

Oedipus Rex Revisited

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This paper argues that psychoanalysts must revisit Oedipus Rex to extract its deeper lessons. Although Oedipus does demonstrate genuinely oedipal desires, his tragedy stems not so much from them as from a narcissistic rage over his original mutilation and abandonment by his parents. But Oedipus is not only the object of our analysis; he is a prototype of the psychoanalyst, as Freud himself recognized. Sophocles thus appears to diagnose the dangers of psychoanalysis. Whatever hope exists in the midst of these dangers is then inferred from his prophetic sequel, Oedipus at Colonus.

Freud first read Sophocles' drama in 1873. Revisiting it in 1897, Freud (1954) attached the name of Oedipus to the now famous complex, writing in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess that he had deciphered the "gripping power" of Sophocles' play in its portrayal of the secret desires of every child: to possess one parent and annihilate the other (Letter 71, pp. 221–225).¹ Indeed, in "The Interpretation of Dreams," Freud (1900) went further and rejected the canonical interpretation of the play as a tragic conflict between human will and divine destiny (pp. 261–263). Instead, he wrote, the legend's power "can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity" (p. 261). Thus, according to Freud, psychoanalysis illuminated the power of the play, rather than the other way around. Sophocles' tragedy, however, hides dark lessons for psychoanalysis itself. In order to unearth these lessons, we must begin by attending to the peculiar inconsistencies of the text, especially those within the puzzle of Oedipus himself.

¹ Cf. Freud (1954), Letter 64, pp. 206–210. See also Rudnytsky (1986), pp. 11–12.

Traumatic Knowledge

The text of this play presents many inconsistencies, but one is so odd that it has persuaded an esteemed philologist (Ahl, 1991) to claim that Sophocles' Oedipus neither murdered Laius, nor married his mother—that the tragedy is his mistaken conclusion that he did both. How many men obstructed Laius at the crossroads and killed him? The answer seems obvious: one—namely, Oedipus. This at least is the version that prevails by the end of the play. But according to the version first told by the king's slave, the one survivor from his retinue, there were many. "This man said," tells Creon, "that the *robbers* they encountered were *many* and the hands that did the murder were *many*; it was *no single man's* power" (122; italics added).² Moreover, this version agrees with Creon's own report from his trip to the Delphic oracle: "let some one punish with force this dead man's *murderers*" (107; italics added).

But we must not take Creon's report of the oracle as the word of Apollo himself, or even of his inspired priestess. That word was notoriously obscure and ambiguous. For instance, Croesus, the Lydian king, consulted the oracle about his plans to attack the neighboring kingdom of the Persians. Delphi returned the answer that he would destroy a great kingdom, and Croesus mistook these ambiguous words as approval of his plan. He failed to consider a darker possibility: that the kingdom he would destroy would be his own.³ Similarly, Creon may hear at Delphi as much what he expects to hear as what Apollo actually says. And like everyone in Thebes, Creon would have assumed for all these years that several men killed his former brother-in-law. Jocasta and the Chorus—who, as so often in Greek tragedy, represent inherited and conventional wisdom—both speak in the plural of "murderers" (292, 715).⁴

In immediate response to Creon's report, and speaking of it later, Oedipus too accepts this conventional version (109, 307). Why wouldn't he? It's what the only eyewitness said. However, on five other occasions during his investigation he speaks of *one* killer (124, 139, 225, 230, 296). Most remarkable of these occasions is the last. The Chorus has just informed Oedipus: "It was said that he was killed by certain *wayfarers*" (292); in the very next line Oedipus replies: "I heard that

² Unless otherwise noted, citations from *Oedipus Rex* are taken from Grene & Lattimore (1991).

³ Herodotus 1.53.

⁴ At 277 the Chorus says, "I neither killed the king nor can I declare the *killer*." But, significantly, their lapse into the singular follows a 60-line speech of Oedipus.

too, but no one saw the *killer*” (293). More remarkable still is that Oedipus, at some level, is aware of the discrepancy. In the midst of the confusion he declares with heavy dramatic irony: “Upon the murderer I invoke this curse—whether he is one man and all unknown, or one of many” (246). According to Dawe (1982), the most recent editor of the Greek text, this is not Oedipus committing a *parapraxis*, a Freudian slip, but instead a technique Sophocles uses to prolong the inquiry and, thus, the dramatic excitement. What goes unexplained is why Oedipus is the one who most often uses the singular. Were it a slip, though, we would know why: he knows that it was one man—himself.

When he has revealed to his audience, and in some ways to himself, that he once killed a rich man and his attendants at a crossroads, he then, significantly, begins to analyze the ambiguity between singular and plural: “You said that he spoke of highway robbers who killed Laius. Now if he uses the same number, it was not I who killed him. One man cannot be the same as many. But if he speaks of a man traveling alone, then clearly the burden of guilt inclines towards me” (840). Despite the validity of his analysis, however, there is no awareness in it of his own persistent reversion to the singular. Oedipus the Wise cannot analyze himself, which has of course been his problem from the very beginning, for there are fundamental questions that Oedipus, solver of the Sphinx’s riddle, ironically never asks—questions, that is, about himself.

His name, for instance, is one such question. In Greek it is *oidipous*. Two etymologies are possible since the *oid-* prefix is the root of two Greek verbs: *oida*, “to know,” and *oideo*, “to swell.” *Pous* means “foot.”⁵ *Oidipous* as a name therefore means at once “swollen-foot” and something like “knower-of-feet.” The latter meaning is especially appropriate for the solver of the riddle of the Sphinx: What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?⁶ The answer is man, an answer that is obvious once it has been discovered. But only Oedipus was able to divine it, and without any divine help. “I solved the riddle by my wit alone,” he contemptuously tells Teiresias, priest of Apollo. “Mine was no knowledge got from birds” (398–399).

Oedipus was born to answer that question. His knowledge came not from birds but from iron. Before Laius and Jocasta sent him off to

5 The genitive of *pous* survives into English as the prefix in “podiatrist,” healer of feet. Sophocles plays upon the Greek etymologies in several places. For instance, at line 43 he ends a line with *oistha pou*, which not only mimics *oidipous*, but also means “you know, perhaps.”

6 “Two-footed” in Greek is *dipous*. The riddle has several variants. The shortest version can be found in Apollodorus 3.53–4.

Mount Cithaeron to be exposed, they had the tendons of his feet pierced and fettered (717, 1034). Exposing deformed children—monsters, as they were once known, since *monstrum* in Latin means sign, in this case a bad one⁷—was an accepted, even common, practice in antiquity. Plato recommends it in his *Republic* (5.460c). Oedipus was no physical monster—not yet anyway. It was the Delphic prophecy received by Laius, that worst of all signs, that destined Oedipus to perform monstrous deeds. But the staples now deformed his feet, which became swollen. He truly became *oidipous*, the swollen-footed: “so that from this,” says the Corinthian messenger who once received him into his arms on Cithaeron, “you’re called your present name” (1036). Oedipus says poignantly, “My swaddling clothes brought me a rare disgrace” (1035).

While he was fettered, furthermore, his two feet were one. The morning of his life, then, was not spent on four feet, but on three. In the evening of his life, after he has blinded himself, he will be guided by his faithful daughter Antigone. Lear (1999) has pointed out that he then walks on four feet.⁸ Oedipus thus inverts the usual course of a human life encoded by the Sphinx’s riddle. Destined not to know that course in his own case, Oedipus nonetheless knows it of others: “the Sphinx came upon him,” says the Chorus in gratitude, “and all of us saw his wisdom and he saved the city” (510). This is the riddle of Oedipus, swollen-footed, knower-of-feet, who does not know until too late why his own feet are swollen. “How terrible to have wisdom,” says Teiresias, “when it brings no profit to him who is wise” (357). He is speaking of himself, but he might equally well be speaking of Oedipus.

Their tragic wisdom is not all they share.⁹ It is not long before they will share blindness. Oedipus will deprive himself of sight because of what he has learned—even, we should add, because of what his wisdom has brought about. Teiresias also lost his sight because of what he learned. According to legend, Zeus and Hera debated the question of who enjoyed sex more, the man or the woman, each insisting that it was the other. To solve their debate, they enlisted Teiresias as judge, who had spent seven years as a woman for striking copulating snakes with his staff. His answer to them was: the woman. Hera was so angered by his siding with Zeus that she blinded him. Zeus, on the other hand, was

⁷ The Greek is *teras* (whence “teratology”) and means the same as the Latin.

⁸ The interpretation, while irresistibly clever, sits uneasily with Teiresias’s parting prophecy that Oedipus will end by “tapping his way before him with a stick” (457).

⁹ Their similarities will be undeniable in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the belated sequel to the *Oedipus Rex*. Goux (1993) points out their salient differences (p. 92).

so pleased that he compensated Teiresias for the loss of his sight with prophetic vision of the future.¹⁰

“Darkness!” cries Oedipus (1314). “Why should I see whose vision showed me nothing sweet to see” (1334–1335). When he had vision, there were crucial facts he never saw. For example, after Creon has returned from Delphi with the oracle’s instructions that the murderers of Laius must be found and punished, Oedipus asks: “Was it at home or in the country that death came upon him, or in another country traveling” (112–114)? Apparently then, Oedipus has never inquired into the death of his predecessor on the throne, not to mention his wife’s former husband.¹¹ When he learns from Creon’s mission to Delphi that he must finally do so, he also learns that there was a witness to the crime; but, as Voltaire (1877, pp. 18–28) first noticed, he doesn’t summon the man for another 700 lines (860)—nearly half the play. According to Dawe (1982), this neglect, like his original failure in enquiring, arises *dramatis causa*: “Sophocles does not throw away the thrill of discovery in a few brief seconds,” Dawe writes, “when he has it in his power to bring his audience to a peak of excitement for an appreciably longer time” (p. 15). Dawe thinks Sophocles is using the same dramatic technique in postponing Oedipus’s realization that he has killed his father and married his mother. By line 1076 Oedipus has, according to Dawe, learned six facts that would have enabled him to draw this inevitable inference: it was virtually certain that he had killed Laius; Laius had once received an oracle that he would be killed by his son; he, Oedipus, was destined to kill his own father; Polybus and Merope were not his real parents; Laius and Jocasta had exposed a baby after mutilating its feet; and finally, he himself has had mutilated feet since infancy (p. 21).

As if these facts weren’t clear enough, especially for the one who solved the riddle of the Sphinx, Teiresias has already told him everything in no uncertain terms: “I say you are the murderer of the king whose murderer you seek” (363) and “I say that with those you love best you live in foulest shame unconsciously” (367). For all his pretense to be an uncompromising seeker of truth (1076 ff.), however, Oedipus has already shown himself systematically unable to learn the truth about one thing—himself. Moreover, while quarreling with Teiresias, his alter ego, and thus his fiercest enemy, Oedipus was hardly in a state

¹⁰ The story can be found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 3.318–338.

¹¹ No less amazing is Jocasta’s ignorance of both men. She has never made serious inquiry into Laius’s murder, and apparently she has never heard the story of Oedipus’s Corinthian past—even though she has borne him four children! Oedipus and Jocasta share a mutual neglect of the past and of one another. For a discussion of Jocasta, see Stimmel (2004).

of mind to believe such truths stated so baldly. Insight into this state of mind, a state that appears to be the *modus operandi* of Oedipus, is what psychoanalysis can contribute to the philological interpretation whose resort to *dramatis causa* appears increasingly unsustainable.

Oedipus takes so long to learn the truth about himself not because Sophocles is drawing out the excitement—as if tragedy were a roller-coaster ride with an especially long incline—but because, like Jocasta, at some level he already knows what it is. And knowing it already—with its fetters and abandonment, drunken humiliations and divine trickery, impulsive rage that destroyed what he wished he could have loved, and blind love that consorted with what he wished he could have destroyed—he’ll do everything he can to hide it from himself.

Knowingness

According to Lear (1999), the way Oedipus hides the truth about himself—his mechanism of defense—is “knowingness.” This pretense to knowledge earns Oedipus rebukes from both Teiresias and Creon. “Do you know who your parents are?” asks Teiresias. The question is rhetorical, and Teiresias answers it himself, as we have seen: “Unknowing” (415). By contrast, Creon admits, “I don’t know; and when I know nothing, I usually hold my tongue” (568). Even the Corinthian Messenger, who has known Oedipus the adult for only a few moments, says presciently: “you don’t know what you are doing” (1008). Despite these many boasts of knowledge, and more, it is not until the very end of the tragedy that Oedipus admits to his daughter that he is a father “seeing nothing, knowing nothing” (1484). By this time, of course, it is too late.

There is considerable debate among philologists about what Aristotle means by *hamartia*—literally, “missing the mark”—when he writes that every tragedy must have an instance of it (*Poetics*, 1453a10). Neoclassicist literary critics interpreted it as the “tragic flaw,” which generations of school kids were then trained to see not only in Shakespeare, but also in Attic tragedy. Dodds (1966), the great English philologist of the last century, argued forcefully, in a paper with the provocative title “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*,” that Oedipus has no tragic flaw—he is the victim of destiny. *Hamartia* for Aristotle is ignorance of a particular fact, he added, not a general flaw of character (reprinted in Bloom, 1988, pp. 35–47). But the distinction is aca-

demic, at least in the case of the Oedipus. Oedipus is ignorant of a fact—his parentage—because of his character flaw, his knowingness.

Oedipus knew the solution to the riddle of the Sphinx—he even learned it by himself—and so he knows everything else too. How else to explain the fact, noticed by Lear (1999), that “on the few occasions when someone challenges Oedipus’s claim to know already—Teiresias, Creon, and the Messenger—Oedipus explodes with anger and suspicion” (p. 43)? These rival claims to knowledge threaten Oedipus’s confidence that *he* knows. Ironically, this confidence in knowledge stems from a wish to ignore; more ironically still, this wish to ignore stems from a deep but dim knowledge. Knowingness is thus allied with ignorance, and ignorance masks knowledge. Motivating these convolutions is the darkness of that basic knowledge.

“But how,” protests the philological skeptic, “can Oedipus’s unconscious knowledge of the truth be proven? All we have is the Greek text, and we must be faithful to it.” In reply, our position is not much different from that of the analyst, who has little more than the text of daily meetings from which to reconstruct the invisible dynamics of a mind. Many of the same clues are available: word choice, metaphors, slips, ambiguities, inconsistencies. Just as the analysand is destined to act out his conflicts in the consulting room, so too is Oedipus destined to act out his conflicts, and thus his dimmest recollections, in the text of the play. Lear (1999) offers an example of this acting out in Oedipus’s extreme reaction to the insult of “bastard.” “It is one thing to be contemptuous of a drunk’s appalling behavior,” Lear writes, “it is quite another to lose control of one’s thoughts and emotions” (p. 48). Why would Oedipus have taken the insult so seriously unless he knew at some level that it was true?¹² His adopted parents certainly do, and their reaction is every bit as defensive. As he retells it: “they took the insult very ill from him” (783). More significant is his reaction to this knowledge: he leaves home never to return. According to Lear, “Oedipus here acts out his abandonment” (p. 48).

The idea is worth pursuing a little further, the idea that Oedipus reveals his unconscious knowledge of his traumatic abandonment by repeating rather than remembering. Beside the acting out of his abandonment, to which we will return below, there are other ways in which Oedipus reveals his unconscious knowledge of the truth about his life. As we shall see, the richest of these ways is dramatic irony, of which the ambiguity of language is a particular example.

¹² This knowledge seems also to inform the one time he takes Teiresias seriously—when he prophesies about his parentage. “Who are they of all the world?” exclaims Oedipus (437).

All of these ways support Freud's (1900) claim—made in “The Interpretation of Dreams” but substantiated neither there nor anywhere later, to my knowledge—that

The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis—that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. (pp. 261–262)

The action of the play is a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis, and this action is Oedipus's investigation. In the beginning he investigates the murder of Laius, but eventually he is revealed to have been investigating, we might say analyzing, himself. Freud's affinity for Oedipus, who anticipated him in performing a relentless self-analysis, thereby becomes immediately understandable. Whether or not they both solved the riddle of the Sphinx—whose answer, as we have seen, was Man—still remains to be determined.

Dramatic Irony

In some cases, the analyst says something that is opaque to himself but clearer to his audience, i.e., the analyst. It is the analyst's job to detect dramatic ironies. In the same way, we serve as analysts to Oedipus. For instance, all the many curses that he invokes against the unknown murderer of Laius will be fulfilled, as we know, by himself (236, 243, 246, 250–251). There are important wishes disclosed by this dramatic irony. On one level, he wishes to assert his innocence: “What I say to you, I say as a stranger to the story, as a stranger to the deed” (219–220). But there is also another wish—to bring upon himself these very curses he feels he deserves. “When I drive pollution from the land,” he says, “I . . . act in my own interest” (138–139).

As for Oedipus's true relationship with Laius and Jocasta, through the repeated use of dramatic irony Sophocles reveals that Oedipus has some knowledge of it. While prosecuting the investigation of Laius, Oedipus says, “I fight in his defense as for my father” (264). While speaking of the king's sad fate, he muses, “Had his line not been unfortunate we would have common children” (261–262). On the surface he does not yet know that he is Laius's only child. We know better. They do indeed have children in common—Oedipus's own children: Antigone, Ismene,

Eteocles, and Polynices—who are also, as Sophocles never loses an opportunity to remind us, his own brothers and sisters.

There are many other examples of dramatic irony, of which we should mention five obvious ones. First, Oedipus says that he is an ally to Apollo and Laius (244–245), but he scorns the first and kills the second. Second, he says that he looks at every story (292), which is no more true now, when he ignores Teiresias, than it has been during all his years in Thebes when he seems never to have asked the most basic questions. In the same spirit, third, he says to Teiresias, “Your life is one long night so that you cannot hurt me or any other who sees the light” (374–375). As with every reference to sight in this exchange, it is Oedipus who is really blind, not Teiresias, who alone sees the truth. Fourth, he claims never to have seen the shepherd before, but this man saved his life as a baby (1110–1111). Finally, Oedipus accounts himself “a child of Fortune, beneficent Fortune” (1080–1081). After only another 20 lines he will be unable any longer to hide from the horrible truth of his life. In isolation, each of these instances may appear to be a simple mistake; taken together, they reveal a pattern of self-deception.

The ambiguity of language is the most specific element of Oedipus’s investigation that can be likened to the work of psychoanalysis. This is, however, merely a special case of dramatic irony. When Oedipus says, for example, that he holds the bed of the former king as well as a *homosporos* wife (260), the word is significantly ambiguous. “Held in common” may be the meaning he consciously intends, but “kindred” seems to be what he means at some deeper level. We are once again in the position of the analyst, perceiving the subtext of his words, waiting for them to become manifest. A reader, however, can appreciate the ambiguity only by hearing Oedipus speak in his own language. At this point, then, the philologist can come to the aid of the analyst. Here are three other examples of the phenomenon.

When Oedipus begins his investigation he says *egō phanō* (132), which can mean either “I will show” (who the criminal is) or “I will appear” (to be the criminal). By now we know which he intends and which reveals a hidden voice. When Jocasta wishes to tell Oedipus, “A messenger has arrived from Corinth to announce that your father, Polybus, is no longer”—is no longer alive, that is—she unconsciously uses an awkward word order that could also mean: “A messenger is here to announce that Polybus is no longer your father” (956). Finally, when the shepherd reports the prophecy that Laius once received, the prophecy that frightened him and Jocasta enough to have the baby Oedipus exposed, he uses a particular grammatical construction that

could mean either that Oedipus would kill them or that they would kill Oedipus (1176). The construction is the accusative and infinitive, the same grammar used by Delphi to trick Croesus into invading Persia.

Abandonment, Betrayal, and Expulsion

Having seen so many instances of unconscious meaning, let us turn now to the most important group of them: those concerning the themes of abandonment, betrayal, and expulsion.

First, when Teiresias withholds the terrible truth from Oedipus, Oedipus immediately suspects him of plotting with Creon to depose him: “And now you would expel me,” he says with mounting rage (399). “My friend Creon,” he adds of his brother-in-law, “friend from the first and loyal, thus secretly attacks me, secretly desires to drive me out” (387). Teiresias cooperates in the enactment: “A *deinos*-footed curse . . . shall drive you forth out of this land” (418). *Deinos* is ambiguous in Greek and can be translated into English as “terrible” or “clever”—both of which signify something important here. A terrible-footed curse has certainly followed Oedipus from the moment his ankles were pierced. So too has he been followed by a clever-footed curse since he first used his native wit to solve a riddle about feet, thereby winning his mother’s hand in marriage.¹³

Most telling of all references to expulsion are those of Oedipus once he has recognized his patricide and incest. He desires to be totally isolated from the world, to “wall up my loathsome body like a prison” (Fagles [1977] 1520; cf. Grene [1968] 1388). With the same self-loathing he exclaims: “Light of the sun, let me look upon you no more after today!” (1182). Sunlight often stands for life, as opposed to the dark mist of Hades. Here Oedipus may be asking to be expelled to the place where his parents originally sought to send him—to death, or he may be anticipating his self-blinding. After all, one reason he gives for this act is that the eyes that saw such crimes as he committed cannot look upon his people (1385). His self-mutilation is thus a self-banishment, just as his parents mutilated him in order to abandon him.

¹³ Teiresias is not alone; the play is steeped in covert references to feet and expulsion. On feet: “A time when first our feet were set secure on high” (49); “at the feet of a king” (128); “at our feet” (130); “with a stronger foot than Pegasus” (468–9); “lonely his feet” (479); “its feet are no service [*ou podi*]” (877); “the laws living on high [*hupsi-podes*]” (866); “the joints of your feet will be witnesses” (1032).

Like the themes of abandonment, betrayal, and expulsion, the metaphors of light and sight run throughout the play, but they cluster here as he takes the brooches to his eye-sockets. The Greek for eye-sockets is *arthra* (1270), the very same word used for ankles.¹⁴ He thus pierces these *arthra* with the gold brooches of his mother, the woman who long ago allowed his other *arthra* to be pierced by iron. As he blinds himself, he says, “I will never see the crime I have committed or had done upon me” (1272). The blinding thus condenses a punishment for his own crimes and a reenactment of his parents’ crime. At the very least he has turned passive into active. What Oedipus was doomed to repeat unconsciously is now in his conscious mind. “Leave me live in the mountains where Cithaeron is,” he laments, “that’s called my mountain, which my mother and father while they were living would have made my tomb” (1451–1454). He now knows consciously what he knew at some level from the beginning: his home is abandonment, the love he knew from birth was betrayal, and the expulsion that Creon will not impose upon him he requires of himself. “I beg of you in God’s name hide me somewhere outside your country, yes, or kill me, or throw me into the sea, to be forever out of your sight” (1410–1412).

The Complex of Oedipus

How does this reading of *Oedipus Rex* inform our understanding of the Oedipus complex? Oedipus appears to have known for a long time, at some level, both that the old man at the crossroads was his father and that the queen of Thebes was his mother. Since he killed the one and married the other, it is arguable that Oedipus was indeed oedipal.¹⁵ But the oedipal constellation of desires is not the constellation that determines his action throughout the play. Aggression, as we have seen, characterizes him throughout, but in the end this aggression is directed equally against Jocasta: entering the room where Jocasta has hung herself, he begs, “Give me a sword . . . to find this wife no wife, this mother’s womb” (1255–1256). This passage is hard to square with unmixed love of the mother, and it is not surprisingly ignored by Freud and by other psychoanalytic critics.

¹⁴ The word survives into English in “arthritis.”

¹⁵ By contrast, Lear (1999, pp. 38–39), Vernant (1988, p. 110), and Bloom (1988, p. 1) believe that Oedipus was not oedipal. Their position is now taken for granted in philology.

Oedipus is thus enraged with both parents, and with good reason. More influential than his so-called oedipal desires are the wounds in his feet. More determinative than his desire to possess his mother and annihilate his father is his longing—first conceived as a prophecy, then reconceived as a conspiracy, but finally recognized as a destiny—to be alone on Mt. Cithaeron where he belongs, and where indeed he will wander the rest of his life. This longing is his deepest “complex,” one more preoedipal than oedipal, born not of forbidden desire but of pain and abandonment.

No wonder he was dangerously proud of solving the Sphinx’s riddle by himself, without help from gods or men. Both abandoned him long ago, and he will prove that he can make it without them. This independence is as evident in his pains as in his pleasures. Proudly ignorant of priestcraft, he has become king of Thebes by answering the Sphinx’s riddle himself. In one famous image, in fact, he points to himself.¹⁶ When he investigates the plague that afflicts his people, he does so for the most part alone, ignoring the warnings of others. Eventually he learns that he is the pollution, and as a result, he pokes out his own eyes. He is thereby prosecutor and defendant, judge and executioner. Still proud of his independence, he says of this self-punishment, “the hand that struck my eyes was mine, mine alone—no one else—I did it all by myself!” (Fagles [1977] 1469–1471; cf. Grene [1968] 1331–1332). French philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux (1993) has summarized Oedipus’s story tersely:

[An] autodidact who has become an autocrat through an autoreferential response, pursues an investigation that will become more and more autobiographical, in which he himself will discover that he is the guilty party, after which he will inflict punishment on himself. (p. 135)

Oedipus and Narcissus

In the light of such a summary, how could psychoanalysts have ignored Oedipus the narcissist? How have they overlooked the oscillation, so typical of narcissism, from the grandiosity of “I count myself the son of Chance, the great goddess” (Fagles [1977] 1188–1189; cf. Grene [1968] 1080–1081) to the abasement of “for the love of god, hide me somewhere, kill me, hurl me into the sea where you can never look on me again” (Fagles [1977] 1543–1546; cf. Grene [1968] 1410–1412)?

¹⁶ The Vatican plate; cf. Goux (1993), p. 135.

The mythic parallels between Oedipus and Narcissus are inescapable and deserve their own treatment. Suffice it now to mention only that the tragedy of each is a tragedy of self-knowledge. In Ovid's version of the Narcissus story, for instance, a prophet is asked whether Narcissus will live a long life, and the prophet declares that he will, *so long as he never knows himself* (Ovid, 3.348). As we have seen, Jocasta speaks nearly identical words to Oedipus before she departs to kill herself: "I pray you never know the man you are" (1068). Less than 20 lines later he will know himself in a way that can no longer be denied, and it will ruin him. The self-knowledge that dooms Narcissus is of course the sight of his own reflection in the still pool, and the prophet who warns his mother is none other than Teiresias. The blind seer thus knows that Narcissus will be ruined by seeing himself; the same blind seer knows that Oedipus will lose his sight by knowing himself—or, paradoxically, for seeing that he has never before recognized what he has somehow known about himself. The intricate similarities and differences between Narcissus and Oedipus deserve further examination, to be sure, but the question remains: why have they so often been ignored by psychoanalysts?

Narcissism has posed a challenge to Freudian psychoanalysis since Freud himself first tried to explain it in his 1914 paper, "On Narcissism." His engagement with it then was deep enough to provoke new developments in his metapsychology, developments that even Ernest Jones described as "a disagreeable jolt to the theory of instincts on which psychoanalysis hitherto worked" (cited in Gay, 1988, p. 341). According to some, though, the jolt was not disagreeable enough. The depth of the challenge has been recognized since at least Kohut's (1971) *Analysis of the Self*, and it is this: to which conflict is narcissism a solution? While answers have been tendered—some more orthodox than others—none has been universally accepted. Metapsychological solutions are not the object of this paper, but metapsychological difficulties may help explain the shortcomings of orthodox analytic interpretations of Oedipus. In order to develop a less-than-orthodox interpretation, then, allow me to return us to the historical context of *Oedipus Rex*. Perhaps the perspective afforded by this return will allow us to elicit from the tragedy a fresh answer to the question it poses once again to psychoanalysis.

Politics and Philosophy

The Greek title of Sophocles' play is *Oidipous Tyrannos*—Latinized slightly, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Despite their inescapable popularity, both

the fully Latinized title *Oedipus Rex* and the English *Oedipus the King* are bad translations; neither captures the notion of usurper inherent in the Greek *turannos*. Hewing to this connotation, Knox (1957) argued that the character of Oedipus condenses Sophocles' prophetic vision of fifth-century Athens, the so-called enlightenment it helped advance, and the revolutionary anthropology first articulated by this movement's philosophers.

These usurping philosophers began to seek wisdom without deference to gods, their priests, or ancestral tradition. Of Heraclitus, for instance, it was said that he was nobody's pupil but that he had "inquired of himself and learned everything from himself" (Diogenes Laertius 9.5). This particular autodidact was supposed to have said, "the knowledge of the most famous persons . . . is but opinion" (Diels & Kranz, 1959, 22B28). Some said he did have a teacher, Xenophanes, who introduced the skepticism that would become the posture of many subsequent philosophers. "No man has seen nor will anyone know," he wrote, "the truth about the gods and all the things I speak of" (21B34). The specific target of this skepticism was the polytheism of traditional Greek religion. If oxen and horses and lions had hands with which to draw, he argued, they would fashion gods in the image of oxen and horses and lions (21B15). So likewise, he argued, do we project our own images and call them gods: "Ethiopians say that their gods are flat-nosed and dark, Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired" (21B16). Freud's "The Future of an Illusion" would follow Xenophanes' lead 2,400 years later.

For all his skepticism, though, even Xenophanes believed in a single, omniscient, and omnipotent god; this god was simply beyond human understanding. Piety could still be found in the philosophers of the sixth century. In the fifth, however, the Sophists took this skeptical posture one step further, subverting even Xenophanes' purified monotheism. Protagoras famously claimed that "Man is the measure of all things," making of every pretense to truth a mere projection. Herodotus effected the same end for conventional wisdom in his *Histories* by recounting stories of foreign customs, stories that implicitly subverted the credibility of local tradition. As for god and customary guarantees of divine punishment for wrongdoing, Critias claimed that one wise man invented the divine in order to guarantee obedience to the laws (Diels & Kranz, 1959, 88B25). Such a projection would be especially useful to a *tyrannus*, and Critias became one himself for a short time after Athens had lost the Peloponnesian War.

This war of almost 30 years cost the Athenians dearly. By the end of it, in 404, they had lost not only their empire and their independence,

but more than one generation of young men. But even in 427—the year Sophocles staged the *Oedipus Rex*—the war had already exacted a high price from them, exacerbating the gruesome plague described by Thucydides (2.47–54). Whose fault was it? Blame is no more easily placed for the plague in Athens than for the plague in Thebes. The mythic plague was in a way the fault of Oedipus, for committing his crimes and polluting the city; then again, Apollo was to blame—for sending it in the present, but in the past for dooming Oedipus to those same crimes. Similarly for the real plague in Athens, it was the fault of the gods; but in another way Pericles was to blame.

Pericles was a student of Anaxagoras, who was the first great philosopher to reside in Athens and also the first of all Greek philosophers to be tried for impiety. Among other blasphemies, he called the sun a hot stone (Plato, *Apology* 26d). (As we read in Sophocles, the Sun was considered divine and was indeed associated with Apollo.)¹⁷ Schooled by Anaxagoras, Pericles devised an eminently rational strategy and sold it to the Athenians with irresistible rhetoric: stay within the walls and allow the Spartans to ravage your fields; rely upon your navy alone and think of Athens as an island. But Pericles never foresaw the irrationality that his rational war would unleash. Neither did he foresee the plague. Once it entered through the port, it spread through Athens so quickly that “the bodies of dying men lay upon one another, and . . . the sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there” (Thucydides, 2.52.2–3). So begins the *Oedipus Rex*: “a deadly pestilence is on our town, strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus is emptied of its people while black Death grows rich in groaning and in lamentation” (27–30). Similarities between Oedipus and Pericles, or more broadly between Oedipus and Athens, are legion, and Knox (1957) has documented them thoroughly in *Oedipus at Thebes*.¹⁸

No less rich are the similarities between Oedipus and Socrates, the quintessential philosopher, who more than any other represents the innovations of the fifth century.¹⁹ Like Oedipus, he too receives a puzzling response from Delphi, as Race (2000) has noted.²⁰ Unlike

17 At 765–767 (Fagles [1977]; cf. Grene [1968] 660–661) the Chorus shouts: “Never—no, by the blazing Sun, first god of the heavens.” “Sun” here translates *Halion*, or Helios.

18 See especially p. 77.

19 Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (423) accordingly used Socrates to condense a century of intellectual innovation.

20 Race (2000) claims that Socrates and Oedipus, “(1) both receive an enigmatic oracle from Delphi; (2) both devise logical plans to avoid fulfilling it; (3) both ironically fulfill it in the very act of trying to avoid it; (4) both discover in the process the limitations of human knowledge; and (5) both become *paradeigmata* for their fellow human beings” (pp. 102–3).

Oedipus, *pace* Race, Socrates does not try to avoid fulfilling this response although he does investigate it critically. Instead, he tries to find out what his oracle means in order that he may discharge his duty to Apollo (Plato, *Apology* 21b). By his attempt to do so, however, and by the oddly similar quest for self-knowledge that his attempt becomes, he likewise ends by fulfilling the prophecy in a tragic way—or at least in a way that seems tragic to those, like his friends, who consider death an evil. Socrates, by contrast, sees death as a liberation, the aim of all philosophical training. In the end, then, he willingly administers the hemlock to himself, just as Oedipus willingly administers the brooches (Plato, *Phaedo* 63e–64a). Additionally, both go to places they consider their proper home: Socrates to the afterlife, where he can discuss philosophy with the heroes; Oedipus to Cithaeron, where he can wander alone. Sophocles’ Oedipus thus seems to condense not only Pericles but also Socrates. With Knox (1957), then, we may say that Oedipus represents the political and philosophical facets of the Greek enlightenment.

Initiations

This condensation comes into even clearer focus when we notice how different is the story of Oedipus in Sophocles’ hands from the formulaic legend of other mythic heroes who undergo the rite of initiation into manhood. The stories of Jason, Perseus, and Bellerophon are examples of this “monomyth,” as Goux (1993) calls it. Simplifying the analysis somewhat, we may say that they must leave home, slay a monster, and receive a bride. But their trials are physical, requiring violence. Oedipus, by contrast, solves the Sphinx’s riddle with words alone. The most famous image of his story—incidentally, the very image Freud received on a medallion when a group of his adherents celebrated his fiftieth birthday by commemorating his achievements—has Oedipus seated calmly before her.²¹ Compare this equanimity with the canonical images of these other heroes: Bellerophon stabbing the Chimaera with a lance, Perseus slicing off Medusa’s head with a dagger, or Jason being disgorged by the Dragon he has slain from within. Oedipus utters just one word: Man. Thereupon the Sphinx kills herself, Thebes is free of her deprivations, and, just like the other heroes,

²¹ For an account of the medallion incident, see Rudnytsky (1986), pp. 4–6 and Gay (1988), p. 154.

Oedipus receives a bride for his exploits. She turns out, of course, to be his mother. In *Oedipus, Philosopher*, Goux (1993) argues that Sophocles intentionally perverted the monomyth in order to diagnose the Greek enlightenment. By trading violent deeds for clever words, in short, the hero is never really initiated. As a result, he never leaves his mother and *must* kill his father. So-called oedipal desires are therefore the price to be paid for enlightenment, Greek or otherwise.

When the results of all these studies are taken together—Lear (1999), Knox (1957), Race (2000), Goux (1993) as well as the other textual evidence we have canvassed—Sophocles appears to have fashioned his Oedipus as a complex political, philosophical, and psychological lesson. Just as Oedipus, the autodidact *tyrannus*, suffers for his knowingness, so too will Athens, both tyrant of Greece and school to its proud philosophers, suffer for its own pride. Furthermore, just as Oedipus, the intellectual hero who fights with words, will never really be initiated and escape the curse of his family, so too will the Greeks, who have traded the archaic world of tyrants, warriors, and mythical monsters for a new one of law, democratic debate, and skeptical philosophy, find themselves facing the old tyrants, monsters, and force—only now deep-seated within each person, in a place yet without a name.

Psychoanalysis as Trauma

But what importance does this historical lesson have for psychoanalysts today? To conclude, let me offer a few hypotheses. Oedipus's knowingness stemmed from the trauma of his original abandonment by parents and gods. To find the roots of Athenian knowingness, then, we should diagnose their particular wound. Taking the parallel literally, we should ask, by whom were *they* abandoned? Following our brief history of skepticism, two culprits emerge: by custom and the divine—in short, like Oedipus himself, by their parents and the gods. After philosophical enlightenment, the Greeks were left alone to fashion a brave new world. The arrogance of an Empedocles—who began his celebrated poem “I go about you as an immortal god” (Diels & Kranz, 1959, 31B112)—may therefore be analyzed as a grandiose fantasy, compensation for the pain of abandonment.

There are testimonies that one philosopher of the fifth century, the Sophist Antiphon, offered psychoanalysis and dream interpretation for a fee. “He founded an art to cure griefs,” claims one ancient source,

“analogous to that one which among physicians serves as a basis for the treatment of diseases; in Corinth, near the marketplace, he arranged a place with a sign, in which he announced himself able to treat the grief-stricken by means of discourses.”²² He himself is known to have written that “the mind leads the body into health or disease or anything else” (Diels & Kranz, 1959, 87B2) We can only imagine how he helped the mind accomplish this or what his analyses involved, but we can be sure that the man who claimed that there was no natural justice would have abjured traditional pieties (87B44). Perhaps we should expect a philosopher who had contributed to the climate of disenchantment also to have developed techniques to manage the new anxieties he may very well have helped to produce. In both capacities, he anticipated Freud. As did Plato. After all, the *Republic* first develops a tripartite model of the soul and places the monsters of mythology where they still remain: in the lowest of the three parts. “It doesn’t shrink from trying to have sex with a mother,” Plato writes, “it will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat” (*Republic* 9.572c–d). His philosophy and the ascetic practices it recommended were the techniques he developed to tame this inner monster. Philosophy itself thus became the Greek enlightenment’s rite of initiation.

We have inherited this philosophy whether we would wish to or not, even whether we know it or not. Like a Delphic prophecy, then, this philosophy, our philosophy, cannot be escaped. Among its many legacies for us are the esteem of doubt over deference, theories over stories, inanimate over animate causes, and a cosmos ordered according to scientific laws over one ruled by divine caprice. Like Xenophanes and his successors, we cannot help but recognize our projections as such. If we fail, psychoanalysis is ready to disabuse us: spirits are really inner objects, the self is but an assemblage of identifications, and romantic love is only a transference. Fortunately, this brainchild of Plato also helps us to manage the disenchantment it encourages, to tame the monsters it now locates within the soul. But how successful can it be?

Sophoclean Hope?

Looking to the text of *Oedipus Rex* alone, we seem to receive a lesson that psychoanalysis has ignored to the letter: simultaneously disenchanting the world and hoping that initiation can be achieved through

²² Pseudo-Plutarch (*Vitae Decem Oratorum*, I, 18), cited in Lain-Entralgo (1970), p. 97–98.

talk will only make matters worse. Behold Oedipus. But we should no more look just to the text of this one play than did Sophocles and the Athenians who viewed his tragedies at the Greater Dionysia. By widening our view first to this festival and then to the sequel Sophocles would not live to see performed there, we can distinguish two reasons for some hope.

The Athenians saw not a character alone but a whole performance in the context of a whole festival, a religious festival in honor of Dionysus. Oedipus made the mistake of seeking self-knowledge alone; Sophocles offered it to the Athenians collectively. If there is hope for analysis in Sophocles' first prophecy, it may be found here—not on the page, but in the communal rite of pity and fear (Aristotle, *Politics* 1341b32ff). While apparently an individual practice—some critics would say a solipsistic one—psychoanalysis is nonetheless communal: a small community of two, to be sure, but a community nonetheless. Like Oedipus, Freud analyzed himself. Ever since, though, the analysand and the analyst participate in the analysis together. If psychoanalysts are to decide for themselves whether this community is enough to manage the anxiety of disenchantment and achieve modern initiation, all without paying the price of Oedipus, they should revisit this play.

For Sophocles, however, such reflection seems to have been only the beginning. In the final year of his life, he wrote a sequel to *Oedipus Rex*, a play neglected by many philologists, not to mention most analysts: *Oedipus at Colonus*.²³ Whereas Oedipus brashly entered the stage of the earlier play, styling himself a savior, and left the same stage blind but no less jealous of his independence, he enters the later play led by his daughter, reminding even her, “We’re outsiders. We need guidance” (12–14). Whereas the younger Oedipus was confident of his knowledge, sought to escape the oracle by applying it, and took responsibility for his crimes when he could not, the older Oedipus excuses his past many times by claiming ignorance of facts and impotence before fate. Of Laius, he protests, “I never knew who he was” (548); of his fate, “the gods know I had no choice” (523). Whereas once he was irreverent, now he is pious—even scrupulous. Arriving in a sacred glade, home to unfamiliar gods, Oedipus urges a local, “tell me their names so I may pray to them” (42). Finally, whereas he once advanced his intellect as remedy to Thebes’s ills, he now makes an unusual offer to protect Colonus. “I have a gift to give you,” he says vatically, “my own broken body—not much to look at, but appearances can deceive, and it has

²³ All citations of this play are taken from the translation by Peter Meineck (Meineck & Woodruff, 2003).

the power to bring you great good” (576–579). Thus putting humility before arrogance, destiny before choice, and his body before his mind, Oedipus receives the summons of a god and disappears (1627–1629).

Sophocles himself was a native of Colonus, not far from Athens. After a lifetime in Athens, absorbing the innovations of the Greek enlightenment, he returns in his final play to his childhood home. The grave he has Oedipus leave there to protect the inhabitants of Colonus may therefore represent his own. Not a hero but a tragedian, his apotropaic legacy is not a tombstone but his plays. Heeding one of them, and despairing, we ought to investigate its sequel if we are to understand Sophocles’ final word and find in it any hope. “We cannot choose between two Oedipus figures,” advises Goux (1993), “the philosopher-king of Thebes and the dispossessed saint of Colonus” (pp. 206–207). Following him, we must depart from Freud, who seems nowhere to have mentioned Colonus. Studying the philosopher-king alone, his assessment of Oedipus remained limited, as limited as were his roughly contemporaneous studies of two other interrupted cases: Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.) and Ida Bauer (Dora). If we are to achieve a fuller understanding of Sophocles’ Oedipus, whether as psychoanalysts or as philologists, we must consider his character in all its phases and postures: the old man alongside the young, the suppliant alongside the king, the saint alongside the sinner. “We must think them through together, as the tension that constitutes the Occidental subject in its tragic dimension” (pp. 206–207).

Whatever does this mean? Let us approach this strange conclusion by another route, summarizing our argument before seeking again some small glimmer of hope in this dark story. Using the work of several scholars, we saw how Sophocles seems to have used the Oedipus of *Oedipus Rex* to represent the pitfalls of the Greek enlightenment: not just arrogant knowingness, the pretentious effort to make everything clear, but also the disenchantment of the world through talk. If the story of Oedipus remains to psychoanalysis what it seems to have been for Freud—a paradigmatic story, a prophetic myth—it dooms analysis to tragedy. The cost of the self-knowledge that is sought in psychoanalysis, in other words, would appear to be tragic if it is sought in the manner of Oedipus the king. Demanding complete transparency, this Oedipus is analogous to the Freudian demand to make the unconscious conscious, the irrational rational.

But if the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex* is somehow redeemed by the events of *Oedipus at Colonus* and if we believe that Sophocles had wider lessons for all who seek self-knowledge, its final cost must be tallied against the peculiar triumph of Oedipus the suppliant. In his

resignation to fate, his humility before ancestral traditions, and the gift of his body rather than the deductions of his imperious reason, this Oedipus could be analogous to a more deferent attitude to the unconscious and irrational. Taking seriously our inability to fathom the unconscious in the rational terms of conscious life, such an attitude not only respects the inherent limits of reason, it goes so far as to value the unfathomable guidance of its internal other. Wisdom, Sophocles could be saying to us, is not to be found in the life of pure reason, the fantasy of the totally analyzed analyst, but instead in a compromise—brokered uniquely by each person in consultation with another—between psychoanalytic inquiries, the recognition of their limits, and a wary esteem for what must always remain beyond them.

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