

Walter Kaufmann

THE RIDDLE OF  
*OEDIPUS*:  
TRAGEDY AND PHILOSOPHY

THE IDEA OF THE Arnold Isenberg Memorial Lectures is beautiful. As soon as I was invited to participate in the first year's series, I thought of "Tragedy and Philosophy" as a singularly appropriate title for my contribution.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Prentice-Hall has published *Aesthetic Theories*, edited by Karl Aschenbrenner and Arnold Isenberg; and this volume includes selections from both Aristotle's *Poetics* and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Tragedy is the art on which great philosophers have written most: besides Aristotle and Nietzsche, also Plato, Hume, and Schopenhauer—and more recently, Max Scheler, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger. I shall not go out of my way to link my ideas to those of the last three men, or even to Nietzsche's, although this lecture has been lumped with some

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1. In 1962/63 I was asked to lecture on "Literature and Philosophy" at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, devoted most of my course to Greek tragedy, and decided to work up my ideas into a book. Invited to give an Isenberg Memorial Lecture, I decided to make use of some of this material. My ideas are developed much more fully in my *Tragedy*, published by Doubleday and Company, Copyright © 1968 by Walter Kaufmann.

As far as it is convenient, references are given in the text, to hold down the number of the footnotes. In the case of modern books, Arabic figures refer to pages; in the case of ancient poetry, to lines.

others under the general heading of "Phenomenology and Existentialism." Let it suffice that I share common concerns with some phenomenologists and existentialists—and with Arnold Isenberg.

My title, "The Riddle of *Oedipus*," is ambiguous. Although I shall venture a suggestion about the riddle of the Sphinx, I shall concentrate on the riddle posed by Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*: I shall try to make a contribution to the interpretation of this tragedy—and not only of *this* tragedy. It is a commonplace—and what is more, it is also true—that Aristotle's uniquely influential theory of tragedy is based pre-eminently on his reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*; and I shall contest this reading and propose a different reading of the play and a more philosophical approach to literature, using *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a paradigm case.

## 1.

Aristotle's classical interpretation of the play is immensely suggestive. Let us first consider a few passages in his *Poetics* in which *Oedipus* is not mentioned explicitly—passages in which we nevertheless encounter generalizations about tragedy that appear to be based on this play.

Aristotle distinguishes six formative elements of tragedy—plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle—and goes on to say, in Chapter 6, that the plot is in a sense more important than the characters, because the characters are required by the action, not vice versa. So far, his observation seems true of the extant tragedies of both Aeschylus and Sophocles, not merely of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, though it seems notably inapplicable to, say, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The perennial fascination of *Prometheus* and the *Oresteia*, *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Philoctetes* and *Electra* is due to what Aristotle calls their plots. (The Greek word he uses is *mythos*,

and it may be tempting to insist on the truth of his statement, even if it is taken to refer to the myths rather than the plots. But I shall try to show later on that this is a common error of considerable significance.) The unique fascination of *Hamlet*, on the other hand, is due largely to the character of the hero, much less to Shakespeare's plot. Shakespeare's characters, like Dostoevsky's, have an inveterate tendency to reach out far beyond the plot and its immediate requirements: they become interesting as individuals. They say things not required by the story line, and our attitudes toward them are shaped much more by speeches of that sort than by the central action—especially in *Hamlet*, but also in *Macbeth*. This is one of the most striking differences between Shakespeare on the one hand and Aeschylus and Sophocles on the other.

When Aristotle goes on, however, still in Chapter 6, to say that the plot works through reversals and recognitions, this is no longer a sound generalization about Aeschylus and Sophocles but probably suggested mainly by his admiration for *Oedipus Tyrannus*. To mention only two of the very greatest of Greek tragedies to which the statement does not apply, there are Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus*.

In the next chapter, Aristotle says that tragedies should be of "such length as will allow a sequence of events to result in a change from bad to good fortune or from good fortune to bad in accordance with what is probable or inevitable."<sup>2</sup> Again, Aeschylus' *Persians* and *Prometheus* do not support this suggestion, while *Oedipus Tyrannus* may be considered a, if not the, paradigm case.

In Chapter 8 Aristotle demands a tight unity of the plot.

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2. In quotations from Aristotle's *Poetics* I have used the annotated translation by G. M. A. Grube: Aristotle, *On Poetry and Style*, The Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, New York 1958. Scholars generally cite Aristotle by the traditional page numbers; but the chapter numbers furnished in the text above are also the same in all editions and less unwieldy.

Most of the other translations are my own, but I have consulted most of the standard translations.

*Oedipus Tyrannus* is the most extreme example, if not the only extant tragedy of Aeschylus or Sophocles, supporting it. A devoted admirer of Aeschylus could hardly have thought of any such demand, nor could any of Sophocles' other six tragedies have prompted it, except insofar as one might consider them inferior to *Oedipus Tyrannus* in this respect.

Finally, in Chapter 9 Aristotle stipulates that the plot should inspire pity and fear, and that this is "best achieved when the events are unexpectedly interconnected." Once more, there is no such unexpected interconnection in *The Persians*, in *Agamemnon*, in *Prometheus*; and there is little of it in some of Sophocles' other plays.

These passages in Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, in which *Oedipus* is not mentioned expressly, gain considerable weight when we find how often Aristotle mentions *Oedipus Tyrannus*, always approvingly and usually as a paradigm case. To this end, let us turn to Chapters 11 to 16.

## 2.

In the case of Chapter 11 of the *Poetics*, it will suffice to quote two sentences from Aristotle's discussion of reversal (*peripeteia*): "So in the *Oedipus* the man comes to cheer Oedipus and to rid him of his fear concerning his mother; then, by showing him who he is, he does the opposite. . . . The finest kind of recognition is accompanied by simultaneous reversals, as in the *Oedipus*."

None of Aristotle's remarks about Oedipus are more interesting than those in Chapter 13, where the fateful notion of the tragic flaw or tragic error of judgment—*hamartia*, in Greek—is introduced. Aristotle considers four possible types of plots for tragedies.

*First*, we might be shown good persons going from happiness to misfortune; but this would never do, because it would

simply be shocking. This is one of the points in the *Poetics* at which Aristotle's sensibility may seem shocking to us. But it is well to remember that Nahum Tate (1652-1715), who was an English poet laureate, rewrote the ending of *King Lear* in 1687 because Cordelia's death was widely felt to be intolerable: in his version Cordelia married Edgar. And Dr. Johnson approved heartily. We can also imagine a sensibility that—leaning on Aristotle, as we shall soon see—would not rewrite the play but find the ending tolerable only inasmuch as poor Cordelia was after all far from innocent, considering that her unrelenting stubbornness had brought about the tragic suffering of her father and, indirectly, her own death. But some of us find part of the greatness of this tragedy in its portrayal of a world in which the good may suffer hideously. And we shall see that in this respect Sophocles is at one with Shakespeare.

The *second* type of plot that Aristotle mentions briefly shows wicked persons who move from misfortune to happiness. Of this Aristotle says that it is the least tragic of all.

In the *third* type, we see a very bad person decline from happiness to misfortune. This, too, is far from tragic, Aristotle says, because we find it satisfying. In none of these three cases do we feel the two emotions that are part of Aristotle's definition of tragedy: pity and fear.

On the *fourth* type, let us quote his very words: "We are left with a character in between the other two; a man who is neither outstanding in virtue and righteousness, nor is it through wickedness and vice that he falls into misfortune, but through some *hamartia*.<sup>3</sup> He should also be famous or prosperous, like Oedipus. . ."

As I understand Aristotle, the fourth type, characterized by the celebrated tragic flaw or error of judgment, is reached

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3. Grube has "flaw" at this point, as well as a footnote explaining that "a moral or intellectual weakness" is meant. He also discusses the concept on xxivf. and 10. To discuss the literature on *hamartia* at this point would lead us much too far afield.

by him at the crossroads of two lines of thought—and certainly not inductively, through a consideration of the masterpieces of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The first line of thought is *a priori*: there are said to be four possibilities; three are excluded, one by one; only the fourth remains. At no point does any consideration of various tragedies and their plots intervene. But Aristotle's thinking is by no means utterly abstract; he does not argue only through a process of exclusion, mindless of all evidence: he has known all along what model perfect tragedies have to approximate; and his ideal is, as usual, not laid up in the heavens but found in experience as the end of a development—in this case, Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Grammatically, to be sure, it would be possible that the character of the fourth or ideal type must be like Oedipus only by being famous or prosperous; but in context there can be no doubt that the whole description of this type reveals Aristotle's notion of King Oedipus. Before contesting this conception of the Sophoclean hero, let us still consider briefly three more passages from the *Poetics*.

In Chapter 14 we are told that the plot should inspire fear and pity, even if we do not see the play: "The story of Oedipus has this effect." And we might add: like few, if any, other tragic plots. But Aristotle does not tell us *why* it does. This is the riddle to whose solution I hope to contribute in the last part of this lecture.

In Chapter 15 Aristotle says that anything supernatural and inexplicable "should be outside the actual play, as in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles." And in Chapter 16 he remarks that "the best recognition" is "caused by probable means, as in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles. . ." It is plain that Aristotle means the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and not *Oedipus at Colonus* when he speaks of the *Oedipus* of Sophocles, and we shall follow his example from now on and simply speak of *Oedipus* when referring to the former play.

In sum, Aristotle's discussion concentrates very heavily on

the plot; particularly on the way in which the transition from prosperity to misfortune, or from misfortune to prosperity, is brought about. He is interested in the hero only incidentally, as the person who makes this transition in the course of the play.

3.

There is another reading of the play that is more popular than Aristotle's classical conception of *Oedipus* as the tragedy of "a man who neither is outstanding in virtue and righteousness" nor falls into misfortune "through wickedness and vice," but one who comes to a tragic end through a tragic flaw or error in judgment. The most widely accepted interpretation is that the play is a tragedy of fate. It is seen as a futile struggle to escape ineluctable destiny.

Obviously, there is some truth in this view; but it fails to distinguish between the Oedipus myth and Sophocles' plot, as we shall see later in detail. Moreover, if this really were the central theme of the play it would be difficult, if not impossible, to account for its tremendous impact from ancient to modern times, from Aristotle to Freud. After all, few if any readers or play-goers could have had any comparable experience of fate; and weird, extraordinary, far-fetched tales of things that are said to have happened once in dim antiquity to legendary people do not affect intelligent men and women the way this tragedy does.

It is the surpassing merit of Freud's interpretation of *Oedipus*, if we consider his comments merely as a contribution to literary criticism, that he brought out like no one before him how the tremendous impact of the story is connected with the way in which Oedipus is somehow representative of all men, including ourselves. *Mea res agitur*.

Interpreters have generally failed to distinguish this insight

from the particular psychoanalytical exegesis offered by Freud. As a result, the classicists have failed to notice how Freud has gone beyond both Aristotle and the vulgar conception of the play as a tragedy of fate, advancing our understanding of *Oedipus* more than anyone else.

Freud's interpretation is stated briefly in the very first passage in which the Oedipus complex is explained by him—in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, October 15, 1897. A little more than two years before the publication of the first and greatest of his major works, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes his friend:

"The state of being in love with the mother and jealous of the father I have found in my case, too, and now consider this a universal phenomenon of early childhood . . . If that is so, one can understand the gripping power of *King Oedipus*, in spite of all the objections that the understanding raises against the assumption of fate—and one also understands why the drama of fate in later periods had to prove such a wretched failure. Against every arbitrary compulsion in an individual case our feelings rebel; but the Greek myth seizes upon a compulsion that everybody recognizes because he has sensed its existence in himself. Every member of the audience has once been potentially and in phantasy such an *Oedipus*; and confronted with the fulfilment of the dream in reality, everybody recoils in horror with the full charge of the repression that separates his infantile from his present state."<sup>4</sup>

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the same point is made in almost the same words, at slightly greater length. I shall quote this version only in part:<sup>5</sup> "If *King Oedipus* moves modern man as deeply as the contemporary Greeks, the solution must

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4. Freud, *Aus den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse: Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess, Abhandlungen und Notizen aus den Jahren 1887–1902*, Imago Publishing Co., London 1950.

5. *Die Traumdeutung*, Franz Deuticke, Leipzig und Wien 1900, 181f. *Gesammelte Werke*, II/III, Imago, London 1942, 269.



surely be that the effect of the Greek tragedy does not rest on the opposition of fate and human will,<sup>6</sup> but must be sought in the specific character of the material in which this opposition is demonstrated. . . . His fate grips us only because it might have become ours as well, because the oracle before our birth pronounced the same curse over us as over him. Perhaps all of us were destined to direct our first sexual stirrings toward our mothers and the first hatred and violent wishes against our fathers. . . ."

In the original edition of 1900, the discussion of *Oedipus* is immediately followed by one of the most remarkable footnotes in world literature. Here Freud shows in less than a page how his interpretation of *Oedipus* also illuminates *Hamlet*. It took eight years to sell the six hundred copies of the first edition of *Die Traumdeutung*, but eventually the book went through eight editions in Freud's lifetime.<sup>7</sup> In the later editions, this footnote is moved into the text, and followed by a new footnote which calls attention to the book in which Ernest Jones had meanwhile elaborated Freud's original note.

We shall take leave of Freud by quoting the end of the original note, preserved verbatim in the body of the text in the later editions: "Just as, incidentally, all neurotic symptoms—just as even dreams are capable of overinterpretation, and indeed demand nothing less than this before they can be fully understood, thus every genuine poetic creation, too, has pre-

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6. Bernard Knox's *Oedipus at Thebes*, Yale University Press 1957, is one of the best modern studies of the play; and on the back cover of the revised paperback edition of 1966 the book is praised for being "aware of Freud." *The Interpretation of Dreams* is indeed quoted at length on p. 4—in an old, notoriously unreliable, translation. As a result, Knox takes Freud for a champion of the view he in fact attacked—that "the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a 'tragedy of fate,' [and] the hero's will is not free" (5)—in spite of the sentence to which the present note refers. Although even the translation he quotes got the meaning of *this* sentence right, Professor Knox was derailed by some mistranslations earlier on. Although he makes a point of the fact that Freud's "discussion of the *Oedipus* does not deserve the strictures which many classical scholars have wasted on it" (197), his own polemic also rests on a misunderstanding.

7. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, I, Basic Books, New York 1953, 360.

sumably issued from more than one motive and more than one stimulus in the poet's soul and permits more than one interpretation."

Even if Freud's footnote consisted solely of this remark, it would still be one of the most profound, suggestive, and enlightening footnotes of all time. If it should strike some readers as mere common sense and obvious, they would do well to keep in mind two striking facts. First, most popular versions of Freud leave this insight entirely out of account—as if he had thought that, for example, he had furnished *the* interpretation of *Hamlet*. But the footnote concludes: "What I have attempted here is merely an interpretation of the deepest layer of impulses in the soul of the creative poet." And secondly the attempts at literary criticism by Freud's most popular epigone, Erich Fromm, suffer greatly from the absence of this insight. Yet they are meant to be, and they are very widely considered, more commonsensical and less paradoxical than Freud's interpretations.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.

The time has come to outline my own approach. Aristotle largely omits consideration of the writer's conscious intent; also of his historical context—either as a clue to his intent or as a subject whose investigation might illuminate a tragedy. This is not said in a carping spirit: rather the *Poetics* is so interesting and has been so vastly influential, in spite of its great brevity, that it is tempting to get lost in it, as if it were impossible to go beyond it. Outside the Bible, there are not many books of well under forty pages that have given rise to such a huge secondary literature and to such intricate disputes about the interpretation of the author's meaning in sentence

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8. Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, Rinehart, New York 1951. For more detailed discussion see my *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, Harper, New York 1958; Doubleday Anchor Books 1961; section 77.

after sentence. When one considers that the impact of the book is largely due to the first sixteen chapters, while the discussion of diction in the last half is too closely tied to Greek words to merit comparable interest, one's admiration for the economy of a great genius who was able to say so much in so small a space—literally, less than twenty pages—is quite apt to lead one into reverend exegesis.

At this point it is well to recall that there is one whole dimension that Aristotle neglects: the writer's relation to his work. Besides the poet's conscious intent and the historical context of the work, we may add, thirdly, its biographical context. Thus nineteenth-century critics of Goethe's work, for example, paid attention not only to historical context but also to supposedly relevant incidents in his life and—taught by Goethe himself—to the history of his development (*Entwicklungsgeschichte*, in German). Goethe showed how his works could be illuminated by being considered in relation to each other, in their historical context and biographical sequence; and under his influence and that of Hegel, such developmental studies came to dominate the criticism of the nineteenth century. Another approach, developed in the twentieth century under Freud's influence, the psychological analysis of the writer and his works, may be assimilated under the same heading: biographical context.

There is yet another way of considering the artist's relation to his work, almost as alien to most criticism of the nineteenth and even the twentieth century as it is to Aristotle: we may choose to pay particular attention to an artist's experience of life.<sup>9</sup>

"Experience of life" is perhaps not self-explanatory. Many professors of literature do not scruple to speak of the writer's or artist's "philosophy." But this use of the word "philosophy"

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9. See, e.g., my *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Beacon, Boston 1959; rev. ed., Doubleday Anchor Books 1960; especially Chapter 5 on Goethe and Chapters 12 and 13 on Nietzsche and Rilke.

is so remote from what most English-speaking philosophers today consider philosophy, and do when they "do philosophy," that it seems better to use another term. In another respect as well, "philosophy" would be more misleading than "experience of life": the former term is much too intellectual and bound to suggest that something systematic or at any rate conscious and deliberate is meant. But I do not have in mind a "philosophy" that an artist or writer has in the first place, and could express in straightforward, non-artistic propositions if he chose to, but elects instead to express indirectly in his work.

For all that, there is a sense in which Aristotle's approach to tragedy is not "philosophical" enough. Of his six formative elements—plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle—thought sounds as if it were relatively most philosophical; but what Aristotle means by thought is, as he plainly says, the thoughts the characters voice in their speeches. As it happens, the thoughts expressed in this way in some of the extant Greek tragedies are often of far greater philosophic interest than the speeches in most later dramas: *Antigone* and many of Euripides' plays come to mind as examples—but hardly *Oedipus*. Yet there is a sense in which *Oedipus* is philosophically very interesting.

## 5.

To get at the poet's experience of life, we must distinguish—as most discussions of *Oedipus*, for example, do not—between the myth and the poet's handling of it. In Shakespeare's case it is palpable that the stories he used are one thing and what he did with them quite another. The same point can be made more systematically in the case of the Orestes story: we can tell a great deal about the different experiences of life encountered in Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Sartre by contrasting their handling of the same myth. Even

more important is the fact that we cannot fully understand the works of the later poets unless we note their departures from earlier treatments. We cannot simply take Aeschylus' version for "the myth"; we must note how his story differs from Homer's—and Euripides' from both—and what variations Sophocles brings in—and how Sartre changes the old story. In the process, we realize how every one of these writers experienced life differently.<sup>10</sup>

In both Orestes' case and Oedipus' there is enough literary material for a bulky tome or a whole year's course in comparative literature. At least twelve Greek poets besides Sophocles wrote Oedipus tragedies that have not survived.<sup>11</sup> These twelve include Aeschylus, of whose Oedipus trilogy only the third play, *Seven Against Thebes*, survives (his *Laius*, his *Oedipus*, and his satyr play, *The Sphinx*, are lost), Euripides, and Meletus, one of Socrates' accusers. Among the Romans, Seneca wrote an Oedipus tragedy, and so did Julius Caesar,<sup>12</sup> who is also said to have dreamt that he had intercourse with his mother.<sup>13</sup> Among the French, Corneille returned to this theme (1659) soon after his own father's death; and at the age of 19, Voltaire wrote his first tragedy, on Oedipus (1718): here Jocasta never *loved* either Laius or Oedipus but only—a French touch—a third man, Philoctetes, and she was not happy with Oedipus. Later authors of Oedipus plays include Dryden and Lee and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. These facts may help to dislodge the stubborn presumption that Sophocles' Oedipus simply *is* Oedipus, that his plot is *the* plot.

It is of crucial importance methodologically to compare

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10. See my article on "Nietzsche Between Homer and Sartre: Five Treatments of the Orestes Story," in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 67, 1961, 50-73.

11. For their names see Otto Rank, *Das Inzest-Motiv in Dichtung und Sage*, Franz Deuticke, Leipzig und Wien 1912, 235. This book is much less well known in the English-speaking world than Ernest Jones' *Hamlet and Oedipus*, but its development and applications of Freud's ideas are incomparably more interesting.

12. Suetonius' *Life of Julius Caesar*, chapter 56.

13. *Ibid.*, chapter 7.

the poet's plot with *previous* treatments of the same material in order to discover, if possible, his originality, his innovations, and his own distinctive accents. In the case of Sophocles' *Oedipus* we shall have to be satisfied with a few major points.

## 6.

The earliest versions of the Oedipus story known to us are found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and they differ markedly from Sophocles' tale. The fuller account comprises ten lines in the eleventh canto of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus describes his descent into the netherworld:

*Then I saw Oedipus' mother, the beautiful Epicaste,  
whose great deed, committed unwittingly, it was to marry  
her own son who, having slain his own father, married  
her; and straightway the gods made it known among men.  
But he remained in dearest Thebes and ruled the Cadmeans,  
suffering sorrows in line with the deadly designs of the gods;  
while she descended beyond the strong bolted gates of Hades,  
plunging down in a noose from a lofty rafter,  
overpowered by grief; but for him she left infinite sufferings,  
forged by a mother's Furies (271-80).*

Here the true identity of Oedipus became known "straightway"<sup>14</sup> after his marriage, and there were presumably no children; and while Jocasta (here called Episcate) hanged herself, as in Sophocles' later version, Oedipus remained king of Thebes, a man of sorrows.

The *Iliad* adds one further touch. In the twenty-third canto, where the funeral games are described, one of the com-

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14. On this point, that "straightway" is meant (as in the version in the Loeb Classical Library, which I have consulted along with several other translations in making my own), see W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, Teubner, Leipzig 1897-1902, the long article on "Oedipus," 701.

petitors is identified as the son of a man "who had come to Thebes for Oedipus' funeral, when he had fallen, and there had bested all the Cadmeans" (679–80). The implication is clear: after having reigned in Thebes for years, Oedipus eventually fell in battle and had a great funeral in Thebes, with games comparable to those described in the *Iliad* for Patroclus.

In Hesiod's extant works, the name of Oedipus occurs but once, in passing;<sup>15</sup> but among the fragments of the so-called "Catalogues of Women" we find three almost identical passages to the effect that "Hesiod says that when Oedipus had died at Thebes, Argeia, the daughter of Adrastus, came with others to the funeral of Oedipus."<sup>16</sup> All this is a far cry both from the conclusion of *Oedipus Tyrannus* and from *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Of the lost cyclic epics of the Greeks, the *Thebais* and *Oedipodia*, little is known. But in the latter it was Oedipus' second wife, Euryganeia, that became the mother of his children.<sup>17</sup> While this is consistent with Homer, the difference with Sophocles is striking. And in both epics, as also in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, Oedipus merely retired in the end and did not go into exile.

Perhaps a few words that have survived as a quotation from the *Oedipodia* will go further than any lengthy argument toward exploding the common notion that Sophocles' story is *the* story, and that no distinction needs to be made between his plots and the ancient myths: the Sphinx "killed Haimon, the

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15. *Works and Days*, 163: "at seven-gated Thebes, when they fought for the flocks of Oedipus." The reference might be to the battle in which, according to the *Iliad*, Oedipus fell.

16. Fragment 24 in Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, with an English translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, rev. ed. 1936, 172f.; cf. fragments 99A and 99. Adrastus is said to have been the only one of the "Seven Against Thebes" to have survived the attack on the city, and Argeia was Polyneices' wife.

17. Pausanias, IX.5.10: "Judging by Homer, I do not believe that Oedipus had children by Jocasta: his sons were born by Euryganeia, as the writer of the epic called *The Oedipodia* clearly shows" (*ibid.*, 482f.). See note 21 below for further discussion.

dear son of blameless Creon.”<sup>18</sup> This should convince all who know Sophocles’ *Antigone* how much freedom the poet enjoyed in using ancient traditions.

In Pindar we find a passing reference to “the wisdom of Oedipus”<sup>19</sup> as well as a passage about fate in which Oedipus is cited, though not by name, as an example:

*His fated son encountered Laius  
and slew him, fulfilling the word  
given long before at Pytho.*<sup>20</sup>

Here we approximate the popular version of the story with its emphasis on fate.

Of Aeschylus’ Oedipus trilogy we know only the third play, in which the theme of hereditary guilt is stressed: the sons pay for their father’s sins, and there are stories of Laius’ guilt. This appears to have been the thread that ran through the whole trilogy. And it *may* have been in Aeschylus that Oedipus’ children were for the first time traced to his incest with his mother.<sup>21</sup>

Euripides’ *Oedipus* has been lost, but in a fragment that has survived Oedipus is blinded by Laius’ servants, not by himself. In his *Phoenician Women* the story is summarized once more in Jocasta’s prologue (10ff.), and Oedipus’ speech

18. Schol. on Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*, 1750; *ibid.*, 482f.

19. *Pythian Odes*, IV, 263.

20. *Olympian Odes*, II, 38–40.

21. Roscher, *op. cit.*, 727, thinks so and cites *Seven Against Thebes*, 906 and 1015f.; see also 753f. Carl Robert, *Oedipus: Geschichte eines poetischen Stoffs im griechischen Altertum*, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, Berlin 1915, I, 110f., argues that Euryganeia was not Oedipus’ second wife but merely another name for Epicaste-Jocasta. In view of Pausanias’ statement (see note 17 above) and Robert’s admission that in the *Thebais* and *Oedipodia* Euryganeia apparently lived to see the mutual slaying of her sons (180f.), his argument seems unconvincing. R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments with Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translations in English Prose*, in the volume *The Oedipus Tyrannus*, Cambridge: At The University Press, 3rd ed., 1893, xv, ascribes “the earliest known version which ascribes issue to the marriage of Iocasta with Oedipus” to Pherecydes of Leros—who flourished about 456, a little later than Aeschylus. *Ibid.*, xvi: “Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides agree in a trait which does not belong to any extant version before theirs. Iocasta, not Euryganeia, is the mother of Eteocles and Polyneices, Antigone and Ismene.”



near the end of the play adds a heavy emphasis on fate (1595 and 1608–14). But this play is later than Sophocles' *Oedipus*, and the surviving version embodies some fourth-century additions.

These comparisons permit us to grasp the tremendous originality of Sophocles' treatment. He might have moved the ineluctability of fate into the center of his plot, but he did not. Compressing the events of a lifetime into a few hours, he makes of Oedipus a seeker for the truth; and the conflicts in his tragedy are not the obvious ones but rather those between Oedipus who demands the truth and those who seem to him to thwart his search. Sophocles' Oedipus emerges as a magnificent, consistent, and fascinating character who is not taken over from the myths of the past but fashioned by the poet's genius.

The problem Sophocles moves into the center is how the truth about Oedipus finally came out. This is a point on which Homer and Pindar, Aeschylus and Euripides had said nothing; and the version in the *Oedipodia* was altogether different from Sophocles'.<sup>22</sup> Robert (62) surmises that the cruel piercing of the feet of Oedipus, when he was exposed, served no function whatever, except to provide, as it turned out, a sign of recognition: Oedipus must have arrived in Thebes with his feet and ankles covered, and Jocasta must have recognized him during one of the first nights. Robert believes that this was assumed in Homer; but few readers of the *Odyssey* would infer that it was Jocasta who recognized Oedipus. And the most important function of the piercing was surely to provide an explanation for Oedipus' name which, like his cult, antedated the story postulated by Robert. While "Swell-foot" is probably the right etymology, an altogether different origin of the name is very possible: one may think of the male organ—or of Immanuel Velikovsky's ingenious explanation in *Oedipus and Akhnaton: Myth and History* (1960), 55ff.

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22. Roscher, *op. cit.*, 728.

In the many plays on the name in Sophocles' *Oedipus*,<sup>23</sup> *oideō* (swell) does not figure, but *oida* (know) does, again and again. While "Know-foot" is probably the wrong etymology, the story that Oedipus guessed the riddle of the Sphinx and knew the feet probably represents another attempt to explain his name. The riddle may have been old, but its injection into Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx, no less than the piercing of the feet, dates, if I am right, from the time after Homer.<sup>24</sup> If so, two of the best known features of the myth were introduced relatively late to explain the name "Oedipus." And one of the motives for the post-Homeric blinding of Oedipus was probably to conform him to the riddle: we see him on two feet, we are reminded of the helpless babe that could not yet walk on two feet, and now we also behold him leaning on a staff—on three feet, as the riddle put it.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus*, of course, all the motifs he adopts from the myths are sublimated and spiritualized. And Sophocles' version of the recognition is evidently entirely original with him.

I should like to add one personal observation before attempting an interpretation. I have seen this play performed a number of times: in a very small theater in Princeton, done mainly by students; in Heidelberg, by professionals; in a large theater in Princeton; a filmed performance in the Yeats translation, with masks; in Warsaw, with Stravinsky's music; and in Vienna, in the Hölderlin translation, with music by Carl Orff. This last performance was incomparably the best; but in any version, however much there was that seemed objectionable and imperfect in the staging or acting, the impact of the

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23. See Knox, *op. cit.*, 182-84 and 264. But these are hardly, as he puts it, "puns"; for there is nothing funny about them; they are terrifying.

24. The earliest literary reference to the Sphinx is encountered in Hesiod's *Theogony*, 326, where Oedipus is not mentioned any more than the riddle. Roscher, *op. cit.*, 715, notes that several scholars have pointed out that Herodotus evidently did not yet know of any connection between the Sphinx and the Oedipus myth; and Robert, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2, argues that in the original version of the myth Oedipus killed the Sphinx without first guessing any riddle.

Sophoclean tragedy was overwhelming. At a personal level, then, the riddle of *Oedipus* means for me at least in part the question of why this tragedy should move me so incomparably. There was a time when I considered the *Antigone* a greater play and liked it better, wondering if *Oedipus* had not perhaps been overrated under Aristotle's influence. More and more, however, my *experience* of the play led me to feel that it was truly *non plus ultra*, the *Antigone* being one of the few tragedies of all time that belong in the same class, along with *Agamemnon* and the best of Shakespeare. What follows may be understood as an attempt to spell out why this tragedy is so effective.

## 7.

I want to call your attention to five central themes in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, without any claim that there are only five. They add up to a sketch of Sophocles' experience of life. Toward that end they cannot be based on *Oedipus* alone. But to be sure that what I find in *Oedipus* is actually there instead of being merely a projection of the critic's own experience and ideas, one must ask in any case what other evidence there is that Sophocles himself felt as one thinks he did. Toward that end, too, we must read *Oedipus* against the background of the poet's other plays.

This does not mean that *Oedipus* must be approached as part of a trilogy: Sophocles did not write trilogies in the sense in which the *Oresteia* is a trilogy. While Aeschylus' trilogies often approximate a play in three acts, Sophocles merely offered three tragedies, one after the other—and both poets ended with a satyr play. But the plays Sophocles offered together did not form a trilogy in the popular sense. Moreover, the *Antigone* was first performed about 442 B.C., *Oedipus Tyrannus* about 425 B.C. (the year is uncertain), and *Oedipus at Colonus* posthumously, having been finished in 406. Each of these plays was part of a different trilogy.

Sophocles was immensely popular, and 96 of his 120 plays won first prize (which means that he won twenty-four times, as each victory involved three tragedies and one satyr play); the others won second prize; he never placed third. But the year he offered *Oedipus Tyrannus* he won only second prize.<sup>25</sup>

That he occasionally returned to the same myths was not unusual but, on the contrary, a necessity, given the number of his plays and the amount of appropriate traditional material. Euripides, for example, wrote a fine *Electra* and an inferior *Orestes* that do not belong together: we know because both have survived. We also still have Euripides' *Trojan Women*, his *Hecuba*, his *Andromache*, and his *Helen*, each being an entirely independent play, and the characters that appear in several of these are sometimes drawn very differently. Instead of adducing further examples from Euripides, we might note that Odysseus in Sophocles' *Ajax* is quite different from Odysseus in the same poet's *Philoctetes*.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, before ascribing ideas to Sophocles we should pause to consider whether they find expression in more than one of his plays—and whether we can be sure the ideas were really his. With this in mind, let us interpret *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

## 8.

First of all, it is play about *man's radical insecurity*. Oedipus represents all of us. You might say: I am not like

25. He was defeated by Aeschylus' nephew, Philocles: see the article on Philocles in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1949) and Jebb, *op. cit.*, xxx. Both fail to mention that his one hundred plays included a tragedy on Oedipus. This is mentioned by Rank, *op. cit.*, 235; but Rank fails to note Philocles' defeat of Sophocles' *Oedipus*.

26. If Roscher, *op. cit.*, 733, is right in suggesting that *Antigone*, 50ff. suggests that Oedipus died when he blinded himself, this would furnish an even more striking instance. Robert, I, 350, contests this interpretation. But at the very least these lines are incompatible with *Oedipus at Colonus* (cf. R. C. Jebb, *op. cit.*, the volume on *The Antigone*, 2d ed., 1891, 19, note for line 50).

him, my situation is different. But how can you know that? He thought his situation was different, too; and he was exceptionally intelligent and, like no one else, had guessed the Sphinx's riddle about the human condition. Indeed, he was "the first of men" (line 33).

In a play so full of ironies, can we be sure that Sophocles really conceived of Oedipus as "the first of men"? After all, Aristotle seems to have considered him an intermediate type, neither wicked and vicious nor outstanding in virtue and righteousness. And scholars have echoed this estimate through the ages. Thus Gilbert Norwood says in his book on *Greek Tragedy* that Oedipus "is the best-drawn character in Sophocles. Not specially virtuous, not specially wise. . ." <sup>27</sup>

We have seven of Sophocles' tragedies. Oedipus is the hero of two of them. What of Sophocles' other heroes? Were they middling characters, neither vicious nor outstanding? To begin with *Ajax*, the earliest of these plays, the last speech ends: "There never has been a man nobler than he." After that, the Chorus concludes:

*Much may mortals learn by seeing;  
but before he sees it, none may  
know the future or his end.*

These themes are precisely those we find in Oedipus: the hero, far from being an intermediate character, is the noblest of men; but he falls suddenly and unexpectedly into utter misery and destruction; and this teaches us that none of us can be sure how we may end.

We never see Antigone prosperous and happy. Aristotle's canon notwithstanding, the action of the *Antigone* cannot be assimilated to any of his four types: she moves from utter misery to a heart-breaking but noble end. But she is certainly

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27. Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*, Hill and Wang (Dramabook), New York 1960, 149.

no middling character. Rather we may agree with Hegel who considered "the heavenly Antigone the most glorious figure ever to have appeared on earth."<sup>28</sup>

In *The Women of Trachis* Heracles is called "the noblest man who ever lived, whose peer you never shall behold again" (811f.). And a little later we are told again: "If any man counts on the morrow . . . he reckons rashly" (943ff.).

In the *Electra*, finally, it is similarly said of the heroine: "Was there ever one so noble. . . ?" (1080) Sophocles went out of his way to tell us quite explicitly that he wrote tragedies about the sufferings of exceptionally noble men and women. Like the author the Book of Job, he was far from believing that the best suffer least; he actually was at some pains to show that while less outstanding people tend to shun the extremes of suffering, like Ismene in *Antigone* and Chrysothemis in *Electra*, the noblest have a special affinity for the greatest suffering.

To return to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it portrays, unlike the two plays just mentioned, the sudden and utterly unexpected fall from happiness and success of "the first of men."<sup>29</sup> In this it resembles Sophocles' *Ajax*, but the impact is incomparably greater and the play immensely superior in almost every way. One is reminded of Job and of *King Lear*. And there can be no doubt, in view of the seven extant plays, that man's radical insecurity formed part of Sophocles' experience of life.

## 9.

Secondly, *Oedipus* is a tragedy of *human blindness*. The immense irony of Oedipus' great curse (216ff.) consists in his blindness to his own identity. Later (371) he taunts Teiresias

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28. *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hermann Glockner, Frommann, Stuttgart, 1928, XVIII, 114.

29. Cf. Knox, *op. cit.*: "Oedipus is clearly a very great man" (50), and "Oedipus represents man's greatness" (51).

for being blind not only literally but also in his ears and spirit, although in fact Teiresias sees what Oedipus fails to see. And when Oedipus finally perceives his own condition, he blinds himself. That much is surely obvious.

Yet it is by no means merely his own identity that he is blind to; his blindness includes those he loves most: his wife and mother as well as his children and, of course, his father—their identity and his relation to them. It may seem that Oedipus' spiritual blindness, no less than his physical blindness at the end of the play, is peculiar to him and not universal. But the overwhelming effect of this tragedy is due in no small measure to the fact that Oedipus' blindness is representative of the human condition.

I have argued elsewhere that "the paradox of love is not that love should be commanded but that there is a sense in which it is hardest to love those whom we love most. To command people to put themselves into their fellows' places, thinking about the thoughts, feelings, and interests of others, makes excellent sense."<sup>30</sup> But even the wisest and most intelligent men who understand the human condition better than anyone else fail typically to comprehend those who are closest to them and whom they love most, because they are too involved with them emotionally. Oedipus, who solved the riddle of the Sphinx by perceiving that it portrayed the human condition and that the answer was "man"—Oedipus, who was "the first of men" and able to deliver Thebes from the Sphinx when even Teiresias, the seer and prophet, failed, comes to grief because he does not comprehend his relationship to those he loves most dearly.

Not only is this an aspect of the tragedy that Freud did not notice; in this respect Freud himself invites comparison with Oedipus. Ernest Jones argues in the last volume of his biog-

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30. *The Faith of a Heretic*, Doubleday, Garden City 1961; Doubleday Anchor Books 1963, section 83.

raphy of Freud that Sandor Ferenczi and Otto Rank, who had been personally closer to Freud than his other disciples, were very sick men. This is surely interesting in a way not dreamt of by Jones. He merely aims to show that their defection was due to their lack of mental health; but another implication of his evidence is rather more remarkable: the master who understood human psychology better than anyone else failed to perceive the psychological troubles of the disciples he loved most. In this respect Freud, like Oedipus, was typical—and Oedipus is even more representative of the human condition than Freud thought.

We are overwhelmed by Oedipus' tragedy because, in the words of Deuteronomy (19.20), we "hear and fear." It is arguable whether "pity" and "fear" are indeed the two definitive tragic emotions, as Aristotle suggested; and one may at the very least object to the English words, "pity" and "fear."

"Pity" is more than apt to suggest a measure of condescension: we do not "pity" those to whom we look up. "Sympathy" may be a slightly better word, particularly if its literal meaning is kept in mind: feeling with, suffering with. To be a tragedy, a play must surely compel us to identify with those who suffer and to feel their suffering as our own. And "fear" sounds too petty and too specific: "terror" comes closer to suggesting the feeling engendered by *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus*, *Oedipus* and *Lear*.<sup>31</sup>

If Oedipus' blindness were his peculiarity, as odd as his fate seems to be, it would not terrify us. But we sense, however dimly, that we ourselves are not too reliably at home with those closest to us. The poet who deals with human relationships in which almost all of his readers and his audience are involved, too, has an obvious advantage at this point over writers who

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31. "The exact meaning of *phobos* lies probably somewhere between fear and terror" (Grube, *op. cit.*, 12).



portray exceptional relationships of which most men lack first-hand experience. No wonder, most of the greatest tragedies deal with the relation of lovers or that of parents to their children and children to their parents; and for sheer terror and sympathy and perpetual fascination no play ever written excels the *Oresteia* and *Oedipus*, *Hamlet* and *Lear*; and no novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Anna Karenina*.

It would be idle to ask whether man's blindness, like his radical insecurity, is equally central in Sophocles' other tragedies. Plainly, it is not: Oedipus' eventual physical blindness sets him apart, and it is one of the *distinctive* characteristics of this play that it is the tragedy of human blindness.

That Creon, in the *Antigone*, fails to understand his son, Haimon—and for that matter also is far from foreseeing the suicide of his wife—provides no close parallel, because there is no presumption whatsoever in the first place that Creon is the wisest of men or singularly discerning regarding the human condition. On the contrary, it is plain from the start that he is not especially sensitive or perceptive. Ajax' blindness in his rage, just before Sophocles' tragedy begins, differs from Oedipus' in the same way. Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* is a little closer to *Oedipus* in this respect, for Deianira, Heracles' wife, is extraordinary in her generosity and empathy, and Heracles is elevated among the gods at the end; yet she kills him unwittingly, and he fails utterly to perceive her agony.

One psychological insight that is prominent in *Oedipus* is almost equally striking in *Antigone* and *The Women of Trachis*: that anger makes blind. Clearly, Sophocles was struck by the fact that a person whose anger is aroused will fail to understand what he is plainly told.

Yet anger does not account fully for Oedipus' blindness in the face of Teiresias' explicit accusations, and some readers may even feel that Oedipus is blameworthy at that point—or at the very least “that only once, confronted with the Sphinx,

the hero's acuteness really stood the test, while in all other cases it goes astray." <sup>32</sup> However widely some such view is held, this strikes me as a serious misunderstanding. We do not do Oedipus justice, nor do we fathom Sophocles' profundity, until we realize how representative is Oedipus' failure. Whatever one may think of psychoanalysis, there would clearly be no need whatsoever for anything remotely like it, if those who are emotionally troubled could simply accept the truth as soon as they are told it.<sup>33</sup> But it is a common human experience that almost anyone can verify in a variety of striking cases that being told something is one thing, and being able to understand and accept it is another. And as long as one is not ready for it, one either fails to hear it, or does not get the point, or discounts it by discrediting the person who is speaking.

This experience is even more common than suggested so far: on re-reading a great novel or play, one frequently finds things that had escaped one the first time though they are plainly there. "Ripeness is all," <sup>34</sup> and until we are ready for an insight we are blind.

It is even conceivable that an interpreter of *Oedipus* today might find that the play says something rather plainly that previous exegetes have failed to notice for twenty-four centuries. But it would be ridiculous to blame this scholar or that for having been acute only once and for having gone astray the rest of the time. We should not identify with Creon of whom Carl Robert says that Wilamowitz was wrong in considering him a "self-righteous Pharisee," because in fact "he is fundamentally a comfortable Philistine by nature." <sup>35</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting how Aristotle, for all of his preoccupation with "recognition," stayed at the surface. He

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32. Robert, *op. cit.*, I, 291.

33. Oddly, the claim that "*Oedipus* is, as it were, merely a tragic analysis [*eine tragische Analysis*]" is found in a letter Schiller wrote to Goethe, October 2, 1797.

34. *King Lear*, Act V, scene 2, line 11.

35. Robert, *op. cit.*, II, 102, and I, 285.

discusses this phenomenon as a part of stagecraft, as a device used in many tragedies, and most effectively in *Oedipus*. But he failed to see how recognition is in this tragedy not merely a matter of superb technique but of the very substance of the play, along with blindness.

10.

Thirdly, *Oedipus* is the tragedy of *the curse of honesty*. I shall not repeat here at length what I have developed elsewhere about the distinction between honesty and sincerity, and the importance of distinguishing degrees of honesty, even as we distinguish degrees of courage.<sup>36</sup> It is possible to be sincere, in the sense of believing what one says, while one yet has low standards of honesty: those with high standards of honesty take a great deal of trouble about determining the truth. They are not satisfied with the first belief at hand, adopting it sincerely; they question and persevere, even when others advise them to stop inquiring.

Oedipus, so far from being an intermediate character in Aristotle's sense—"not specially virtuous, not specially wise"<sup>37</sup>—is outstanding in his honesty. He is not only extraordinarily wise, possessed of more knowledge of the human condition than other men, and hence the only one who solved the riddle of the Sphinx; he is no less imposing in his relentless desire for knowledge and his willingness—nay, his insistence upon taking pains to find out what is true.

Modern readers, not versed in the classics, may feel that the attribution of such an ethos to a Sophoclean hero involves a glaring anachronism. But Sophocles' contemporary, Thucydides, formulated these standards in almost the very words

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36. *The Faith of a Heretic*, sections 2 and 83.

37. Gilbert Norwood's phrase: see note 27 above.

I have used: "So averse to taking pains are most men in the search for the truth, and so prone are they to turn to what lies ready at hand."<sup>38</sup> Sophocles' Oedipus shares Thucydides' feeling, though not Thucydides' sarcastic contempt for oracles.<sup>39</sup> This does not necessarily prove, as most writers on Sophocles suppose, that the poet believed in oracles. He scarcely thought that contemporary statesmen ought to be guided by them. After all, the Athenians, including Aeschylus, had fought at Marathon in open defiance of the Delphic oracle, which had advised the Greeks to yield to the Persians; and the greatness of Athens dated from Marathon. But Oedipus belonged to the heroic age, centuries earlier, and his story depended on his belief that the oracle was probably right. This permits us no inference about Sophocles' traditional piety.

Sophocles tells us how in Corinth, when a drunken man had taunted Oedipus, suggesting that he was not the son of the king of Corinth, Oedipus first questioned the king and queen, who comforted him, and eventually pursued the question all the way to Delphi. Typically, the oracle "sent me back again balked of the knowledge I had come to seek," but informed him instead that he was fated to lie with his mother and kill his father—mentioning these two events in that order, not in the sequence in which they were to be realized (779ff.).

More important, Sophocles constructs his whole plot around Oedipus' relentless quest for truth, although the old story was not a story about honesty at all. This is his most striking departure from the mythical tradition. The central spring of the action of Sophocles' tragedy is not, as it well might have been, fate but rather Oedipus' imperious passion for the truth.

The play begins with the priest's request that Oedipus save

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38. I.20, conclusion; C. Foster Smith's translation in the Loeb Classical Library.  
 39. II.47 and 54, Thucydides comments sarcastically on oracles in connection with the plague, and V.26 he speaks of "the solitary instance in which those who put their faith in oracles were justified by the event." See also VII.50.

his city once more, from the plague this time; and Oedipus replies that the priest and the crowd behind him have not roused him like a sleeper: days ago, he has sent Creon to Delphi to determine "by what act or word I could save this city," and by now Oedipus is impatient for Creon's return because he cannot wait to know.

When Creon comes, he does not deliver a long speech to which Oedipus might listen patiently; rather Oedipus questions him searchingly and gradually extracts the oracle that the murderers (plural) of the late king Laius must be found and driven from the city. And soon Oedipus reproaches Creon for not having inquired more about the murder of king Laius when it happened, years ago. Burning with the desire to know, in spite of all obstacles, he has no sympathy for those who do not share this passion. He pronounces his great curse on all who know something about the murder and keep it silent—and, of course, on the murderer himself. There is no need for us to dwell here on the many ironies of that staggering speech.

Next, the Chorus suggests that Oedipus send for Teiresias, but again Oedipus has long sent for the prophet and is impatient because he is so slow to come. And when Teiresias does appear, he counsels Oedipus to stop inquiring because wisdom is terrible "when it brings no profit to the man that's wise" (316ff.). This attitude infuriates Oedipus: the prophet does not share his high standards of honesty but asks him outright to cease looking for the truth because it will not profit him. As if an Oedipus sought truth for his own profit!

Oedipus is not in the least concerned with his own happiness but in any case could not be happy knowing that his happiness hinged on self-deception. Moreover, he is deeply concerned with the welfare of his people for whom he, as king, is responsible: knowing that the plague will not cease until the murderer is found, Oedipus cannot give up the search merely because the seer thinks the truth would not profit him. Teiresias' attitude is, to his mind, preposterous:

*You know of something but refuse to speak.  
Would you betray us and destroy the city? (330f.)*

More and more enraged by the prophet's refusal to tell what he knows, Oedipus says, understandably:

*If you had sight,  
I should have sworn you did the bloody deed alone (348f.).*

After all, how else could he explain Teiresias' stance?

When Teiresias flares up in anger at this taunt and, flatly reversing his own stubbornly repeated vow of silence about Laius' murder, shrieks, "you are the land's accursed defiler" (353), Oedipus supposes that the old man no longer knows what he is saying: he assumes that Teiresias, who has long lost his respect, is simply cursing him. And when the old man cries, "you are the murderer of the man whose murderer you seek" (362f.), Oedipus thinks that he is merely shouting something, anything, to vent his impotent resentment and to cover up the truth that he has long insisted on concealing. Soon, therefore, he asks Teiresias whether Creon, who has also seemed to drag his feet, albeit Laius was his sister's husband, did not put the prophet up to his "design" (378f.).

All the conflicts in the tragedy are generated by the king's quest for the truth. It would be pointless here to work our way through every scene. Later, Jocasta counsels Oedipus to stop inquiring, especially, but not only, in her last scene (1056ff.). Again his persistence is testimony to his high standards of honesty and to his concern for his people. The latter point is worth mentioning because so many critics speak of his persistence as a fault, as if he could in decency accept Jocasta's plea. But it is the former point that Sophocles keeps stressing. Jocasta's pleas

*If you have any care for your own life  
give up this search! My anguish is enough. (1060f.)*

and: *O be persuaded by me, I entreat you*<sup>40</sup>

40. This loving concern for Oedipus is "altogether different from the Epicaste of the epic [the *Odyssey*, cited above], who conjures up the Erinyes against her son" (Robert, *op. cit.*, 286).

meet with his unhesitating answer: "I will not be persuaded not to ascertain all this clearly" (1065).

Eventually, the shepherd, too, resists his pleas and literally begs Oedipus to ask no more; but Oedipus will not be put off. The issue is drawn clearly again and again: Oedipus is told by Teiresias, Jocasta, and the shepherd that self-deception and the refusal to face the truth may make a human being happier than his relentless honesty—and he spurns all such counsels as contemptible. And this is part of Oedipus' greatness and his claim to our awed admiration—precisely because it is *true* that honesty does not make the honest man happy.

To be sure, it is popular prattle that "honesty is the best policy," and even Plato preached the famous falsehood that virtue and happiness are one. But Sophocles' experience of life was more profound. For all his admiration of honesty, he knew how the man of surpassing honesty is alienated from all other men and driven to despair. In this respect, too, Oedipus is representative of the human condition.

Are we reading our own experience of life into *Oedipus*, imputing to Sophocles concerns that were quite alien to him? Or do any of his other tragedies suggest that the curse of honesty was part of his experience of life? In the *Philoctetes*, too, honesty does not figure in the traditional myth, but Sophocles' whole tragedy is built around Neoptolemus' high standards of honesty, and nobody could possibly doubt the poet's admiration for this virtue. Nevertheless, Neoptolemus' honesty makes for a tragic conclusion, which in this play is averted at the last moment by a *deus ex machina*. Thus we need not fear that we have merely projected the curse of honesty into Sophocles' experience of life.

## 11.

Fourthly, *Oedipus* is a play about a tragic situation—a drama that shows how some situations are characterized by

*the inevitability of tragedy*. If Oedipus gave up his quest, he would fail his people, and they would continue to die like flies: his honesty benefits them, but at the cost of destroying not only him but also Jocasta and the happiness of their children. Whatever he does in the situation in which Sophocles places him at the beginning of the play, he incurs a terrible guilt. Again, this is Sophocles' genius and not in any way dictated by the myth. And in this respect, too, Sophocles' Oedipus is representative of the human condition.

Most interpreters quite fail to see this dilemma, and many readers suppose that Oedipus, of course, ought to take the advice he is given and desist from his search. In his third treatment of the play, in *Poiesis* (1966), H. D. F. Kitto derides any notion that we are shown an "ideal King who will properly and nobly do his duty by doing his utmost to deliver the city from peril, even at the cost of his own life—an interpretation which . . . founders on the simple fact that it never occurred to Sophocles to mention that the city in fact was delivered. Naturally, we could infer it, but if we are really attending to the play, we shall not even think of it."<sup>41</sup>

Here Kitto, often so suggestive and always a pleasure to read, is surely unconvincing. In the first place, an interpretation of Oedipus' motivation obviously could not founder even on the fact that the oracle subsequently did not keep its solemn promise and allowed the plague to continue after the murderer of Laius had been driven from the city; much less on the fact that Sophocles' tragedy ends before Oedipus is driven from the city, and we are told plainly that Creon is seeking further instructions from Delphi. Secondly, if we really attend to the play we should realize that Oedipus' anger at

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41. *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (Sather Classical Lectures: Volume 36), University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1966, 209. Cf. Kitto's *Form and Meaning in Drama*, Methuen, London 1956, University Paperbacks 1960, 200. Kitto also had a section on this play in his *Greek Tragedy* (1939); rev. ed., Doubleday Anchor Books (n.d.), 142ff.



Teiresias and Creon is prompted in large measure by their lack of concern for the city. We have already quoted Oedipus' words to Teiresias:

*You know of something but refuse to speak.  
Would you betray us and destroy the city? (330f.)*

And we should also note that when Teiresias mocks Oedipus, saying that his very greatness has proved his bane, the king replies:

*I do not care if it has saved this city (442f.).*

Finally, Kitto notes: so much is made of the plague in the beginning, and then "Oedipus or Creon mention it (at vv. 270–272, 327, 333, 515f.); so too does Iocasta, at her first entry (vv. 635f.). Thereafter it is totally forgotten."<sup>42</sup> And others have suggested that the plague is simply taken over from the beginning of the *Iliad*. But there was surely no chance for the plague to be totally forgotten by the audience, let alone for them to consider it a mere literary allusion. Athens had been devastated by the plague only a few years earlier, in 430 and in 429, when her first citizen, Pericles, died of it along with a very large part of the population; and this had proved a turning point of the Peloponnesian War, which was still raging and, of course, eventually lost by Athens. Pericles was a statesman of extraordinary wisdom, but the plague upset his calculations and took his life. There were probably few in the audience who had not lost members of their families and close friends to the plague, and few who did not feel reminded of Pericles. The vivid description of the plague in the beginning must have struck terror into their hearts. And what other crucial elements in the story are given more space? Oedipus' obligation to do all he can to save the city must have been very clear to the audience.

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42. *Ibid.*, 209.

To be sure, most men never find themselves in situations in which tragedy is as dramatically inevitable, whatever they do, as it is for Oedipus, Antigone, and Neoptolemus. Still, millions have found themselves in situations in which they either had to incur the guilt of breaking the law and suffering a cruel death (like Antigone) or had to continue to live with the knowledge that they had abetted some moral outrage. And it is far from being an uncommon experience that *raison d'état*, or at any rate the interest of some major enterprise and the welfare of a lot of people, dictates dishonesty (the course Odysseus would embrace in *Philoctetes*), while the man who values honesty (like Neoptolemus) must choose between incurring the guilt of dishonesty or shouldering the blame for wrecking some great undertaking. In *Oedipus* the welfare of the people requires honesty—and a tragic self-sacrifice.

More generally, it is a chronic feature of the human condition that we cannot please and benefit all, any more than Oedipus can; we cannot satisfy all the claims that we should meet. Sartre has said, speaking of "The Responsibility of The Writer":

"If a writer has chosen to be silent on one aspect of the world, we have the right to ask him: Why have you spoken of this rather than that? And since you speak in order to make a change, since there is no other way you can speak, why do you want to change this rather than that?"<sup>43</sup>

Alas, the "if" is unwarranted: none of us can speak about all aspects of the world or press for all the changes that would benefit our fellow men. Those who press for a great many changes can always be asked both: why do you work for all of these but not for those? and: why are you scattering your energies instead of concentrating on one major effort? There is no way out. Luther realized this and insisted that in a life

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43. "The Responsibility of the Writer" (lecture at the Sorbonne, in 1946, at the first general meeting of UNESCO) in *The Creative Vision: Modern European Writers on Their Art*, ed. H. M. Block and H. Salinger, Grove Press, New York 1960.

devoted to works failure was inevitable, but he believed in salvation through faith in Christ's vicarious atonement and in eternal bliss after death. Sophocles' experience of life was different.

12.

Fifthly and finally, *Oedipus* is a play about *justice*. Indeed, it calls justice into question in two ways and at two levels. First, we are all but compelled to ask ourselves whether Oedipus' and Jocasta's destruction is just. Do they deserve what happens to them? The answer can hardly be in doubt: they don't. We may concede that both have their faults—as who does not?—and yet insist that they get worse than they deserve; incomparably worse, like Antigone and Lear. Indeed, Oedipus' faults are closely related to his passion for honesty and his intolerance of dishonesty. His faults are inseparable from his righteous—should we say, “just”?—indignation.

In fact, he did not really “murder” king Laius, his father. The act was wholly unpremeditated, prompted in equal shares by self-defense and righteous indignation: the charioteer hit Oedipus who, in return, struck him;

*When the old man saw this, he waited for the moment  
when I passed, and from his carriage he brought down  
full on my head, his double-pointed goad.*

Oedipus hit back and killed him with one stroke (800ff.).

At the first level, then, the tragedy raises the question of the injustice of men's fates and their sufferings. The nobler often—if not more often than not—fare worse than those who are less admirable.

Justice, however, is also called into question in another way. Even as Sophocles, for all his admiration for honesty and his palpable disapproval of Odysseus' ethic in *Philoctetes*, perceives the curse of honesty, he also calls into question *human* justice. To be sure, he does not do this after the man-

ner of Thrasymachus or Callicles in Plato's *Republic* and *Gorgias*; nor does he do it as a philosopher might. The poet's communication is, to use Kierkegaard's term, "indirect." For all that, it is more powerful if we measure its impact on those who get the point; only most readers, play-goers, and critics do not get the point—consciously. This does not rule out the possibility that the tragedy strikes terror into hearts that dimly sense how their most confidently championed moral values are shown to be extremely problematic.

Who can hear Oedipus' great curse (216ff.) without feeling this? Sophocles does not argue and plead, saying, as it were: look here, a murderer is a human being, too; and there, but for the grace of God, go you and I. He offers no comment and does not need to because the audience knows that the murderer on whom the king pronounces his curse is none other than the king himself. Were that not so, few men before the nineteenth century would have seen grounds to question that the curse was just, if stern. But if that is justice, should we not be better off without it?

The king's desire, just a little later, to punish Teiresias and Creon might be called unjust. But given the facts as they appear to Oedipus, would not the punishment be just? And is not this another way of questioning man's justice—to remind us how the facts are easily misunderstood, and how punishments that to the righteously indignant seem to be unquestionably just are often anything but that?

Yet later, Jocasta kills herself. And Oedipus blinds himself and insists on being exiled. These self-punishments, too, are acts of human justice and quite problematic.

The poet does not offer us alternative solutions. But the dark side of justice is exposed more powerfully than perhaps by any one before his time. We usually assume that justice is unproblematically good. Sophocles shows us how questionable it is; and this, too, is part of the greatness of the tragedy and of its powerful effect.

13.

In the end, let us consider *Oedipus* in the light of some of Plato's remarks about tragedy. In the *Republic* Plato offers three sweeping generalizations that are simply wrong when applied to this play.

"Strip what the poet has to say of its poetic coloring, and you must have seen what it comes to in plain prose. It is like a face that was never really handsome, when it has lost the fresh bloom of youth" (601).<sup>44</sup>

That is beautifully put and true of most literature—especially literature with some philosophical pretensions. But I have tried to show how utterly false it is in the case of Sophocles. And an Athenian philosopher who was over twenty when Sophocles died—and Sophocles wrote till the end—might have taken Sophocles into consideration when he discussed tragedy. Yet Plato never once quotes Sophocles, and he mentions him only twice—once in the *Republic* (329B), on an anecdotal, sub-literary level.

Plato's second generalization is that the poets do merely what pleases the multitude and reproduce conventional opinions.<sup>45</sup> Again, this is no doubt true of the great majority. But I have tried to show that it is false about Sophocles.

Thirdly, poetry is, according to the *Republic* mere imitation of appearances; it turns our attention in the wrong direction, while mathematics, being incomparably closer to philosophy, leads the soul to face in the right direction, toward universals that are not ephemeral and do not change (509ff., 597–608). This view of literature is hardly very perceptive and utterly misses the philosophical import of Sophocles.

These criticisms of Plato are not unfair, considering his

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44. F. M. Cornford's translation, Oxford University Press 1945.

45. *Republic* 602 and 479 D; cf. Cornford, *op. cit.*, p. 333, note 1.

resolve to banish from his commonwealth not only tragic poets of inferior worth but tragic poets generally. It was surely incumbent on a philosopher taking that stand at that historical moment to consider Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides no less than their epigones of the fourth century.

Next, let us compare Plato's explicit prescriptions for the poets with Sophocles' practice. According to Plato, the poets must insist that the divine is responsible for good only, never for evil, and that the divine never deceives (379ff.). *Oedipus*, like the Book of Job, is more realistic.

Plato insists that virtue must be rewarded in literature—a point repeated in *The Laws* (663)—and that goodness must be shown to be more pleasant. Surely, Sophocles was more profound.

And in *The Laws* (660) Plato would compel the poets to write only about men "in every way good." One can see how Aristotle's views, which I have criticized in the beginning, represent some slight improvements over Plato's notions; but one should add, as Aristotle's admirers through the ages have not done, that though he may be less wrong than Plato, there is no reason for applying altogether different standards to the two philosophers, as far as their ideas about tragedy are concerned. It has been the fashion to dismiss Plato's ideas on the subject very lightly, while assuming that Aristotle must very probably be right in the main. It seems more reasonable to suggest that he made partial but insufficient amends for some of Plato's errors.

#### 14.

Sophocles surely meant to teach humility—by reminding us, for example, of man's insecurity and blindness. We may contrast this with Plato's overconfidence in himself and in his rational vision.

Sophocles further differs from Plato in showing us that virtue and happiness are not Siamese twins. And he realized that some of the virtues are profoundly problematic. Plato, on the other hand, believed in the compatibility of all the virtues and in the desirability of making everybody as virtuous as possible.

If we closed on this reflection, we should give a misleading picture of both men. These points were worth making because they help to show Sophocles' philosophical relevance by suggesting that he was right on matters of profound importance on which Plato was wrong. But the note on which I wish to end involves a final *peripeteia*, a reversal.

Sophocles did not strike his contemporaries the way he strikes me. Incredible as it may seem, his tragedies—even *Oedipus*—apparently had a somewhat sedative effect: the audience felt that it learned moderation, accommodation, resignation. Sophocles celebrates the hero who goes to the opposite extremes; but the audience is much more likely to conclude that it is wise to lie low.

This may help to explain Sophocles' reputation for piety, and it also provides some content for one of the most celebrated conceptions in Aristotle's *Poetics*: *catharsis*. Whatever Aristotle may have meant—and the literature on that question is staggering—he clearly disagreed with Plato's claim that the exhibition of violent emotions on the stage is likely to lead men to emulate, say, a Philoctetes (the example, of course, is mine) by shrieking and moaning in agony instead of learning self-mastery. Aristotle suggested that emotional people, particularly the less educated, need some relief and purgation—precisely in order to behave with more restraint in real life.<sup>46</sup> What neither Plato nor Aristotle realized was that most men's

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46. Cf. the final chapter of Aristotle's *Politics* (VIII.7) and Grube's discussion, *op. cit.*, xvff. For two other suggestions about catharsis, see my "Nietzsche between Homer and Sartre" (note 10 above), 60 and 72.

daring is so slight that it can be spent in an hour's identification with *Oedipus* or *Antigone*; then their spirit, having taken its brief flight, settles down again on the level of Antigone's sister, Ismene, or Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, or Oedipus' foil, Creon. In that sense, Sophocles became a teacher of traditional piety.

Plato, on the other hand, set up societies, both in *The Republic* and in *The Laws*, in which moderation, accommodation, and temperance are held high as norms and Sophoclean tragedies are not allowed. But many readers are much more deeply affected by Plato's own refusal to resign himself, to accommodate himself, to be moderate—by his radicalism—by his Oedipean spirit. And it may take a reader trained by Plato—a philosopher—to read *Oedipus Tyrannus* as I have done.