet in the aftermath of human cruelty, betrayal and genocide; it is the realm in which Sophie and Antigone dwell as living dead, in which Nathan and Creon cry out for justice but no one responds. At its best, mourning-work does not just retrench existing boundaries of self, community, and nation and condemn us to repeat our current traumas, as Hawley suggests is the case with the U.S. focus on repatriation after Vietnam. At its best, mourning-work also points us beyond ourselves. At its best, mourning-work asks us to extend ourselves in a kind of self-overcoming toward an other and toward a future, beyond the divide of nature and culture, the human and non-human, because in burial (as in life) all such distinctions slide and we are left not with the gladness of a new day but with a rather murky river. What lies beyond Stingo's mo[u]rning, beyond Antigone's revenge-seeking love for Polynices as philos, even though he is also an ekhthros to Thebes, beyond Laqueur's incommensurably coupled mourning and justice? Perhaps a different kind of mourning-work, not a working through but rather a loving letting go, such as that imagined by Whitman in *Reconciliation* , where the sharedness of death itself, that ultimate other, and the power of the word, work some sort of a magic and draw the living to the dead in the moment of ritual burial. The encounter is intimate. The body here is neither a corpus delecti nor the basis of shared memory. Instead forgetting is invoked and the evanescence of time affirmed. There is here no Antigonean call for vengeance, no declaration of the satisfactions of justice, no triumphalism--just a sense of shared vulnerability and mortality, with a nod to literariness and its abundant powers:

 Word over all, beautiful as the sky!

 Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be

 utterly lost;

 That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly softly

 wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world:

 ... For my enemy is dead--a man divine as myself is dead;

 I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin--I draw

 near;

 I bend down, and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the

 coffin.

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Honig, Bonnie. "The Other Is Dead: Mourning, Justice, and the Politics of Burial." *TriQuarterly* 131 (2007): 89+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 27 Oct. 2014.

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA186314229&v=2.1&u=lom\_accessmich&it=r&p=EAIM&sw=w&asid=9cf204e7aefa9b615318fd19fd5524c1

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A186314229

Title: Citing the law in Sophocles's Antigone

Author(s): [Judith Fletcher](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Judith+Fletcher%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)

Source: [***Mosaic (Winnipeg)***](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/aboutJournal.do?pubDate=120080901&rcDocId=GALE%7CA187012503&actionString=DO_DISPLAY_ABOUT_PAGE&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&resultClickType=AboutThisPublication&contentModuleId=EAIM&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=GALE%7C2109)***.*** 41.3 (Sept. 2008): p79.

Document Type: Critical essay

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2008 University of Manitoba, Mosaic

<http://www.umanitoba.ca/mosaic/>

Full Text:

The citizens of fifth century BCE Athens who wrote, produced, performed, watched, and judged [Greek tragedy](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=) accepted certain anachronisms in the depiction of a mythological past that focused on the catastrophic lives of a few royal families. Among the most striking of these anachronisms is how democratic law making processes familiar to the Athenian audience (and a relatively recent political system) are retrojected into the monarchies of myth and legend. In [Aeschylus](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=)'s Suppliant Women, King Pelasgus, responding to the Danaids's petition for sanctuary, insists on seeking the approval of the assembly of Argive citizens, whose voting practices are pointedly emphasized in the text (607). Of course, King Theseus, the archetype of democratic principles, emphasizes the judicial processes of Athens ([Sophocles](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=), [Oedipus](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=) at Colonus 1051-53), and consults the Athenian populace when he decides to champion the cause of Argive mothers (Euripides, Suppliant Women 404-408). Less benign is the Argive assembly who vote to stone their prince Orestes for matricide (Euripides, Orestes 440-42), or the Greek army at Troy, whose motion to sacrifice the captive Trojan princess Polyxena, reproduces the enactment formula that preceded the decrees passed by the Athenian democratic assembly of the fifth century (Euripides, Hecuba 107-108).

When tragedy mirrors the legislative processes of Athenian democracy, it makes the heroic world of mythology more familiar and accessible to the fifth century citizen audience (Easterling 2-3), but it is important to note that the legal practices of Athens are not embedded in its drama in any simplistic or merely self-congratulatory manner. Law is represented as a complicated and sometimes precarious power. Tragedy gives careful consideration to how the language of law can create the social world: the decrees engendered by the legislative bodies represented in drama are all examples of what [philosophers](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=) of language such as J.L. Austin and John Searle have identified as speech acts or illocutions. In classical Athens, some of the most authoritative speech acts were collectively voiced by citizens in the legislative assembly and law courts. Their edicts and decrees exemplify Sandy Petrey's synthesis of the performative utterance as "a combination of language and social practice," which functions "within the conventional interactions that characterize a given sociohistorical group" (13).

The homologies of Athenian law and its theatre have often been noted--their shared audience and actors, their rule-governed scripts (Lanni 183; Allen 379). Like a dramatic text, a law or decree is programmatic; it prescribes what people say or do. A legal speech act, such as a decree, functions in tragedy as a potent generator of plot and action. To use Austin's terminology, the tragic events that emanate from an edict (for example, the sacrifice of Polyxena) are the perlocutions of the speech act (Austin 101). Oedipus's decree condemning the murderer of Laius (Oedipus Tyrannus 223-51) replicates Athenian legal procedure for investigating and prosecuting a homicide (Carawan). It sets in motion a series of perlocutionary consequences that cause the edict to recoil on its author, who turns out to be that murderer. Tragedy, it would seem, not only echoes the performative language of law, but exposes its fallibilities as well. In this respect, Sophocles's Antigone holds a special place in any consideration of the representation of law in tragedy, since it poses fundamental and disturbing questions about the capacity of language to create law, the relationship between law and force, and specifically, as this paper will argue, about the role of the citizenry in lawmaking.

I do not intend to argue that this tragedy represents any specific political situation in fifth century BCE Thebes, or Athens, although, as Richard Seaford notes, Sophocles's Theban [plays](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=) might have reassured Athens that the "horrors of tyranny are projected onto the mythical past [. . .] and are safely projected onto Thebes" (42-43). The Thebes of tragedy may be the "Anti-Athens" as Froma Zeitlin put it (144), but I maintain that there is a democratic voice embedded in this text, which suggests that the civic ideology of Athens is a natural and unquenchable force. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood is justifiably cautious about reading Sophocles's Thebes as a "mimetic representation of Athenian democracy" (136), but she does advocate a reception of the play that takes into account the cultural and political context of its production, that is, democratic Athens. Her conception of how this reception operated and its relationship to democracy is substantially different from mine, however. My approach to the play is one that takes into account its status as a cultural product of "a festival of the democratic polis" (Goldhill, "Great" 115), that is informed by and sustains an ideology generated by a system in which the democratic collective "ruled through its control of public speech" (Ober, "Public" 483).

The project of this paper, then, is to consider how democratic forces manifest in this fictional version of Thebes. My strategy will be to examine the trajectory of Creon's interdiction forbidding the burial of Polyneices from its inception to its reception and eventual annulment. This command helps us to frame an important question about language and law: what gives a legal performative its status beyond its utterance by a powerful civic figure? By considering the interdiction as a speech act that becomes part of public discourse and is disseminated through the various channels of communication in the polis, I hope to expose the infelicities and distortions that vitiate its status as law. Unlike the "democratic" monarchs of tragedy, Theseus or Pelasgus, Creon does not consult the citizens of Thebes before he makes his announcement forbidding the burial. We might assume that he composed this prohibition on the battlefield where there would be no opportunity for deliberation, but he does announce it a second time to the assembly of Theban Elders without any debate or consultation. It is my contention, nonetheless, that the voice of the demos (the citizens) is by no means silent in this text, which reflects some of the informal discursive structures of Athenian democracy.

First, however, we need to determine if there is any chance that the fifth century BCE audience could conceive of Creon's interdiction as a law. Creon refers to his proclamation as a nomos, a polyvalent term that can mean "established custom," or "law." Antigone describes the burial of Eteocles and the defenders of Thebes as being the "right use of custom" (toi nomoi) (22) (1); she explicitly denies that Creon's interdiction is a law. How would the original audience of this tragedy view her denial and challenge? In her influential article, Sourvinou-Inwood argues that we need to set aside our contemporary focus on individual freedoms which make us hostile to Creon's position (135-37). Creon represents the polis, and in every Greek city-state of the fifth century BCE, it was the polis that authorized religious activities, including funeral rituals. Antigone is overstepping her limitations by claiming to know what the gods want; only Teiresias has the authority to do this. The fact that Teiresias substantiates Antigone's claims should not, according to Sourvinou-Inwood, affect our reading of the play since we need to put ourselves in the position of the audience who cannot read ahead. Because the ruling power of Thebes has issued the prohibition, it was necessary for all Thebans to obey, regardless of their private feelings. The prohibition (kerugma) on burying Polyneices seems to echo an Athenian law forbidding the burial of traitors within the city walls. Generals sometimes pronounced kerugmata on the battlefield, and it was the duty of the common citizen to comply. (2)

Larry Bennett and William Blake Tyrrell have a different perspective: "Antigone acts correctly because she does not defy Creon, leader of Athens, but Creon, the totalitarian ruler of impious Thebes" (42). Edward M. Harris implicitly supports this approach by analyzing what the ingredients of law were to an Athenian audience. I shall return to some of his arguments later in this paper, but the germane point for now is that Athenian citizens swore the Ephebic Oath, promising to "obey those who are ruling prudently and the established laws and those which they may prudently establish for themselves in the future." In other words, blind obedience to the commands of a ruling power was not an obligation if those commands were not sensible (Harris 39-40). Moreover, epic poetry and tragedy are consistent in how they recognize the need for proper burial. While an Athenian law might have prevented burying traitors in Attica, it did not prevent traitors from being taken outside Attic borders for burial (20-21). Proper burial of the dead is a fundamental concern of the Greeks. The Homeric gods are disturbed by the defilement of Hector's corpse in Iliad 24. Sophocles's Ajax and Euripides's Suppliant Women both deal with the crisis of unburied corpses. Indeed, Creon himself, after hearing the prediction of Teiresias, decides to bury the corpse because "it is best to obey established laws" (1113-14).

Certainly by the end of the Antigone it becomes obvious that the gods were offended by Creon's interdiction, but would an Athenian audience have to wait for the prophecy of Teiresias before they recognized not only the impiety of the prohibition, but also its innate illegality? It is my contention that the dramatic architecture of Sophocles's Antigone suggests the instability of the interdiction and its illusory status as law from the opening lines of the prologue. Antigone will never call this interdiction a "law" (nomos), but only a kerugma ("announcement"), a word cognate with kerux, "herald," and she will never call Creon king, but merely strategos, general, i.e. a type of magistrate (Harris 35-36; Griffith 122). Her position toward Creon's interdiction is that of an Athenian citizen who had the right to denounce a magistrate for malfeasance and who recognizes and demonstrates that the authority of law resides in a power that transcends Creon's articulation of a command.

It is thus significant that the first person to speak in the play is not Creon announcing the edict, but Antigone complaining about it to Ismene. The play opens at an important moment in the communication of the prohibition: its reception by the very person who will contravene and obstruct it.

 And what is this announcement (kerugma) that they say the general

 (strategos) has just now made for the entire city? (7-8)

Antigone answers her own question by quoting the kerugma transmitted to her by a process of public communication. On first consideration, the kerugma seems to fulfill the criteria required of a felicitous speech act identified by Austin (34): an "appropriate figure," the most powerful man of Thebes, possessing "the appropriate authority" has issued a command in the "appropriate circumstances," a public forum (presumably the battlefield before the play began). But as events unfold, it seems that Creon's kerugma has a rather subversive energy that radiates beyond its initial utterance; its status as a citation, necessary for it to take effect, somehow undermines its authority. In other words, Creon can make his pronouncement, but he cannot control the context of its reception and repetition.

When Antigone repeats the interdiction to her sister, she highlights its transmission; kerux words are significant in this speech, which lays stress on the announcement of the proclamation, and a reference to the process of its transmission. "Eteocles, so they say, thinking it just to make right use of custom, he has buried in the earth, to be honored by the dead beneath. But the wretchedly dead corpse of Polyneices it has been announced (ekkekeruchthai) to all the citizens, they say, that no man may cover with a grave nor lament. That is what, they say, noble Creon has proclaimed (kerukschant' echein) for you and me, for me I tell you" (22-32). Antigone's citational practices ("they say," "it has been announced," etc.) emphasize that the utterance has been removed from its author, a necessary function of its status as a civic announcement. It is not only Creon's articulation of the interdiction that gives it legs, but also its repetition by a public voice. An audience who participated in the making of law would be aware that the kerugma is circulated by the citizens of Thebes who made no contribution to its formulation. Although in his opening speech Creon claims to value the counsel of his subjects (179), he later reveals his tyrannical nature by insisting to Haemon that the city belongs to its ruler (738; see also Podlecki 363-64; Euben 160). With complete incredulity he asks his son if it is the polis who will tell him what he must order (734). Creon's unilateral edict is a strong contrast to the many ancient sources that describe law as a product of common consent (Harris 27; Allen 389). Demosthenes (25.16), for example, asserts that law is "a general agreement of the entire community." As we have already noted, Athenian tragedy regularly espouses the requirement for communal participation in the legislative process, even in states ruled by mythical kings. Tragedy might be set in a mythical past, and feature legendary monarchies, but the most reasonable sovereigns seem to adhere to democratic principles. There is no evidence, however, that the citizens of Thebes make any contribution to the interdiction other than to circulate Creon's decree.

Is there any indication that Creon has the support of the citizens, whose city he purportedly wishes to enhance (191)? Charles Segal describes the interdiction as "public speech" represented in the opening scene as "part of an anonymous, ill-defined public voice" (161). He understands the public voice and Creon's broadcast of the decree to be unanimous. But is it? It is true that the Chorus offers no objections; Ismene apparently assumes that since the people of Thebes transmit the decree they must approve of it; she feels helpless to act "in defiance of the city" (79). Even Antigone eventually submits to the idea that she is acting "against the will of the city" (907). She can hardly be blamed for feeling abandoned as she is led to her death and taunted by the Chorus of Theban Elders (509), although earlier she had suggested to Creon that the Chorus agreed with her position even if they were afraid to speak out in his presence. More importantly, there are strong indications that the Chorus of Yes-men are not representative of public opinion, that Creon is not the singular voice of Thebes, and that behind his back a dissident group of voices whisper their disapproval.

Creon himself is well aware of malcontents who "from the very start muttered secretly against me" (290-91). He mistakenly believes that dissenters have bribed the guards so they can bury the corpse, but nonetheless he is aware that people are talking about his order behind his back. In defense of Antigone, Haemon corroborates Creon's realization of community unrest with an eloquent account of the disapproval of the demos (683-723). He tells his father that the population of Thebes denies that Antigone is wrong to bury her brother; this would surely include the people who transmitted Creon's interdiction to Antigone. This may not be a government where the demos contributes to the making of law with a vote, but the public voice does comment on Creon's autocratic proclamation. Antigone's citation of the demos in her quotation of the kerugma is neutral, but Haemon is especially insistent on the voices of the community who commend Antigone's action and condemn the edict. (3) Haemon can overhear what the city is saying "in the shadows" (692-93) and how it mourns Antigone, who dies undeservedly for a praiseworthy act. This report of what the city says includes a version of his father's interdiction that dogs and birds will prey on the corpse (205-206), an illustration of how the pronouncement is quoted and critiqued by the citizens of Thebes. The public announcement of Creon thus becomes a "dark secretive report" that spreads throughout the city (700). These irrepressible but anonymous voices are a powerful reminder that Creon does not have total command of the discourse in every context of the polis, despite his fantasy of absolute control. Although the Chorus of Elders may be afraid to oppose him openly, the polis includes a background of citizen voices, citing and critiquing the command--voices that have circulated its contents so effectively that Antigone can repeat them, and Haemon can report the permutations of his father's edict.

So it seems that underneath the official position we can detect a clamor of informal debates and disagreements. The text features an assortment of voices, some sympathetic towards Antigone's position, others less so, and this polyphony, a chief factor in the undeniably slippery quality of the tragedy, helps to represent the manifold voices that constitute a polis, even an autocratic polis. The play was written for an audience whose understanding of law-making included a democratic debate. The ekklesia (the democratic assembly), where laws were created, was a raucous uproar of competing opinions: the trained speakers who bantered back and forth, and also the common men, the demos, whose collective disapproval or approbation was expressed by their vote, but also less formally as a clamor, a thorubus, that arose in the assembly and was "a crucial element of Athenian democracy [...] in which ordinary people could make their thoughts known" (Tacon 180). Thucydides, Plato, and others report this thorubus, catcalls, boos, cheers, and shouting, (4) not only in the assembly, but also the courts where laws were enacted. The clamour of the corona, the bystanders, and their thorubos of dissent or approval provided one of the unofficial but necessary checks on the juries (Lanni 187). I suggest, then, that the dissent that Haemon reports to his father should be understood as just such a thorubus of dissapproval.

The "dark secret report" is also a form of gossip, another important form of unofficial communication in Athens. Antigone and Ismene depend on gossip and rumour for Creon's message, since they were obviously not present at the initial utterance of the proclamation. Yet Creon himself does not hear what is said in the back allies and dark corners of his realm; he sends but he does not receive. Gossip was a powerful means of transmitting information back and forth between the public and private spheres in the Athenian democracy; it contributed to a two-way stream of communication lacking in Thebes. Contrastingly, the Athenian political system allowed for the flow of rumour back into more formal modes of discourse. Josiah Ober lists gossip and rumour as one of several political forums of debate and communication, along with the courts, assembly and theatre, where Athenian citizens could exchange information and ideas with each other (Mass 148-51). Speakers in law courts exploited the conception of Athens as a face-to-face community in which everyone knew everyone else's business, either by frequenting the agora (town square/market-place), or shops, or through prostitutes and entertainers at drinking parties. [Plutarch](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=) (Nicias 30.1) records how news of the devastating naval disaster at Sicily in 416 BCE was first heard in a barber shop, and travelled rapidly throughout the city. Rumour was an important means of disseminating information and sharing opinions between the common citizen and the elite members of society. Furthermore, as Hunter has shown (303, 307-16), gossip could be integral to the public scrutiny of magistrates, the dokimasia, when it would be woven into Athenian political discourse in a useful manner.

Thebes is abuzz with talk of the interdiction and Antigone's defiance, but the informal yet conventional modes of communication (the thorubos and gossip) that had authority in the Athenian democracy, are occluded in the Theban tyranny. The Guard's reluctance to report the burial to Creon suggests a cowed populace afraid to bring unwelcome news to their king. But Antigone seems to have activated a shadow demos, a ghostly whisper of the uncontainable vox populi and its thorubos. Public talk has become displaced in Thebes--squeezed into private conversations and secret debates--but it cannot be completely silenced. From the first moments of the play, Antigone appears to have taken control of the discourse and to become a vital part of the reception and transmission of democratic talk. This in itself is perhaps one of the most striking examples of the discursive disturbances of Thebes. As Thucydides makes Pericles say, the ideal woman is "the least mentioned" (2.45.2); the absence of any female voice from fifth century BCE Athens suggests the advice was heeded. Not only is Antigone mentioned quite a bit in Thebes, but she speaks out in a political context. Creon's effects on the channels of civic discourse apparently include the erosion of the ideal of decorous feminine silence. Antigone is thus both a symptom and a remedy of Thebes' distorted discursive system.

Antigone's intrusion into public talk is evident in the prologue: she first cites Creon's kerguma, precisely where Creon will publish it himself, on the steps of the royal residence, but then she also performs her own speech act in this same spot: "I myself will bury him," she declares to her sister, "I will lie dead beside him" (71-72). Ismene, paradigm of feminine docility, timidly recommends silence about the plan, but Antigone insists upon public broadcast of her speech act:

 Oh no! Announce it. You should be much more hateful, if you keep

 quiet and not proclaim [kerukses] this to everyone (86-87).

The prologue, which opened by emphasizing how public information had seeped into an intimate moment between two sisters, draws to a close as Antigone begins her intervention into public discourse. She expropriates the vocabulary of Creon's order for her own act of defiance: she wants the burial of her brother to be announced (kerukses) in the same way that Creon's ban was announced. As Judith Butler notes, "Like Creon [...] Antigone wants her speech act to be radically and comprehensively public" (28); Segal adds, "Usurping his word, she mounts a total challenge to the civic logos" (62).

Given the impropriety of female speech in the public sphere, Antigone's role as the voice of democratic law might seem anomalous. It is true that women of citizen status in Athens did not speak out in public, much less participate in debates about law, but Antigone's social identity as a virgin gives her special symbolic status for several reasons. The Athenina audience of this play worshipped Athena, a virgin goddesses who dispensed laws. More generally, Dike (Justice) is traditionally personified as a virgin (Hamilton 96-97). [Hesiod](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=) describes the murmur of protest that spreads among the people when the virgin Dike is dragged off by evil men (Works 220-21), a passage that suggests the thorubos of disapproval by the Theban citizens in Sophocles's play. Likewise, the allegorical figure Demokratia is a young woman. (5) Furthermore, the orators of the fourth century exploited the mythology of sacrificial virgins as a model for young male citizens who were being incorporated into the polis; the daughters of the Athenian King Erectheus, who willingly sacrificed themselves on behalf of the state, were a paradigm for Athenian youths (Larson 103-104).

It is somewhat anticlimactic when Creon makes his announcement (for the second time) to his council of Elders. (6) Concurrently, Antigone, whose citation and ussurpation of the kerugma have been given priority of placement, is defying the interdiction even as it is spoken--a dramatic contrast to the compliant Chorus. The Elders, having been summoned to hear the kerugma, account for their presence in this public space: they have been called for a sunkleton leschen, a "convened assembly" by a "public announcement" (koinoi kerugmati) (160-61), terminology that evokes the summoning of the democratic assembly in Athens. But they offer no argument or comment; all they can say in response is "if it is pleasing to you" (211), an ironic contrast to the enactment formula, "it seems best to the people," that preceded Athenian decrees. Creon's announcement is delivered in an official sounding formal register: "I have proclaimed (keruksas) to the citizens" (192); "it has been proclaimed" (ekkekeruktai) (203). Again kerux words predominate, but this vocabulary is far removed from the language of Athenian law-making. This is a command fashioned for a very specific circumstance, yet it is is the nature of law to apply to general situations. [Aristotle](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=EAIM&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R5&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=12&contentSet=GALE%7CA187012503&&docId=GALE%7CA187012503&docType=GALE&role=)'s comment that every law is "about a general matter" (Politics 1137b11-14, 27-29, as qtd. in Harris) is illustrated by the phrasing of Athenian laws--for example, "If anyone destroys the democracy at Athens" (Andocides 1.96, qtd. in Harris 23). (7)

The subsequent confrontation between Antigone and Creon would have a special resonance for the Athenian audience of the play. The process of creating laws and decrees in their political structure embraced the important principle of isegoria, the right of every citizen to debate in the assembly. It is quite obviously a freedom that does not exist in Creon's regime, but Antigone enacts the role of the citizen who had the right to disagree and debate about any motion made in the assembly. Hannah Roisman rightly hears her as the voice of free speech (98-102). Unlike the Watchmen, the Chorus, or the cowed Theban polity, Antigone speaks without fear in the presence of Creon. When Creon tells her that his proclamation is a law (nomous) (449), she fearlessly disputes him. As I have argued, the structure and subtext of the drama emphasize the infelicities of Creon's interdiction. In her much admired argument, Antigone is able to articulate related deficiencies when she makes the distinction between one man's proclamation and true nomos:

 As far as I'm concerned, Zeus did not make this proclamation

 [keruksas nor did Justice, who dwells with the gods below, enact

 such laws [nomous] for mortals. And I don't think that your

 announcements [kerugmata] are so strong that they enable a mortal to

 outrun the unwritten and unshakeable [asphale] laws [nomima] of the

 gods. (450-55)

The passage emphasizes the deficiencies of Creon's proclamation in several ways: first and foremost, his kerugma is not sanctioned by the gods, which is to say Creon does not possess "the appropriate authority" to make it. A popular analysis interprets the play as a conflict between civic law and divine law (e.g. Goldhill, Reading 96), but this concept is not natural to Greek thought; the Greeks understood true law to come from the gods (Harris 27; Allen 389). It is the goddess Athena who bestows a court of law on her city at the end of Aeschylus's Eumenides. As the philosopher Heraclitus put it, "the laws of men are nourished by one law, the divine law" (fr. 253 Kirk and Raven). Demosthenes (25.16) likewise states that "every law is an invention and gift of the gods" (qtd. in Harris 27-30). Sophocles himself describes law as coming from Zeus (Oedipus 863-70). If the just laws of the polis are intrinsically divine, then obviously Creon's interdiction cannot be a law.

Antigone's second point is to compare the instability of Creon's order with the laws of the gods, which are unwritten. The notion of "unwritten laws" is not unique to this text, but recurs in other contemporary sources. (8) They are, in the words of Rosalind Thomas, "a preexisting set of customs, traditions and assumptions onto which written laws were grafted" (54). They existed before law codes were written down, and included the treatment of one's parents, the worship of the gods, and proper treatment of the dead. While they are not specific to one polis, and common to a diversity of peoples, they are not normally set in opposition to the laws of the state. Greek thought tends to represent the two forms of nomos as complementing one another. In Thebes, however, an interdiction against burying the dead cannot be grafted onto or supported by the laws of the gods; it contradicts divine nomos, and so is not really a law.

Antigone's dichotomy between the unwritten laws of the gods and Creon's order poses an interesting problem. If the laws of the gods are unwritten, does this align the kerugma with writing? And if it does, how does this quality bear upon the transmission of the interdiction through the medium of public repetition? Antigone does not say that the kerugma is written, but in a sense it is. Writing suggests the possibility of repetition, what Jacques Derrida calls "iterability" (318), precisely the feature of the kerugma that results in its dissemination. Writing also allows for a separation between author and utterance, a phenomenon exemplified by the various repetitions of Creon's interdiction throughout the city. The ancient audience could understand that an order like Creon's, which has not been grafted onto the fixed universal laws, could be erased and "rewritten," unlike the permanence of divine nomima.

Another indication of its lack of stability is the emendable quality of the kerugma. Like a written document, it can be erased and re-written, a quality suggested by its apparently instable penalty. Antigone claims that the penalty for disobedience is public stoning (36), but in his proclamation to the Chorus, Creon specifies no penalty. Once her transgression has been revealed, he sets the punishment of entombment for Antigone to avoid polluting the city with her death (773-80), a rather curious concession from a man willing to leave a corpse to rot in the sun. Explanations of this apparent deviation are various: that Antigone adds a bit of her own "emotional embroidery" with the detail (Podlecki 359), or that Creon has been partly affected by Haemon's arguments (Kamerbeek 142). Whatever reconstruction we imagine, the conclusion has to be that Creon's word is not stable, or to use Antigone's term, asphale, if it can be subjected to modifications or amendments.

At this point, it should be apparent that Creon's order, his kerugma, exists throughout the play as an impermanent creation, always, it seems, in flux, and never completely within Creon's control. Its illocutionary authority is explicitly denied by Antigone, who refuses to abide by it and so dies. But this does not confirm the force of Creon's words, since the circumstances of her death underscore the limitations of his linguistic authority. She made her own declaration in the prologue: "1 will lie dead beside him" (73). She conspicuously disobeys the edict, and insults its author, forcing him to enforce it. As Nicole Loraux remarks, Antigone "chose to die by her own will and so to change execution into suicide" (31-32). Her suicide draws attention the king's inability to control the effects of language, since it occurs after Creon ordered Antigone to be saved. There is a tragic symmetry, characteristically Sophoclean, in this organization: as Creon makes the command, Antigone defies it; as Creon says that he will rescue Antigone, she kills herself.

Thus on his first day as king, Creon discovers that language is not so much a blunt instrument as it is an uncontainable fluid. The tyrant is slow to learn that he cannot control the city with his words. He absolutely refuses to authorize any other voice until Teiresias speaks. The blind prophet delivers two warnings to Creon. The first is based on his reading of the bird signs, a signifying system that has become distorted by their feast of human meat. The process itself is a form of reading: the boy attendant describes the bird signs and sacrifices, Teiresias interprets and cites the text, as it were, to Creon. Yet, as long as his initial attempts to move Creon are structured as a chain of citations, he remains ineffective. It will not be the signs cited by Teiresias that persuade Creon, but a more direct communique. An important shift occurs when Teiresias changes register in his second thesis (1064-90); now speaking in a powerful mantic voice that motivates Creon's change of heart, he utters a forceful prophecy of disaster described as akineta, "unmoveable" (1060). "You provoke me to speak the immoveable secrets (akineta) of my soul," he groans after Creon has uttered his most blasphemous rebuttal. The term akineta conveys the violent exposure of some securely lodged truth; it could be accurately translated as "steadfast" or "secure," in other words as a synonym for asphale. Teiresias apparently speaks from the same place, and has access to the same divine truths, as Antigone. She spoke in reference to steadfast (asphale) lasw authored by the gods that should manifest as universal moral laws or precepts. Teiresias refers to a divinely authored consequence of breaking these laws, a consequence that he would prefer to keep hidden and so akineta. But the deeper implications of his akineta are that they come directly from the gods; this prophecy is not obtained by interpreting the boy's description of the sacrifice, but rather through an immediate intuitive process that involves no reading of symbols--in this respect they also qualify as agrapta, unwritten. There is no separation between author and reader in his case, but a mystical process by which he acquires unmediated knowledge. Teiresias's revelations validate Antigone's insistence that her brother must be buried, and validate this conviction with terminology that recalls her own arguments.

Since Teiresias has direct access to the divine, he adds weight to Antigone's contention that Creon's announcement is not what he says it is--a law. A mortal cannot make a command that supersedes the authority of the gods. But Creon's utterance is performative; it does set a series of tragic events in motion, although these consequences are not the ones he intended. If the utterance is not a law, then what is it? One of Searle's modifications to Austin's inaugural theory was to make a distinction between speech acts that are ratified by communal protocols (this would include making laws) and individual speech acts such as promises, wagers, threats, and insults, which turn on social protocol but do not necessarily require an explicit formula or authorization (Searle, Expression 17). Creon's interdiction pretends to fit into the former category--an institutional speech act or law--but in fact falls into the latter, a threat by an individual. Creon does things with words, since various members of the community are intimidated by his threat (the Watchman, for example, guards the corpse and apprehends Antigone). But like his predecessor Oedipus, who issued a decree that turned out to have more impact on its author than any other citizen in Thebes, Creon makes a proclamation that has devastating personal consequences for himself--the loss of his son and then his wife, in essence the eradication of his family line.

Antigone (whose name means "against the family") has turned out to be a powerful agent of Creon's catastrophe; she is also the agent who reveals the flaws in his attempt to make law. She, too, has made a speech act; Timothy Gould aptly calls this a play about "a conflict of performatives" (19). Her announcement--which appears to be an individual promise--turns out to have the institutional force that Creon's illocution lacks. But she, too, has her limitations. Antigone herself was not able to persuade Creon that the unburied corpse of her brother offended the gods. This is an important point consonant with a society and a genre that associated authoritative speech with men. The original dramatic production might have emphasized the disparity by having the same actor play both Antigone and Teiresias: only when the actor portrays a male character does his voice have authority for Creon. It is not until Teiresias confirms that the laws of the gods have been violated that Antigone's similar assertion is authenticated. Teiresias predicts that, within a few days, Creon will repay corpse for corpses "because you keep up here one who belongs to the gods below, a corpse unburied, unhonored, all unhallowed" (Jebb 1070-71). Apparently, then, Antigone's burial of her brother was not a complete act. As J.L. Whitehorne notices, Antigone intended to perform the entire multi-staged ceremony herself, first approaching Ismene for help lifting the body, and then planning to erect a monument over the corpse (80-81). For the original audience of this play, a complete funeral was a multi- staged event, with distinct activities for both genders: women's roles consisted of pouring libations and mourning (as described by the Watchman at 431), but responsibility for burying the dead lay with the male members of a family (Whitehorne 137; Garland 36; Sourvinou-Inwood 140; Hame 151). It is obvious from Teiresias's words that Antigone's attempt to take over this function is innately defective; the gods clearly demand a more public, complete ritual.

Creon and Haemon are the only living male relatives who can assume this role. In taking over the responsibility for her brother's burial, Antigone had challenged Creon's position as the head of her household, and "as king of Thebes, the legal successor to the political estate of Eteocles and Polyneices, its co-rulers" (Whitehorne 137). Helene Foley has argued that Creon's refusal to bury Polyneices means that Antigone becomes an "honorary male" (180); as she reminds us, the citizens of Thebes had praised her for taking on this duty, an indication that there were exceptional circumstances in which a woman might act autonomously. Appealing as this interpretation may be, it still does not explain why Teiresias refers to the corpse as unburied, nor does it account for the fact that Antigone cannot perform the ritual as completely as she says she will. Sourvinou-Inwood is correct to stress the need for ritual closure to satisfy the gods of the underworld. This is accomplished (too late) when Creon sets about performing the necessary rites. The messenger later describes the ritual washing and arrangement of the corpse, the cremation, and the raising of the monument (1199-1204) all performed by Creon.

This would be a suitable point to return to Austin who states that, in order for a performative utterance to be effective, "the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation for the particular procedures invoked" (15, 32). A saint, to use one of Austin's examples (34), cannot baptize a penguin, and a woman, from the cultural perspective of an Athenian audience, cannot properly say, "I will bury him." She lacks the authority to make this particular promise since she is not the appropriate person to do so.

On the other hand, Antigone's insistence on inserting herself into public channels of communication and on speaking out in public functions as a necessary check on the abuse of language that Creon has perpetrated. Her performative utterance had the perlocutionary effect of her brother's official burial. Her speech act takes a most oblique route and possesses a strange spectral power, but her vow to bury her brother interfered with Creon's prohibition. By defying the edict, she sets in motion a chain of events that lead to Haemon's suicide; it is Teiresias's prophecy of this disaster that motivates Creon to bury Polyneices, foolishly believing that he has the power to change the gods' decrees, which, unlike his own, cannot be erased. Creon performs the burial first in an attempt to deflect the gods' anger but there are no second chances in this tragic universe. Harris is mistaken when he speculates that had she waited but a few hours, Creon would have rescued her and reunited her with Haemon (48). The prophecy of Teiresias allowed for no such conditions or alternatives; it was a speech act of unimpeachable authority.

Just as Antigone insinuated herself into an authorial position by speaking Creon's edict and then enacting its penalty on herself, so too her deformed speech act ("I will bury him") exposes Creon's considerable failures at language, his inability to say "no-one will bury him." The performative power of Antigone's words resides in an uncanny combination of quotations, and parodies, but she prevails. She operates in a shadow land of language that subtends the Theban autocracy where a tyrant's word is supposed to be law. Antigone's infelicities reveal her uncommon agency, which is such that the pre-eminent male of Thebes, a king who should have the greatest authority to do things with words, cannot control his subjects by language, or even control of the effects of his language. He ends up doing precisely that which he forbade. Creon attempts to create law unilaterally, ignoring both the voice of the demos and the laws of the gods. What develops is an aberration, a situation that forces a woman into the civic space, and requires her to speak on behalf of the demos. Antigone, whose action is the subject of muffled rumours and silent uproars, who creates a scandal, becomes the embodiment of democratic debate, and the voice of true law.

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Fletcher, Judith. "Citing the law in Sophocles's Antigone." *Mosaic* [Winnipeg] 41.3 (2008): 79+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 27 Oct. 2014.

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA187012503&v=2.1&u=lom\_accessmich&it=r&p=EAIM&sw=w&asid=75f8999eb4c85780ae03895ea2a8272f

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A187012503

***Oedipus the King:* Literary Criticism and Response**

Instructions: Read the literary criticisms of *Oedipus* below. Choose one criticism, and, on another sheet, write a response either *in support of* or *opposing* the critic’s argument. Remember to cite the text (both the criticism and the play) for support.

**Criticism #1: CHARLES SEGAL**

[**Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).**](http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=111506861)

Sophocles' play asks, Why do our lives turn out to have the shape that they finally have? He opens before us a kaleidoscopic configuration of different possibilities: the circumstances of our birth, our character, parental nurture or its absence, sheer luck, a mistake or miscalculation or wrong decision at a crucial moment, a mysterious doom or destiny, the will of the gods. The play brings together the question of how we make sense of our individual lives and how we make sense of our world given the elusiveness of final truth, the mysterious remoteness of the gods, and the slipperiness of language. The play adds the further question: even if we could know what “reality” is, that is, could discover the ultimate pattern determining the course of our lives, would this pattern offer us any hope or comfort, or would it turn out to be a kind of cruel joke, an “infernal machine,” to cite the title of Jean Cocteau's Oedipus play?

**Criticism #2: PAUL ROSEFELDT**

**Rosefeldt, Paul. "From Strange Interlude to Strange Snow: A Study of the Absent Character in Drama." *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* (2002)**

Ever since Oedipus Rex, absent characters have played an important part in dramatic construction. Many dramas are built around the quest for such an absent character. For example, the dead fathers in Oedipus Rex, Hamlet, and Ghosts are all driving forces of dramatic action. The absent character, however, needn't be dead. The father in Miss Julie, like the elusive Mr. Godot, never appears, but his implied presence acts as a dramatic catalyst. An absent character is a character who does not appear in the play, but who is the focus of attention for the other characters and is central to the play's plot. The absent character does not appear in the play's plot, the action that unfolds before the audience, but is part of the play's story, the overall narrative of actions that take place before the plotted action or in between the scenes. Objects and people associated with the character recreate the character's presence, a presence which influences the play's action.

But in these dramas, as in the cases of Oedipus Rex and Hamlet, mourning is connected with a crime and a guilty secret. In each of the plays, there has been an actual or implied crime committed against the hero, either directly or indirectly, by a father figure. War itself is attached to violence and impurity. Also, it is primarily a sacrifice of the sons by their fathers although other Characters also feel the guilt and partake of the crime. This guilt intensifies the mourning process. These dramas follow the same pattern as Oedipus Rex and Hamlet. Both plays follow a paradigmatic pattern in which "mourning is brought about by an initial crime" (Lacan 41). The notion that the ghosts of those murdered must have their sorrows remembered is an ancient concept at the heart of dramatic ritual (Ridgeway 37). The search for a criminal action or a guilty secret determines the dramatic structure of many mourning plays. And such searches take the form of some combination of the detective story and the tragic drama (Auden 16). For August Strindberg, drama is based on "a secret made known to the audience either at the beginning or toward the end" (183). All of these factors--mourning, hidden crimes, guilty secrets--are based on a need to reveal or bring into presence that which is absent. In this way the drama of the absent hero brings together some of the deepest forces that underlie the workings of serious drama. This study will investigate these and other forces which lie at the heart of dramatic presentation.

**Criticism #3: X.J KENNEDY AND DANA GIOIA**

**X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, Compact Edition*.* (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995).**

We are not altogether sorry, perhaps, to see an arrogant man such as Oedipus humbled, and yet it is difficult not to feel that the punishment of Oedipus is greater than he deserves. Possible this feeling is what Aristotle meant in his observation that a tragedy arouses our pity and our fear: our compassion for Oedipus and our terror as we sense the remorselessness of a universe in which a man is doomed. Notice, however, that at the end of the play Oedipus does not curse God and die. Although such a complex play is open to many interpretations, it is probably safe to say that the play is not a bitter complaint against the universe. At last, Oedipus accepts the divine will, prays for blessings upon his children, and prepares to endure his exile – fallen from high estate, but uplifted in moral dignity. [www.phuhs.org/teachers/bradleysc/files/.../**Criticism**%20Response.docx](http://www.phuhs.org/teachers/bradleysc/files/.../Criticism%20Response.docx)

**Oedipus' Ill-Fated Quest for the Truth**

**Date:** 1951
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Cedric H. Whitman
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

Oedipus was proverbial for two things—sagacity and atrocious misfortune. Greek popular wisdom had it that if a man were careful and prudent, he would avoid trouble. Of all men, Oedipus should have succeeded, but of all men he particularly did not. Oedipus remains a type of human ability condemned to destruction by an external insufficiency in life itself—as if knowledge were possible, but the objects of knowledge, to use Plato's phrase, were somehow illusory, or at least evil. Such is Oedipus in the Sophoclean version, and such he must have been always. The myth is ultimately its own best interpreter and needs no *fabula docet*. It is for form's sake alone that the *Oedipus Rex* closes with the same old Herodotean saw which opened the *Trachiniae:*

Let mortals hence be taught to look beyond
The present time, nor dare to say, a man
Is happy, till the last decisive hour
Shall close his life without the taste of woe.

For Sophocles, however, the tale has deeper though less clearcut implications. Something of the fiery character of Laius, as it is hinted at in the *Oedipus Rex*, is perhaps derived from Aeschylus. But Oedipus himself illustrated two great dilemmas: first, like Orestes, he was the unwilling instrument of crime, and second, he was at once the emblem of shrewd wisdom and utter blindness. Aeschylus must unquestionably have dealt with the first of these dilemmas, and it is probable that he believed that Oedipus, in some degree, deserved his sufferings. But it is with the second dilemma that Sophocles is concerned. In the *Oedipus Rex*, he passes over the question of whether or not Oedipus is morally guilty of parricide and incest and concentrates wholly on the extent of his knowledge. Later, in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles reverted to the other dilemma, and made old Oedipus defend his moral innocence in several spirited harangues, but the whole matter of moral guilt or innocence is never broached, even for an instant, in the earlier play. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated simply from the character of the king himself in the *Oedipus Rex*, that Sophocles never considered him morally guilty. He was, from the first, the man who contrived his own fall without deserving it. And to this bitter fact may be added the even bitterer one that the means by which Oedipus destroyed himself was not his folly but his keenly intelligent moral conscience, which led him to take every possible step to avoid the unspeakable pollution that had been prophesied for him.

As he tells us himself, Oedipus thought that he was the son of Polybus, King of Corinth; but once, after being twitted by a drunken companion about his origin, he consulted the oracle and was told that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, he avoided his supposed parents thereafter and made his way through Phocis, where his real father, Laius, met and attacked him at a cross-roads. In the fight which ensued, Oedipus slew Laius and all but one of his companions, and then proceeded to Thebes. So far, if we make allowances for the bloody practices which travel in the wilder districts sometimes enjoined upon the wayfarer of the heroic age, Oedipus had behaved with a good conscience. At Thebes he found the "riddle-singing Sphinx," the pest of the land, which by his sagacity he destroyed. He was rewarded by the grateful citizens with the hand of the recently widowed queen, Jocasta. And so for some years he reigned and bred sons and daughters, a happy and revered ruler, until the coming of the plague, at which point Sophocles begins his play. The plague, we are told, had been sent as a punishment because the city was polluted by the unavenged blood of Laius. And now, apparently for the first time, the question arises: who is the murderer of Laius?

If Sophocles had wanted us to consider the problem of right and wrong, he would have dramatized the scene at the crossroads. Instead he has dramatized the search for the murderer; the whole action is therefore devoted to the effort to draw truth out of the uncertainty and ignorance which at first center around the plague and later begin to gather more and more ominously around the king himself.

Whitman, Cedric H. *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1951): pp. 122–25. Quoted as "Oedipus' Ill-Fated Quest for the Truth" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO21&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO21&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO21&SingleRecord=True)

***Oedipus At Colonus* and Its Connection with the Oedipal Cycle**

**Date:** 1987
On *Oedipus At Colonus* by Sophocles
**Author:** Peter L. Rudnytsky
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

Any study of the interrelations among Sophocles' Theban plays must begin with the recognition that they do not form a trilogy. *Antigone*, the earliest in order of composition, was probably produced in 442 b.c. and *Oedipus the King* in about 425 during the plague in the second year of the Peloponnesian War; *Oedipus at Colonus*, written shortly before Sophocles' death at the age of ninety in 406, was first performed posthumously in 402. The difficulties of interpretation are compounded by the fact that nothing certain is known about the other two works that were performed together with each of these plays, and which may or may not have been related to them in subject matter. It must be borne in mind, furthermore, that all three plays are independent wholes, apart from their relations to any larger sequence.

These important considerations notwithstanding, I wish to press the case for the unity of the Oedipus cycle. Certainly there are minor inconsistencies from one play to the next.

But these discrepancies are outweighed by the evidence for continuities linking the three plays. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, above all, it is clear that Sophocles has sought to establish connections with *Oedipus the King*. In a broad sense, the plot of *Oedipus at Colonus* constitutes a reversal and an undoing of the earlier play: instead of a movement from strength and weakness, there is movement from weakness to strength; and Oedipus, rather than attempting to circumvent the predictions of oracles, now aligns himself with the forces seeking their fulfillment. The parallels between *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* are announced as early as the first word, since the address of the aged Oedipus to his daughter Antigone, *teknon* ("child"), recalls that of the proud king to his assembled people, *tekna* ("children"). The speeches of Oedipus opening both plays, moreover, are each thirteen lines long, and divided into units of eight and five lines, marked by the transition *alla* ("but"). Most significantly, Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus* has Oedipus allude (ll. 87–95) to his visit to the Delphic oracle recounted in *Oedipus the King* (ll. 788–93), where it had been foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother, only Oedipus now discloses for the first time a new aspect of the prophecy—that he would find his final resting place in a grove of the Furies, whence he would become a blessing to his friends and a curse to his enemies. This direct reference to *Oedipus the King* in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the transposition of Oedipus' fate into a new register, epitomizes the continuity between the two plays. Finally, it is noteworthy that in *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles attempts to smooth over the previous discrepancies in the accounts of the succession to the Theban throne, since Ismene explains (ll. 367–73) that the two sons—who, after all, were young boys at the time of Oedipus' fall—agreed *at* *first* to resign the throne to Creon, only to change their minds and battle with one another as they grew older. Whether one judges Sophocles' effort to obtain coherence to be skillful or maladroit is less important that the fact that he makes it at all, because the very undertaking shows his desire to preserve the unity of the Oedipus cycle.

It follows that the pivotal play in any discussion of the Oedipus cycle as a whole is *Antigone*, since it may be regarded either as a beginning or an ending. A further corollary is that the Oedipus cycle possesses *two* endings— *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus* —which qualify and react upon one another. Recast in more theoretical terms, the implication of the double arrangement of the Theban plays is that they invite a reading that is at once *synchronic* and *diachronic*.

Rudnytsky, Peter L. *Freud and Oedipus*. New York: Columbia University Press (1987): pp. 275–77. Quoted as "*Oedipus At Colonus* and Its Connection with the Oedipal Cycle" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO36&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO36&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO36&SingleRecord=True)

## Blindness and Vision: Oedipus Tyrannus

**Date:** 1967
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Herbert Musurillo
**From:** *Oedipus Rex*, Bloom's Guides.

Very subtly is the theme of the plague united with the symbolism of the ship. The priest of Zeus, narrating to Oedipus the latest ravages of the common disease, speaks of the city as a ship (23–4) that

Cannot keep its prow above the bloody swell.

It is wallowing in blood, in death, as the bodies fall in the city and empty the state of its manpower (55–7), the ship of its crew. But the pilot Oedipus—as Jocasta is later to call him (923) and the Chorus in a moment of eulogy describes him (694–6)—tells the priest and the suppliants that he has not been asleep (65–7),

But know you that I have wept many tears
And travelled many roads within my mind.

That is, he has been worried and deeply concerned—a characteristic mark of Oedipus' make-up. He began his career by wandering out of anxiety away from Corinth where he was raised; and his final wandering will take him back in spirit to discover the mystery of his birth and birthmark. Indeed, the theme of Oedipus the wanderer, the outcast from birth (1350), whose nurse and mother is the broad range of Mt. Cithaeron (1090–95), is a minor, secondary one within the broad and rich background of the play. It is to Cithaeron that he wishes to return, to live and die as a recluse among the hills (1451 ff.), Cithaeron that heard his baby cries and echoed, at the end, with his animal bellow of recognition as he sees the truth of what the prophet had foretold.

But it is with the ship and harbor imagery that I am chiefly concerned. To Jocasta, the Chorus and Creon, Oedipus is the pilot who has steered the ship of state on a fair breeze; and Oedipus himself is conscious of his administrative role. Indeed, he is not like the Creon of the *Antigone* who sees his captaincy as a kind of divine absolutism, a role which gives him complete dominion over the citizens as though they were his slaves. No, Oedipus fulfills his position by his positive contribution to the welfare of the state, and his actions always depend upon the consultation of the Theban people. It is precisely his solicitude which helps to bring him to disaster. His position begins to disintegrate with the reluctant arrival of Teiresias. Oedipus cannot imagine the reason why the ancient seer will not speak out and suspects that Creon and Teiresias have guilty knowledge of Laius' death. Very rightly does Oedipus conclude that kings most often lose their thrones by the machinations of those who are closest to them; if Creon and the prophet got rid of Laius, they surely now would try to murder his successor. Teiresias' withering reply unleashes all the most shocking details of Oedipus' unwitting crime, clothed in prophetic obscurity. He tells him of the dread-footed Curse that is pursuing him (419 ff.).

Both now while you have sight, and later blind.
And what harbor shall there not be for your cry,
What Cithaeron's grove shall not re-echo with it,
When you realize the marriage which you've made,
Sailing on a favorable breeze to a harborless harbor …

Oedipus' great and sudden rise in life, his towering success as king of Thebes—this is the harbor into which he has piloted his ship under favorable winds. Teiresias' words recall the pathetic prayer of the Chorus in the parodos (194 ff.): they beseech their patron gods to drive out Ares the fever-god (whom they believe is at fault for the plague), like an infectious, disease-bearing cloud, to the east or to the west,

to Amphitrite's great chamber,
Or that most friendless anchorage,
The Thracian sea.

To Oedipus, then, the palace of Thebes has become a "friendless anchorage," a treacherous harbor which consumes and destroys the vessels that are innocently moored in it. The fair breeze, the brief success in quelling the baneful influence of the Sphinx, the solemn nuptials with queen Jocasta—all this was but the semblance of happiness, a shadowy glory sent by the gods to make Oedipus' descent into the abyss all the more appalling and irreversible.

But there is a still more ominous pronouncement to come. The Chorus ironically interprets Oedipus' voyage in the ode which just follows the final revelation (1186 ff.). We see now that the rise-and-fall pattern of human life not only fits those who are guilty of *hybris* as they had previously suggested (873 ff.); it may also describe the life of any man whom the gods have somehow chosen to humiliate, thrusting him into a life which is merely an illusion of happiness, and then plunging him into the blackest despair.1 This image of climbing and falling we shall touch upon farther on. What is interesting in this last choral ode is the final development of the ship and harbor imagery which had been so pervasive throughout the earlier part of the play. For the earlier cry of healing, the paean, has turned into a lament (1219), as though Oedipus were already dead. In their most prophetic mood, the Chorus continues to sing (1207 ff.):

Alas, my famous Oedipus!
The same great harbor sufficed
Both for father and for son, to fall,
Both husbands. How, how indeed,
Could those maternal fields, poor child,
Have born you for so long?

The imagery, though obscurely delicate is direct. The harborless harbor, the friendless anchorage, is none other than his own mother. He has, like a grim husbandman, inherited the fields his father sowed—the Greek is ambiguous—and he has "fallen" upon the same harbor as his father.2 It is the moment of supreme irony in the play: for the Greek for "harbor" can also mean "womb."3 No greater crime can be imagined; no greater disturbance of the Laws which rule on high.

## Notes

1. See my article, "The Illusion of Prosperity in Sophocles and Gregory of Nyssa," *Amer. Journal of Philology* 82 (1961), 182–187.
2. For a discussion of the many levels of irony in this word, see *Symbol and Myth in Ancient Poetry*, pp. 86–7.
3. See the fragment of Empedocles cited in Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (7th ed. 3 vols. Berlin 1954), I.346.21. Aeschylus makes Polyneices "flee the darkness of his mother" (*Seven against Thebes* 664), that is, the womb.

Musurillo, Herbert. "Blindness and Vision: Oedipus Tyrannus." In *The Light and The Darkness: Studies in the Dramatic Poetry of Sophocles*. E.J. Brill, 1967. Quoted as "Blindness and Vision: Oedipus Tyrannus" in Bloom, Harold ed. *Oedipus Rex*, Bloom's Guides. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2007. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BGOR019&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BGOR019&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BGOR019&SingleRecord=True)

## Oedipus Rex and the Modern Reader

**Date:** 2001
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Charles Segal
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

The place of *Oedipus Tyrannus* in literature is something like that of the Mona Lisa in art. Everyone knows the story, the first detective story of Western literature; everyone who has read or seen it is drawn into its enigmas and moral dilemmas. It presents a kind of nightmare vision of a world suddenly turned upside down: a decent man discovers that he has unknowingly killed his father, married his mother, and had children by her. It is a story that, as Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, makes one shudder with horror and feel pity just on hearing it (14.1453b5–7). Tragedy stirs the deep emotions of pity and fear as it brings us face to face with suffering, strength, and courage at the outer limits of human experience; and *Oedipus* is Aristotle's favorite example for this tragic effect. We find the unexpected reversal in the lives of the great and fortunate deeply moving, both for individuals and for the state, as we know from contemporary responses to the deaths of famous people—our equivalent to the mythical kings of ancient Greece—such as that of Princess Diana of Britain. The stories of kings are themselves exemplary of the extreme limits of human criminality and human grandeur; and this play shows a great and passionate king confronting unspeakable horrors.

In Sophocles' hands this ancient tale also becomes a profound meditation on the questions of guilt and responsibility, the order (or disorder) of our world, and the nature of man. The play stands with the Book of Job, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* as one of Western literature's most searching examinations of the problem of meaning and suffering. A life that seems happy, productive, and distinguished in the service of others suddenly crumbles into dust. The well-meaning king of Thebes—an effective, admired, and respected ruler—suddenly finds that he is not only the source of the calamity from which he has tried to protect his citizens, the plague with which the play begins, but also guilty of the two most horrible crimes imaginable: incest with his mother and the bloody killing of his father. The hero's determined march toward the horrifying discovery of these facts produces the feeling of an inexorable doom surrounding his life, as he recognizes that he has fulfilled prophecies that Apollo had given to him and his parents. In fact, the very attempts to avoid these prophecies seem to have brought them to pass. Thus, on one reading, the play is a tragedy of a destiny that the hero cannot evade, despite his best attempts to do so.

The play is a tragedy not only of destiny but also of personal identity: the search for the origins and meaning of our life, our balance between "one" and "many" selves, our recognition of the large areas of darkness about who we "really" are, and the effort to explore the essential mystery of our selfhood. It dramatizes the lonely path of self-discovery, as Oedipus separates his true self from an illusory self defined by the external status of his kingship, and retraces his existence from powerful ruler to lonely wanderer, without parents, city, home, or even a sure name. The hero chosen to perform exceptional deeds has also to undergo exceptional suffering as the polluted parricide and outcast who has infected his city.

Segal, Charles. Oedipus Tyrannus: *Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press (2001): pp. 3–4. Quoted as "Oedipus Rex and the Modern Reader" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO19&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO19&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO19&SingleRecord=True)

## The Innocence of Oedipus: The Philosophers on *Oedipus the King*, Part 31

**Date:** 1966
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Thomas Gould
**From:** *Oedipus Rex*, Updated Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations.

E. R. Dodds has complained recently that the undergraduates at Oxford still read *Oedipus the King*, and Greek tragedy in general, in ignorance of the new enlightened thinking that they could have found in almost any scholarly work on the subject today.2 They drearily repeat, he says, the very misconceptions that Wilamowitz thought he had put an end to seventy years ago. He finds the idea still depressingly common, for instance, that Greek tragedies always show men coming to bad ends because of "tragic flaws" in their character. The students could have been disabused of this notion, Dodds points out, by reading any one of quite a number of excellent books or articles. Two of Dodds' complaints may not be as justified as this one, however. On two important counts the undergraduates seem to have been right and their examiner wrong. And since Dodds, quite correctly, implies that his views represent those of the majority among recent scholars, it is worth looking at these two points.

First, there is the general agreement among modern critics that the greatest of the Greek tragedies were never tragedies of fate, that, whatever the reader thinks who comes fresh to the text without the benefit of scholarly and critical works, the finest tragedies never show good men being crushed by destinies that they could not have avoided. To believe in tragedies of fate, according to Dodds and to many others, is worse even than to believe in a "tragic flaw."

The second point concerns Aristotle on the "tragic flaw." Did he or did he not assert that in a play in which the protagonist is shown coming to grief the catastrophe must be felt to be due, at least in part, to some avoidable error on the part of the protagonist? Since Bywater's time, as Dodds says, more and more scholars have come to the conclusion that Aristotle required only that there be an unavoidable mistake in the facts. This is now the orthodox position. Yet ordinary readers, ignorant of the works of these critics, still tend to assume that Aristotle demanded a flaw in the protagonist's character or intellect.

I would like to champion the judgment of the naive reader on both of these questions.

*1*

There is a line of reasoning that goes something like this. If the *Oedipus* is a tragedy of fate, the story of a man who is ruined by forces he cannot be expected to have understood or influenced, then the protagonist of the story was obviously not responsible for his misery in any way. But if he was not responsible for what happened to him, he is a mere puppet and his story is sad, but not "tragic"; it cannot engage our moral sensibility and it cannot, therefore, be profound or moving. But the *Oedipus* is profound and moving. Therefore it is not a tragedy of fate.

If we ask someone who feels this way about the play just why he wants Oedipus to be "responsible," we usually get a rather complicated answer. First of all it will be vigorously denied, more than likely, that what is wanted is that our playwrights show us punishments fitting crimes—a world where the good are always rewarded and the bad made to pay for their failings. If we admitted this we would be admitting that Aristotle's theory of the "tragic flaw" (interpreted in the old-fashioned way) was really right after all. Whatever is meant by "responsible" in this context, it is usually not the same as criminal guilt. What is wanted, apparently, is "free will" or "free choice" in the protagonist's actions. "What fascinates us," Dodds suggests, "is the spectacle of a man freely choosing from the highest motives a series of actions which lead to his own ruin." Oedipus must be innocent of harboring any culpable desires, then; and yet it must be he, acting freely, who brought on the catastrophe, not the gods, not fate.

There is a muddle here somewhere, surely. Oedipus' intentions were good, but the results of his actions were bad; and the explanation for this is that he did not have certain important pieces of information. One would have thought that we were reduced to one of two possibilities. Either Oedipus could not have come into possession of the important facts however much he had improved his intelligence or character, which would mean that something else must have been at fault for his catastrophe—chance, the world, fate, or the gods. Or Oedipus brought his misery upon himself and nothing external is to be blamed, in which case it must be true that Oedipus would have been able to avoid his catastrophe had he been a better man or at least a better thinker. Yet, according to the theory we are considering, neither of these is the case: it is denied that Oedipus is brought down by things external to him, but it is also denied that his uncompelled moves were bad or foolish in any way.

There are two favorite ways of coping with this difficulty. Sometimes it is suggested that Oedipus would not have avoided his misery by having been a better man, but he *could* have remained prosperous and happy if he had been a *less* good man. I shall examine this strange theory in Section 3 below. The other way out is to point to the fact that the Greeks before the Stoics had not yet conceived of the will as we do and so did not see fate and free will as exclusive alternatives. That is, if we think away "our" notion of the will and accept Sophocles' idea of it, we will be able to see that Oedipus acted freely and was responsible for what happened even though the whole sequence of events is repeatedly said to be the work of the gods.

Our first task, then, is to examine the difference between the ancient and the modern notions of the will.

Neither the poets nor the philosophers of classical Greece had any difficulty in distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary actions; between situations where a man could act as he saw fit and situations where, because of nature, the gods or other men, a man could not so act; between human acts in which the character of the actor could be read (and praised or blamed accordingly) and acts where nothing could be justly inferred about the character of the men involved, and so on. They also knew full well, of course, that some men were decisive, energetic and able to make their characters felt by the world, whereas others either lacked energy or opportunity or for some other reason did not so often or so effectively impress their unique personalities on the events in which they were involved. What, then, is meant by the complaint that the ancients did not have "our" notion of the will? Usually what is meant is that it rarely, if ever, occurred to the Greeks (before the Stoics and Epicureans) that in the act of making a decision a man is introducing a surge of energy (or a twist, or a focus) that could not be accounted for by the sum total of all antecedent events. The ancients tended to think that the crucial distinction was that between a man who is allowed to act according to his character and a man who is given no such opportunity; but they also thought that the character was probably determined by all of the things that had happened in his past (his habits, education, reading, accidental encounters, even the experiences in his previous lives, according to Plato, and certainly the experiences of his society even in the years before he was born). Modern readers, on the other hand, are very often made uncomfortable by this formulation. Unless the will can break the chains of efficient causes which are governed by unalterable mechanical laws, it is argued, we are not "free," and we cannot blame anyone for anything: a man's character would be made for him, not by him, and his every act would already be determined before he was born. In such an idea, it is feared, we have an intellectualized version of fatalism.

From Homer to Aristotle both poets and philosophers tended to ask not "was he free?" as we might do, but "is he responsible (*aitios*)?" The questions are the same in that they both are attempts to identify the extent to which events were in our power, so that we will be able to assign praise and blame with justice. They are different questions, however, in that the latter, the ancient question, is answered in the affirmative if it can be shown that the men involved acted according to their characters; the modern question, on the other hand, can on occasion be a request for something else in addition to this. It can also express a desire to know whether there Were men involved in the events in question to whose inner tendencies or thoughts we can trace at least some of the real causes of the events—"causes" now being used, not in a practical sense (was he brought up well? should he be re-educated? must we try to change his character by persuasion or punishment?), but in a metaphysical sense (were there new beginnings at the moments of decision-making which cannot be restated as effects of antecedent events?).

The ambiguity in the English word "responsible" is the cause of many misunderstandings. There are at least three things that we could mean when we ask to what extent a man is "responsible" for what he did. The word can mean 1) that the man so described acted in accordance with his own character, saying nothing about what determined that character, 2) that in addition to being "responsible" in this way, the man's character might have been different had he developed different habits in his past, saying nothing about what things would have had to be different in order that he should develop different habits, or 3) that in addition to these two requirements, somehow, either at the moment we are concentrating on or in the past when his character was being formed, there was within him somewhere a new beginning, a turn or an impulse that cannot be entirely accounted for by antecedent events.

Although the Greek word *aitios* was capable of the same ambiguities (cf. *Nic.Eth.* 3.5), in the period before the Stoics and Epicureans, as I have said, it *almost* always meant the first, or the first combined with the second; the third possibility did not seem vital or appropriate. This restriction may have been, not a weakness, however, but the strength of the Greek moralists. With this meaning of "responsibility" they were able to distinguish clearly enough between moral and immoral actions; between the man who put a high value on looking ahead, calculating, moving with due forethought, etc., and the man who saw no value in such planning; between the man who hated the desires within his own psyche that were capable of leading him to self-defeating goals (the man of conscience, the man who could feel guilt) and the man who was too willing to look for purely external sources for his failures, and so on. By having nothing to do with the third sense of "responsibility," they could then concentrate on the circumstances that were responsible for a man's character's being what it was, in hopes always of finding something that could be changed in order to improve men's characters in the future.

The main difficulty, as the earlier Greeks saw it, was not in the nature of the will, but the consequences of the power and the intentions of the gods. Were the gods humane? all of them or merely some? could you choose your own divinity or did it choose you? was divinity all-powerful or not? did it care whether human beings were happy? were the rules that the gods themselves were subject to comforting or appalling things? One's tests for human "responsibility" necessarily varied according to the way one answered questions like these. And yet, because they also asked about the character of the man and whether or not he was acting gladly, the Greeks of the classical period stayed remarkably clear of the maze of puzzles that such questions could lead to; and they usually stayed clear of the worst features of oriental fatalism also, even when their answers to these questions about the gods were most bitter and pessimistic.

The *Iliad* already shows us a whole range of subtly different attitudes toward the presence of the power of divinity. Paris was thought by Hector and others to have drawn annoyingly incorrect conclusions from the fact that human destinies are in the laps of the gods. Once, when he is scolded by Helen, he tells her to stop criticizing him: Menelaus had won this time, with the help of his god; he, Paris, would win on some other occasions with the help of *his* god (3.438ff, again at 6.339). But Hector had an even more appalling vision of the power of the gods or fate and of the helplessness of men than Paris had (and Homer makes us feel that Hector was not only perceptive but pious, too, and knew what he was talking about), yet his fatalism did not tend to make him craven or self-indulgent at all. Indeed, it made his criticism of his brother all the sharper. In one breath Hector says that Zeus obviously sent Paris to be a bane to his countrymen; in the next he wishes Paris would die swiftly; then he goes off to see him in order to upbraid him and to change his ways (6.280–5). Helen constantly criticizes *herself*, although she believes, or says she believes, that the gods willed her disastrous yielding to Paris (6.349; at 6.357–8 Helen makes a conjecture as to what the purpose of the gods might have been). Helen struggles against her *daimôn*, in marked contrast to Paris, who, when he is favored by the same goddess, yields willingly and takes pride in the fact (3.65). Although Helen blames herself—or rather *because* she blames herself—neither Hector nor Priam do blame her. I do not hold you responsible (*aitie*), says Priam. The gods are responsible in my eyes. The elders agree, though they wish she would go away nevertheless.

In the fifth century Gorgias composed a defense of Helen in which everything *but* character is given as a cause. The results are startling. She could not be blamed, he says, because she must have gone with Paris for one of four reasons (*aitiai*): either 1) because of the plans of fortune and the premeditations of the gods, or 2) because she was seized by force, or 3) because she was won over by reason, or 4) because she was captured by desire (fr. B 11, 6). Euripides gives Helen a similar, though even more elaborate, defense in the *Trojan Women*; but he then has Hecuba refute these reasons one by one. Hecuba's main weapon is to translate Helen's observations back into terms of the personal character implied. Thus Helen says that Aphrodite could not be resisted by a mortal; Hecuba retorts that "Aphrodite" is a misleading name for a certain well-known kind of weakness (988–9).

As Aeschylus tells the story, both Clytemnestra and Orestes committed crimes because the curse of the house of Atreus had to be worked out. Yet Aeschylus obviously disapproves of Clytemnestra, even though he portrays Orestes as entirely blameless. Clytemnestra can apparently be held responsible, despite the existence of the divine plan, because she was, nevertheless, acting willingly, according to her character—she saw the course of action open to her as one that fitted well with her vision of how she would like things to be. (Aegisthus was attractive and it was convenient that Agamemnon should be got out of the way.) The case was otherwise with Orestes: he was truly horrified by the demands of heaven. Apollo had repeatedly to impress on the young man that the consequences of not killing his mother would be even more revolting than the polluting crime itself. And so Orestes is thought admirable, Clytemnestra not.

A belief in fate or the ultimate triumph of divine will does not always make judgments of human excellence impossible or nonsensical. There are different ways of judging men implied in different conceptions of the divine will. According to the Stoics, for instance, the wise man is the man who, as he does what the rulers of the universe will have him do, finds that it is exactly what he would have wanted to do anyhow. ("Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt," attributed by Seneca to Cleanthes, *SVF* 1.119.) On this theory, it is Clytemnestra, not Orestes, who acted well—if we can accept the curse as the plan of Providence. The Stoics, of course, denied that divinities could have conflicting desires or that different divinities were triumphant at different moments in history. For them, therefore, the discovery that someone did gladly what divinity would have him do was a sufficient test of that person's moral excellence. Aeschylus assumed that divinity could want for a man what a man ought not to want for himself; the Stoics were certain that doing the god's will—living according to nature—is invariably the shortest path to happiness, also to a feeling of freedom and to true goodness. Neither the Stoics nor Aeschylus, then, allowed their belief in the inevitable triumph of divine plans to deprive them of a way to distinguish good men from bad men. Indeed, their different conceptions of divinity helped define their different schemes for praise and blame.

But perhaps it is wrong to speak of the need to distinguish better men from worse men as though this were a secondary consideration. It is obviously primary. A society that deprived itself of the means to influence the character and desires of its members just could not last very long. And the most important means that it has to effect changes of this sort is to make its disapproval felt by a wrongdoer or potential wrongdoer and so make that person hate the part of himself that harbors the destructive desire. If we let a man who has acted regrettably speak blandly of forces external to his character, when the circumstances are the same once more he is likely to make the same disastrous move all over again. This is why Hector and Helen cannot allow Paris to lessen his disgrace by pointing to the role of the gods in his defeat, and why the Achaean princes cannot change their feelings toward Agamemnon even if they half accept his conjecture that it must have been a god who took his wits away the day that he alienated Achilles. Paris and Agamemnon are judged "responsible" in the sense that they acted according to their character; regrettable events were traced to regrettable tendencies in these men, and these tendencies were thought to be capable of being improved by the instillation of shame or guilt. They saw no inconsistency between this attitude and a belief in powerful and frequent divine interventions.

On the other hand, this does not mean that Homer or the tragedians thought that men were *never* able to lessen their responsibility for a crime or disastrous act by pointing to the role of the gods. We accept Patroclus' plea (*Il*. 16.845) that he was not disgraced because Apollo and Zeus were really his killers, not Hector. And we accept Orestes' plea that Apollo forced him to kill his mother. It is entirely possible, therefore, that Sophocles meant us to accept Oedipus' plea that the gods, not he himself, are responsible for his wretchedness. If Sophocles were a Platonist or a Stoic or a Christian, then we would be right to insist that divine action alone could not be responsible for Oedipus' misery; but Sophocles was none of these things. Sophocles seems to have honored the gods and thought them wonderful and believed them to be on the side of excellence and justice in the long run; but so did Homer and Aeschylus. He seems also to have accepted, with Homer and Aeschylus, the possibility that the gods could ruin the lives of excellent and well-intentioned men.

Sophocles could believe, then, that Oedipus was undone by external things and that Oedipus was in no way responsible for his misery; and yet this would not make him a universal fatalist. Nor would it make his Oedipus a puppet without character or excellence. There is nothing to prevent us from seeing what kind of man the protagonist of the story is—complicated, unique, conscientious, impetuous, brilliant—even if his major goals are hideously frustrated in the end. Sophocles no doubt assumed that many, perhaps most, men, good and bad, were given frequent opportunities to act according to their characters. It is evidently only very special men, in his belief, who are systematically prevented by divinity from pursuing their own goals. This is a vision of things that may baffle us or disappoint us (even while we are moved by the play itself), but the baffling or disappointing part is not the notion of the will that is implied; it is the conception of divinity. At least there is no obvious way that we can think away "our" notion of will and accept an older notion and so make Oedipus responsible for his own miseries again.

*2*

So far we have considered only the significance of fatalism in the *Oedipus*, Sophocles' assumptions about destiny and the plans of the gods. There is another, related problem, however—the question of determinism. The two positions might be distinguished one from the other as follows: If you believe that there is a superhuman force or being that sometimes (or regularly or always) overrides men's desires and intentions, canceling them out, making them ineffectual, in order to fulfill its own primeval designs, then you are a fatalist; but if you believe, that complete knowledge of a man's character plus his circumstances would tell you why he had to do what he did, even during those moments when he felt he was free—when he says that he could have done something else—you should be called not a fatalist, but a determinist.3 Sometimes when modern critics conceive a desire to show that Oedipus was free and responsible for at least some of the things that happen to him, what they seem to fear is not fatalism so much as the supposed consequences of determinism.

When these interpreters point to the fact that the ancients did not have "our" notion of the will, what they appear to mean is that since "our" notion of the will is the true one, whereas the ancient conception does not allow for true freedom or moral responsibility, and since the *Oedipus* nevertheless engages our sympathies profoundly when we read it or witness a performance today, we must be justified in assuming that Sophocles had an instinctive understanding of the human will that transcended the theories put forward by his countrymen. Before the Epicureans, it is pointed out, the Greeks rarely if ever doubted that men's varying characters, visions and desires were caused by what they were born with plus all that had happened to them up to the moment of their varying "decisions," yet they were rarely troubled by the implications of this assumption. In particular they did not see that if this were true all sensations of free choice would be illusory and all praise and blame unrealistic. It is implied that if the ancients had seen these supposed consequences, they would have stopped talking the way they did about the external factors responsible for men's acts. Therefore, if we are to put ourselves in the right frame of mind to enjoy the *Oedipus*, to be deeply moved by its plot, we must simply think away or discount all such "deterministic" talk.

It is the oracles that cause the trouble, of course. If we accept the assumption that a god can really predict infallibly what a man will do before he is even born, then we must either assume a fatalism, at least in this one man's life, or, if not that, we must accept the assumption that the causes for our every act were in existence even before we were born. We might say that Oedipus was "fated" to do what he did if the gods had a purpose that could only be effected by selecting Oedipus for a role he did not choose for himself, "determined" if the god did not interfere but merely saw correctly the nexus of causes and effects that resulted inevitably in his "doing" what he did—just as the same god might predict what any man ever "did."

Unlike Aeschylus (*Seven Against Thebes* 742ff) and Euripides (*Phoenician Women* 18ff), Sophocles presents the oracle to Laius as unconditional and therefore purposeless (or at least not illuminating any purpose). Delphi told Laius, according to Jocasta, that his doom would be to die by the hand of his son. That is all. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, too, Sophocles has Oedipus defend his innocence (in response to Creon's taunts) by saying that the gods were responsible—and the plea is all the more effective because no moral purpose is discerned in the gods' moves. There were versions of the Oedipus legend in which Oedipus was "fated" to do what he did; that is, a moral plan could be discerned in all the wretchedness suffered by the various members of his family. Sophocles consistently mutes this feature of the story, however. The absence of any mention of a crime committed by Laius is in fact unique and quite remarkable.

According to one versions Laius, while enjoying the hospitality of Pelops, fell in love with, and then carried off, his host's youngest son. It was this that made it right that Laius die by the hand of his own son. The punishment fitted the crime. In the versions in which this earlier history is not stressed, the god nevertheless gives Laius a *choice*: either so to conduct himself that he cannot have a son or to engender a son and then be killed by him. Even if we assume that the god knew which Laius would do, his prediction still points to some fault in Laius as the cause of subsequent suffering.4 There is not a word of any of this in any surviving play by Sophocles. When, in the *Antigone*, Ismene and Antigone fear the working of a family curse, it is the consequences of the accidental marriage between Oedipus and Jocasta that they fear, not any old remembered crime of Laius'. In the *Oedipus at Colonus* (964ff) Oedipus says of his unwitting patricide and incest: this is the way the gods wanted it, *perhaps* because they had some ill will for my family from of old. Then he adds that he knows this *because* in him himself there was no flaw to upbraid in payment for which he had done these things against his parents and himself. And then he adds a second proof. If an oracle is given to a father that his son will kill him, he asks—if that oracle is given before the son is born—how could one blame the son?

Undergraduates reading these plays without the benefit of the scholars are almost always troubled by the oracles. What *does* follow from the fact that the god knew before the birth of Oedipus exactly what he would do? If these students were to turn to the new orthodoxy for help, however, they would find, alas, not a solution so much as an aphorism. Oedipus' acts were "not predestined," suggests Bernard Knox, "merely predicted, an essential distinction."5 "The Olympians have not willed [Oedipus'] fall," says Cedric Whitman, "they have foretold it. To say that the gods are responsible, as Oedipus does [*O.T*. 1329f], means at most that they permit life to be as it turns out to be."6 "In [Sophocles'] plays," says Gordon Kirkwood, "events do not take place because the oracles say that events will; on the contrary, the oracles say that events will take place because they are going to. There is no fatalism involved in the oracular utterance itself; the oracles need not say why the events will take place, and they may come about because of human character, though it may also involve divine will."7 In other words, we can think away the oracles and judge the responsibility of Oedipus and others as though oracles did not exist.

This is really a radical way out, however, because Oedipus certainly and Sophocles almost certainly would not have agreed. In both plays Oedipus is shown banking heavily on the significance of the fact that everything that he had done had been foretold exactly.

The proof that there is such a thing as exact foreknowledge does not necessarily imply that the being who has this knowledge is himself the one who has set the events in motion. On this point Knox and the rest are certainly right. The existence of an infallible foreknower does seem to imply, however, that one of the following things must be true. Either 1) there is some force in the universe that wishes things to turn out in a certain way, however men will feel about it. (If this force has the power to override men's wills when the time comes, it does not matter whether it knows what their desires will be or not. The force in question may or may not be identical with—or in league with—the source of the prediction.) Or 2) there is nothing indeterminate in the world—the nexus of efficient causes is not interrupted by the wills of the men and gods involved; a god need only know what is true now, therefore, in order to have certain knowledge of the future. Or 3) there is at least one god who is so unlimited in his power that he can actually have foreknowledge even of yet undetermined things. Men are free and will be held responsible for what they do. Divinity knows what they will do neither because it itself will bring these things about nor because the causes determining the men's moves are already in existence; divinity knows merely because it can see into the future. There is no kind of knowledge that it does not have.

Sometimes when modern readers are able to convince themselves that the oracles do not limit Oedipus' freedom, they may have this third possibility in mind. Unfortunately it is the one of the three that Sophocles is least likely to have entertained. It is probably a late idea that grew out of a desperate attempt to acquit an omnipotent deity of any responsibility for those of men's decisions that he would rather had been otherwise. Epicurus set the challenge for the Stoics (according to Lactantius, in *The Anger of God* ch. 13). God either wants to remove evils but cannot, he argued, or he can but does not want to, or he can and wants to, or he neither can nor wants to. If he wants to but cannot, he is weak—which is not a quality of god; if he can but does not want to, he is ungenerous—which is also unlike god; if he neither can nor wants to, he is both weak and ungenerous—that is, he cannot be god; but if he can and wants to, which is what one would expect of god, where does evil come from and why does not god remove it? This argument was especially embarrassing for the Stoics because they accepted god's foreknowledge and insisted that there were accurate oracles. If god can see when a man is about to do a foolish or destructive thing but does not interfere, surely that means he either cannot or does not want to stop the sinner. One Stoic solution, that god could have foreknowledge and yet the sinner, not god, will still be responsible for the sin, depends on the idea that the act of "choice" introduces a new motion not caused by antecedent events. This idea may have originated in the Epicurean theory of the indeterminate atomic "swerve" at the moment of decision making, or it may come from a non-philosophic way of thinking, but it cannot be found for certain very far back into the fourth century. The Stoic ideas of will and foreknowledge were later taken up by the Christians (e.g., Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, Bk. 3), and that, presumably, is why this approach seems to many people today to be such a natural and inevitable solution. It is very unlikely that this was Sophocles' solution, however.

Making abstract pronouncements about the significance of oracles, then, is a hazardous procedure. We would do better to stick close to the text and see what Sophocles has Oedipus say about these things.

Throughout both *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the problem is worried over in these terms: was Oedipus a willing or unwilling perpetrator of the crimes? Was he an agent at all, or only a victim? and was the *daimôn* that was responsible for his misery (*kakodaimonia*) his own *daimôn*, in the sense of his intelligence and character, or was it an independent being for whose actions he need take no blame?

These things are all considered to be exactly equivalent: he is the one who really did it; he acted willingly and knowingly; from the consequences one may justly infer his character. Pollution, horror, even self-loathing followed from Oedipus' acts; his life is ruined, all his good works undone. But like job, Oedipus insists that the explanation must be sought for not in his character but in divinity. That is, not only do the consequences bear no resemblance to the goal he was motivated by; the consequences could not have been altered had he been a better man, a man motivated by worthier goals. He concludes that he was really a victim, not an actor. Do not be afraid of me, says the aged, mutilated outcast (*O.C*. 266f), because these things were done to me, not by me. My nature is not evil.

You have suffered, says the chorus later on (*O.C.* 537). Yes, Oedipus replies, things horrible to bear. You did things, says the chorus; *no*, I "did" nothing. (The verb ἔρδειν can mean either "to act" or "to do harm to someone.") Very similar language is used in *Oedipus the King*; in the crucial scene just after the self-mutilation (1297ff)

In both plays the involuntary nature of Oedipus' crimes is insisted on and underlined. The messenger stepping forward to describe Jocasta's death and Oedipus' blinding (*O.T*. 1230) says that these events, unlike the patricide and incest which were involuntary things, were voluntary, they were miseries deliberately chosen as such; that is, this time, *un*like the times before, the actors knew what the consequences would be.

When Creon, in the later play, speaks of the patricide and incest in tones that suggest that Oedipus, because of these crimes, is not only polluted (*O.C.* 945) but also a man without dignity or rights, Oedipus replies in fury that he bore these things against his will, (964). "One thing I know," he says (985ff); "*your* attack against me and my mother is a wilful act, whereas I married her unwillingly, nor is it by my will that I am speaking of her now." The truth of the matter is, he says, that "I shall not be deemed a bad man, either in that marriage or that killing of my father which you always hurl at me with bitter words."

What makes these acts involuntary, according to Oedipus, is the absence of the crucial information (983); as a consequence of their being involuntary in this sense, they fall into a special class, he insists—crimes that do not stem from a criminal's act (967–8).

The point that we are made to concentrate on, then, is Oedipus' "will" defined very strictly as "moves toward goals thought to be desirable." The question, worried over in both plays, is this: if a man enters into an action with his own consent and the action has appalling consequences, how automatically does it follow that he is a bad man (*O.C.* 270)?

The trouble is, when Oedipus' claim to innocence is spelled out on this level and in these terms, it seems much too simple. There is no room for doubt: he is not responsible for the evils. But then why is Oedipus in such agony? Oedipus is profoundly disturbed by what he has not "done." Why should he be, we may ask, if he really believes what he says about his own innocence? This is the source of the greatest trouble for some interpreters.

The puzzling thing is that Oedipus seems to harbor two seemingly contradictory feelings about himself at one and the same time: he is brilliantly clear and quite consistent about one consequence of his having committed these horrible crimes involuntarily—namely, that it means he is not to be thought of as a bad man; but it never occurs to him that he is freed by this fact from the uncleanness of the guilty man. His first thought after the discovery is that it means that he is not protected by any god and that he is unholy, a product of unholy parents (*O.T*. 1360). At line 1131 of the *Oedipus at Colonus* the blind old man forgets for just an instant and asks Theseus to give him his hand, that he might touch it and even kiss it, if that is lawful. Suddenly he rears back: "How could I, reduced to utter wretchedness, desire that you touch me, me with whom all stains of evil live?" Yet Oedipus says that he "did" no evil. In the modern world this would be a slightly odd, perhaps neurotic, frame of mind. It is not so odd, however, in the setting of the Greek notions of pollution. Innocence could be established quickly and decisively, but cleanliness, it seems, was won more slowly.

At the beginning of the *Oedipus at Colonus*; Oedipus, in his ignorance, blindness and helplessness, accidentally commits yet one more impiety: he trespasses unintentionally, like Philoctetes, on holy ground. To the alarmed inhabitants he announces that this time, for all his frightening appearance, he has a right to ask for sanctuary. "For I have come as one who is holy," he says (*O.C*. 287), "pious, and one who brings benefits to these citizens." He is holy because he is suppliant to the Furies (44), pious because he has come in obedience to Apollo (102). His claim to these qualities is really proleptic, however. That is, as he has said in his prayer to the Furies earlier on (86ff), he has reason to believe that his uncleanness is *almost* over. When Apollo had decreed those many woes, he spoke of this place as the end, he says, a rest after so many years. There he would make the last turn in this wretched life, and Apollo had also said that to those who would accept him, he would be a source of benefits; to those who drove him away as a pariah, he would bring disaster. In other words, the people who understood enough to realize that, terrible as he was, he ought at the last to be welcomed, protected and allowed to stay, these people would be blessed by the presence of his grave.

Even Orestes, whose innocence is much clearer than that of Oedipus, could not be automatically declared clean after the heaven-fated matricide. It took time. His pollution (*Eum*. 281) was ritually cleansed at Delphi when it was fresh, but still the Furies pursued him. The bloodstain is "sleepy" and is "dying away," pleads Orestes. As evidence he points out that he had met many people who were not harmed by being with him. "Time, as it grows old," he says, "undoes all things alike."8 And yet more anguish awaited him.

The idea of pollution continued into the fourth century at least. Plato speaks with quite unqualified approval of the old notions concerning the blood guilt that was thought to cling even to involuntary killers (*Laws* 9.865), The tragedians are right, he says (*Laws* 8.838), when they show us Oedipus as unholy, hated of the gods and longing for death. Plato specifically includes among polluted men a man who has actually perpetrated a violation with his own hand even if he did what he did entirely involuntarily (865b). Some importance seems to have been put on the accomplishment of the act by one's own hand. By Athenian law, even an involuntary homicide, if the accused is supposed to have done it with his hand, was tried at the august Areopagos, whereas even a voluntary homicide, if the accused is only thought to have planned or commissioned it, was tried by a lesser court, the Palladion. The attitude implied in this distinction explains, perhaps, the stress which Sophocles puts on the fact that Oedipus killed Laius with his own hand (*O.T*. 107, 139–40, 266, 810, 821, 1331, etc.). Like Orestes, or like any Athenian who had committed a lawful homicide (such as killing a highwayman who had struck first, cf. Demosthenes 23.53, Aeschines 1.91, Antiphon 4d,3), Oedipus might expect eventually to be welcomed back into the community; but this was never achieved without time and difficulty. According to Demosthenes (23.72) an involuntary killer went into exile for a while (like Oedipus), and, even after he was allowed to return, had to perform sacrifices and undergo cleansing.

A man who was the carrier of a pollution (*miaros*) may sometimes have felt the uncleanness as something terrible. At least that is the impression we get from *Oedipus at Colonus* 1131ff, quoted above. And the special nature of Oedipus' involuntary violations would in any case have made his stain no ordinary one. Perhaps most men would have considered him beyond cleansing. Still, the suffering of Oedipus in these two plays cannot really be explained in terms of peculiarly Greek rules concerning pollutions. We, who have no such feelings about ritual pollution, nevertheless respond to this long dead way of talking almost as though it were our own. What are we really responding to?

It is just common sense, one might have thought, not to feel badly about a violation, however terrible, if the deed was truly involuntary and could not have been avoided by having been a better person. Yet that is not the way it works, at least in many cases. After Deianeira unwittingly destroys her husband, the chorus tries to comfort her: Whenever we trip up not of our own volition, the anger felt is tempered, and so it should be now with you (*The Women of Trachis* 727ff). But Deianeira answers: He will never talk like this who has a share in the wrong; only he who has no burden of his own. In other words, attempts to cope rationally with feelings of self-hatred, especially in cases involving accidental harm done to those we love, are not always very easy. This problem is still with us, surely. We might put it slightly differently from the Greeks, that is all. It is often the feeling of guilt that most puzzles us: is it the beginning of wisdom and morality or is it an illness of which we should be cured? We sometimes suspect that self-hatred such as Deianeira felt probably indicates the presence of a culpable desire, at least on an unconscious level; on the other hand, we are also impressed by the harm that men do, to their own lives and to others', as the result of exaggerated or unjustified self-loathing.

Also involved in this talk of pollution is the ability of a society to treat an individual rationally, especially its ability to temper its fear and anger at a violator when it is plain that the person had not done what he did because his character was bad. Toward those who have harmed us we can be forgiving if, and only if, the harm was not intended, says Cleon (Thucydides 3.40). But the Athenians failed to be impressed by Cleon's argument on this occasion—the revolt of Mytilene—and voted, out of humanity, a punishment that would have been appropriate, according to Cleon, only if the Mytileneans had betrayed Athens involuntarily. As the war continued, this kind of confusion was repeated many times, but the results were ever less frequently humane. Again and again Thucydides describes men treating with utterly unreasonable resentment those who could not have been expected to act otherwise. He saw this as one of the chief horrors of the war. Consider the prominence he gives to the Spartan condemnation of the Plataeans and to the Athenian slaughter of the Melians.

This problem, too, is still very much with us. Should we treat criminals as ill? enemies as deprived and unenlightened? How much do a man's intentions count for? What are the fair criteria for "reduced responsibility" or "mitigating circumstances"? Should we try to replace hatred with pity? loathing with tolerance and love?

Many of these questions can be—and often are—translated into terms of the single problem: what if anything in human action is truly voluntary? This is true of the ancient debate as well. Somebody in Sophocles' *Tyro* (fr. 665, Pearson: the play concerns a mortal woman who was seduced by Poseidon) expresses the sentiment we have seen elsewhere in his dramas: No man is evil if he did wrong unwillingly. We may contrast this with Socrates' famous dictum, no one is evil *willingly*. As usual, Sophocles' idea would have seemed more normal to the average Greek than Socrates'. It is universally agreed upon by lawmakers, Plato complains, that there is a clear and vital difference between voluntary and involuntary wrongdoing (*Laws* 9.860); but this is not the right procedure, he says. The right distinction, he insists (862), is that between harmful acts and harmful acts that are traceable to a human being of bad character. If it can be determined that we have an example of the latter sort, then, in addition to compensating for the wrong done, we must correct the character or intelligence of the agent. The reason why it is useless to ask whether the deed was done willingly or unwillingly is that all men in fact pursue their own true, unillusory well-being, and all bad men are bad only because they are pursuing a false vision of their good under the impression that it is the true notion. Punishment then, or persuasion or education or whatever the appropriate measure is, will benefit not only the punisher, but the punished as well. It will cure the reason and restore the moral sense that alone can lead to happiness. The original and distinctive premises in Socratic thinking are two: 1) that happiness depends on the establishment of the correct power structure within each man's psyche, i.e., there is one and only one part of the psyche that would lead each man to true victory for the whole person in the fulness of his existence, and 2) that the part of the psyche of which this is true—and this part only—will, if given command over the other parts, lead a man not only to happiness, but also to the life that is most rewarding and helpful for his fellow men.

The sentiments of Sophocles and Socrates are not contradictory; both define a punishable action as one that stems from a badly motivated human move. The two ideas differ very sharply indeed, however, as Plato saw clearly enough, in what they imply about the natural (and divinely guaranteed) consequences in this life of having a good character and pursuing the right goals. Do happiness and goodness invariably go hand in hand? Socrates said yes; Sophocles, no. Socrates and Plato beg us to start with the awareness of wretchedness or happiness and infer from that whether we are pursuing illusory or genuinely valuable ends. If you are wretched, they say, then you may assume that there are hateful drives within your soul carrying you to false visions. Sophocles, on the other hand, asks us to accept involuntary unhappiness as not only possible, but in certain cases a significant and moving phenomenon.

And so the modern reader of the *Oedipus* who is puzzled by the fact that Oedipus did not allow the knowledge of the involuntary nature of his crimes to soften his own wretchedness, if he then infers that Oedipus really did "will" the acts in some sense, must first be led through the evidence for Sophocles' assumptions about pollution and involuntary wrongdoing. Next it might be suggested that his inference may stem from a failure to appreciate the difficulty that we ourselves still have in coping rationally with such things—especially with our feelings of responsibility for whatever happens to those nearest to us. Perhaps their belief in pollution gave some Greeks a ritual way to deal with problems and temptations which we find all the more troublesome for having left behind that way of thinking. As Freud points out in a famous passage in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (standard Eng. ed. of complete works, 4.267f), the *Oedipus* is not merely the story of a man crushed by overpowering forces that he could not influence, it is the story of a man trapped by such forces into doing very special things: "His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. We shrink back from him with the whole force of the repression by which the wishes have . . . been held down within us. Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us by Nature."

Freud, like Plato, argued that we knew of these desires from our dreams. If this is so, then Sophocles is playing a very dangerous game indeed when he has Jocasta try to comfort Oedipus by telling him (980ff): Do not worry about marrying your mother; many a man before this has slept with his mother in dreams, too. On the surface this means only that a prophecy to the effect that we will sleep with our mother need not upset us, inasmuch as many men have been given such prophetic warnings, in their dreams as well as by oracles, but none actually went through with it. (The καί just might be read as concessive, also: many have lain with their mothers, although only in their dreams.) But the effect is to remind us that complacency about having such desires only, without fulfilling them, is not easily won. Here is a man who is no more criminal in his wishes than we are, but who was tricked by the gods into living them in his waking life.

Throughout the *Oedipus* Sophocles takes great care that we can separate our thinking about ourselves from our concern for Oedipus. He does this, among other ways, by using what has been called, since Bishop Thirlwall's time, dramatic or Sophoclean "irony";9 that is, by having a character say something that has one meaning for himself, another for us—giving us "proof" that we are not watching our own story, but his. If we down here in the audience know something that he up there on the stage does not know, then our separate identities have been proved and it cannot be ourselves whose tragedy we are witnessing. But in this passage (as elsewhere also), Sophocles compels us to come close to facing our own predicament even while he lets us think that we are excited for Oedipus, not for ourselves.

But another, even more important effect of this constant, almost heavy-handed, use of "irony" in the *Oedipus* is to give us a sense of predestination. Something far larger than Oedipus seems to be mocking him by making him say things again and again that he will look back on later with bitterness. And this brings us back to our earlier question, whether the uncanny correctness of the oracle which was given before Oedipus was born implies a fatalism or some kind of determinism.

Sophocles' description of the role of the gods in the lives of men is, as we noted earlier, without any very clear sense that there is purpose or justice in their actions. Lives of intelligent and well-intentioned men are wasted right and left, and "there is nothing in all this," as the chorus says at the end of *The Woman of Trachis*, "that is not Zeus." But Zeus seems almost to be a name for unavoidable unhappiness, no more. A reader who did not believe in fate or divinity might well be moved by the thought that Oedipus was undone by the same destiny that could undo us all, as Freud suggested, meaning by "destiny" no more than the bitter realities of life, Cocteau's infernal machine. Oedipus' complaint, therefore, that Delphi had predicted what he would do before he was conceived, could be understood, not as a complaint against the malice or heartlessness of real gods, but merely as a demonstration that intelligence and good intentions are never enough to protect one even from the most horrible errors. The treatment of the oracles by Knox and the rest seems to suggest that something of this sort is the case.

The evidence is in favor of the other assumption, however—that is, that Sophocles, for all his freedom from the usual Greek assumptions about the aid that good men could expect from gods, did nevertheless think of divinity as alive and wonderful in some mysterious way. He would be more accurately described as a fatalist than a determinist. Oedipus is not Everyman; he is, as he says even in the earlier play, selected for a very special fate (*O.T*. 1455–8). True, he calls this doom a "marvelous evil" and he is horrified, not overjoyed; but he need not mean that divinity's moves were evil from its own point of view. He may well mean only that the way in which he has been marked off from all other men obviously involves misery for himself to a previously unheard-of extent. Sophocles' picture of his death in the *Oedipus at Colonus* is not really inconsistent with this. Oedipus is cleansed, finally—he had been unwilling to let Theseus touch him just a few minutes earlier, but at the very end he asks Theseus to give him his hand, 1632—and he goes with steadiness and strength, not in despair, when summoned by the thunder and the supernatural voice; nevertheless his suffering is not wiped off the record by his final transfiguration—any more than Christ's is. We do not envy Oedipus. Yet a purpose of sorts has been discerned at last: because his suffering was truly fearful and because it was not given in punishment for anything he had done, therefore out of a terrible evil a terrible beauty is born. The grave of Oedipus will be a blessing to the land.

The messenger reminds the chorus (*O.C*. 1587ff) how the blind old man, rose up and walked into the sacred grove as though he saw: none of his friends was leading him. Surely we are being invited to remember the messenger's speech in *Oedipus the King* (1258) where Oedipus is said to have let out a terrible cry and gone to the bedroom where he would find the dead Jocasta, "as though someone were leading him, for it was none of us who stood by him." The *daimôn* who ruined Oedipus' life now returns at the end in order to complete his obscure design. The design may not be as comprehensible or comforting as more conventional religious visions, but we cannot call it unreligious, unless we are willing to condemn the voice from the whirlwind in *Job* as unreligious too.

*3*

Some modern readers take comfort from the fact that what the gods made Oedipus do—kill his father and take his father's place with his mother—happened years before the action of the play begins; these fated incidents are "outside" the play, therefore, as Aristotle says all illogicalities should be. The plot that grips us, it is felt, concerns these horrible memories incidentally only. The essential plot is one of wilful self-discovery. Here is how Dodds sums it up, for instance:

Oedipus might have left the plague to take its course; but pity for the suffering of his people compelled him to consult Delphi. When Apollo's word came back, he might still have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated; but pity and justice require him to act. He need not have forced the truth from the reluctant Theban herdsman; but because he cannot rest content with a lie, he must tear away the last veil from the illusion in which he has lived so long. Teiresias, Jocasta, the herdsman, each in turn tries to stop him, but in vain: he must read the last riddle, the riddle of his own life. The immediate cause of Oedipus' ruin is not "Fate" or "the gods"—no oracle said that he must discover the truth—and still less does it lie in his own weakness; what causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to the truth. In all this we are to see him as a free agent, hence the suppression of the hereditary curse. (*op. cit*. 43)

There are two things that make this theory attractive in the eyes of many readers. First, by declaring the patricide and incest to be incidental to the action, we can avoid the most distressing consequences of the Freudian and Platonic suggestion according to which our excitement at a play must be explained in terms of our own secret involvement. (It is much nicer to think of ourselves as bravely bunting for our true identities than as trying to cope with ancient sexual troubles.) And second, of course, the theory seems to solve the problem raised by our conviction that a play about a man who was not a "free agent" could not move us.

There is an essential distinction, then, according to this theory, between what Oedipus did those many years ago when he committed patricide, then incest, and the things he does within the course of the plot itself. The former may have been fated; but in each move that we see him make on stage he has a choice, there is a decision he must come to. Here is Bernard Knox's version (italics mine):

The hero is faced with a *choice* between possible (or certain) disaster and a compromise which if *accepted* would betray the hero's own conception of himself, his rights, his duties. The hero *decides* against compromise, and that *decision* is then assailed, by friendly advice, by threats, by actual force. But he *refuses* to yield; he *remains true to himself*, to his physis, that "nature" which he inherited from his parents and which is his identity. From this *resolution* stems the dramatic tension . . . from the *stubborn insistence* of Oedipus at Thebes on knowing the full truth, first about Laius' murder and then about himself, and from old Oedipus' *resolve* to be buried in Attic soil. In each play the hero is subjected to pressure from all sides . . . Oedipus tyrannos runs into Tiresias' majestic refusal to speak, the compromising advice of Jocasta and her final desperate appeal, the agonized supplication of the herdsman at the last moment. Later at Colonus he faces the strong disapproval of Theseus, the revulsion of the chorus, the arguments, threats, and violence of Creon, and the appeal of his son . . . . The Sophoclean hero and his situation are best described in that marvelous image which in the last play of all compares the blind old man to "some sea cape in the North, with storm waves beating against it from every quarter" . . . [*O.C.* 1240–1]. Like the cape, the hero *rides out the buffeting* of the storm and *remains unmoved*.
(*The Heroic Temper* [Berkeley and Los Angeles 1964] 8–9)

Nobody would want to deny that there is much truth in this manner of summing up what is stirring and admirable about the typical Sophoclean hero. It can surely be overdone, however. The refusal to yield or compromise is also a characteristic of a number of non-heroic figures in Sophocles' plays, most spectacularly Creon in the *Antigone*. (Creon does yield in the end, of course, after the gods make clear where they stand; but the same is true of Philoctetes too, after all.) Refusing to take the prudent course in order to remain true to one's nature is admirable only if one's nature is itself admirable.

What we usually mean when we say that one man remained true to his nature, whereas another did not, is that the first man, unlike the second, eschewed mere survival or security, or perhaps a short-lived or wicked power or pleasure, because he was motivated by a remoter and nobler vision of what is truly worth preserving or pursuing. Thus Knox speaks of Oedipus' remaining "true to himself, to his *physis*, that 'nature' which he inherited from his parents and which is his identity." (Notice that there is no room here for the Stoic and Christian theory of a decision as an original surge of energy. A "decision" is taken to be a move toward one alternative because that appears to the agent to fit better than other possible courses do with his vision of how he would like things to be. This is still the most practical assumption unless we are wrestling with problems of evil and the concept of a god who is invariably benign.) But good men and bad men alike can act according to their characters, their essential natures, if they are given an opportunity—that is, if they are put in a situation where at least one course open to them has calculable consequences that fit with the thing they value most. If there were no such moments, we would never be sure what a man's character was. And the admirableness or despicableness of his character is most clearly seen when the price for taking the right path is very high. The real difference between the "decisions" that resulted in Oedipus' committing patricide and incest and the "decisions" that led him to discover what he had done is that the latter, unlike the former, are so set up that we can see by the alternative to which he was attracted that his character was admirable. And even that should not be overstressed: which of us in his place would have let Thebes languish in the plague or have failed to pursue the hunt for the killer of Laius or for the identity of his parents in response to Tiresias' absurd-sounding accusations or Jocasta's sudden, inexplicable plea? Even at the last moment, when Oedipus knows in his heart what he will hear in a minute from the reluctant herdsman, is Oedipus' persistence really a feat that none of us would be capable of?

It would seem to take two things to make a dilemma "tragic": a protagonist who is an excellent man—one whose vision of life makes him act well even when compromise or prudence would have prolonged his existence (or his power or comfort or reputation); and a universe in which a good action can sometimes lead to bitter unhappiness, whereas less good actions would have been rewarded with things rightly prized as worth pursuing. If you have the former only, a man who chooses rightly, then you can conclude, like Socrates, that the things this good man gives up were not really worth the having. In that case an unjust death, for instance, will be like the execution of Socrates, no occasion for tears at all if it is correctly understood. On the other hand, the introduction of the second factor, a world where the most worthwhile things can only be got by being the kind of man whom we should not admire, brings with it a fresh problem. The goodness of the good man who, in order to be true to his nature, turns down these truly worthwhile things, needs some explanation, some further justification; otherwise he will appear quixotic or just foolish. That is, as Socrates and Plato were not slow to point out, tragedians tend to imply that the reason why one ought to be good is apparently not that being good brings us the most rewarding experiences possible in human life. But that thesis can be maintained, the philosophers argued, only if we assume that the gods do not in fact ensure that good men get good things, bad men bad things. If you are a humanist through and through, if, in other words, you believe that you can defend your notion of human excellence on, rational grounds, introducing no irrational or inscrutable divinities—or no divinities who act otherwise than to reinforce the "humane" conduct of affairs—then Sophoclean tragedy is absurd. And so it would seem that fate and divine causation are a necessity for a play like the *Oedipus*: if it were not for the presence of this supernatural and essentially incomprehensible force we should have to conclude either 1) that it was all just a very sad accident, and Oedipus ought not to feel too badly, or 2) that Oedipus should not be so sure that his suffering was not a payment for some genuine fault, or 3) that Oedipus was undoubtedly rewarded in the end if he was truly good.

It is often presented as self-evident, indeed blazingly clear, that Sophocles chose to dramatize Oedipus' discovery of his old crimes, not the actual commission of those crimes, because the former are self-willed, whereas the latter were not. Only in this way, it is asserted, could he play down the traditional role of fate in the legend and make of it a moving play, one about a free agent acting on his own. But it is just as possible to explain his choice with the observation that at the time when Oedipus was actually committing the crimes he *thought* he was the master of his own life—he thought that gods merely reinforced the law that men of good intention tended to be rewarded for their efforts—whereas on that terrible day when he was made to see what he had done, he could see how wrong he had been, how horrible and unpredictable the hand of fate had been all along. "Let my lot move where it will," he concludes (*O.T*. 1458). And even the self-revelation is not really self-caused. The god sent the plague, then directed Oedipus to find the killer of Laius; and perhaps the god sent the messenger from Corinth as well—at least that is the feeling we are given when the Corinthian arrives with his fateful information just as Jocasta sacrifices to Apollo, "because you are the nearest *daimôn*" (919). Oedipus accepts the title "perpetrator" (1331) only for the self-blinding. That alone strikes the others on stage as something that Oedipus should be held responsible for. But Oedipus points out that he had been reduced to so wretched a position by the gods that, horrible as the consequences of the blinding were, they were nevertheless less horrible than the alternatives—to kill himself and so look on his parents, or live seeing and so look on his children.

*4*

The ancients talked of the power to do what one wants (or what seems best, or what really is best) and responsibility (the justice with which one could infer from an act whether or not the man was good) more often than they spoke of freedom. Nevertheless, their notions could easily be translated into terms of freedom—and sometimes were, as in *Republic* 8 and 9. They too, just like ourselves, assumed that freedom was a very desirable thing. They could imagine a man as being free, however, even if it were assumed that the causes for his actions could ultimately be traced to things outside himself. A man is free, they thought, if at least one of the possibilities presented to him is among those he could imagine with pleasure. If none appeals to him, he is under constraint, not free. They might also insist, as the Socratics did for instance, that if freedom is really a good thing, then an additional factor must be present: the thing that the man imagines with pleasure must be *correctly* imagined, i.e., if he gets what he wishes he will not be disappointed. His character must be such that when given a chance to act according to it, according to his own vision of what is worth pursuing, he will move toward the highest possible happiness. After all, the most obvious reason for calling a man's habits or his notion of what is valuable bad or foolish is that we think he is pursuing self-destructive goals. And a self-destructive goal is one which will eventually result in the disappearance of his freedom; he will find himself blocked, disheartened, frustrated, or actually restricted by society.

It will be noticed that this conception of the problem leaves plenty of room for "free" actions even if it is assumed, as it usually was in antiquity, that chance, nature, the gods, and the society that educated us were among them the real causes of men's characters being what they were. It did not occur to them—nor should it have—that just because the causes for our behavior can always be traced to things outside us in this manner, therefore there is no point in trying to change society, influence politics, sharpen the criteria for assigning praise and blame, revolutionize education, please the gods, and so on. If A moves to interfere with B's pursuit of what he thinks valuable (by calling B bad or foolish, or educating him, or having him arrested, or whatever) the appropriate question to ask is not did As desire to interfere come into being ultimately as the result of causes outside of A, but will the results of the interference be good or bad? for A and B both or only for A? etc. The "lazy argument," as the Stoics called it (see von Arnim, *SVF* 2.277–79), the conclusion that, because a man's recovery from an illness must be determined by things already in existence, therefore he will recover whether he calls a doctor or not, is fallacious. (See also Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* [Cambridge 1954] ch. 2, "It was to Be.") One of the most crucial of the causes determining his recovery is the existence (or future existence, depending on how far back we go) of a conviction in his head that a doctor's presence would be desirable.

There are several reasons why modern readers find distasteful or inadequate this idea that one ought not to look at the causes of a man's character to find out if he is acting "freely"—the idea that freedom means only the opportunity to act according to one's character (or the opportunity so to act if one's character is good, if we follow the Socratic line). One reason is that, like the Hellenistic and Christian philosophers, we have a habit of looking not for those points in a chain of causes that are of greatest practical importance, but for ultimate origins. The philosophers of the classical period avoided much confusion, however, because they thought of a man's character primarily in terms of the vision of what is valuable that motivates him. Socrates catalogued men according to the thing they cherished most: wine, honor, wisdom, etc. (*Republic* 5.475). If we cling to that as what we most want to know when we ask what a man's character is, then, when we entertain the possibility that an observer might, with certain knowledge of our character and our situation, predict infallibly what we will do, even during those moments when we feel most free, the thought will just no longer disturb us. The causes of our characters will be sought in a practical spirit: if our vision of life has led us to unrewarding things, we shall look for those factors in our past—our education, our reading, and the values cherished by our society, for instance—that might profitably be *changed*.

But for many people this is not the end of the problem either. The difficulty that some find with the classical notion of the will is that it seems to them to be empty of everything that they mean when they say that they want to be "free." According to Plato a man is free if and only if he is motivated by a set of values that will not lead him into a trap; the man who is best equipped for life, as Aristotle puts it, is the person for whom what appears to be most worth pursuing and what really is worth pursuing are one and the same (*Nic.Eth.* 3.4). To do what you think to be to your benefit is useless, Socrates points out (*Gorgias* 466ff), unless you are right that it will benefit you. The highest freedom, therefore, will be achieved if you are absolutely certain about the true good. In one sense, then, you have no choice at all when you are really free. Only one course of action is open to the truly free man, the one that he *knows* will lead to happiness.

There are in fact two main difficulties with this formulation of complete freedom, both felt already by the ancients themselves. First, it seems to violate our need to feel that we are each unique. If perfection in the art of living must be bought at the price of pursuing only what divinity and all other men want us to pursue, we would prefer (in some moods, anyhow) to remain imperfect; we cherish the right to make our own mistakes. Plato points out (*Republic* 9.590d–e) that all societies, without exception, must hold their young in check. They do not let them do what appears to them to be to their good, and they only liberate them and call them adult and responsible when they think that the young will want just what their elders want them to want. They assume that the children would not have been free if they had been let go while they still had immature desires. And in fact, Plato says, the truth can only make a few men free; the rest are so ill-equipped to understand the important things even in their mature years that their nearest approach to true freedom will be to be made by the laws to do what they would have wanted to do had they been as perspicacious as the framers of those laws. That the ancients were perfectly capable of being made uncomfortable by this thought is clear from Plato's vigorous parody of the Democratic Man. Not that there is a clear way out of Plato's conclusion, however. Even the most eloquent defenders of the freedom to make mistakes (e.g., John Stuart Mill and Isaiah Berlin) have had to build their arguments largely on practical considerations. The issue is still very much alive, in any case, and is part of the quarrel between Catholics and Protestants, and that between Socialists and Capitalists (the Communist Party and the Catholic Church finding themselves bedfellows not for the first time).

The second difficulty with the notion that complete freedom is equivalent to having a perfect character is more serious. It involves the existence, power and benevolence of divinity. God's will is my freedom, says Epictetus. If we can learn to value what divinity (or Nature or Reason)10 would want us to value, then we will be free in the sense that 1) everything we want will be in our power and 2) there will be nothing more rewarding that we could have been pursuing instead. And yet, if one believes, as the Fathers of the Church were bound to do, for instance, that divinity could do anything it wanted to do and what it wanted for all of us was that we achieve this most rewarding of all possible kinds of freedom, then a new difficulty arises. How are we going to account for God's refusal to make himself manifest in all his glory so that we *must* choose him, or at least to have arranged things so that we never failed to do things his way in the end, to our own supreme benefit? If freedom in the highest sense is certainty about what it would be best for us to devote ourselves to, and God could give us this certainty any time he wished, why has he so far refused to do so? The Christian answer,11 of course, is to say that this is *not* freedom in the highest sense; freedom in the highest sense is the ability to make decisions, in uncertainty. This is the other side of the notion that the best freedom is freedom to make our own mistakes. To be unerringly disposed, whether by passion or by intellect, toward Our true well-being, plus living in a favorable time and place, then, is thought to be less desirable than to be allowed to do what merely appears to be for our own good, even when we know full well that we might be making a disastrous error; to be set alternatives one of which is demonstrably better than the other is thought to be less valuable than to be set alternatives neither one of which can be shown without a doubt to be preferable to the other. And so valuable is this freedom, it is believed, that God gives it to us knowing that it will mean that most of us will in our ignorance "choose" damnation.

No wonder, then, that we quite often get a complicated and rather muddy answer when we ask a modern reader of the *Oedipus* just what he means when he insists that the protagonist must have been "free." Inappropriate ideas—some charged with great emotion—are likely to crowd into our heads and prevent us from getting straight what actually happens in the course of the play.

We must first think away the Stoic and Christian contributions to the debate about "freedom," and then try to recover the excitement and confusion of the quarrel that involved sophists, poets and philosophers in Sophocles' Athens.

In *Republic* 2.380a, Socrates quotes from a lost play by Aeschylus12 where it is said that "god plants criminal responsibility in men," whenever he wishes to destroy a family utterly. Socrates is horrified. Divinity is not responsible (*aitios*) for all things good and bad, "as the many think"; it is responsible only for a few things in men's lives, Socrates insists (379c). "For the good things nothing else should be held responsible (*aitiateon*), but for evils other things, *not* god, must be sought as the cause (*aitia*)." The gods ruled the universe, Socrates and Plato thought, to the extent that the men of the most excellent character could be guaranteed to win the best things life has to offer. But the existence—indeed, predominance (*Republic* 2.379c4–5; *Laws* 9.906a)—of self-destructive energy in the world and in human moves proves that divinity is not able to do what would be best of all, to free everyone by giving them only true desires. Freedom is possible only for the wise, according to Socrates, and for those of the foolish who are lucky enough to be trained and governed by the wise. Although the gods presumably want us all to be happy and can guarantee that all who are truly perceptive will be so, they cannot obliterate those features of incarnate existence that make men less than perfectly perceptive.

The philosophers were right when they insisted that the tragedians did not see things in this light. Sophocles represents the gods as invariably getting their way, although at the expense of the happiness of many a good man. He regularly shows the gods as operating on a scale of values that cuts across the strivings of some of the best of men; their highest intention is something other than to reward all men who are good, and a man who finds his plans frustrated by divinity need not conclude that his goals were therefore impious or immoral in addition to being contrary to divine plans. Sophocles represented the final victory of the gods as beautiful and ultimately to man's best interests; the benefits of the divine interventions, however, are usually remote and obscure. Above all, there is no obvious benefit in this life for the god's innocent victim himself. Troy needs the innocent suffering of Philoctetes, Salamis that of Ajax, Athens that of Oedipus, we need the heroes, and the martyrs are memorable and thrilling to watch. We are thankful for the innocent suffering of these heroes in some obscure way. But we cannot actually learn anything from them as to why we should be good. Or at least we cannot learn what some of Sophocles' contemporaries thought was the first premise of any moral system, that the reason why one should be truly excellent is that only then can one be truly free.

The Stoics had every reason to call Socrates their most important predecessor, at least in one respect. Socrates was the first to argue that complete freedom in the classical sense was really quite possible to achieve if one were intelligent enough. That is, the gods are humane in their demands and nature is benign, so a man who does the wisest of the things possible for him to do at every turn will in fact inevitably achieve lasting happiness, no matter how ill-advised and unjust the actions of other men toward him might be. But Socrates' was only the most startling and influential suggestion in what was really a prolonged and articulate debate. It may be that there never had been, and never has been since, a crisis in morality that was so brilliantly and so variously talked about by those living through it. Sometimes the debate centered on the scale of values received from society (was conventional morality a trap to take away your freedom? could you be free only if you were a *tyrannos*? will a shrewd man always circumvent the demands of his society?), sometimes on the role of the gods (are men's laws divinely inspired and administered or is there a superhuman code that cuts across men's laws? is this superhuman code liberating and really more humane than laws framed by mortals or is it something impossible for men to live by and be happy?).

Hard as it is to extract any logical argument from the plays of Sophocles (far harder than in the case of Aeschylus or Euripides), some things can be inferred about his stand in the debate about freedom: 1) The gods use the excellence of some men to bring benefits to mankind, or to certain cities or families, anyhow. 2) The most beneficial of human lives are not those which are enriched with happiness, but those full of innocent suffering. 3) The innocent suffering is contrived not by unjust men, but by the gods themselves; and the pious onlooker, the one who stands to benefit from the catastrophe, is he who realizes the godsent, involuntary nature of the pollution incurred by the sufferer. 4) The gods need not be thought of as bringing about involuntary pollution by ordering a good man to do something contrary to his nature, as Aeschylus thought; they sometimes allow him to act voluntarily on good motives and then make a mockery of the voluntary nature of what he had done by showing that he had not had some crucial piece of information. 5) Freedom can be, won, therefore, neither in Socrates' nor the sophists' way, or at least this freedom is not guaranteed by the gods; they choose good men, not bad, to be the martyrs for the world.

What Oedipus is shown doing on the stage, hunting the killer of Laius, attempting to find out the identity of his parents, and so on: even this has an element of the involuntary in it. That is, the gods know, but he does not, that the outcome of his efforts is going to be stupefyingly different from what he could possibly guess. We hardly think about that, however; what occupies us most is Oedipus' discovery of what he had done involuntarily in the past, to his parents and to himself. We are watching a man come to the realization that he was, and had been for many years, although he did not know it, one of the chosen of the gods. By dramatizing the discovery instead of the innocent acts themselves, Sophocles has sharpened to an incredible degree the bitterness of being such a chosen one, the folly of supposing that a man can be free by being good. We may well ask why such a vision stirs us rather than depressing us or disgusting us as it did some of the Socratics, but we ought not to deny that this is the implication of the action we are watching.

Instead of saying that since the *Oedipus* moves us, therefore Oedipus must be a free agent, we should do better to say that since the *Oedipus* moves us, and he is obviously *not* free, the assumption that only the actions of a free agent could engage our deepest sympathies and interest ought to be looked at again. We should at least not close the debate before it is begun.

*5*

There is another common argument that runs as follows: Greek tragedies do not in fact show us stories of men suffering catastrophes because of faults in their character or intellect. Aristotle understood Greek tragedy. Therefore Aristotle, when he said that, the best kind of protagonist is one whose fall is caused by a major *hamartia*, cannot have meant by *hamartia* a mistake that indicates a flaw in the protagonist's character or intellect. As Professor Page puts it, "since [Aristotle] illustrates his theme with the example of *Oedipus* (among others), it is clear that he is thinking of involuntary *hamartia*" (ed. of *Agamemnon* xxix n.2).

That the word *hamartia* in *Poetics* 13 means an unavoidable mistake in the facts is confidently believed by the majority of critics today. The passages in Aristotle which are most often quoted in support of this idea are *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.8 and *Rhetoric* 1.1374b5ff. The scholars most often cited as having "demonstrated" this interpretation are O. Hey (*Philologus* 83 [1927] 1–17 and 137–63), P. W. Harsh (*TAPA* 76 [1945] 47–58), and Bywater and Else in their commentaries *ad loc*. Now there is no doubt that the word, taken in isolation, might mean "mistake in fact," that *hamartêma* does mean that, both in key passages in Aristotle's own writing and also in interesting passages in the tragedies themselves. But it is also true that the word *can* mean a catastrophic error for which one can blame oneself morally, and this use, too, can be found both in Aristotle (e.g. *Nic.Eth*. 3.110b28ff) and in tragedy (e.g., *Antigone* 126ff). It is simply not possible to find a conclusive answer to the puzzle of *Poetics* 13 by studying the various uses of the word *hamartia* and adding to that only our own understanding of what in fact does happen in the tragedies.

Before Aristotle gives his description of the best kind of protagonist, he eliminates all of the kinds that would fail to serve the natural function of tragedy, the pleasurable production of pity and fear in the audience. Heading the list and very roundly condemned indeed is the truly admirable and excellently equipped man, for if he is seen to fall from good fortune to bad fortune, the experience for the audience will be *miaron*, "unclean," polluted and therefore polluting. (From other parts of the *Poetics* we can infer that such a man could, without bad effects, be shown going from bad to good fortune, but such a plot would be considered by Aristotle to produce a pleasure other than that appropriate for tragedy, e.g., 1453a35.) But neither do we want a wicked or depraved man, whether falling into misery or triumphant. "What is left is someone between these extremes, a man who does not stand out for his excellence or justice, nor yet does he fall into misfortune because of wickedness or vice."

At this point nobody could deny that Aristotle is asking for a protagonist who has some imperfections in his character. If he had not gone on to use the word *hamartia* there would be no doubt about it: not only is it better that the man be less than spectacular with regard to human excellence and justice, if the plot fails to show him to be flawed in these qualities the spectacle of his downfall will be "unclean." Aristotle cannot be merely eliminating an insipidly perfect, saintly man; he cannot be saying merely that audiences are more sympathetic to "human" figures than to impossibly good men. The word *miaron* is too strong to allow that interpretation. He is saying that unless the audience sees that the protagonist has a flawed character, they will have an appalling, defiling experience instead of the appropriate pleasure.

Nor is it possible to assert confidently that Aristotle did not want this imperfection of character to be the cause, or a cause, of the protagonist's fall into misfortune. Although he says that pity can only be aroused by the spectacle of one coming to a misfortune that he did not deserve (1453a4), and although he uses for the act that brings the man down a word (*hamartia*) of neutral coloring, a word that might well include non-culpable mistakes, the rhetoric of these sentences seems nevertheless to imply that the mistaken move is *proof* that the protagonist, though he is not a wicked man, is not a man of outstanding virtue, either. Both times that the protagonist's catastrophic *hamartia* is spoken of it is in explanation of the requirement that he be in between the outstandingly good man and the outstandingly bad man. He should fall not through wickedness or vice but through a *hamartia* (1453a10); "he should be a man either such as we have described or better rather than worse, falling from good to bad fortune through a great *hamartia*" (a16).

Among the most famous and admired passages in the *Poetics* are those concerned with the requirement that there be a necessary connection between the character of the protagonist and the plot. When we find Aristotle discussing the various possible kinds of plot (1452b23) in terms of these same two things, therefore, i.e., whether the movement is toward unhappiness or away from it, and whether the protagonist is good or bad, we should surely expect him, in describing the best of all plots, to do so in terms of the *relation* between the moral excellence of the protagonist and his passage from or to misfortune. One thing that would certainly disturb Aristotle about the fall of an excellent man is that the connection between this good man's character and his fall would seem to be necessarily a tenuous one. The catastrophe should occur to a man sufficiently excellent (and highly placed and successful) so that we feel that such a thing ought not to have happened to such a man; but if the man did *nothing*, he ought not to have done, there would appear to be no connection between character and plot at all. Or so Aristotle may well have supposed.

But Aristotle is saying much more than this. It is not only an artistic blunder to show perfectly blameless suffering; the spectacle is a polluting one, *miaron*, he says. This is an unusual, perhaps even a unique, use of the word *miaron*. Applied to an act, it nearly always means (in the fourth and fifth centuries, anyhow) that the event brings a *miasma* or pollution. Applied to a person it means that he has done, or is the kind of man who might do, something that makes him a carrier of a pollution and therefore one who will pollute everyone who comes into contact with him.13 The opposite of *miaros* is *katharos*, *hagnos* or *hosios*, "cleansed," or "pure" (e.g., Plato, *Laws* 9.865ff, Antiphon 2a10, Andocides 1.96 *SEG* 12.81.11, *O.T.* 823, 1383, *O.C.* 945). Although this is hard to prove, it seems that it was especially appropriate to call a person *miaros* if he had violated, or was thought capable of violating, a close family tie.14

The word occurs again in the next chapter of the *Poetics*. There Aristotle argues that the best plots are those in which the suffering results from deeds done (or intended) within the family, "as when the murder or whatever is carried out or intended by brother against brother, son against father, mother against son, or son against mother" (1453b19–22). That is why tragedians keep returning to the houses of Alcmeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus and a few others, he says (1453a20–1). The worst variation on this theme, he goes on to say, is the story of a person intending such a deed in full knowledge of what he is doing, who then does not do it after all. "For it both has the *miaron*, and in addition (because there is no suffering) it is not tragic" (1543b39). Better is the situation where the person goes through with such a deed not knowing what he is doing, and then discovers afterward what he has done. "For the *miaron* is not present, and the effect of the discovery is shattering" (1454a4). (Such, he had said earlier [1453b31], is the situation in Sophocles' *Oedipus*.) Best of all, however, is the story of someone about to commit such an act in ignorance, who then finds out the truth and so does not go through with it. We have to fill in the reasons why Aristotle preferred this last situation. First, there is "suffering," because a deed of the right sort is intended by a man who would not have wanted to do such a thing knowingly. (Aristotle has already said that an intended violation of a family tie is enough to cause "suffering"; it need not be carried out. Aristotle is obviously thinking of the perpetrator's "suffering," not the victim's—which is just what we should expect if his models are stories like those of Oedipus and Thyestes. In the worst kind of plot, where the deed is also intended but not carried out, the would-be perpetrator undertakes the deed voluntarily, with full knowledge of the identity of the victim; that apparently is why it is appropriate to say that there is no "suffering" in his story.) Secondly, since in the best version the deed, which would have been free of *miaria* anyhow, is not even carried out, the situation is as free of *miaria* as a story of such a violation could be. Also, it is possible that Aristotle considered the "discovery" to be best of all in this version. Because it comes in time to prevent the dreaded act, it is thrilling but *not* shattering.

So anxious was Aristotle to show that in the best plays *miaria* was minimized, he appears to have been driven to a conclusion in chapter 14 that is hard, if not impossible, to reconcile with his preference in the chapter before for an unhappy, rather than a happy, ending.

The word *miaron* in chapter 14, then, seems to have been chosen because of its common connection with a violation of family ties. And that fact makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that this was also the case in chapter 13 when Aristotle called the spectacle of innocent suffering *miaron*. There must be some difference in the two uses, however. He says in chapter 14 that Oedipus committed his violation in ignorance and that in such situations. there is suffering, but "*miaria* is not present." In chapter 13 the story of Oedipus is also singled out as one that is not *miaron*, but for a different reason altogether: Oedipus and Thyestes are mentioned (1453al1) as examples of the very best kind of protagonist, in that. they are not pre-eminently good, yet do not fall because of vice, either; they fall because of some *hamartia*, and belong to the class of men who, in the beginning at least, are highly thought of, very successful and famous. There are two different things, therefore, that would have made the story of Oedipus *miaron*—if Oedipus had known what he was doing, *or* if he had been a thoroughly excellent man instead of one of the intermediate kind. His act had to have two qualities that are by no means easy to reconcile one with the other: it had to be done in ignorance, and it had nevertheless to stem from an imperfection in his character. The failure to have either one would have heightened the *miaria* to an intolerable degree, Aristotle insists.

Why it should be thought that there would be pollution if Oedipus were to be portrayed as knowing full well what he was about to do is easy enough to see. Show a violation too horribly criminal and there is a *miaria* right there in the theater involving even the audience itself. But why this should also be the result of showing a violation which is done in ignorance of the victim's identity, but which in addition to that is done because of no fault at all in the protagonist's character—that is much harder to see. For this idea we must go not to the tragedies themselves or to archaic ideas of pollution, but back once more to the Socratic revolution and the quarrel between Socrates and the poets. According to Socrates and his descendants, as we have seen, the universe is so arranged that it is in fact impossible (or at least extremely unlikely, according to Aristotle's version) that a man who has all the virtues will do something that will cast him into genuine unhappiness. The man who is pre-eminent in excellence and justice is the man who has the necessary conditions for success. Indeed, Socrates even said that such a man had the *sufficient* conditions for happiness, and Plato and Aristotle each modified this notion only a little. To present a story, then, of a man who had what were believed to be necessary and sufficient conditions for happiness but who nevertheless did the kind of thing that all men hoped that they would never do, would be to present a picture of the universe that is false in the most dangerous and corrupting way possible. Socrates and Plato looked at Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and saw that this was exactly what they did do. Again and again good men were either forced directly to do something of the most polluting kind or they were kept in ignorance and then shown later what they had done—forced15 or tricked by the gods themselves. No wonder that the censorship of the tragedies was so large a part of Plato's ethics: to be present at a tragedy and be profoundly moved by it was just about the most dangerous kind of defilement that a man could be exposed to.

Now Aristotle, for rather complicated philosophical reasons, came to the conclusion that writing tragedies and attending them must be a natural and therefore good-directed activity. Witnessing violations within the family must ultimately be an aid, not a hindrance, to the philosophic life, he seems to have concluded. But he had Plato's arguments to overcome before he could get anybody to believe this. If he had agreed with Plato that the vision implied in tragedies was indeed contrary to what men must come to believe if they were to win happiness, then it would have been necessary to conclude that tragedies were either ludicrous or dangerous. But he could accept neither of these alternatives if he supposed that tragedies were "rational," a help to the good life. And yet Aristotle did not wish to contend that the Socratic view of life was basically incorrect, either. He took the only remaining way out. He concluded that Plato had read the plays incorrectly. *If* tragedies did indeed imply that a man who had achieved the necessary and sufficient conditions for happiness could nevertheless be forced or tricked by the gods to do what no good man should ever want to do—one of the things we all hope most passionately that we shall never do—then watching and enjoying these tragedies would clearly be a dangerously misleading experience in the eyes of Socrates, Plato *or* Aristotle. But the best tragedies, Aristotle argued, do not *really* imply any such thing, for they have protagonists who do, what they do, in part at least, because they are not perfectly good men.

From the fact that most of the key words in the *Poetics* seem to be echoes of Plato's arguments against the poets, we ought probably to conclude that the treatise was aimed mainly at those of Plato's followers who still clung to the master's decision about tragedy. The appearance of a surprising and uncharacteristic word like *miaron*, then, might well be explained as a result of this aspect of the work. That is, it may have been a word that would not have occurred to Aristotle had not one of his opponents used it first. And indeed we find that this whole cluster of words, μίασμα, μιαρός, μιάστωρ, μιαίνειν, μιαιφονεῖν, μιαιφόνος, μιαρία, so common and crucial in the tragedies, is also found frequently in Plato, but is simply not part of Aristotle's vocabulary at all. Plato was still vitally interested in pollutions, as we have seen, although he had some new ideas about them. But Aristotle just did not think in terms of pollution. (No wonder he was unwilling to admit, what tragedies show all the time, that a man could do something through no fault of his own and yet feel unclean for what he had done!) The explanation for his choice of *miaron* in *Poetics* 13, then, must surely be sought in the usage of Plato or of Plato's more orthodox supporters in the Academy.

Plato called the lowest part of the psyche, "*miaron* to an extreme degree" (*Republic* 9.589e4). And at the very close of the *Republic*, Socrates implies that if that lowest part gets command of the whole person, the result is a *miasma* that the psyche takes with it even into the next world. (If we live well—according to intelligence—we shall cross Lethe safely, he says, and "we shall not be polluted with regard to our psyche," [10.621c2, cf. *Phaedo* 81b].) Of course, when the lowest part finds its desires frustrated by intelligence, it calls the restrictions put on it by the higher part *miaroi* (*Republic* 8.5624); but the truth is just the other way around: it is the yearnings at the lowest part that are really *miaroi*. (We might be reminded of the scene in the *Antigone* where Creon and his son quarrel as to which of the two is really *miaros*, which of the two is violating the more sacred ties in pursuing his desires [744ff].) Plato often used strong words indeed to indicate the unholiness of our basest desires. The lowest part of the psyche is entirely without god, he says (*Republic* 9.589e4), and to judge from its Sprees in our dreams, there is nothing it will not do. It will commit 1) incest 2) *miaiphonein*, "*miasma*-causing murders," stopping at nothing in the choice of a victim (571d2) and 3), eat what must not be eaten (a reference to crimes like that of Thyestes?). And *this* is the part of the psyche, Plato argues, that is awakened, fed and made strong; by watching tragedies!

The word *miaron* and the verbs and nouns related to it are, as I have said, not found in Aristotle. There are in fact only five exceptions, the three appearances of *miaron* in the *Poetics* and two appearances of *miaiphonos*, a rare compound meaning "guilty of having committed a *miasma*-causing murder." This is, of course, just the adjectival form of the verb used by Plato in the passage on unholy dreams quoted above, *miaiphonein*. Once in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1177b10) Aristotle is reaching out for an absurdly strong word: a man would have to be completely *miaiphonos*, he says, to want to turn his own people into enemies merely in order to have someone against whom he could wage war. But the other occurrence of this word *is* more interesting, because it comes in a discussion of "pity" and "fear." If we are pained at the unmerited suffering of others, he says (*Rhetoric* 2.1386b28), we shall take delight, or at least not be pained, by the deserved punishment of a *miaiphonos* or one who strikes his own father (πατραλοίας, another Platonic word appearing only here in Aristotle; cf. *Republic* 596b6). Evidently, then, the notion of pollution occurred to Aristotle only in connection with tragedy and the question why we should enjoy it.

In the *Laws*, when Plato goes into the question of *miasmata*, he decides, as we have seen, that the old belief, according to which even involuntary violators of family ties should be held to be *miaroi*, is correct. He says that playwrights, therefore, who bring on stage "Oedipus, Thyestes, or Macareus" are right to show them, once these heroes realize what they have done, horrified to the point of wanting to kill themselves (8.838). The stories of Oedipus and Thyestes are also the ones most obviously suggested in the catalogue of wicked dreams in the *Republic*, as we have just noticed. When, therefore, we find Aristotle choosing once more these same two heroes as the best examples of the ideal protagonist (*Poetics* 13.1453a11), we may begin to guess that these figures had become stock examples in the discussion of tragedy in the Academy. And we may also guess that the supposed *miaria* of their acts is what made them such suitable examples for the Platonists. That is surely how we should explain the fact that Aristotle talks of *miaria* only in connection with tragedy.

To Plato it seemed clear that Oedipus was *miaros*, and that anyone who allowed himself to get sympathetically excited by his crimes was risking that most dangerous of *miasmata*, the surrender to the part of his psyche that is just as *miaros* as Oedipus. But Aristotle turned the tables on Plato. Because Oedipus did not know the identity of his victim, he is not really *miaiphonos*, he argued. And anyhow, the only really *miaron* experience would be the spectacle of completely innocent suffering, for that would be a violation of all that the Socratics held most dear. Any Platonist would have to admit that this was a clever reversal of the master's argument. He could console himself, however, with the observation that it rests on an impossible reading of Attic tragedy.

The opposite to the incurrence of *miaria* is *katharsis*. Did Aristotle first hit upon that name for the thing that good tragedies did for us because of his anxiety to deny the charge that there was *miaria* in such experiences? Or did he first think of it in its medical use (which is certainly uppermost in his discussion in *Politics* 8), in response to Plato's notion of tragedy as "filling," "stuffing" or "satisfying" the lowest part of the psyche (*Republic* 10.606a4,5,6; cf. 9.57c6,7)?

Aristotle did not believe that there was a part of our psyche that was naturally *miaros*, a part that loved Oedipus' doing what he did. For him an irrational passion was only an inefficient passion, one of a pair that had to be steered between; what it wanted was always a real good in itself. When he found that he enjoyed tragedy, therefore, he could not but conclude that it must somehow be a rational enjoyment. He could hardly deny that tragedies regularly violated the very important assumption that excellence is recognized by success in the achievement of real happiness in this life; dreadful things were always happening in tragedies to people to whom such things ought not to happen. But he found a minor good to be achieved even by that upsetting spectacle: we were cleansed or emptied of our exaggerated tendencies toward pity and fear, he suggested. And he did deny that the philosophers' assumption was *completely* contradicted by good tragedies. He could not conceive of himself liking such a plot; that would be truly *miaron*, he says. But all one needed to convert an experience that would be *miaron* into an experience of the opposite sort, a *katharsis*, was to introduce a modicum of justice: the protagonist must be assumed to have made at least one great mistake, however excellent he may have been in all other ways. A factual mistake that was not his fault is not enough. The *hamartia* must be evidence of some imperfection in the protagonist's character or intellect.

*6*

Aristotle should be ignored, therefore, and the *Oedipus* read as a tragedy of fate. But we are still left with the problem why a tragedy of fate should be so stirring, so seemingly profound. We surely cannot just leave it, as Goethe did, for instance, that the sublimest form of tragedy is in fact that which shows a man crushed by an insoluble problem or by an unavoidable necessity. It may be true; but why is it true?

Plato offered an explanation for the attractiveness of such a spectacle, but we do not want to go all the way with him, either. We cannot imagine ourselves coming to the conclusion that Greek tragedy should not be shown to those who have not been given the "antidote" of Socratic philosophy. Still, Plato's opposition to the tragedians was based on two considerations, each of which contains an interesting observation, even if neither need be taken quite as Plato took it.

First, there is the suggestion that *if* we believed the Socratic vision of life, then tragedies must either look nonsensical to us or they must get their power by satisfying a latent longing within us not to believe the truth. This much is surely correct. It is Plato, not Aristotle, who read the plays correctly. *If* we accepted Socrates' assumption that the universe is so constructed that no good man can be deprived of anything truly valuable, then tragedies must, if they move us, appeal to something in us that works on a false notion of life. But few of us are willing to subscribe to the Socratic vision of life without reservations. We might agree, for instance, that the human qualities that we admire ought to be those that do in fact lead to true happiness; but we might still suspect that personal happiness and social happiness must each be compromised for the sake of the other, and that either can be undone by chance or natural forces at any time. We could then conclude that tragedies need not be banned on the supposition that they imply false things about morality and life. Yet we should still be left with the valuable observation that tragedies do in fact tend regularly to emphasize something which is, in a way, the reverse of what philosophers and other moral teachers often want to emphasize. Moral philosophers, anxious always to improve things, try to get us to look within for the true causes of our failures. They want us always to be fearful of the possibility that we might be pursuing false goods and harboring hateful desires that cannot lead to happiness. Tragedies, on the other hand, show men coming to bad ends even when their goals were rational and their desires not the sort that they should be ashamed of or regret at all.

Philosophers want us to replace resentment with guilt. They want us to assume the burden for our own failures. Indeed, our parents and teachers have told us much the same thing as long as we can remember. Perhaps we can learn this lesson too well, however. Taken full strength, this is a comforting lesson only if a man is already strong and deeply satisfied with himself and life, day after day, every hour of every day. The vast majority of us would welcome some relief from the feeling of guilt and regret, at least from time to time. We would like to be able to feel that what we have missed *had* to be missed, that we could not have got it however wise we had been or less subject to base yearnings. just to be allowed to resent something outside ourselves would help. That is much less painful than guilt. Better yet would be a vision that would make it alright in the end, a vision implying that there is a divine beauty to be discerned even in our failings. Maybe we did not really fail at all if our unhappiness is part of a divine scheme.

Plato's second complaint is that the part of us that enjoys all those polluting crimes portrayed by the tragedians is the part that actually yearns to commit those very crimes, even though we are not conscious in our waking hours of harboring any such yearnings or resentments. This suggestion too, though it seems to be reinforced by modern studies of dreams and the unconscious, need not be taken without modifications. Above all, Plato was surely wrong in conceiving a fear of art because of this connection it would seem to have with the unconscious.

We are not necessarily "reducing" great literature to something dangerous, or silly, or base when we say that—in addition to containing harmless delights and to stimulating conscious perceptions of things human—it sometimes also taps unconscious fantasies which are upsettingly primitive. When we are young and incapable of better things, what we hunger for is stories that have heroes or heroines with whom we can identify consciously, just as in a daydream. Such stories are aids to daydreams, really. When we "grow out" of a certain kind of story we often do so for the same reasons that might lead us to abandon a daydream—either we become painfully aware that it is "unrealistic," i.e., the dreamed—of goal is just too improbable, if not downright impossible; or the achievement no longer seems an attractive and satisfying thing to go after. Then, if the whole class of stories in which we identify with the protagonist more or less consciously no longer seems to touch anything very important in our lives—they do not let us dream the dreams we really must or want to dream—we are ready to graduate to serious literature. Here our sympathies and parallel fantasies go underground. One sign that we have reached this step is that we find unhappy endings sometimes just as good as happy endings. And certainly things happen to the protagonists—death, failure and the most appalling accidents—that rarely, if ever, figure in our conscious desires. But this takes great art: our unconscious lives are unconscious precisely because we have found that waking life is tolerable only if we refuse to own up to them. To say of a tragedy, then, that it allows us to live through things that we have long kept from our conscious awareness, is to say that the skill and art of the writer must have been extraordinary.

Plato's two observations (thus modified) have this in common: both point to the possibility that tragedy can, among other things, allow us to cope with fear, impossible desires, a sense of loss and irrational self-hatred, some of which date back to our earliest childhood. If this, is what Aristotle had meant by his suggestion that tragedy provides a *katharsis* of pity and fear, we should have to conclude that he was right. Unfortunately, Aristotle spoiled the idea by insisting that the protagonist be not completely innocent. If it were not for the innocence of the protagonist and the clear presence of a power that he could not have been expected to understand or overcome, living through his crimes and failures would be very painful, not cleansing and exhilarating at all.

**Notes**

1. Part I appeared in *Arion* 4.3, Part II in *Arion* 4.4.

2. "On Misunderstanding *Oedipus Rex*," *Greece and Rome* 13.1 (April 1966) 37–49.

3. This is the most usual way that these positions are distinguished in modern times, anyhow, as by J. S. Mill, for instance. Some of the Stoics had rather different ways of distinguishing the two ideas, however. See Cicero's *De fato* 42(18), for example.

4. For the various forms the story took and what can be said for the antiquity and popularity of each, see C. Robert, *Oidipus* (Berlin 1915), also H. W. Parke and D.E.W. Warmell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford 1956) 1.298–300, and R. Lattimore, *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy* (London 1964) 3–6.

5. In *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven 1955); cf. *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven 1957) 38.

6. *Sophocles* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1951) 141.

7. *A Study in Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958) 73.

8. *Eum*. 286. The manuscripts read καθαιρει~, time "destroys" or "cancels," but many editors change the accent to καθαίρει, time "cleanses." Most editors since Musgrave consider the line spurious because 1) it is thought to contradict Orestes' claim to have been absolved at Delphi and 2) by itself (with the MSS accent) it sounds like a proverbial line meaning "Time destroys (or whisks away) all things eventually." The first of these arguments is based on a misreading of βρίζει, μαραίνεται and πέλει in 281–82, however, and the second is a mere guess.

9. "On the Irony of Sophocles," *Philological Museum* 2 (1833) 483ff. Before Thirlwall, "irony" was used in English only in the ordinary Greek sense of *eirôneia* or as a description of one of Socrates' mannerisms, i.e., pretended ignorance of one sort or another. Thirlwall's choice of this word for unintentional double meanings is comprehensible only if we suppose fate or the gods to be practicing *eirôneia* on Oedipus, i.e., fate seems to allow Oedipus to make sense but it knows better and has a mischievous purpose. Cf. the French *ironie du sort*. In recent decades, however, Thirlwall's new use of the word—*without* any thought of fate—has become almost primary.

10. "History" would be the Communist equivalent, perhaps.

11. Except for some, mostly Protestants, who say that it would be foolish or even impious for us to expect our reason to be able to uncover God's reasoning.

12. This fragment was for a long time known only from Plato's quotation. But see D. Page, *Literary Papyri, Poetry*, Loeb ed. 8. Page makes an interesting case for believing that the sentiment is also at the heart of most Aeschylean tragedy: see his ed. of the *Agamemnon* (Oxford 1957) xxviii f.

13. A. W. H. Adkins, "Aristotle and the Best Kind of Tragedy," *CQ* 16 (May 1966) 96, argues that the loose use of *miaros* in the orators and in comedy (he might also have added *Phaedrus* 236e, *Charmides* 161b and 174b) justifies the assumption that *miaros* is "a piece of 'ordinary language' used generally at the time to condemn works of art that were felt to be shocking." It is a long leap, however, from an angry or jocular use of an epithet meaning literally "you who have committed a pollution-causing violation," but which is used in a non-literal, exaggerated spirit, to "polluted" as a description of the experience of an audience at a play. If *miaron* had come to mean little more than the English "filthy" or "revolting," the characters in Aristophanes would surely have lost interest in it and looked for a stronger word.

14. Perhaps because the notion of kinsman was sometimes felt to include all of one's fellow countrymen, treason too might be thought of as a *miaria*. Socrates' indictment (*Apology* 23d) said he was "*miarôtatos* and a corrupter of the young." At *Republic* 5.470a2 the offer of spoils taken from kinsmen (i.e., any other Greeks) is called a *miasma*. At *Euthyphro* 4c Euthyphro suggests, that a *miasma* is the same whether in the family or not, but Socrates denies it. This is his more usual stand, cf. *Republic* 8.565e, *Laws* 9.872e. We shall look at another, uniquely Platonic, use of the word below.

15. See Page's interesting, if somewhat oversimplified, defense of the innocence of Agamemnon, in his edition of the *Agamemnon* xx–xxix. There is no question of Agamemnon's ignorance; like Orestes, he is compelled by necessity to do the impious deed with his eyes open.

Gould, Thomas. "The Innocence of Oedipus: The Philosophers on *Oedipus the King*, Part III."*Arion* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1966), pp. 478–525. © 1966 by *Arion*. Reprinted in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Oedipus Rex*, Updated Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2006. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=MCIOR04&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=MCIOR04&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=MCIOR04&SingleRecord=True)

## The Contrast Between Antigone and Creon

**Date:** 1958
On *Antigone* by Sophocles
**Author:** G. M. Kirkwood
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

That a contrast between Antigone and Creon lies at the heart of the drama can be taken for granted. Our task in this section will be to examine two matters: the complexity of this contrast, and the subsidiary character relationships and their effect on the action. We shall review first the secondary contrasts and end with the main clash between Antigone and Creon.

Antigone and Ismene are together in two scenes, in the prologue and at the end of the second episode. The contrast between them is not that of devotion to a cause *vs*. timidity; it is more complex than that and more revealing of the character of Antigone. Of course Antigone is devoted and has a cause; and Ismene, by contrast, is timid. But to what, exactly, is Antigone's devotion, and what does it indicate about her? The contrast with Ismene helps us to answer these questions. In the prologue Antigone's first concern is not for religious duty, which looms so large in her scene with Creon. Her first reaction is a personal one; the matter is one of family loyalty, where, she feels, Creon has no right to intrude. Antigone is intense, as we see from the opening line on; her greeting to Ismene has more of intimacy and passion than of loving gentleness. To Creon's clumsy interference with her duty to her family, she responds with instinctive hostility. She is furious that Creon should seek to legislate to her in a matter so personal to her: "Such conditions they say the worthy Creon has proclaimed for you and me—yes, even for me" (32–33)! The burial of Polyneices becomes for her the very touchstone of nobility, and she declares that Ismene by her attitude toward it will show "Whether you are of noble nature or base though your parents were good" (38). Like Ajax and Deianeira, Antigone has an unhesitating devotion to her concept of what is becoming to the >noble.

In all this there is no thought of the *kagrapta nomimal* ; up to this point Antigone has not reflected and has not formulated her instinctive idealism. She is not to be thought of as primarily a philosopher or an embodiment of the reasoned way of life. By the contrasting reaction of Ismene we understand more clearly what Antigone is. Ismene's conduct is equally instinctive. Suddenly confronted with a bold and illegal scheme, she shrinks at once, for her instinct is to obey, just as surely as Antigone's is to exercise her own will: she is a woman, and cannot fight against men (61–62); she must obey (47, 59, 79); Antigone's plan lacks common sense (68); those below will forgive her for not acting (65–66); she cannot act k*via politonl* (79). So far as moral attitude is concerned, there is no fundamental difference; Ismene is as aware as Antigone of the wrongness of Creon's edict. The difference is in personality: Ismene is without the imperiousness, willfulness, and single-mindedness of her sister; she is prudent and sees other aspects of the situation. Antigone has eyes for only the one issue that is to her all-important.

There is another contrast between them. When Ismene shows reluctance to act, Antigone becomes instantly hostile. She declares bitterly that she would not now accept her sister's help if it were offered (69–70); when Ismene advises silence and says that she too will be silent about the plan to bury Polyneices, Antigone angrily bids her tell it to all (84–87). Antigone promises Ismene the hatred of their dead brother and of herself (93–94); Ismene in the last words of the prologue assures Antigone of her love, mad though she may be.

Kirkwood, G. M. *A Study of Sophoclean Drama*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press (1958): pp. 118–20. Quoted as "The Contrast Between Antigone and Creon" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO53&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO53&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO53&SingleRecord=True)

## The Two Burials in *Antigone*

**Date:** 1972
On *Antigone* by Sophocles
**Author:** Marsh McCall
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

Sir Richard Jebb called attention long ago to a problem of motivation in Antigone's presumed double burial of Polynices, and he remarked, 'I have never seen this question put or answered'. Were he alive, he might well wish he had never raised the question, so frequent and various have been the answers proposed during the intervening three-quarters of a century. It has even been suggested that concern for the question is irrelevant to the text or fostered merely to produce 'original' literary criticism. The number of able scholars who have dealt with the problem of the double burial, however, would appear to reflect a real uneasiness about the true meaning of the text.

If Antigone alone performed both burials, then Sophocles felt that two burials supply something to the development of the play which a single burial would not. It has never been argued persuasively that the second burial is required for religious purposes. The guard explicitly credits the first burial with all necessary observances. The purpose of the second burial must be dramatic. More 'dramatic' solutions for Antigone's return to her brother have been proposed than can be noted here. For the most part, however, they may be grouped under the following headings. (1) Antigone's return signifies her *khamartial*, the stubbornness which forms her tragic flaw. (2) Antigone in some way *wants* to be caught. (3) The Athenian audience does not really notice, or at least does not question, the two visits. (4) It is simply a natural and dutiful act of devotion for Antigone to return to her brother, especially on learning that he has been uncovered. (5) Two burials increase the suspense of the play and serve to show Antigone triumphant before we see her defeated and captured. Clearly these categories impinge upon one another, and writers have not always restricted themselves to one alone.

Two other questions may also be asked. If the second burial is only a dramatic device, why does its character seem so different from the first burial? There, Antigone accomplishes her mission with stealth; the guards are wholly unaware of her presence. At the second burial, on the other hand, once the dust storm has lifted, Antigone is perceived making no effort either to hide herself or to keep silent. She conducts the first burial with caution, the second with abandon. Her approach to the second burial might be used to support the theory that she desires capture, but then why does she wait until a second burial to expose herself? The difference in the *modus operandi* of the two burials must be taken as a dramatic inconsistency in any theory involving Antigone's performance of both of them, unless we say that she was required religiously to return and lament over the body, and by so doing reveals herself. This has been argued but, like other solutions of a religious nature, without compelling evidence.

Secondly, why does Antigone make no mention of the double act of devotion to her brother in the scenes from her capture to her final exit? One would think that in her defiance of Creon and in the maintenance of the higher justice of her actions such a mention would find natural and emphatic expression. Yet it never occurs. At 442, when Creon first addresses Antigone after the guard's reluctant indictment of her, *he* uses a generalizing plural, *ktadel*, to refer to her actions (he of course is quick to attribute both burials to her), and she assents to his words, but he seems to be thinking mainly of the second burial, and in any case k*tadel* can signify singular as easily as plural. At 542, Antigone rebuffs her sister with a reference in the singular to what she has done.

McCall, Marsh. "Divine and Human Action in Sophocles: The Two Burials of the *Antigone*." *Yale Classical Studies*, vol. XXII (1972): pp. 103–7. Quoted as "The Two Burials in *Antigone*" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO54&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO54&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO54&SingleRecord=True)

## The Representation of Antigone's Opening Address

**Date:** 1982
On *Antigone* by Sophocles
**Author:** David Seale
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

O Ismene, my kindred sister, my own dearest sister . . .

The opening address is extraordinarily elaborate and signifies more than the conventional warmth of a family relationship; the keynote of the drama, kinship, is immediately sounded on the lips of her who is to stake her life on its obligations. This is Antigone, in her earliest youth. It is her secret initiative with her sister, Ismene, which sets the tragedy in motion. They stand before the royal palace at Thebes, the house that once belonged to their father. Family is indeed the subject-matter of the whole scene, the ill-starred family of Oedipus. We hear of the self-inflicted blindness of Oedipus himself, the suicide of his mother and wife, Jocasta, and now most recently, the mutual fratricide of his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices. His daughters, now before us, are the sole survivors (58). They are there together as a unit, in visual harmony, their closeness set against the verbal background of violent family conflict. And the question is whether they can overcome a new evil which has befallen them— *as a pair* .

The new evil of which Antigone speaks is the proclamation of Creon, now king, which prescribes discriminatory treatment for the bodies of her two brothers: Eteocles, the defender of the city, is to be buried with due honour; Polynices, who has invaded Thebes with foreign troops, is to be left unburied and unwept. The horror of the exposed corpse is impressed upon us by Antigone with shocking clarity; it will provide an unending feast for birds, as they see it from the air. But she intends to defy the proclamation and bury her brother's corpse at the risk of death by public stoning. Here, in the darkness of pre-dawn (16 and 100), Antigone tries to involve Ismene in her secret resolve. Her failure signals the breakup of this last family relationship and we watch the heroine of the tragedy come into being before our eyes. Ismene is cautious, obedient to male authority and lacks the courage of her convictions. Antigone is fearless, self-reliant and willing to die for hers. And she disdains Ismene's promise of concealment, ready to match Creon's 'proclamation' with her own, a love of kindred declared in deed (86–7). The growing rift which develops in the course of the scene culminates in their separate departures, a visible rupture of the initial harmony. The shape of the theatre makes this severance particularly impressive; Ismene withdraws unobtrusively to wait in the palace, Antigone leaves by a *parodos*. The independence, the single-mindedness, the open and solitary defiance are all there in the long walk from the scene. Antigone separates herself from all that Ismene is. And she abandons one who is no longer a sister, for she goes to be with the dead, the only kindred that remains to her. The exit of Antigone is an emblem of her absolute isolation.

For a moment the stage is empty. Then the Chorus enters from the other *parodos*, oblivious of the intrigue to which the audience has been privy and, as yet, unaware of Creon's proclamation. The personality of the Chorus is important. It consists of the elders of Thebes, who represent community. The conflict between private and public morality which lies at the heart of the tragedy is already foreshown in the scenic contrast, the desolate figure set against the harmonious group. As in the *Electra* the prologue is separated from the world of the play, and even more dramatically; Antigone is the main character and she is distinctive among the 'heroes' of Sophoclean tragedy in her given isolation from the Chorus, by age, by status and, uniquely, by sex. The elders have come to celebrate the city's glorious victory over the foreign invaders and they fill the scene with sound and movement as personal grief gives way to public exultation:

Ray of the sun, fairest light that ever *appeared* [ *phanen* ] on seven-gated Thebe, you *appeared* [ *ephanthēs* ] finally, *eye* of golden day, having come above the streams of Dirce. . . . (100–5)

These first choral lyrics of the play, with one image of light piled upon another, echo and re-echo a visible joy. But the brilliant sunlight which they hail actually belongs to the previous day of victory and the dramatic sequence has it emerge from the pre-dawn darkness of Antigone's ominous venture. The ecstatic performance—and this is the land of Dionysus, the god of ecstasy (151–4)—is thus out of place, an illusion of brightness which has already passed, as the final image of night perhaps implies (152).

Seale, David. *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*. Chicago: Chicago University Press (1982): pp. 84–85. Quoted as "The Representation of Antigone's Opening Address" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO56&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO56&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO56&SingleRecord=True)

## The Psychological Evolution of *Antigone*

**Date:** 1936
On *Antigone* by Sophocles
**Author:** Edouard Schuré
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

*The* 'Antigone', *Revealer of the Eternal-Feminine and of Universal Love*

We may now attempt to pierce the secret of the tragedy of *Antigone*, the conclusion of the great Theban trilogy.

This drama represents the blossoming of the thought of Sophokles. It brings before us the most extraordinary psychological evolution that has ever been represented on the stage. This evolution not only comes about in the heroine, it spreads all around and affects the whole city. Let us follow the stages of this metamorphosis which seems miraculous, though the magic of art makes it inevitable.

The city of Thebes is emerging from the horrors of a civil war which has grafted itself upon the disasters of the family of Oedipus. The sons of the incestuous king have provoked this war in an attempt to usurp the reins of government. The besiegers have been repulsed, but the two rival brothers have inflicted deadly blows each upon the other. Thebes is freed from her external enemies, though as completely crushed by her misfortunes as if she had been vanquished. Only apparently now does she believe in her Gods, in divine justice. Two powers alone rule over men's hearts and cause them to bow their head: Hatred and Fear. Kreon, an ambitious upstart, a clever and intriguing tyrant, crafty and obstinate, has attained to power. No longer having another master, the city of Thebes trembles before him. Straightway he intends to give the people a proof of his absolute authority. The body of Eteokles, the defender of Thebes, has been buried in accordance with the usual rites; but the body of Polyneikes, the enemy of his country, whose sole representative Kreon henceforth wished to be, is deprived of funeral honours, his body rots in the sunlight, a prey to dogs and vultures. And such is to be the lot of those who dare to disobey the tyrant of Thebes. We must remember that the Greeks believed the souls of the unburied dead to be condemned to endless wanderings, to eternal sufferings. Only one person, Antigone, in all the city dares to oppose the decree and confront the tyrant. What is it that gives such extraordinary courage to a defenceless virgin, of royal blood, true, though owing her birth to the crime of incest?

Day has not yet risen upon the sleeping city. In the semi-darkness of the approaching dawn, Antigone and Ismene, the two daughters of Oedipus, stealthily leave the palace of Kreon. News of the sinister decree which condemns to the gibbet the body of Polyneikes, has reached them. For fear of eaves-dropping, they have left the palace to consult together. One trembles with indignation, the other with fear. The courageous elder sister informs the younger of her resolve to confront the tyrant, and, in spite of him, to bury the body of her brother. She asks Ismene to join her in the act. The timid and gentle Ismene, however, lacks her sister's fine courage. She shrinks from the project, alleging the folly and danger of such an act undertaken by two feeble women. Whereupon Antigone answers with cold disdain: 'I would neither urge thee nor, if thou wert still willing to act, wouldst thou do it pleasingly with me at least. But be thou of what sort it seems good to thee, I however will bury him. It is glorious for me to die, doing this. From this moment, a wide gulf separates her from her sister. Subsequently, when the feeble though kind and faithful Ismene, moved by her sister's tragic fate, wishes to follow her in death, the latter proudly replies: 'No, thou hast chosen to live and I to die.'

Schuré, Edouard. *The Genesis of Tragedy and The Sacred Drama of Eleusis*, trans. Fred Rothwell. London: Rudolf Steiner Publish Co. and New York: Anthroposophic Press (1936): pp. 226–29. Quoted as "The Psychological Evolution of *Antigone*" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO55&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO55&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO55&SingleRecord=True)

## Recurring Imagery

**Date:** 1951
On *Antigone* by Sophocles
**Author:** Robert Goheen
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

*The Fact of Recurrence*

Recurrence of imagery is a fact of the *Antigone* which we have already stated to be one of the keys to the total structure, and it is a fact with which we shall be concerned for most of the rest of this essay. It is of significance for us in several ways and on several levels.

At a rather elementary level it serves as an indication that an unobtrusive image or one which might otherwise be regarded as "dead" is in fact alive within a pattern of meanings created by the poet about it. Consider, for example, the military terms in the opening speech of the play:

And now what is this new thing which they say that the general ( *stratêgon*) has just had heralded to the city and all its people: Do you know? Have you heard? Or do you fail to see that the evils of your enemies are marching ( *steichonta*) on your friends?

When Antigone refers to Creon here as the *stratêgos* (a general term for the leader of the state in many tragedies, a military general, a chief executive in the Athenian state) the term may seem only general and of not much particular significance at first. At the same time, the implication of military rigor to be felt in the term is given support by the military implication of the other word, *steichonta*, which follows closely behind. This later term often means only to proceed, but it is connected closely with marching and military columns. Together these two images in the overtones of Antigone's first reference to Creon have connection to, and show their vitality in their bearing upon, Creon's second and crucial statement of political principle, which, as we shall see more fully, rests upon a military conception and includes obedience "to small orders and just orders and orders of the opposite kind." And here, as Antigone's initial, latent characterization of Creon's manner of rule foresees, well in advance of the vision of the other characters, the limited character of that rule and expresses it in just the terms which Creon later brings into the open, the recurrences of military imagery take us to a further level of meaning and a more internal kind of awareness—that of Antigone's intuitive knowledge and its validity, despite the general discredit which it suffers for over half of the play.

Another example is worth noticing, for it involves an almost hoary metaphor being called to life and being so developed as to take us into the clash of points of view on one of the central issues of the play. This is the sequence built on *hyperbainein* (to overstep, transgress) in application to law and religious principles. The first appearance is 449. Creon asks Antigone,

Did you then dare to overstep these laws?

She replies affirmatively and in her famous speech of defense presents the righteousness of her conduct as against his view that he, a mortal, could override (*hyperdramein*) the unwritten and imperishable laws of the gods. Creon returns to his original expression in 481, and the momentary balance and clash of these images subsides for the time being. But following this scene, the Chorus recalls Creon's original term to generalize upon Zeus's invincible power and law of retribution against human *transgression*. As a result of the previous exchange with this image in relation to human and divine law, suggestive overtones are aroused when the Chorus continues and applies this general theme with a further pedal image:

For far-ranging expectation is to many men a comfort but to many the deceit which follows light desire. Disillusionment comes to him who knows not until he burn his foot in the hot fire.

Goheen, Robert F. *The Imagery of Sophocles'* Antigone: *A Study of Poetic Language and Structure*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1951): pp. 9–11. Quoted as "Recurring Imagery" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO52&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO52&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO52&SingleRecord=True)

## Bloom on Sophocles

**From:** *Dramatists and Dramas*, Bloom's 20th Anniversary Collection.

*Electra*

Sophocles was a child of three or four when Aeschylus presented his first tragedy, in 499 B.C.E. At twenty-eight, Sophocles won the first prize competing against Aeschylus, and until 456, when Aeschylus died, there must have been many contests between the two. Sophocles's *Electra* has a complex relation to Aeschylus's *Libation-Bearers*, which was the second play of a trilogy; in Sophocles's case, *Electra* stood alone.

I intend to contrast *Electra* and the *Libation-Bearers*, employing Richmond Lattimore's version of the Aeschylus, and the new translation of the Sophocles by the Canadian poet Anne Carson. Carson, a major poet and a classical scholar, cites Virginia Woolf 's essay, "On Not Knowing Greek," from *The Common Reader.* Woolf remarks that Electra's cries "give angle and outline to the play," and Carson (who shows a dark affinity for Electra) writes a remarkable foreword, emphasizing Electra's horror of the evil in her life, a horror virtually beyond measure: "she is someone off the scale." Strikingly comparing the Electra of Sophocles to Emily Dickinson's "equally private religion of pain," Carson observes that: "They touch a null point at the centre of the woman's soul."

Woolf, Dickinson, and Carson perhaps have only their literary greatness in common, and yet Carson's translation teaches us to uncover the Sophoclean Electra in the novelist and in both poets. Electra's grief is passionately personal in Sophocles, as John Jones noted in his *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy.* "Personal" seems not strong enough, because we have debased the word, as when we speak of a "personal letter." That is too far from "Electra's private language of screams," as Carson phrases it, and too far also from Woolf 's *Three Guineas*, Dickinson's Master poems, and Carson's tangos, *The Beauty of the Husband.*

In the *Libation-Bearers*, Electra is perhaps more angry than pained, a princess who fiercely resents her debasement, and who centers her love upon Orestes. The Electra of Sophocles has a death-absorbed imagination, as Carson says, and suffers the negation of her own sexuality. Here is Aeschylus's Electra, craving revenge, and unwilling to abandon life:

Almighty herald of the world above, the world
below: Hermes, lord of the dead, help me; announce
my prayers to the charmed spirits underground, who watch
over my father's house, that they may hear. Tell Earth
herself, who brings all things to birth, who gives them strength,
then gathers their big yield into herself at last.
I myself pour these lustral waters to the dead,
and speak, and call upon my father: Pity me;
pity your own Orestes. How shall we be lords
in our house? We have been sold, and go as wanderers
because our mother bought herself, for us, a man,
Aegisthus, he who helped her hand to cut you down.
Now I am what a slave is, and Orestes lives
outcast from his great properties, while they go proud
in the high style and luxury of what you worked
to win. By some good fortune let Orestes come
back home. Such is my prayer, my father. Hear me; hear.
And for myself, grant that I be more temperate
of heart than my mother; that I act with purer hand.

Such are my prayers for us; but for our enemies,
father, I pray that your avenger come, that they
who killed you shall be killed in turn, as they deserve.
Between my prayer for good and prayer for good I set
this prayer for evil; and I speak it against Them.
For us, bring blessings up into the world. Let Earth
and conquering Justice, and all gods beside, give aid.

Such are my prayers; and over them I pour these drink
offerings. Yours the strain now, yours to make them flower
with mourning song, and incantation for the dead.

This woman contrasts sharply to the Sophoclean Electra:

Alright then, you tell me one thing—
at what point does the evil level off in my life?
you say ignore the deed—is that right?
Who could approve this?
It defies human instinct!
Such ethics make no sense to me.
And how could I nestle myself in a life of ease

while my father lies out in the cold,
outside honor?
My cries are wings:
they pierce the cage.
For if a dead man is earth and nothing,
if a dead man is void and dead space lying,
if a dead man's murderers
do not give
blood for blood
to pay for this,
then shame does not exist.
Human reverence
is gone.

*Electra* is believed to have come late in Sophocles's career, and the celebrated irony of *Oedipus Tyrannus* seems far away. The dramatic ironies of *Electra* turn upon freedom, rather than knowledge. Orestes frees Electra from her immediate torments, but he has arrived too late to save her from the negativity that has become her nature. Knowledge cannot liberate Oedipus: to know the truth causes the agony in which he blinds himself. It may even be that pity in Sophocles is only another irony. Electra, in Carson's version, cannot be said to have suffered and then broken free. Throwing the corpse of Aegisthus to the dogs will not cut the knot of evils inside Electra. Her irony is simply that there is no correcting the past, least of all for women.

*Oedipus Rex*

Whether there is a "tragic flaw", a *hamartia*, in King Oedipus is uncertain, though I doubt it, as he is hardly a figure who shoots wide of the mark. Accuracy is implicit in his nature. We can be certain that he is free of that masterpiece of ambivalence—Freud's Oedipal complex. In the Age of Freud, we are uncertain what to do with a guiltless Oedipus, but that does appear to be the condition of Sophocles' hero. We cannot read *Oedipus the* *King* as we read the *Iliad* of Homer, where the gods matter enormously. And even more, we know it is absurd to read Oedipus as though it were written by Yahwist, or the authors of Jeremiah or Job, let alone of the Gospels. We can complete our obstacle course by warning ourselves not to compound Oedipus with *Hamlet* or *Lear.* Homer and the Bible, Shakespeare and Freud, teach us only how not to read Sophocles.

When I was younger, I was persuaded by Cedric Whitman's eloquent book on Sophocles to read Oedipus as a tragedy of "heroic humanism." I am not so persuaded now, not because I am less attracted by a humanistic heroism, but because I am uncertain how such a stance allows for tragedy. William Blake's humanism was more than heroic, being apocalyptic, but it too would not authorize tragedy. However the meaning of Oedipus is to be interpreted in our post-Nietzchean age, the play is surely tragedy, or the genre will lose coherence. E.R. Dodds, perhaps assimilating Sophocles to the Iliad, supposed that the tragedy of Oedipus honored the gods, without judging them to be benign or even just. Bernard Knox argues that the greatness of the gods and the greatness of Oedipus are irreconcilable, with tragedy the result of that schism. That reduces to the Hegelian view of tragedy as an agon between right and right, but Knox gives the preference to Oedipus, since the gods, being ever victorious, therefore cannot be heroic. A less Homeric reading than Dodds's, this seems to me too much our sense of heroism—Malraux perhaps, rather than Sophocles.

Freud charmingly attributed to Sophocles, as a precursor of psychoanalysis, the ability to have made possible a self-analysis for the playgoer. But then Freud called *Oedipus* an "immoral play," since the gods ordained incest and patricide. Oedipus therefore participates in our universal unconscious sense of guilt, but on this reading so do the gods. I sometimes wish that Freud had turned to Aeschylus instead, and given us the Prometheus complex rather than the Oedipus complex. Plato is Oedipal in regard to Homer, but Sophocles is not. I hardly think that Sophocles would have chastised Homer for impiety, but then, as I read it, the tragedy of Oedipus takes up no more skeptical stance than that of Plato, unless one interprets Plato as Montaigne wished to interpret him.

What does any discerning reader remember most vividly about *Oedipus the King*? Almost certainly, the answer must be the scene of the king's self-blinding, as narrated by the second messenger, here in David Grene's version:

By her own hand. The worst of what was done
you cannot know. You did not see the sight.
Yet in so far as I remember it
you'll hear the end of our unlucky queen.
When she cam raging into the house she went
straight to her marriage bed, tearing her hair
with both her hands, and crying upon Laius
long dead—Do you remember, Laius,
that night long past which bred a child for us
to send you to your death and leave
a mother making children with her son?
And then she groaned and cursed the bed in which
she brought forth husband by her husband, children
by her own child, an infamous double bond.
How after that she died I do not know,—
for Oedipus distracted us from seeing.
He burst upon us shouting and we looked
to him as he paced frantically around,
begging us always: Give me a sword, I say,
to find this wife no wife, this mother's womb,
this field of double sowing whence I sprang
and where I sowed my children! As he raved
some god showed him the way—none of us there.
Bellowing terribly and led by some
invisible guide he rushed on the two doors,—
wrenching the hollow bolts out of their sockets,
he charges inside. There, there, we saw his wife
hanging, the twisted rope around her neck.
When he saw her, he cried out fearfully
and cut loose the dangling noose. Then, as she lay,
poor woman, on the ground, what happened after,
was terrible to see. He tore the brooches—
the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—
away from her and lifting them high
dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out
such things as: they will never see the crime
I have committed or had done upon me!
Dark eyes, now on the days to come, look on
forbidden faces, do not recognize
those whom you long for—with such imprecations
he struck his eyes again and yet again
with the brooches. And the bleeding eyeballs gushed
and stained his beard—no sluggish oozing drops
but a black rain and bloody hail poured down.
So it has broken—and not on one head
but troubles mixed for husband and wife.
The fortune of the days gone by was true
good fortune—but today groans and destruction
and death and shame—of all ills can be named
not one is missing.
(1.1237–86)

The scene, too terrible for acting out, seems also too dreadful for representation in language. Oedipus, desiring to put a sword in the womb of Jocasta, is led by "some god" to where he can break through the two doors (I shudder as I remember Walt Whitman's beautiful trope for watching a woman in childbirth, "I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors"). Fortunately finding Jocasta self-slain, lest he add the crime of matricide to patricide and incest, Oedipus, repeatedly stabbing his eyes with Jocasta's brooches, passes judgment not so much upon seeing as upon the seen, and so upon the light by which we see. I interpret this as his protest against Apollo, which brings both the light and the plague. The Freudian trope of blinding for castration seems to me less relevant here than the outcry against the god.

To protest Apollo is necessarily dialectical, since the pride and agility of the intellect of Oedipus, remorselessly searching out the truth, in some sense is also against the nature of truth. In this vision of reality, you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you mad. What would make Oedipus free? Nothing that happens in this play, must be the answer, nor does it seem that becoming an oracular god later on makes you free either. If you cannot be free of the gods, then you cannot be made free, and even acting as though your daemon is your destiny will not help you either.

The startling ignorance of Oedipus when the drama begins is the *given* of the play, and cannot be questioned or disallowed. Voltaire was scathing upon this, but the ignorance of the wise and the learned remains an ancient truth of psychology, and torments us every day. I surmise that this is the true force of Freud's Oedipus complex: not the unconscious sense of guilt, but the necessity of ignorance, lest the reality-principle destroy us. Nietzsche said it not in praise of art, but so as to indicate the essential limitation of art. Sophoclean irony is more eloquent yet:

CREON: Do not seek to be master in everything, for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life.
(*As Creon and Oedipus go out.*)
CHORUS: You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus,—him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful; not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot—see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him! Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.
(1.1521–30)

The *Oedipus Plays*

Because of Freud's unfortunate formulation of "the Oedipus complex," we find it difficult to interpret the Oedipus plays of Sophocles without indulging in rather irrelevant Freudian considerations. Freud should have named it "the Hamlet complex," since that is what he suffered from, an accurate sense that "the poets" (meaning Shakespeare) had been there before him. In this case, Sophocles had not been there before him, since Oedipus in fact had no desire whatsoever, conscious or "unconscious," to kill his father and marry his mother. Once we clear that confusion away, at least we can confront the authentic difficulties presented by Sophocles' three extraordinary dramas.

They are three very different plays, and do not always illuminate one another. *Antigone* was first acted when Sophocles was around fifty-four years old; it is a mature and powerful tragedy, and is very much Antigone's own tragedy. *Oedipus the King* was first produced perhaps fifteen years later, and was regarded by Aristotle as the exemplary tragedy. Sophocles lived another twenty years, dying in 406 or 405 B.C.E., at the age of ninety or so. It is generally assumed that *Oedipus at Colonus* was the work of his final years, since its first staging was posthumous, about five years after the poet's death. The play, highly original and difficult, has a subtle relationship to the initial drama of Oedipus, and makes us read *Oedipus the King* differently, whether that is wholly valid or not. All three plays abound in ambiguities, pragmatically in ironies, but the irony or ambiguous wordplay of any one of them is not at all that of the other two.

*Antigone*, the Hegelian model of "a struggle between right and right," Antigone and Creon, turns upon the irony that Antigone's sense of "the law" relates to the gods, and Creon's to the state. Creon's stance is not intrinsically false, but it violates human dignity, and becomes something ugly because it is not appropriate to the human moment, as Antigone's position certainly is. *Hubris*, the arrogance of power, is now permanently associated with Creon's name, even as the courageous stubbornness of principle is Antigone's legacy.

But there are no qualities or principles most of us are prepared to associate unambiguously with the name of Oedipus, in either of the Sophoclean plays that feature him in their titles. Once we have set aside the irrelevant Freudian reductions, *Oedipus the King* becomes a battlefield of conflicting Interpretations. Is Oedipus innocent, so that only the gods are culpable? Are we to prefer Oedipus or the Sophoclean gods? Is Oedipus to blame for being so intelligent that he destroys the illusions without which we cannot go on living? Or is fate alone guilty, however we judge the flaws of Oedipus and the gods? Are *all* notions of guilt or innocence of little interest to Sophocles, and does he care only for the strife between illusion and truth? Or are all these questions useless, because the language of Sophocles knows only ambiguity, at least in human terms? Shall we say finally that we can make no sense of Oedipus as long as he is alive, because his only authentic language is the language of the gods, who urge him to stop tarrying and to come join them as yet another oracular god, at the close of *Oedipus at Colonus*?

All of these interpretations have been subtly urged by distinguished, scholarly critics of Sophocles, and they cannot all be right, because they strongly contradict one another. *Hamartia*, Aristotle's tragic flaw, seems dubious when we apply it to Sophocles' Oedipus, who never aims inaccurately, and who seems to me absolutely guiltless, and horribly unlucky, that last phrase being quite ludicrous in the context of his terrible story. I do not think that Sophocles means to honor the gods, since clearly we are to prefer Oedipus to the gods. When Oedipus blinds himself, a Freudian tends to speak of symbolic castration, but I think that Oedipus is making a religious protest against Apollo, and so against the light that does not let us see. And yet the power and self-confidence of Oedipus, his proper faith in his own intellect—these are gifts of Apollo. Oedipus knows this, and so I interpret him as crying out against the nature of truth, since the truth can only drive you mad.

That is a very dark reading, and I would not assert that it applies also to *Oedipus at Colonus*, an uncanny work, resembling nothing else that I have read. Why are the gods not insane, since they know the truth? Oedipus, becoming a god, abandons his characteristic fur: Henceforth he will share in the anger of the gods, which evidently is very different from our own. Presumably the madness of the gods also has nothing in common with our own. Whatever it is that destroys us can have no effect upon them. A Bible-educated culture cannot fully understand *Oedipus at Colonus.* We begin to gain entrance into the play only when we apprehend that it is totally other from any idea of religion that we possess.

Bloom, Harold. "Bloom on Sophocles." *Dramatists and Dramas*, Bloom's 20th Anniversary Collection. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2005. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BLCDD004&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BLCDD004&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BLCDD004&SingleRecord=True)

## *Oedipus At Colonus* and Its Connection with the Oedipal Cycle

**Date:** 1987
On *Oedipus At Colonus* by Sophocles
**Author:** Peter L. Rudnytsky
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

Any study of the interrelations among Sophocles' Theban plays must begin with the recognition that they do not form a trilogy. *Antigone*, the earliest in order of composition, was probably produced in 442 b.c. and *Oedipus the King* in about 425 during the plague in the second year of the Peloponnesian War; *Oedipus at Colonus*, written shortly before Sophocles' death at the age of ninety in 406, was first performed posthumously in 402. The difficulties of interpretation are compounded by the fact that nothing certain is known about the other two works that were performed together with each of these plays, and which may or may not have been related to them in subject matter. It must be borne in mind, furthermore, that all three plays are independent wholes, apart from their relations to any larger sequence.

These important considerations notwithstanding, I wish to press the case for the unity of the Oedipus cycle. Certainly there are minor inconsistencies from one play to the next.

But these discrepancies are outweighed by the evidence for continuities linking the three plays. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, above all, it is clear that Sophocles has sought to establish connections with *Oedipus the King*. In a broad sense, the plot of *Oedipus at Colonus* constitutes a reversal and an undoing of the earlier play: instead of a movement from strength and weakness, there is movement from weakness to strength; and Oedipus, rather than attempting to circumvent the predictions of oracles, now aligns himself with the forces seeking their fulfillment. The parallels between *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* are announced as early as the first word, since the address of the aged Oedipus to his daughter Antigone, *teknon* ("child"), recalls that of the proud king to his assembled people, *tekna* ("children"). The speeches of Oedipus opening both plays, moreover, are each thirteen lines long, and divided into units of eight and five lines, marked by the transition *alla* ("but"). Most significantly, Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus* has Oedipus allude (ll. 87–95) to his visit to the Delphic oracle recounted in *Oedipus the King* (ll. 788–93), where it had been foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother, only Oedipus now discloses for the first time a new aspect of the prophecy—that he would find his final resting place in a grove of the Furies, whence he would become a blessing to his friends and a curse to his enemies. This direct reference to *Oedipus the King* in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the transposition of Oedipus' fate into a new register, epitomizes the continuity between the two plays. Finally, it is noteworthy that in *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles attempts to smooth over the previous discrepancies in the accounts of the succession to the Theban throne, since Ismene explains (ll. 367–73) that the two sons—who, after all, were young boys at the time of Oedipus' fall—agreed *at* *first* to resign the throne to Creon, only to change their minds and battle with one another as they grew older. Whether one judges Sophocles' effort to obtain coherence to be skillful or maladroit is less important that the fact that he makes it at all, because the very undertaking shows his desire to preserve the unity of the Oedipus cycle.

It follows that the pivotal play in any discussion of the Oedipus cycle as a whole is *Antigone*, since it may be regarded either as a beginning or an ending. A further corollary is that the Oedipus cycle possesses *two* endings— *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus* —which qualify and react upon one another. Recast in more theoretical terms, the implication of the double arrangement of the Theban plays is that they invite a reading that is at once *synchronic* and *diachronic*.

Rudnytsky, Peter L. *Freud and Oedipus*. New York: Columbia University Press (1987): pp. 275–77. Quoted as "*Oedipus At Colonus* and Its Connection with the Oedipal Cycle" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO36&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO36&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO36&SingleRecord=True)

## Right and Wrong in Sophocles

**Date:** 1944
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** C. M. Bowra
**From:** *Oedipus Rex*, Bloom's Guides.

[Sophocles uses] final song, divinities on the stage, and impartial human characters [to] guide us through the plays and to see events in their right light. But they do not disclose everything that the poet felt or tell us all that we wish to know or confirm all that we feel when the plays are acted. They are subsidiary to something else which is harder to define and yet more important, the way in which the plays force us to strong feelings and even to definite opinions and judgements about the characters and events. In the *Antigone*, for instance, we are made to feel that in the last resort Antigone is right to do as she does. Her nobility moves us, and her defence is far more touching and convincing than Creon's accusations. In due course we find that our feelings are justified. The gods punish Creon, and the Chorus at the end condemn him. But long before these revelations we are sure of our feelings and condemn Creon as we admire Antigone. Again, in the *Philoctetes*, where the issues are far more tangled and obscure, our feeling that Neoptolemus is wrong to do what Odysseus tells him and right to disobey him even in the face of what seems to be a divine plan are justified in the end, but we do not wait for the end to belie it. These feelings are forced on us not by what the characters say in their own defence but by what they are and by what they do. We react to them not merely with our intellects but with our hearts and consciences. We feel that it is unjust for Antigone to be treated as she is, that Neoptolemus is right not to tell lies, no matter for how important an end. In different ways this is true of all the plays. In each there are characters who appeal more to us than others and seem to have right on their side. We cannot always prove it during the play, but at the end we see that our feelings are justified.

It may seem rash to speak of right and wrong in a tragedy. There are forms of tragic suffering where such distinctions do not exist, where all that matters is the suffering of human beings. There are others, like Racine's *Britannicus*, which display great forces of evil at work but allow no clear distinction between right and wrong. Agrippine is indeed Nero's victim, but she is no virtuous woman and her troubles are the fruit of her own past crimes. The situation is different in Shakespeare. When Desdemona is ruined through the machinations of Iago or Macbeth driven to murder by his wife, we may distinguish between good and evil and feel as much hostility for the wicked as pity for their victims. But in the onrush of overwhelming emotions which he awakes we hardly wait to assess the balance of right and wrong, at least while we read or see the tragedy. Sophocles is not like this. The tragic emotions are as great as in Shakespeare; the excitement of the action is hardly less great. But in all the excitement and horror there is an element which is absent from Shakespeare. The tragic events are such that we inevitably try to explain them to ourselves and to find out how the poet explains them.

The reason of this is that while the conflict in Shakespeare is between men and men, in Sophocles it arises in the last analysis between men and gods. It is the gods who make Ajax mad, who ordain his hideous end for Heracles, who punish Creon, who arrange the whole career of Oedipus, who send Orestes to kill his mother, who decide that Philoctetes shall take Troy, who turn the old Oedipus into a daemonic being. When they are at work, the whole setting is different from Shakespeare's. It is in some sense theological, and if the gods act in this or that way, we ask why they do and what it means. We can hardly do otherwise, and Sophocles demands such questions from us; for he has his answers to them. To understand his tragic pattern we must understand his theology. It is a product of his age, and we know something about it. The difficulty is to find his own treatment of accepted doctrines in his presentation of particular issues. The chief evidence is what happens. When the gods intervene or display their will through oracles or prophets, we know what they mean and what their part is. In every play this happens. Some of the machinery may mean little or nothing to us. It is, for instance, hard to attach great importance to oracles. But, whatever Sophocles may have thought about them in ordinary life, and there is a good possibility that he believed in them, in his plays they account for a great deal, and that is all that concerns us. The plays are nearly all that we have of his and certainly all that matters. They show that Sophocles built his tragic conflicts on the relations of men with the gods, and therefore we must know what these relations are and mean.

Because of this, issues of right and wrong are more emphatic in Sophocles than in Shakespeare. If the gods force a fate on men, we ask not only why they do it but if they are right and if their victims deserve it. The question may not always be relevant, but we cannot but ask it, and Sophocles evidently intended that we should. Thus in his treatment of Oedipus, though he does not allow that Oedipus' hideous misfortunes are in any sense deserved, he knows that some will think that they are and has his answer for them. In the *Ajax* and *Antigone* the fall of Ajax and Creon follows a traditional scheme and is by Greek standards deserved. In the *Electra* and *Philoctetes* the issue is much less clear. Until the action is quite advanced we may wonder whether Electra is really right to desire vengeance on her mother or whether the gods' plan to bring Philoctetes to Troy is really right, but in the end we see that what the gods approve is right and must be accepted. This interest in rights and wrongs is an essential part of the play's effect on us. Because our moral emotions are aroused, we are more excited about what happens. The conflict between right and wrong, its obscurities and its excitements, is fundamental to Sophoclean tragedy.

This interest touches more than the mere structure of a play or its main theme. The chief characters sometimes argue and disagree on right and wrong as they do not in Shakespeare. The burial of Polynices is a matter for bitter disagreement not only between Antigone and Creon but between Antigone and Ismene; Deianira's attempt to win back Heracles by magic is viewed differently by the Chorus, by Hyllus, and by Heracles; Odysseus and Neoptolemus do not see eye to eye about the uses of deceit for political ends; the old Oedipus argues fiercely with Creon about his alleged crimes. In these controversies passions are aroused and are undeniably dramatic, but the issue has to be settled and is a matter of morals. In Euripides debates on such points are no less common. Jason and Medea, Dionysus and Pentheus, represent opposite causes and apply rhetoric and sophistry to them. But in Sophocles the subjects of dispute seem simpler and more fundamental. The interest is less in the give and take of debate than in the importance of what is at stake. Euripides may not always care which side we support; Sophocles clearly cares a great deal and, though he is always dramatic, he leads us to a decision. With him actual argument counts less than it does with Euripides. His debates and disputes appeal first to the conscience and to the heart. He wishes to convince us in all our being, to carry us with him in a full and imaginative understanding of what is at stake.

It may then be said that there is in all Sophocles' plays an element of ethical discussion, of casuistry, which pervades the atmosphere and gives meaning to the tragic events. As his art developed, these issues became more complex and more subtle. In the early plays they are quite simply and directly presented, but in the later plays, notably in the *Electra* and *Philoctetes*, they are so complex that much of the excitement lies in finding out what they are. The protagonists in a struggle no longer stand on opposite sides of right and wrong but seem to present such a struggle in themselves. As he grew older, Sophocles did not abate his love of an ethical issue but brought it closer to the complexities of human nature. But in all the plays the dramatic material demands close considerations of right and wrong. They are forced on us, and we cannot neglect them. This does not mean that Sophocles is didactic or instructional in any narrow or derogatory sense, that he uses his characters simply to illustrate moral truths. He is always a dramatist, and the ethical issues are subordinated to human interests. But just as it is impossible to understand human life without considering moral issues and even passing moral judgements, so in Sophoclean tragedy much of the interest turns on such issues. Sophocles is as much concerned with men's souls as with their fortunes.

It is perhaps in this that his peculiar difficulty lies. In the scheme of every play there is a moral or religious problem, an issue to which there must be a right answer but on which more than one opinion is tenable. This issue is presented in a very personal and concrete form, with all the richness that great art can give. As in life we may be deceived and form wrong opinions about matters of great moment, so in his plays Sophocles shows how deceptive many issues are, presents different views of them, and looks at them from more than one angle. As the drama develops, the nature of the problem becomes clearer, and eventually we know what it is. It follows that in examining his work we must find what these problems are and how they are presented. If we can do this, we have made a considerable advance in the study of his work and art.

(…)

By modern standards the gods who decide on Oedipus' fate before he is born and then inflict it on him without mercy treat him cruelly. But this is not a view that Sophocles would have held or admitted. He would more probably hold that men cannot judge the gods and might even agree with Heraclitus that 'For God all things are beautiful and good and just, but men think some things unjust and others just.' For he states emphatically that the gods must be honoured, and shows that their word must be believed. Nor is it legitimate to argue that their word is sometimes hard to understand. That, too, arises from the ignorance and blindness in which man lives. He can only do his best to understand the gods by what means he possesses, to recognize that his own judgement may be wrong. The gods, who know everything, are right. Nor may man complain of them. He must humble himself before them and admit that he is nothing and that he knows nothing. This is the lesson of *King Oedipus*. The last words draw attention to it. Oedipus is

That Mighty King, who knew the riddle's mystery.

But his knowledge is of no avail in dealing with the mysteries of the gods. On this note of ignorance and humiliation the play ends. It is hardly a quiet end. Oedipus is still an abhorred and defiled creature who may not remain in the daylight and is fated to suffer more. Creon, who does correctly what the gods require, insists on his going indoors. His manner may seem rigorous, but he does his religious duty. He cannot do otherwise, and Oedipus, now fully conscious of his nothingness before the gods, knows that Creon is right. He asks to be sent out of the land (1518); he knows that the gods abhor him (1518). What will happen next must, as Creon sees (1438– 9), wait on the gods' decision. We know that Teiresias has prophesied more miseries for Oedipus and that they will infallibly come. The play ends in the anguish of humiliation and the anticipation of more to come. But at last the truth is out, and the gods have had their way.

The gods humble Oedipus as a lesson to men not to trust in their happiness or their knowledge. The horror of his fate and his fall is fore-ordained that others may learn from it. But though this plan determines all that happens, the actual events follow a pattern which is tragic and Sophoclean. When Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother the inviolable laws of the gods are broken and the divine order of things sustains a grievous wound. The wound must be healed, the order restored. Before this can be done, the evil that has been, albeit unconsciously, committed, must show its full force. This it does in the growth of Oedipus' illusions when the plague forces a crisis on him. From illusions he moves to dangerous acts. His fits of fury, his moments of scepticism, his certainty that he is right, are the natural products of his state. Such a condition cannot last, and it is broken by the events which follow the death of Polybus. As Oedipus comes to see the truth and to punish himself for his past actions, he makes his peace with the gods. He does what is right, accepts his position, knows the truth. Through resignation and suffering the rightful harmony of things is restored. By divine standards Oedipus at the end of the play is a better man than at the beginning. His humiliation is a lesson both to others and to him. Democritus' words, 'the foolish learn modesty in misfortune', may be applied to Oedipus, who has indeed been foolish in his mistakes and illusions and has been taught modesty through suffering. The lesson which the gods convey through his fall is all the more impressive because he is the great king and the great man that he is. In the eyes of the gods what matters is that he should know who and what he really is. To secure this end his power and his glory must be sacrificed. In his acceptance of his fall, his readiness to take part in it, Oedipus shows a greatness nobler than when he read the riddle of the Sphinx and became king of Thebes.

Bowra, C. M. "Right and Wrong in Sophocles." In *Sophoclean Tragedy*. The Clarendon Press, 1944. Quoted as "Right and Wrong in Sophocles." in Bloom, Harold ed. *Oedipus Rex*, Bloom's Guides. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2007. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BGOR015&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BGOR015&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BGOR015&SingleRecord=True)

## Oedipus' Ill-Fated Quest for the Truth

**Date:** 1951
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Cedric H. Whitman
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

Oedipus was proverbial for two things—sagacity and atrocious misfortune. Greek popular wisdom had it that if a man were careful and prudent, he would avoid trouble. Of all men, Oedipus should have succeeded, but of all men he particularly did not. Oedipus remains a type of human ability condemned to destruction by an external insufficiency in life itself—as if knowledge were possible, but the objects of knowledge, to use Plato's phrase, were somehow illusory, or at least evil. Such is Oedipus in the Sophoclean version, and such he must have been always. The myth is ultimately its own best interpreter and needs no *fabula docet*. It is for form's sake alone that the *Oedipus Rex* closes with the same old Herodotean saw which opened the *Trachiniae:*

Let mortals hence be taught to look beyond
The present time, nor dare to say, a man
Is happy, till the last decisive hour
Shall close his life without the taste of woe.

For Sophocles, however, the tale has deeper though less clearcut implications. Something of the fiery character of Laius, as it is hinted at in the *Oedipus Rex*, is perhaps derived from Aeschylus. But Oedipus himself illustrated two great dilemmas: first, like Orestes, he was the unwilling instrument of crime, and second, he was at once the emblem of shrewd wisdom and utter blindness. Aeschylus must unquestionably have dealt with the first of these dilemmas, and it is probable that he believed that Oedipus, in some degree, deserved his sufferings. But it is with the second dilemma that Sophocles is concerned. In the *Oedipus Rex*, he passes over the question of whether or not Oedipus is morally guilty of parricide and incest and concentrates wholly on the extent of his knowledge. Later, in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles reverted to the other dilemma, and made old Oedipus defend his moral innocence in several spirited harangues, but the whole matter of moral guilt or innocence is never broached, even for an instant, in the earlier play. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated simply from the character of the king himself in the *Oedipus Rex*, that Sophocles never considered him morally guilty. He was, from the first, the man who contrived his own fall without deserving it. And to this bitter fact may be added the even bitterer one that the means by which Oedipus destroyed himself was not his folly but his keenly intelligent moral conscience, which led him to take every possible step to avoid the unspeakable pollution that had been prophesied for him.

As he tells us himself, Oedipus thought that he was the son of Polybus, King of Corinth; but once, after being twitted by a drunken companion about his origin, he consulted the oracle and was told that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, he avoided his supposed parents thereafter and made his way through Phocis, where his real father, Laius, met and attacked him at a cross-roads. In the fight which ensued, Oedipus slew Laius and all but one of his companions, and then proceeded to Thebes. So far, if we make allowances for the bloody practices which travel in the wilder districts sometimes enjoined upon the wayfarer of the heroic age, Oedipus had behaved with a good conscience. At Thebes he found the "riddle-singing Sphinx," the pest of the land, which by his sagacity he destroyed. He was rewarded by the grateful citizens with the hand of the recently widowed queen, Jocasta. And so for some years he reigned and bred sons and daughters, a happy and revered ruler, until the coming of the plague, at which point Sophocles begins his play. The plague, we are told, had been sent as a punishment because the city was polluted by the unavenged blood of Laius. And now, apparently for the first time, the question arises: who is the murderer of Laius?

If Sophocles had wanted us to consider the problem of right and wrong, he would have dramatized the scene at the crossroads. Instead he has dramatized the search for the murderer; the whole action is therefore devoted to the effort to draw truth out of the uncertainty and ignorance which at first center around the plague and later begin to gather more and more ominously around the king himself.

Whitman, Cedric H. *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1951): pp. 122–25. Quoted as "Oedipus' Ill-Fated Quest for the Truth" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO21&SingleRecord=True>.

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO21&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO21&SingleRecord=True)

## Life's Tragic Shape: Plot, Design, and Destiny

**Date:** 2001
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Charles Segal
**From:** *Oedipus Rex*, Updated Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations.

**Removing Preconceptions**

One of the hardest problems in approaching the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is trying to look at it freshly. To do that, one must remove a few layers of misconception; so I have to begin with a few "nots." This is *not* a play about free will versus determinism. The Greeks did not develop a notion of a universal, all-determining Fate before the Stoics in the third century BCE. The human characters are not mere puppets of the gods; no figure in Greek tragedy is. To be sure, the supernatural elements are important: Apollo, the plague, the oracles, Teiresias' prophetic knowledge. But the play does not label any of these as the certain *causes* of suffering. There are no gods on stage, as happens regularly in Aeschylus and Euripides, nor is there the direct confrontation of powerful god and crushed mortal victim that occurs at the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*. For all its concern with prophecy and oracles, the *Oedipus* has a startling modernity precisely because these supernatural elements are not only kept in the background but are also hidden and mysterious.

The issues of destiny, predetermination, and foreknowledge are raised as problems, *not* as dogma. How much control do we have over the shape of our lives? How much of what happens to us is due to heredity, to accidents, to sheer luck (good and bad), to personality, to the right (or wrong) decision at a particular crossroads in life, or to the myriad interactions among all of the above? These are the questions that the play raises, and it raises them *as questions*. It shows us men and women who are both powerful and helpless, often at the same moment. Oedipus embodies the human condition in just this paradoxical relation to both open and closed conceptions of life. He is both free and determined, both able to choose and helpless in the face of choices that he has already made in the past or circumstances (like those of his birth) over which he had no power of choice. The play, as one interpreter remarks, shows us the issues of choice and predetermination as "a box of mirrors to bewilder each new generation; the whole tangle is here in this story. . . . The play offers to each spectator as much as he is capable of seeing."1

Although it is customary to group *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* together as the three Theban plays because they deal with the royal house of Thebes, the three works were not conceived as a trilogy. *Antigone* was written more than a decade before *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* was composed some twenty years after. There are numerous verbal echoes of *Antigone* in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and of both plays in *Oedipus at Colonus*, which self-consciously looks back to these two works. It is helpful, therefore, to have the earlier works in mind when reading the later ones, but esthetically the three works are independent.

Oedipus does *not* have a tragic flaw. This view rests on a misreading of Aristotle (see Chapter 12), and is a moralizing way out of the disturbing questions that the play means to ask. Sophocles refuses to give so easy an answer to the problem of suffering. Oedipus' haste and irascibility at crucial moments (particularly in the killing of Laius) contribute to the calamity but are not sufficient reasons for it nor its main cause.

Finally, the play does *not* end with the self-blinding of Oedipus, but continues afterwards for nearly three hundred lines. These closing scenes are essential for understanding how Sophocles conceives of his hero and should not be neglected.

The tragic effect of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* lies in part in its dramatic irony, long ago observed by Aristotle: what seems to be bringing salvation in fact brings destruction. In the very first scene the Theban priest invokes Oedipus as the "savior" from the plague, when in fact he is its cause. Later, Oedipus will curse his savior, the man who saved him from death when he was exposed on the mountain in infancy (1349–54). Despite all the attempts to avoid the three oracles—the oracles given to Laius in the remote past, to Oedipus some twenty years ago at Delphi, and to Thebes in the present—they all come true. In this perverse-looking situation, every would-be savior in the play is also in some sense a destroyer: Creon with his news from Delphi, the prophet Teiresias, Jocasta in the past, the two herdsmen, Apollo, and of course Oedipus himself.

The plot that unfolds these events may look like a diabolical trap set for Oedipus by the gods (which is the direction that Jean Cocteau follows in his re-working of the play, *The Infernal Machine*), but Sophocles lets us see these events as the natural result of an interaction between character, circumstances in the past, and mere chance combinations in the present. Nevertheless, by placing the oracles in so prominent a position in the action, Sophocles, from the first scene, makes the question of divine intervention unavoidable. The play forces us to ask where the gods are in this tale of extraordinary coincidences and extraordinary suffering. Even the supernatural element of the oracles operates in a human way.

Typically in Greek tragedy, the gods work through normal human behavior and motivation. They are, one might say, an added dimension of our reality, not an arbitrary negation of reality. What we mean by calling *Oedipus Tyrannus* a tragedy of fate might be more accurately phrased as Sophocles' sense of the existence of powers working in the world in ways alien to and hidden from human understanding. Karl Reinhardt has put the ancient view very well: "For Sophocles, as for the Greeks of an earlier age, fate is in no circumstances the same as predetermination, but is a spontaneous unfolding of daimonic power, even when the fate has been foretold."2 The play leaves it an open question whether Laius, Jocasta, or Oedipus might have prevented the fulfillment of the prophecies if they had simply done nothing: not exposed the infant, not consulted Delphi, not avoided Thebes, not married an older woman, and so on.

Oracles, moreover, like dreams, are traditionally elusive, and even dreadful prophecies may prove innocuous. Herodotus, for example, tells how the expelled Athenian tyrant Hippias, accompanying the Persian invaders at Marathon in 490 BCE, had the "oedipal" dream that he would sleep with his mother. He interpreted the dream to mean that he would be restored to his ancient mother, his native land of Athens, but the vision is fulfilled in a very different way when he loses a tooth in the Athenian soil (Herodotus, *Histories* 6.107). Actual incest is never at issue.3

In contrast to Aeschylus, as we have seen, Sophocles' oracles to Laius and Oedipus do not give commands or advice; they simply state the way things are. How things got that way we do not know. All we can say, and all the play shows us, is that the events do work out as the god said they would and that the human figures bring about these events through a chain of actions that contains some striking coincidences but is nevertheless within the realm of possibility. The oracle to Thebes that sets the action in motion, to be sure, does have the form of a command: "Lord Apollo ordered us clearly to drive out the land's pollution," as Creon reports from Delphi (96–97). Yet even this command is not an arbitrary intervention but a statement about the disorder that has spread from the polluted royal house to the whole kingdom. The reasons behind the older oracles that resulted in this disease are left obscure. Equally obscure is the god's choice of the time to reveal the truth. Why did the plague not break out immediately after Oedipus' marriage to Jocasta or after the birth of his children? The chorus asks this question later in its own poetic terms (1211–13): "How, how could the plowed furrows of your father have been able to bear you, miserable man, in silence for such a long time?" We are given no answer other than the fact that such is the shape that Oedipus' life is to have, and in that intermingling of guilt and innocence, responsibility, chance, and character lies the quality that we (following Aristotle) have come to call "tragic."

Sophocles' plot has some faults, which must be confronted frankly. To achieve his dramatic effects he has had to pay a certain price in terms of verisimilitude. We have to accept that Jocasta never before discussed with Oedipus the child she and Laius exposed, that Oedipus never mentioned the encounter at the crossroads, that neither of them ever talked about the scars on his feet, that the sole witness to Oedipus' killing of Laius was also the Herdsman to whom the infant was given for exposure, and that the Messenger from Corinth who reports Polybus' death had received this child from the Herdsman. Critics have also been troubled by the fact that a man of Oedipus' intelligence takes so long to put two and two together to discover the truth, especially after Teiresias has told him that he was the killer early in the play. Modern playwrights, from Corneille to Cocteau, have recast the plot to answer these questions (see Chapter 12).

We also have to accept the facts that the sole survivor and witness simply lied about how many attackers there were (118–19) and that Oedipus is mistaken in thinking that he killed "all" the men escorting Laius (813).4 And we have to admit that Sophocles has left vague the amount of time that had elapsed between the killing of Laius and this witness' return to Thebes to find Oedipus already in place as king (758–62). During this unspecified interval (see 558–61), Oedipus has managed to defeat the Sphinx, marry Jocasta, and become installed as king of Thebes.

A play is not a novel, and the *Oedipus*' rhythm of action is so gripping, the movement of human emotions so convincing, that these problems do not bother us while we watch or even read the play. If we do stop to think about them (as most viewers or readers do not), they all have plausible answers. Laius' trusted Herdsman who received the child for exposure would be a likely escort for the king on his journey to Delphi. A man who "fled in fear," as Creon says (118), at the attack on Laius would be likely to keep quiet out of fear after finding Laius' killer established as the ruler of Thebes. Being a slave, he is at Oedipus' mercy, and his timidity and vulnerability are clear when we see him interrogated by Oedipus later. Knowing that he failed in his duty to protect his king, he might well have lied about the number of assailants and have taken his time in returning to Thebes to give his report of the event. We may compare the Guard of the *Antigone* (223–36), who makes a point of his reluctance to report to an irascible King Creon the bad news that his orders have been disobeyed and the corpse of Polyneices has been buried.

Oedipus might be faulted for having neglected to investigate Laius' killing and for not even knowing where it happened (113–14). Yet the play shows that the old king's death was primarily the Thebans' concern in the period before Oedipus assumed the throne, and that they were too preoccupied with the Sphinx to carry out a full inquiry. Oedipus asks why they did not investigate more thoroughly, and he receives a satisfactory answer (128–31, 558–67). Newly installed as king of a country ravaged by a monster, involved with a new marriage and new duties, he would naturally have been far more concerned about the future than the past. By the time of the present action, Laius' murder was regarded as past history, and this is clear from the way Oedipus speaks of the event. The Sphinx is gone; orderly succession to the throne has occurred; and Thebes has been happy, so far, with its new ruler. The old king is dead; long live the king!

Teiresias' prophetic powers also raise questions. If he has such foreknowledge, why did he not intervene to stop the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta? Why could he not answer the riddle of the Sphinx himself, and why did he wait so many years to declare Oedipus the killer of Laius? Oedipus raises these last two questions (390–98, 558–68), and they are never answered explicitly. When Oedipus asks Creon point blank why Teiresias delayed so long in naming Laius' killer, Creon merely says that he does not know (569). This is probably Sophocles' way of telling us to leave the matter there; the ways of prophets are obscure, after all, and especially the ways of prophets as awesome as Teiresias.

Teiresias' foreknowledge suggests the existence of forces and patterns in our lives beyond the limit of ordinary human knowledge. As to his failure to help Thebes earlier, we have to accept it as a given piece of background detail that the Sphinx could be defeated only by the young hero from outside, not an old prophet within. Monsters too have ways of their own, and Sophocles, in any case, is careful to keep details about this fabulous beast very vague.

Teiresias' silence, however, is a more interesting matter. Even in the play's present action, Oedipus has to force him to speak; so it is not surprising that he volunteered no information in the past, assuming that he knew the truth even then. Even if Apollo had revealed the truth to Teiresias long ago (a fact that we have no right to assume), presumably the god also revealed that he, Apollo, would bring it to light in his own sweet time.

Speculation along these lines is fruitless, and one runs the risk of disregarding the conventions of the literary form and falling into the so-called documentary fallacy, treating the events as if they occur in real life and not as part of a literary construct that creates a circumscribed, artificial world. For the artifice to work, however, it has to be plausible, and the meeting between the king and the prophet is indeed plausible, both dramatically and emotionally. They interact as two such leaders might be expected to respond in a crisis involving power and authority. They are both proud, stubborn, and hot-tempered men; both are defensive, and both are led to say more than they initially intended. Oedipus, we know from the prologue, will be energetically exploring every means available to do what Apollo has commanded, and find the killer. The unsolved murder of his predecessor makes him uneasy and suspicious about a conspiracy to overthrow his own regime. Teiresias too is not used to being contradicted, let alone accused. We may compare the irascible Teiresias of *Antigone* (1048–94) and the aged and blind Oedipus himself in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

It is part of the tragic pattern that Teiresias' very silence raises Oedipus' suspicions of his collusion with Creon, as we see when Oedipus interrogates Creon about Laius' death, the inquiry to Delphi, and Teiresias' silence in the past (555–65). Here again possible divine causation interacts naturally and plausibly with human motivation. Viewed as part of a divine plan, Teiresias' silence can be attributed to his knowledge, as a divine prophet, of what is bound to happen, regardless of whether he speaks. Viewed in terms of normal human behavior (especially in the volatile political atmosphere of a late fifth-century *polis*), Oedipus is justified in assuming that Creon and Teiresias have conspired to accuse him of the murder and seize power for themselves.

The silence of Teiresias has another and perhaps more profound meaning, and this relates not so much to character as to moral structure. His presence, like that of the oracles, implies the existence of some kind of order operating mysteriously in our world. The most general Greek term for this order is *dikê*, often translated as "justice" but actually connoting something like "path of retribution." It implies a process that undoes violence by violence. It restores a balance in the world order that has been upset by action beyond the limits of allowable human behavior, and this restoration of order may bring with it even greater suffering than the original crime. In simplest terms, the crimes of Oedipus, regardless of his moral guilt, are a source of this kind of disorder, and the violence that he has released will return to his world and his life.

The stain of blood that Oedipus carries from killing Laius, even though he acted in self-defense, is the source of a pollution that results in the plague. Sophocles' audience would naturally assume that the plague was sent by the gods, and Apollo's command, which Creon reports from Delphi in the first scene, confirms this. Sophocles, however, never actually says that the gods have sent the plague. In its mysterious and probably supernatural origin, the plague is both the causal agent of the process of purging disorder that the Greeks called *dikê* and the sign that this process is under way.

Oedipus' pollution would normally require ritual purification and exile from his city, at least for some years. As Bernard Williams has recently suggested, the Greek view of this aspect of Oedipus' situation may be compared with our law of torts rather than with criminal law.5 According to criminal law (both ours and the Greeks') Oedipus is not a criminal, for he acted in self-defense in the one case and in ignorance in the second. Yet his actions (which would correspond to his liability under the law of torts) have caused serious damage, in the form of the pollution, from which individuals and the community have suffered, and he must make some kind of requital. In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus will in fact successfully argue the legal basis of his innocence before the citizens of Colonus (258–74, 960–99). Unlike the later play, however, *Oedipus Tyrannus* stresses the sheer misfortune and unpredictability of Oedipus' situation rather than questions of legality.

The play clearly distinguishes between the parricide and incest that Oedipus committed in ignorance and the willed act of self-blinding when he discovers the truth (1329–46). This willed and self-chosen punishment also contrasts with his involuntary curse on himself as Laius' killer, which he pronounced early in the play (246–51). At the same time this curse becomes another of the tragic coincidences that stretch Oedipus' sufferings to their fullest possible pitch, for his own zeal to help his city dooms him even more horribly, "to wear out his wretched life wretchedly in utter doom" (248).

At a time of intense interest in issues of causality, motivation, and legality, the play explores the shadowy areas between involuntary crime, religious pollution, moral innocence, and the personal horror in feeling oneself the bearer of a terrible guilt. Oedipus is not completely innocent, but, as a court of human law might measure it, his suffering and the suffering of those around him (Jocasta, their children, and all those who have died in the plague) are far out of proportion to the degree of guilt. Like every great tragedy, the play forces us to rethink our comfortable assumptions about a just world order. Oedipus' tragic heroism consists in taking on himself, by his own hand, a punishment far greater than what the law would require.

The irreducible discrepancy here between what a man has done and what he suffers makes up the play's tragic view of life, a view that presents our control over our circumstances as precarious and our grasp on happiness as always uncertain. Teiresias, in his paradoxical vision-in-blindness, knows this truth but is reluctant to tell it, partly because we do not want to hear it. It is a characteristically tragic wisdom, and as such it must be wrested from him forcibly and received reluctantly, if at all.

In an old tale we find a mythical paradigm for this kind of knowledge and its difficult reception among men. Silenus, a satyr and companion of the god Dionysus, is captured and forced to reveal his knowledge. "Why do you force me to tell what it is better for you not to know?" he asks his captors. "For life is freest of pain when it is accompanied by ignorance of its own suffering . . . For mortals, best of all is not to be born" (Plutarch, *Consolation to Apollonius*, 115D). The reluctant silence of Teiresias is akin to the reluctance of this wise demigod of nature; Sophocles echoes the sentiments in a choral ode in his last play: "Not to be born wins every accounting; and by far second best is when born to return there whence one has come as quickly as possible" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1224–28).

What is at stake in Oedipus' inquiry, then, is not just his personal situation—it is also the makeup of the world and its bearing on the possibility of happiness in human life. Through Teiresias, the oracles, and the puzzlement of the chorus, questions about the orderliness, justice, or chaos of our world will be framed not in the small, petty circumstances of daily life, but in the large civic arena and against the background of the vast natural world. The mountains—especially Cithaeron, which reappears throughout the play, and also Parnassus and Olympus—are in the background, part of the outer frame, as are the places beyond the limits of the mortal world mentioned in the odes, especially the far western realm of death in the first ode (the parodos) and the eternal realm of the gods and their laws in the third (the second stasimon).

**Story and Plot**

In looking at the remarkable design of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, we must distinguish not only between the play and the myth but also between the *story* (the totality of the events as they might be told in chronological order) and the *plot* (the events as they appear in the order shown in the play). This play does not tell the whole myth of Oedipus, nor even the whole story of his life; it unfolds as a *plot*, a carefully chosen and constructed sequence of events at one brief, though decisive, crisis in the hero's life. From that point, the play moves both backward and forward to other parts of the myth as a whole. The plot does not give us all the details at once, nor does it present them in a continuous order or as a single, linear development. It reveals fragments, and we, like Oedipus, have to piece these together to make up a coherent narrative.

It is characteristic of Sophocles' selective narration that he reserves his most focused, continuous account of events for the few tense moments surrounding Jocasta's death and Oedipus' self–blinding (1237–85). There is no connected story of Oedipus' life, from his birth to his rule at Thebes, such as Euripides provides in the prologue of his *Phoenician Women*. Instead, the past of Oedipus is a shadowy area of elusive facts submerged in what seems to be remote, mythic time.

The plot structure has two other related effects. First, the events of the past are surrounded by mystery, both because they are so remote and so horrible and because they are recovered so gradually and so painfully. Second, the *process* of the discovery is as important as the *content* of what is discovered. This is a play about how we uncover a hidden, frightful, and frightening past. The rhythm of this process of discovery gives the play its unique power and fascination.

The play's most powerful moments come when the search for knowledge takes two different directions simultaneously. This happens first near the exact center of the play. Jocasta, intending to turn Oedipus away from further pursuit of Teiresias' prophecy, gives him the clue about the triple road that in fact intensifies his search. Later the pattern is repeated when the Corinthian Messenger inadvertently deflects Oedipus from the search for Laius' killer to the search for his own parents. At the end of this scene, Jocasta urges him not to carry his investigation any further (1056–68), but Oedipus is determined to press on, ignorant that the answer to both searches is the same. The following scene closes that gap between the two searches, but to reach that moment of "terrible hearing" (1169) Oedipus again has to wrest knowledge forcibly from one who refuses to tell. It is part of the play's irony that the same action that led to triumph in the past—namely overcoming the resistance of one who knows but won't tell (the Sphinx)—now leads to total disaster.

**Telling the Story Backward: Reversible Time**

The *Oedipus* is almost unique among Greek tragedies in telling its story in reverse. Nearly every crucial event in the action has already happened. The action is therefore almost all retrospective action—that is, it depicts how the characters (and the spectators too) see and understand in the present events that took place far in the past. It is part of the same effect that the play uses and scrutinizes the different ways in which stories unfold, the different ways in which one may tell one's life story, and the different ways in which such stories are heard and understood. Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* offers a modern analogy. The chief events of Oedipus' life history—his birth, exposure, victories over Laius and the Sphinx, and marriage—emerge piecemeal, from different points of view and in partial, fragmented perspective. Like Oedipus, we as spectators have to reconstruct a hidden past from hints, memories, glimpses.

The play's dislocation of the chronological order of the events makes it hard, if not impossible, for Oedipus to disentangle the riddles of his past.6 This situation helps explain why a man of his intelligence cannot see the truth and at the same time supports his claims of moral innocence later. It is a subtle but important feature of Oedipus' innocent ignorance that, whenever he tells the oracle that has darkened his life, he reports its two parts in the order incest and parricide; and only after the revelation of the truth does he report the order in which these events actually occurred, parricide and incest.7 A third conclusion also follows, namely that we have at least to consider the possibility that something in the structure of reality itself lies behind this innocent suffering. This mysterious agent Oedipus calls "Apollo" and modern interpreters call "fate." The play, however, leaves the matter as a question, unresolved but important. Rather than giving a final answer, it shows us the hypotheses of the various characters, including the chorus, to try to account for the suffering.

Because of this way of telling its story, the play is also about narrative. It uses the special privilege of literary texts to reflect on their own artifice and to remind us of the ways in which they can suspend reality to offer an enhanced vision of reality. One of Sophocles' contemporaries, the philosopher and rhetorician Gorgias, wrote, apropos of the effect of tragedy, "He who deceives is more just than he who does not deceive, and the one deceived is wiser than the one who is not deceived."8 In the case of *Oedipus*, the "wisdom" that we (the "deceived" audience) get comes from accepting the dramatic illusion (the "deception" of the plot) and participating in the special vision of the world that we thus receive. At the same time we know that this vision is real only in a particular sense, as a model of a problem or a hypothesis about our world that we rarely see so sharply focused in our everyday reality.

As part of its wise deception the play also exploits its freedom to tell its story in fragments, in scenes taken out of chronological order, with omissions that are filled in later, and in flashbacks. Art has the power to reverse time and so to let us see, and question, modes of causality that are invisible in "real" life. We are forced to think about the role of the gods and, especially, about the mixture of free choice and necessity in the oracles. If Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus, for example, had done nothing to avoid the oracles, would they have come true anyway? Or by taking their evasive action did they in fact play into the hands of the gods and bring about the very events that they were trying to prevent? The literary device of telling events out of their chronological order also creates much of Sophocles' celebrated irony: the discrepancy between the larger picture that we, the spectators, see and the small piece visible to the participants who are immersed in the stream of events.

It is revealing to compare Oedipus' story with that of Odysseus, another hero whose myth embraces the whole of a life cycle. The dominant feature of Odysseus' story, as we see it in Homer's *Odyssey*, is commitment to his return from the Trojan War, a successful and ultimately happy journey home, with a clear goal and strong emphasis on the motifs of recovery and rebirth. The dominant feature of Oedipus' story is the tragic shape of a life that is always turning back on itself instead of going forward. He can realize his identity only by losing it, and then gaining it back under the sign of tragic truth.

The continuity of life-movement in the *Odyssey* corresponds to the clarity and forward movement of narrative in the epic form, in contrast to the halting, unpredictable, blocked movements of narrative in tragedy.9 In the expansive epic frame, narrative is relatively unproblematic because time is unproblematic. Although the *Odyssey* uses retrospective narration (in the flashback of books 9–12), the hero's movement in time is steadily forward, toward his goal. In tragedy, and especially in *Oedipus*, time is constantly bending backward and forward with mysterious gaps and discontinuities. The dangers and limits that surround human life in tragedy make both generational time and narrative time uncertain, unreliable, and complicated. Even though the recognition of the limits of mortality is a major theme in the tale of Odysseus, he is always able to see, and ultimately achieve, his goal of returning to the full life that he left behind. For Oedipus past and future are always getting entangled with each other. In the terrible circularity of his life pattern, he can never pull free of the maimed life in the past.

The almost simultaneous return of the Corinthian Messenger and the Herdsman, who together saved the baby Oedipus many years ago, seems like pure coincidence, but, on reflection, it reveals a coincidence of another kind. Such returns are appropriate to a life story that cannot break free of its past. The past is always returning, in the wrong place. The child returns to the bed and to the "furrows" of his mother, "sowing" where he was "plowed," as Oedipus cries out in his agony near the end (1403–5). The son cast out by the father comes back to meet the father in just the wrong place, and so to kill him. The oracle originally given to Laius keeps returning, different yet always the same, to mark the different stages of Oedipus' life: in infancy, at the end of his adolescence, and in his maturity, when he is king of Thebes. Even a slave at the periphery of a famed king's' life turns out to be a part of a mysterious rhythm of fatally overlapping returns. The Herdsman who saved the infant Oedipus reappears at his passage between adolescence and adulthood to witness his killing of Laius, and then again at his tragic passage from full maturity to the blindness and debility of his remaining years. Sophocles does not use these coincidences as proof of a deterministic universe, but rather as the facts of an uncanny pattern of a life that is thus marked as tragic.

**Time, Oracle, and Riddle**

The riddle has had the opposite role from the oracle in Oedipus' life: it is a source of pride and confidence, whereas the oracle is a source of anxiety and helplessness. Oedipus can resolve the simultaneity of the various stages of life intellectually, in the *verbal* play of the riddle; but he acts out the horror of that fusion of separate generational stages in living a *life* that fulfills the oracle.

While the answer to the riddle implies the complete span of a full life, from infancy to extreme old age, the oracle would prevent this life from getting started at all. In the form in which the oracle is given to Laius, it would first prevent a child's begetting and then prevent his growing up. Oedipus solved the riddle by seeing through its metaphor of feet for motion through life. But of course his own feet hold the secret or riddle of his life, and that is partly because of the oracle, which led his parents to bind his two feet together into one so that he, unlike the creeping, walking, and cane-using generic human being of the riddle, would never walk at all, never move through any of the stages of life.

The circular movement of time in the play itself is governed by the oracles. The first oracle is in the present: the command from Apollo at Delphi to drive out the land's pollution, the cause of the plague. It is a command and thus is directed to the future, but of course it points us back to the past, the killing of Laius nearly twenty years ago. The second oracle, given to Laius and Jocasta, referred to future events: the father will die at the hands of his son. But at the point when Jocasta tells Oedipus about this oracle, it belongs to the remote past (711–23). And Oedipus fears that his own oracle, the third, which he received at Delphi many years before, will point to his future, but when he relates it to Jocasta (787–93) it is in fact already part of his past: he has already fulfilled it in his journey from Delphi to Thebes.

Measuring and counting time is one of Oedipus' major actions onstage. But his attempts to organize time into logical patterns collapse in the terrible uncertainty of time in his own life. Rather than serving as something he can find out and know with certainty, time becomes an active force that finally has "found him out" as the one who "long ago" made that "no-marriage marriage" in which "birth and begetting," origins and maturity, were fused together (1213–15). Rather than becoming an aid to human understanding, time seems to have a kind of independent power that blocks knowledge. It blocks future knowledge because its course has been hidden from the actors. It blocks past knowledge because memory selects and filters. Both the Messenger of the blinding scene and the Old Herdsman attribute this failure of knowledge to erroneous or partial memory. Even Oedipus cannot accurately remember the details of his fatal encounter with Laius. As we now know, he did not kill all of the travelers.

Time in the play expands and contracts, producing effects of vagueness or density by turns. It is both the indefinite and inert passing of years and the single moment of crisis in decision and action, the irreversible turning point of a mans life. When he can still hope that the truth will leave his present view of himself intact, Oedipus describes himself as defined by his "kindred months" in a slow rhythm of waxing and waning, becoming small and great (1082–83). But in fact he is defined by the abrupt catastrophe of a single day (351, 478) which makes him both "great and small," king and beggar, in one instant.

Time can have an unexpected fullness, as in Creon's account of past events in the prologue. Here there seems to be an indefinite interval between the death of Laius and the arrival of Oedipus to vanquish the Sphinx, an interval in which the Thebans cannot investigate the death of their king because the Sphinx compels them to consider only the immediate present, "to regard the things at our feet, letting go the things unclear" (130–31). It is as if this major crisis in the present life of the city retreats to the obscurity of remote happenings, far beyond living memory. But Oedipus, in his confident belief that he can overcome time, announces, "But I shall bring these things to light *from their beginning*" (132).

When Oedipus thinks that he has in fact reached through time to reveal this hidden truth, the time surrounding Laius' death again has the same vagueness and fullness. Interrogating Creon, whom he now takes to be the agent of the murder, Oedipus asks, "How much time before did Laius [die]?" and Creon replies, "Times for, years] great and old would be measured" (561). As in the prologue, that critical event, the death of the king and the father, becomes surrounded by an aura of remote, almost mythical time, as if it were an act belonging to primordial beginnings (as in one sense it did) and not to a specific historical moment in the life of an individual and a city.

Oedipus is confident that he will uncover these "beginnings" (132), but origins are more mysterious and harder to fathom than he knows. At the climactic moment of discovery this vague temporal duration is suddenly ripped open by the electrifying flash of the single moment of "terrible hearing" (1169). In the relaxed seasonal tempo of the Herdsman's life on Cithaeron, before Oedipus' birth, only the changes of summer and winter, without events, mark the passage of time (1132–39). But tragic time has a wholly different aspect: it is the single instant of decision and recognition that suddenly overturns an entire life.

It is a gift of prophetic knowledge to see time past, present, and future in a single vision. Calchas, the prophet of the *Iliad*, "knew what is and what will be and what is before" (*Iliad*, 1.70), and the prophetess Theonoe in Euripides' *Helen* "understood the divine things, those now and all those to come" (*Helen*, 13–14). In *Oedipus*, we the audience first see Oedipus in the present as king and ruler, supplicated by his people because they hope he will save them. But Teiresias, a little later, sees the Oedipus of the future, a blind man tapping his way with his stick. Jocasta and the Herdsman see Oedipus as a helpless newborn, his feet pierced so that no one will take him up. Jocasta, again, in her last words on stage, sees the whole course of Oedipus' life as one of utter misery, which she marks in her final words for him, "ill-fated" and "ill-starred" (1068, 1071). The spectator at the play enjoys the omniscient perspective of the gods; like the gods, he or she can see Oedipus in all three roles at once: the powerful king, the accursed and helpless infant, and the blinded sufferer.

**Tracking the Past: The Return of the Repressed**

Knowledge in the play results from bringing separate, individual past events together into a single moment in the present. The major action of the play gets under way with Oedipus' inquiry about Laius' murder: "Where will be found this trace, hard to track, of the ancient crime?" (108–09). The investigation is like a hunt, and Oedipus assumes that he can follow a set of tracks that will lead smoothly from the present to the past, Laius' past. But the road into the past proves not to be single but manifold, just as Oedipus himself proves to be not one but many. Thus instead of the "track" leading to only one object of inquiry, Laius' killer, it in fact diverges into several different paths—triple roads, one could say: Oedipus' origins, his exposure by his parents, his marriage with Jocasta.

This collocation of the past with the present receives vivid dramatic enactment in nearly every scene of the play. Indeed, the very first line of the play, Oedipus' address to the suppliant citizens, juxtaposes old and new: "O children, of Cadmus old the newest brood." Visually too this scene displays a combination of ages in the onstage presence of youths, mature men, and elders, as the priest explains a few lines later (15–19). Oedipus is himself an anomalous composite of "young" and "old," since the incest makes him the member of two generations simultaneously.

This combination of past and present again becomes ominously vivid in Teiresias, the old man who belongs to the past and sees the "truth" that threads the past together with the future. "The future events will come of themselves," he says at the beginning of his interview with Oedipus, "even if I conceal them in silence" (341). Instead of thus "concealing" the future, he brings it visually before our eyes in his dreadful prophecies. Although he is not understood by Oedipus in the present, Teiresias warns him that he does not see "where he is" (367, 413–15) or the future sufferings that await him (427–29, 453–60). Those sufferings consist precisely in the fact that the incest makes the father "equal" to his children (424) and removes the boundaries that should separate those stages and activities of life. Oedipus, Teiresias reveals, unknowingly inhabits this fearful simultaneity of different generations (456–60).

Oedipus' intelligence, Jocasta suggests later, lies in "inferring the new by means of the old" (916). When Oedipus does in fact bring together the "old things" of his remote infancy and early manhood with the "new things" of his present life and circumstances, he knows himself as both king and pollution, both the savior and the destroyer of Thebes.

As Oedipus begins his "tracking" of Laius' killer (109), he needs, as he says, a *symbolon* (221), a word usually translated as "clue." But the word also means a "tally," one of two parts of a token that fit together to prove one's rightful place. In Sophocles' day Athenians used such "tokens" for admission to the law courts. The investigative skill that Oedipus will demonstrate, then, consists in fitting pieces together. The word *symbolon* also has another meaning, namely the "token" left with a child exposed at birth to establish later proof of his identity. The word carries this sense in the tale of Ion, another foundling, dramatized in Euripides' *Ion*, a kind of Oedipus story in reverse. Presented with an old basket that contains the secret of his origins, Ion hesitates to open it and examine the "tokens from his mother" (*Ion*, 1386) lest he turn out to be the child of a slave (1382–83: see *Oedipus* 1063, 1168). He finally decides to take the risk ("I must dare," *Ion* 1387), just as Oedipus does ("I must hear," *Oedipus* 1170), although with very different results. Oedipus' initial objective, the public task of "tracking down" a killer by a "clue" (*symbolon* in the juridical sense), turns into the personal and intimate task of finding the "birth token" (*symbolon* in the personal sense) that proves his identity.

As the forward rhythm of the push for knowledge begins to accelerate, there is a retarding movement that pulls back toward not knowing, toward leaving origins veiled in darkness. It is appropriately the mother who takes on this retarding role. She who stood at the first beginning of his life and (as we learn) was involved in a contradictory pull between the birth and the death of her new child (1173–75), would still keep him from the terrible knowledge and thus save his life. Like all great plots, the play combines forward movement to the end with the pleasure of delaying and complicating that end.10

This simultaneity of past and present belongs to the uncanny or the inexplicable, which is represented onstage in the blind prophet, behind whom stands the remote and mysterious Apollo. Although Oedipus' first act is to consult Apollo at Delphi, he never integrates what Apollo and Teiresias know into what he knows. Not until it is too late does he put the oracles together by means of that intelligence whose special property is to join past and present, to connect disparate events, facts, experiences, and stages of life. Oedipus' failure in logical deduction was one of Voltaire's objections to the structure of the play.11 But what an Enlightenment rationalist would consider a fault the ancient dramatist would consider the very essence of the tragic element. Oedipus uses his human knowledge primarily in conflict with the divine, to block, deny, contradict, or evade it.

Knowledge veers not only between human and divine, but also between active and passive. Human knowledge is actively sought and willed as the achievement of man's intellectual power. The divine knowledge comes, it seems, by chance, on precarious and unpredictable paths. The mysterious divine knowledge is conveyed through the blind prophet, but its truth is confirmed only by sheer coincidence, through the arrival of the Corinthian Messenger and then the Old Herdsman, and it is the latter who provides the clinching piece of knowledge, Oedipus' identity as the exposed child of Laius and Jocasta.

This first mention of the one person who "knows" anything is as vague as possible: the man is only "some one man" (118). Oedipus makes no attempt to refine this description. Instead he shifts attention from "some one *man*" to "some one *thing*" in his next line: "What sort of thing [did he say]? For one thing would find out many things for learning" (120). The grammatical categories of language itself—the ease of shifting from masculine to neuter (one man, one thing) and from singular to plural (robber, robbers)—lead the investigators astray from what will finally solve the mystery. Language itself encourages their deception and leads them to pursue what will prove to be, in one sense, misinformation.

Forgotten for some six hundred lines, more than a third of the play, this individual resurfaces when Jocasta's reference to the triple roads (another numerical problem) arouses Oedipus' anxiety (see 730). "Alas, these things are now clear," he says. "Who was it who spoke these words to you, my wife?" (754–55). "A house-servant," Jocasta replies, "who arrived as the only one saved" (756). This last phrase is the other, objective side of Creon's more subjectively oriented description of the man as "having fled in fear" in the prologue (118).

"Did he then happen to be present in the house?" Oedipus presses on. "No," answers Jocasta, and she explains how the servant came to Thebes, found Oedipus already in possession of the royal power and Laius dead. Touching Jocasta's hand, he asked to be sent to the fields (761) and to the pastures of the flocks, so that "he might be as far as possible out of sight of the town" (755–82). The contrast between "house" and "field" (756–61) recalls Oedipus' first specific point of investigation of Laius' death: "Was it in the house or in the fields?" (112). The sole witness there was "some one man" (118); and Creon's phrase calls attention to his unitary identity.12 His initial "oneness," like that of Oedipus, bifurcates ominously into two. He is both the house-servant (756) and the herdsman in the "pastures of the flocks" (761). He is both the man described by Jocasta and the man described by Creon, both the man who survived the attack on Laius and the killer/rescuer of the infant Oedipus on Cithaeron. Like Oedipus, he is both an insider ("reared in the house," as he describes himself later [1123]) and an outsider, one who was sent from the house to the fields or the mountains.

This figure of the Herdsman/escort plays an increasingly important role in giving different perspectives on what really happened in the past. He possesses "knowing" (*eidôs*) from a crucial "seeing" (*eide*, 119), a play on the similarity be tween the Greek words that is not easily translated into English. But here, as throughout the drama, this wordplay is charged with meaning. At this early point in the work, when Creon mentions this lone survivor for the first time, his reported story introduces the identification of knowing with seeing that is central to the play's concern with ignorance and perception. Later, Jocasta tells Oedipus that it was after the Herdsman "saw" Oedipus on the throne that he requested from her a kind of absence of vision, to be "out of sight of the house" (762). Like Oedipus in the future, he seeks a combination of negated vision ("out of the sight of the house") and exile from his place in house and city (see 1384–94, 1451–54).

Still confident as the king searching for the killer of Laius, Oedipus then sends for this only survivor of the attack on the former king (765–770). It is sheer coincidence that this man should also be the one whom Laius entrusted with killing the infant Oedipus. And yet that coincidence points to a deep necessity. Oedipus cannot progress in his role as ruler of the city, whose task it is to discover and expel Laius' killer, until he has solved the mystery of his own origins. He cannot solve the mystery of the plague until he solves the mystery of himself. To do that, he has to force the figure who holds the missing piece to recapitulate earlier stages of his life as well: when he changed from house-servant (756) to herdsman (761) and when, in that earlier role, he had brought Oedipus to both doom and salvation on Mount Cithaeron (see 1349–52). The philosopher George Santayana remarked that those who do not know history are compelled to repeat it. The Oedipus works out the truth of this statement on the level of personal history: not to know who you are is to be compelled to search ceaselessly for your origins.

The Herdsman's life also parallels Oedipus' in the spatial shift that he undergoes in the course of the play, from house to mountain, from a figure at the center of the palace life (756) to a figure at the margins of the city, in the mountains. The Herdsman's life, governed by such different rhythms of space and time,: proves to be causally related to Oedipus' life and also similar to it in form, parallel in its course but also more vaguely outlined and set into a larger and remoter frame. The condensation of Oedipus' life into the hour or two acted out in the "real" time of the performance has behind it, like a larger shadow, the more expansive movement of the Old Herdsman's passage through time.

The Herdsman recurs as a figure dimly parallel to Oedipus in his life's movements and spontaneous impulse of pity and fear, but he is also in one essential point the opposite of Oedipus. The first specific detail given about him is his "flight in fear" in order to be "the only one saved" (118, 756). His characteristic mode of action in the play is evasion through running away. This is what he did when Oedipus attacked Laius at the crossroads and what he did again when he returned from that episode to find Oedipus ruling in Thebes. It is also what the young Oedipus did when he heard his destiny foretold him at Delphi (788–97). The Herdsman repeats the pattern a third and last time on the stage when Oedipus interrogates him. He tries to escape by evasion or denial (see 1129–31, 1146–59, 1165), but now Oedipus compels him to face and speak the "terrible" that is contained in the truth (1169–70).

This last scene brings Oedipus and his shadowy double together, finally, on the stage. Now neither of them can run away. Yet this coming together shows us their characteristic divergence. The Herdsman is a slave (see 1123; also 764, 1168), and he seeks survival by denying the truth. The king goes to meet his destiny head-on, confronting the "necessity" that comes from his oracles, even if that confrontation means his death. The Herdsman/slave at the crossroads was "the only one to be saved" (756). King Oedipus is ready to become the communal victim, the *pharmakos* or scapegoat, whose single death saves the whole city (see 1409–12), although his submission to Creon in the final scene prevents that pattern from being completely realized.13

**Notes**

1. Philip Vellacott, *Sophocles and Oedipus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 108.

2. Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, trans. H. and D. Harvey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 98.

3. In the *Dream Analysis* (*Oneirokritika*) of Artemidorus (second century CE) even intensely sexual incest dreams have nonsexual meanings: see John J. Winkler, *Constraints of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 37–44, with his translation of Artemidorus 1.79 on pp. 213–15.

4. The contradictions and problems of the plot have been observed as early as Voltaire's *Letters on Oedipus* (see Chapter 12). For a convenient list see John J. Peradotto, "Disauthorizing Prophecy: The Ideological Mapping of *Oedipus Tyrannus*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 122 (1992), 7–8, 13–14. The Old Herdsman's lie is rather unusual because when Sophocles lets his characters lie, he generally provides some hint in their manner of speech or some warning to the audience that a lie is being told. Presumably in this case he could assume that the story was sufficiently familiar so that the audience would know the truth and realize the falsehood of the Herdsman's statement. The reference to his "fear" here, as well as his frightened request of Jocasta of which we are told later (758–64), also helps us to recognize that he must be lying.

5. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 62–67. R. Drew Griffith, *The Theatre of Apollo: Divine Justice and Sophocles' Oedipus the King* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), especially 45–69, argues, unconvincingly, that Oedipus is justly punished by Apollo for killing Laius. No one would suggest that Oedipus is innocent, and he himself immediately recognizes his polluted state as Laius' possible killer (*Oedipus* 813–23). Yet an approach, like Griffith's, which focuses on this single act, leaves out all the overdeterminations and complications that the play interweaves as essential parts of Oedipus' life story (the oracles, the plague, the coincidences, the rhythm of discovery, the character of all the figures in the story, and so on). The fragmented reading of the type that Griffith proposes reduces the richness of the tragedy to a banal moralization. For the range of interpretation in this question of Oedipus' guilt, it is worth noting that Griffith's thesis is just the reverse of the theory of Frederick Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), that Oedipus did not kill Laius at all.

6. See Brian Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy* (London: Longmans, 1979), 500–13; also Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 100–104.

7. Incest and parricide: 791–93, 825–27, 994–96; parricide and incest: 1184–85, 1288–89, 1357–59, 1398–1408.

8. Gorgias, fragment 82 B23 in Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. 2, 6th ed. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1952), pp. 305–6. The fragment is quoted by Plutarch, *On the Glory of the Athenians*, chap. 5, 348C.

9. For some suggestive remarks on the differences between time and life patterns in epic and tragedy see Bennett Simon, *The Family in Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 13–21, 59–60.

10. See Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot: A Model for Narrative," in his *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 90–112, especially 101–9.

11. Voltaire, *Letter on Oedipus*, Letter 3.

12. The phrase "Laius dead" (in the same metrical position) occurs in both Creon's account of the Herdsman/escort (in 126) and in Jocasta's tale of how this man came to her after he saw Oedipus on the throne (in 759). The verbal echo is an other link between the two passages and perhaps also serves to remind us of the causal connection, still hidden from all but this herdsman, between Laius' death and Oedipus' "power" or kingship (*kratê*, 758).

13. On the scapegoat pattern, see below, Chapter 9, with note 11, and Chapter 12; also my *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 42–45.

Segal, Charles. *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge, 2nd ed.*, pp. 53–70. © 2001 by Oxford University Press. Quoted as "Life's Tragic Shape: Plot, Design, and Destiny" in Bloom, Harold, ed. *Oedipus Rex*, Updated Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2006. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 27 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=MCIOR11&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=MCIOR11&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=MCIOR11&SingleRecord=True)

## The Relevance of Plague Imagery

**Date:** 1957
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Herbert Musurillo
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

Even though I risk the wrath of modern critics, I should like to suggest four important qualities which have been found in ancient as well as modern poetry in varying degrees. They are i) the prosodic element (rhythm, rhyme, assonance, etc.), ii) a peculiar compression of ideas (which avoids the complete exposition of ordinary prose), iii) a kind of image-logic based on analogy and association, and iv) a special choice of words (again in a way that avoids the suggestion of prose).

Now in the *Oedipus* Sophocles proceeds by laying down a series of fundamental images; then, in the course of the play, the most important of these (the predominant or leading images) are taken up and developed like musical themes and allowed to acquire deeper connotations as the play comes to a close. It is this developmental process, and particularly Sophocles' use of predominant images, which we wish to illustrate here.

In the first part of the play, up till the end of the *Parodos*, the chief image would appear to be that of the great plague; and in Sophocles' hands it is not only an image but also a symbol. Further, it should be recalled that for the Greeks as well as the Romans the word "plague" had no definite pathological denotation. In any case, how far Sophocles in the Oedipus incorporated the actual symptoms of the great Athenian plague, or what was the real nature of the plague as described by Thucydides, need not concern us here. But it may perhaps be important to note that the Theban plague created by Sophocles is not only what we today would call an epidemic (affecting human beings); there is, as well, a blight on plants ( *O. T.*, 25, 254), and an epizootic among the cattle ( *O. T.*, 26). Further, the symptoms of the epidemic are complicated by the occurrence of what would seem to be puerperal fever ( *O. T.*, 26, 173–4), affecting, therefore, merely the women in childbirth. Now whether or not we may find historical examples of such a coincidence, the additional details of the blight and the puerperal fever are, I think, significant for the symbolism. For it would appear that Sophocles has conceived of the divinely sent plague as a daemonic force attacking the very sources of life for Oedipus' unwitting crime has, for the Greek mind at least, caused a profound disturbance in those laws which govern relationships between parents and offspring. For this he has incurred a ritual defilement, and it was only fitting that the penalty inflicted on Thebes should somehow symbolize the nature of the crime.

It is a commonplace that the Greek notion of a ritual defilement is for modern Western minds an extremely difficult one. For it was, in a sense, a kind of moral guilt without implying the full knowledge and culpability which we demand with our Western, or perhaps more Roman, approach to moral problems. But perhaps the best analogy may be taken from medicine. A ritual defilement is incurred as though it were a disease, without full awareness being necessary; it is infectious and can defile a family and an entire city, and even perhaps be transmitted by heredity; and it may be cured by isolating the defiled individual from the community and having him undergo certain ritual purifications imposed by the god offended or by his legitimate ministers. It is only, of course, an analogy: but it was perhaps some such association of ideas which for Sophocles made the Athenian plague (with the various changes which Sophocles adopted) an extremely suggestive symbol for the opening movement of the *Oedipus*.

Musurillo, Herbert. "Sunken Imagery in Sophocles' *Oedipus*." *American Journal of Philology*, vol. LXXVIII (1957): pp. 37–40. Quoted as "The Relevance of Plague Imagery" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 28 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO16&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO16&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO16&SingleRecord=True)

## Freud's Interpretation

**Date:** 1992
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Rush Rehm
**From:** *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists.

Long considered the 'classic' Greek tragedy, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* holds a special place in the history of Western theatre. In some respects the notoriety of the play helps it work on the contemporary stage, since most audiences know the outline of the story. Compare the lack of familiarity with Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, or Euripides' *Ion*, or Sophocles' own *Philoctetes*. However, exposure to the Oedipus myth has its drawbacks as well, for much of the modern fascination with the play derives from Freud's use of the story as the paradigm for his psychoanalytic theory of male infantile desire. There is no denying the importance of the Oedipal complex as a psychological and interpretive model, but it sheds little light on the play Sophocles wrote and, when applied to a production, leads the audience down a theatrical blind-alley.

So, too, does the application of psychological realism to the play, epitomized by questions like 'Why did Oedipus marry someone old enough to be his mother?' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not a cautionary tale of crime and punishment, where the audience are meant to think that Oedipus and Jocasta should have known better. The issue held no dramatic interest for Sophocles since it never is hinted at in the text.

A more insidious form of theatrical reductionism arises from the mistaken belief that the characters in the play are simply puppets in the hands of the gods. Although Oedipus is born to doom, everything he does on-stage he freely chooses. Even while matching his life to the terrible fate inscribed for him, Oedipus continues to act autonomously, following the best information available. Thinking he is the son of Polybus and Merope, he strives to avoid the pollution of parricide and incest by fleeing Corinth; as political leader of Thebes, he struggles to rid his city of the plague by tracking down the killer of Laius; and, when the opportunity arises, he applies his energies relentlessly to untangle the riddle of his own identity.

This last effort, the most compelling in the play, returns Oedipus to the riddle of the Sphinx on which his earlier fame rests. The answer to the question 'What creature goes on two, three, and four feet?' is man. Oedipus himself personifies the enigma, a tragic figure who is more than one (terrible) thing at a time. It is important to note that in his confusion Oedipus manifests no moral failing or 'tragic flaw', a (mis)translation of Aristotle's term *hamartia*, which literally implies an archer 'missing the mark', not hitting a bull's-eye. Oedipus errs through simple ignorance of the material facts of his own birth. Out of that situation Sophocles crafts a play that is both keenly particular (Oedipus is like no man) and broadly universal. Do any of us know who we really are, what we are doing, the full consequence of our actions?

The audience's familiarity with the story operates to best advantage in the play's ubiquitous ironies. As Oedipus drives towards the truth, he unwittingly participates in a remarkable series of puns, perhaps nowhere more striking than on his own name. Meaning 'swollen-footed', a reference to the pierced ankles he suffered when exposed as a child, 'Oedipus' contains the Greek word *oide* meaning 'I know', literally, 'I have seen'. The prophet Teiresias taunts Oedipus with 'not knowing who lives with you' (337–38), prompting the retort 'but I/the one who knows nothing, Oedipus, I stopped the Sphinx' (396–97). The verbal play, more prominent in the Greek than in most English translations, suggests that Oedipus' name signals his destiny. A man of intellect, whose rational gaze saw through the riddle of the Sphinx, gradually comes to realize how flawed his vision and understanding have been. His self-blinding adds further irony to his name, 'Oedipus—the one who has seen'.

Rehm, Rush. *Greek Tragic Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge (1992): pp. 109–10. Quoted as "Freud's Interpretation" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Sophocles*, Bloom's Major Dramatists. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2002. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 28 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO18&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO18&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BMDSO18&SingleRecord=True)

## Blindness and Vision: Oedipus Tyrannus

**Date:** 1967
On *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
**Author:** Herbert Musurillo
**From:** *Oedipus Rex*, Bloom's Guides.

Very subtly is the theme of the plague united with the symbolism of the ship. The priest of Zeus, narrating to Oedipus the latest ravages of the common disease, speaks of the city as a ship (23–4) that

Cannot keep its prow above the bloody swell.

It is wallowing in blood, in death, as the bodies fall in the city and empty the state of its manpower (55–7), the ship of its crew. But the pilot Oedipus—as Jocasta is later to call him (923) and the Chorus in a moment of eulogy describes him (694–6)—tells the priest and the suppliants that he has not been asleep (65–7),

But know you that I have wept many tears
And travelled many roads within my mind.

That is, he has been worried and deeply concerned—a characteristic mark of Oedipus' make-up. He began his career by wandering out of anxiety away from Corinth where he was raised; and his final wandering will take him back in spirit to discover the mystery of his birth and birthmark. Indeed, the theme of Oedipus the wanderer, the outcast from birth (1350), whose nurse and mother is the broad range of Mt. Cithaeron (1090–95), is a minor, secondary one within the broad and rich background of the play. It is to Cithaeron that he wishes to return, to live and die as a recluse among the hills (1451 ff.), Cithaeron that heard his baby cries and echoed, at the end, with his animal bellow of recognition as he sees the truth of what the prophet had foretold.

But it is with the ship and harbor imagery that I am chiefly concerned. To Jocasta, the Chorus and Creon, Oedipus is the pilot who has steered the ship of state on a fair breeze; and Oedipus himself is conscious of his administrative role. Indeed, he is not like the Creon of the *Antigone* who sees his captaincy as a kind of divine absolutism, a role which gives him complete dominion over the citizens as though they were his slaves. No, Oedipus fulfills his position by his positive contribution to the welfare of the state, and his actions always depend upon the consultation of the Theban people. It is precisely his solicitude which helps to bring him to disaster. His position begins to disintegrate with the reluctant arrival of Teiresias. Oedipus cannot imagine the reason why the ancient seer will not speak out and suspects that Creon and Teiresias have guilty knowledge of Laius' death. Very rightly does Oedipus conclude that kings most often lose their thrones by the machinations of those who are closest to them; if Creon and the prophet got rid of Laius, they surely now would try to murder his successor. Teiresias' withering reply unleashes all the most shocking details of Oedipus' unwitting crime, clothed in prophetic obscurity. He tells him of the dread-footed Curse that is pursuing him (419 ff.).

Both now while you have sight, and later blind.
And what harbor shall there not be for your cry,
What Cithaeron's grove shall not re-echo with it,
When you realize the marriage which you've made,
Sailing on a favorable breeze to a harborless harbor …

Oedipus' great and sudden rise in life, his towering success as king of Thebes—this is the harbor into which he has piloted his ship under favorable winds. Teiresias' words recall the pathetic prayer of the Chorus in the parodos (194 ff.): they beseech their patron gods to drive out Ares the fever-god (whom they believe is at fault for the plague), like an infectious, disease-bearing cloud, to the east or to the west,

to Amphitrite's great chamber,
Or that most friendless anchorage,
The Thracian sea.

To Oedipus, then, the palace of Thebes has become a "friendless anchorage," a treacherous harbor which consumes and destroys the vessels that are innocently moored in it. The fair breeze, the brief success in quelling the baneful influence of the Sphinx, the solemn nuptials with queen Jocasta—all this was but the semblance of happiness, a shadowy glory sent by the gods to make Oedipus' descent into the abyss all the more appalling and irreversible.

But there is a still more ominous pronouncement to come. The Chorus ironically interprets Oedipus' voyage in the ode which just follows the final revelation (1186 ff.). We see now that the rise-and-fall pattern of human life not only fits those who are guilty of *hybris* as they had previously suggested (873 ff.); it may also describe the life of any man whom the gods have somehow chosen to humiliate, thrusting him into a life which is merely an illusion of happiness, and then plunging him into the blackest despair.1 This image of climbing and falling we shall touch upon farther on. What is interesting in this last choral ode is the final development of the ship and harbor imagery which had been so pervasive throughout the earlier part of the play. For the earlier cry of healing, the paean, has turned into a lament (1219), as though Oedipus were already dead. In their most prophetic mood, the Chorus continues to sing (1207 ff.):

Alas, my famous Oedipus!
The same great harbor sufficed
Both for father and for son, to fall,
Both husbands. How, how indeed,
Could those maternal fields, poor child,
Have born you for so long?

The imagery, though obscurely delicate is direct. The harborless harbor, the friendless anchorage, is none other than his own mother. He has, like a grim husbandman, inherited the fields his father sowed—the Greek is ambiguous—and he has "fallen" upon the same harbor as his father.2 It is the moment of supreme irony in the play: for the Greek for "harbor" can also mean "womb."3 No greater crime can be imagined; no greater disturbance of the Laws which rule on high.

## Notes

1. See my article, "The Illusion of Prosperity in Sophocles and Gregory of Nyssa," *Amer. Journal of Philology* 82 (1961), 182–187.
2. For a discussion of the many levels of irony in this word, see *Symbol and Myth in Ancient Poetry*, pp. 86–7.
3. See the fragment of Empedocles cited in Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (7th ed. 3 vols. Berlin 1954), I.346.21. Aeschylus makes Polyneices "flee the darkness of his mother" (*Seven against Thebes* 664), that is, the womb.

Musurillo, Herbert. "Blindness and Vision: Oedipus Tyrannus." In *The Light and The Darkness: Studies in the Dramatic Poetry of Sophocles*. E.J. Brill, 1967. Quoted as "Blindness and Vision: Oedipus Tyrannus" in Bloom, Harold ed. *Oedipus Rex*, Bloom's Guides. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2007. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 28 Oct. 2014 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BGOR019&SingleRecord=True>.

How to Cite

**Record URL:**
[http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BGOR019&SingleRecord=True.](http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=191276&SID=5&iPin=BGOR019&SingleRecord=True)