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THE INNOCENCE OF OEDIPUS: THE PHILOSOPHERS ON *OEDIPUS THE KING*

Thomas Gould

II[1]

PLATO WAS CONVINCED THAT ALL men, when they are caught up by a story or deeply stirred by a drama, are, whether they realize it or not, surrendering their rational pursuit of reality and happiness, and are "awakening, then nursing and making strong" energy and drives that normally "wake up" only in dreams when reason is asleep (*Republic* X 605b3, cf. IX 571c3.) Because by "reason" he meant enthusiasm for all that really will bring genuine happiness for the whole man, he had, of course, to condemn anything that tended to weaken its command. And so he condemned Attic tragedy and its "father," Homer.

We sometimes think that complete rationality would be a limited, a cold and priggish goal, that the fuller, more admirable man lets quite a considerable part of his life be run by "irrational" passions. But when we think this way we are drawing the line between the rational and the irrational in a manner significantly unlike Plato's. Plato's criterion is simple and uncompromising: if the man is animated by enthusiasm for what is truly desirable, he is rational; if his desires are for things that cannot make him happy, then and only then are his energies irrational. Because we think that complete rationality would bring the absence of all passions, we feel that it would be ridiculous not to "enrich" our lives with non-rational enthusiasms; because Plato thought that the line should be drawn, not between reason and passion, but between rewarding and self destructive passions, he could see only danger in a set of drives that apparently had to be suppressed, "put to sleep," whenever we were being wholeheartedly rational. When he became convinced that the part of the psyche that enjoyed tragedy was the same part that "sprang forth" in the dreams even of some reasonable men and then acted out its horrible desires in vivid phantasies (571c6,ff.), the same part that dominated the waking lives of driven men, compulsive criminals, sex maniacs and mad tyrants (574e, 576b), he could not but conclude that tragedies were among the institutions that were inimical to right education and reform, the institutions that made men stubbornly resist enlightenment and cling instead to their old, unhappy ways.

[1] Part I appeared in *Arion* IV.3. There is one more part to come.

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Almost immediately after Plato's most earnest attack against tragedy as an ally of unreason, in Book Ten of the *Republic*, he presents one of his most stirring and imaginative *mythoi*, the story of Er's visit to the afterworld. And, of course, all of his discussions of Homer and the dramatists are themselves presented in the form of lively, imaginative dramas. As Aristotle points out (mischievously, no doubt), Socratic dialogues are excellent examples of mimetic art even if they are not written in verse. (*Poetics* 1447b10.) But then Plato was perfectly aware of that. (*Laws* III 386c.) What Plato objected to was not the very existence of literary invention and imaginative art (all men, even the guardians, are necessarily introduced to life through "images" of reality presented in stories and song), but the prestige and influence of stories that were not written by philosophers.

Why, Plato asks, do decent men have one code of conduct when they are fully conscious and responsible—moving easily and efficiently toward happiness and excellence—but another when they let themselves be moved by tragedy? Is it not significant that we have to abandon in real life what we indulge in in the theater? (*Republic* X 603–4.) What one must "put to sleep" when one is rational must be a drive toward something *other* than reality and true success. Just consider where these drives would take us if we let them grow sufficiently! In our dreams, he says, we stop at nothing. Sexual crimes are first in his list, and among sexual crimes the attempt to make love with one's mother (*μητρί τε γὰρ ἐπιχειρεῖν μείγνυσθαι* 571d1); next comes the desire to kill—nor do we balk at anything in the selection of our victim (*μιαιφονεῖν τε ὁτιωῦν*). Upon awakening we shudder with horror; but do we not once more relapse into a strange enthusiasm when we see such things presented on stage? We think of our emotions in the theater as harmless, he says, because they seem to arise from the lives of the dramatic figures; but in fact we are, unbeknownst to ourselves, deeply involved and in danger of being seriously and permanently changed by such experiences. (606a-b.) This, says Plato, is the most important of all the reasons why philosophers should have the power to say which stories could and which could not be published, recited or put on stage. (605c6.)

In Aristotle's defense of tragedy, in which he argues that it is no enemy but an ally of rationality, there are verbal references to Plato's complaints that tragedy stirs passions which should remain asleep; but there is no head-on criticism of Plato's fears. His revisions of Plato's theory about the true nature of irrational drives are found in *De anima*, in the *Ethics*, and in the physical and metaphysical treatises, but not in the *Poetics*. In the *Poetics* he ignores altogether the suggestion that in the theater we relax or forget the standards of conduct that we operate on in our daily lives. He says, on the contrary, that if we saw a play that violated very seriously our best considered judgements about the connec-

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tion between excellence and happiness, merit and reward, we would be very seriously put off. The experience would be μιαρόν, "unclean," and the play could not function for us. So far was Aristotle from believing that in the theater we lapse into the tyranny of that part of the psyche which rules in madness or in incestual and patricidal dreams, that he chose *Oedipus the King* as his prize example of good, "cleansing" drama.

When, in the second book of the *Republic,* Plato tried to demonstrate the dangerous thoughtlessness and immorality of the tragedians, he chose Aeschylus to represent the rest—no doubt because Euripides would have been too easy and so the argument could not have been convincing. If even the beloved, wise old Aeschylus can be convicted of passing on to the Athenians suggestions about happiness and excellence that were actually criminal and blind, then Plato has made his point in the strongest possible way. Did Aristotle chose the *Oedipus* for similar reasons? Here is a story that not only dwells on the two primary crimes in Plato's list of wicked dreams, but a story that also appears to offer an extraordinarily difficult challenge to anyone who holds the thesis that an injustice which would sicken us in real life would sicken us also on the stage, that we do not, as Plato suggested, have one standard when we are thinking realistically and another when we are being moved by fiction. For, according to Sophocles, the god at Delphi announced before Oedipus was born that he would kill his father and marry his mother. And Oedipus, far from fulfilling the prediction gladly, seems to have tried vigorously and intelligently to avoid committing these crimes. He even asked Apollo point-blank who his parents were, but Apollo did not answer. This would surely seem to be the story of a good man's fall to wretchedness, a fall not brought about to any significant degree by any "major flaw" in the protagonist's character or intellect. But according to Aristotle's theory such a sequence of events should sicken us, not cleanse and delight us. Here is a challenge indeed!

The trouble with Plato's way of explaining the power of a play like the *Oedipus*—and with modern psychoanalytic treatments of such plays, too—is that it seems to "reduce" the play to something absurd. It seems to suggest that anyone who wished to repeat Sophocles' success with audiences would have merely to tell again a story of unwitting patricide and incest. But Seneca, Voltaire and Dryden, and many lesser men as well, have tried and failed. There is obviously "more to" Sophocles' play than that. Aristotle, by refusing to trace the drama's power to repressed desires in the souls of the individuals in the audience—that is, to repressed desires for things similar to the deeds acted out on stage, rather than to a general, non-criminal emotional need—made it possible to turn to features in Sophocles' art that were genuinely helpful in our attempts to understand the poet's greatness.

Aristotle's way has its difficulties too, however. Above all, by

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refusing to go along with the idea that we have a double standard of justice, one when we are pursuing our own well-being in the real world and another when we are excited by the stories of others' adventures, Aristotle was forced to eschew any explanation that was based on the assumption that what we *think* about when we puzzle out a play after we come out of the theater, what satisfies us as an explanation *then*, is not necessarily anything we were responding to while we were in the grips of the performance. This, I submit, has led to some strange theorizing. Nor could there be a better example than Aristotle's treatment of *Oedipus the King* as a story, not of a man who suffers a misfortune which he did not bring on himself, but of a man who, to a significant degree, brought his misery on himself.

There surely are people—Aristotle may well have been one—who never forget themselves in a theater, never stop thinking just as they would at work or in the classroom (their minds tick over during every dramatic confrontation no differently than it would at a political or philosophical debate: "he needn't have made that concession . . . oh, but there was another alternative . . ." etc.), but it is at least debatable whether or not this is the best way to respond to fiction. Aristotle seems to have reasoned as follows: good men enjoy performances of *Oedipus the King;* good men would be appalled if they were to be confronted in life with the case of a good man—themselves, a friend, or anyone else—suffering a calamity that they did not merit; therefore the story of the *Oedipus* is not of that sort. But if (as I shall try to show) the play belies the theory, then perhaps we should reconsider Plato's idea: that the *normal* experience in the theater is not as Aristotle has it at all—that *normally* we respond to things that simply do not fit quite naturally into our standards for "sense" outside the theater.

The reflections that I offer here on the *Oedipus* are not meant as an interpretation of the play as a whole. I want to consider only the question Aristotle raised—whether or not Oedipus is presented to us as being morally responsible for his catastrophe. I shall argue that Oedipus is innocent to a degree that should trouble anyone who follows Aristotle's way of reading the play. I would not want to suggest that the innocence of Oedipus is the all-important key to the drama, however. Playwrights who have tried to repeat Sophocles' success by giving us tragedies of fate, stories of men ground down by great malevolent or incomprehensible forces that they cannot influence, have not been automatically successful any more than those who have retold stories of incestuous marriages and the like. Above all, as several recent works on Sophocles have shown, the heroes of Sophoclean tragedies are truly "heroic": magnificent, defiant, turbulent, unable to be untrue to themselves, unwilling to compromise merely to survive, never mere pawns or puppets of the gods. It does not follow that if divinity, not Oedipus, is responsible for Oedipus' wretched-

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ness, that he is not marvelous and stirring. As we concentrate narrowly on the question of his guilt or innocence, however, we shall not often have occasion to dwell on these important qualities.

1.

The plague is one of Sophocles' inventions in the story of Oedipus. The chief consequence of this innovation of his is to increase the role of the gods in the action, especially Apollo. In all versions of the story Apollo is important as the god of Delphi, but the plague makes his presence palpable and frightening. He is not just a voice off stage predicting or warning, he is a destroyer.

In fact "Apollo" means "destroyer." It is an ancient pun. Archilochus (fr. 30) and Euripides (fr. 781,11–13) both play on it, for instance. And when Oedipus begins the famous strophe with the dochmiacs, "it was Apollo, friends, Apollo, who brought my evil evils to completion,"

Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,
ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα
(1329–30).

many in the audience must have remembered Cassandra's dochmiacs (*Agamemnon* 1080–1082):

Apollo! Apollo
Aguieus! My own Destroyer!
You have destroyed me utterly a second time!
Ἄπολλον Ἄπολλον
ἀγυιᾶτ' ἀπόλλων ἐμός.
ἀπώλεσας γὰρ οὐ μόλις τὸ δεύτερον.

At the beginning of the *Oedipus* Apollo had been hailed as a Savior, for he was the god to whom one always went to find out how to relieve a city or an individual from a defilement. At the end of the play the relief from the defilement turns out to be a bitter loss. Strangely enough the plague, and the fact that it will presumably stop, now that the killer of Laius has been found and will be banished, is not even mentioned in the dénouement. Apollo is Destroyer. Ah yes, how could we have forgotten?[2]

[2] Teiresias speaks bluntly enough of Apollo as destroyer, at 376–7. Unfortunately it is not certain whom he means the victim to be. Oedipus tells him that, inasmuch as he is blind, he cannot harm anyone who can see. According to the MSS (with only one nonsensical exception), Teiresias replies that it is not his, Teiresias', doom to be undone by Oedipus, that Apollo is enough, who will take care of that. Like Cassandra, then, Teiresias looks on his service to Apollo as his undoing. Most modern editors accept Brunck's emendation, however:

οὐ γάρ σε μοῖρα πρός γ' ἐμοῦ πεσεῖν
for με μοῖρα πρός γε σοῦ

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It is not actually said that Apollo sent the plague. The chorus says that the havoc caused by the plague *is* Ares (190ff.)—in the manner of Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (659–66 and 678–85)—and they include Apollo as one of several gods to whom they pray for protection against the sickness (204ff.) But a Greek could hardly forget that it was Apollo with his silver bow who, in the opening of the *Iliad*, brought the plague on the Achaians, then withdrew it when the offense against him had been made good. And it was apparently believed that Apollo had sent the plague on Athens in 430 (Thucydides II 54.4–5). And anyhow it was entirely up to Apollo to tell them what to do to stop the plague. Sophocles' failure to say explicitly that Apollo himself sent the destruction in the first place is probably deliberate: it allows the actors to concentrate on Apollo as Savior and forget his role as the Destroyer.

It is regular, though not invariable, to refer to a divine presence, the identity or significance of which one does not know for certain, by the name *daimôn* rather than *theos* or by the god's proper name. Very often, though again not invariably, it is thought that the daemonic referred to in this way is more likely to be sinister than the reverse. Several times in our play the shrines and images of well known gods are referred to as those of *daimones* (by the chorus, 886; by Jocasta, 912; by Oedipus, 1378). Among these shrines are one or more before our very eyes, by Oedipus' palace. These we learn are to Apollo, with whom Oedipus identifies himself (almost as Hector identifies himself with the same god in the *Iliad*). Oedipus thinks of himself and Apollo as allies —Apollo is Oedipus' *daimôn* (244). Wha the does not know is that he, Oedipus, is *echthrodaimôn*, hated by his *daimôn* (816, 1519), and really without a god (ἄθεος, 1316). People are sometimes puzzled by the absence of more references to Apollo at the end of the play and the sudden thinning of references to *daimones* in the last speeches; but is this really so surprising? Apollo has been present, although in a way no one had suspected; then when he has done his work, his presence is not looked for anymore.

Jocasta, when she goes to Apollo's shrine, asking that he relieve Oedipus from his obsessive fears, remarks, with horrible innocence, that she has chosen him among the *daimones* "because you are the closest," ἄγχιστος γὰρ εἶ (919). Indeed he is the closest. He pounces at that very moment. Jocasta's rites are interrupted by the fateful arrival of the messenger from Corinth. This is the only event in the play that does not grow inevitably out of what has happened before in the proper Aristotelian fashion—*unless* we are to feel that Apollo has a hand in the arrival of this messenger and the events he announces. We are told that the

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In that case Teiresias' reply is that it is not Oedipus' doom to be undone by Teiresias, that Apollo is enough.

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shrine on stage is to Apollo Lykeios (as also in line 203). The cult name ought to mean Apollo of the Morning Light, or perhaps the Lycian Apollo. But this too is an ancient pun, for it was also seen that it could refer to Apollo the Destroyer.[3]

A *daimôn*, says th emessenger (1258, 1260), guided Oedipus to the bedroom (where his mother-wife had given birth to him, made love with him and given birth to his children) in order to show her to him dead. That this was Apollo is said—almost, but not quite, directly—by Oedipus himself. The chorus has misunderstood and thought that it was the self-blinding that the *daimôn* had caused. No, says Oedipus, that was his own act; but there was a *daimôn* in the rest: "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo."

And it is not really true that references to the daemonic disappear in the last scenes. Oedipus states firmly that he is not master of his fate, and that he knows without a trace of doubt that he will end his days in some strange and unnatural way (1457–8). He wants to be let loose where he had been exposed as an infant and see what the *daimôn* wants with him. Creon's announcement that he will not allow this yet, that he will send to Delphi first, appalls poor Oedipus; he thought that his misery was complete, but Creon's decision makes it even worse. Had he not suffered enough from that quarter? Send to Apollo again! Remember what had happened every time he had done that! It is surprising how many readers take this final scene as showing the rebirth of the active and effective Oedipus; but notice how the action really ends. Oedipus is ordered into the house (not out of the city as he had wished); he obeys but asks that his daughters be allowed to stay with him; no, says Creon; why, asks Oedipus; don't argue, answers Ceron: "The power you had did not stay with you through your life," Καὶ γὰρ ἀκράτησας οὔ σοι τῷ βίῳ ξυνέσπετο (1523). And that, except for a few melancholy verses by the chorus, is the last thing said in the play. Oedipus had just admitted that he was hateful to the gods (ἀλλὰ θεοῖς γ' ἔχθιστος ἥκω, 1519); Creon concluded that he therefore had no right to make decisions for himself.

Why did Apollo send the plague? Modern critics sometimes dwell on the magic sickening of all nature because of the unholy marriage. No doubt this kind of association makes the occurrence of a plague in this of all stories somehow right. Nevertheless, nothing of the sort is said in the play. The word from Delphi is that the pollution will remain in the city and therefore the blight, disease and barrenness, until the man who killed King Laius is removed. Now all violent deaths, even accidental ones, required

[3] Deriving Λύκειος from λύκος, Wolf, as in another of Apollo's epithets, Λυκοκτόνος, wolf-slayer (or Slayer-wolf?): cf. Sophocles, *Electra* 7, Pausanias 2,19,3. Several of the Olympians, e.g. Artemis, had this kind of dual nature, Savior and Destroyer.

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cleansing; but distinctions were usually made. A vicious plot against a head of state might bring endless trouble to the land—as Agamemnon's murder did, for instance. But an accident could be made up for usually by a simple ritual. And so from Apollo's reply it is naturally assumed that Laius had been the victim, not of an unpremeditated act of self-defense, but of immoral and illegal intrigue. There was a criminal in Thebes who must be driven out or put to death. When Teiresias tells Oedipus that it is he whom Apollo was referring to, therefore, Oedipus is naturally dumbfounded. He had already thought of the possibility that the murderer of Laius might be after him as well. He puts two and two together and decides that the seer's outrageous, utterly unbelieveable remark was part of a plot to discredit him and get him out of the way. (Pericles' enemies tried a similar move, the original audience must surely have remembered). But no, the illogical thing was the correct thing: Teiresias was telling the literal truth. Apollo really did mean him.

Oedipus knows himself to be incapable of an act that would bring on a great pollution, necessitating a ruinous plague on the land. What he had done at the crossroads was not a crime by civil or religious law (if indeed we can distinguish between these in Greece), or rather it would not have been a crime *if* the victim had not chanced to be the king—*and* the slayer's father, *and* if a further consequence had not been an incestuous marriage. But none of these things were his fault. Oedipus, like Plato, thought that divinity was reasonable, that there was justice in its interventions. We watch him work to free the city from the plague, scrutinizing oracles and seers and messengers, pronouncing holy curses on the unknown author of the trouble—and it occurs to us what his mistake was: he thought that men who were outlawed by the gods must necessarily be evil men and that men with good intentions could expect the friendship and protection of divinity. Apollo, especially, was a savior because he set things right. Or so Oedipus thought.

It might be argued that Apollo was the only actor—the only true agent—in the play. Oedipus did not know the identity of the old man who attacked him with a two-pronged ax, nor that of the widow whose hand he was offered by the Thebans in gratitude for his services to them. But Apollo knew, and had predicted these coincidences even before Oedipus was born. A rude man in his cups had once taunted Oedipus with being a foundling, but when he asked his "parents" they indignantly denied the allegation. Bothered by the continuing gossip he went to Apollo. But Apollo acted as though Oedipus, by asking him point-blank who his parents were, had almost spoiled the plot. He did not answer the question at all; instead he told him something that would help to insure his doom. He told him what he had told Laius years before, that Oedipus would kill his father and take his father's place

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with his mother. This made it inevitable that the shocked Oedipus would head in some direction other than his boyhood home—however uncertain he might be (thanks to the god's silence on the point) as to whether or not it was his real home. The journey that resulted led, of course, to the fulfillment of the terrible prediction.

Thebes had been pleased with its intelligent and loving king. Sophocles emphasizes this in the opening scene: although the city's difficulty was the sort that usually required the advice of priests (as the Achaian princes went to Calchas about their plague), the priest and suppliants came to the king—almost, the priest says apologetically, as though he were a god. Oedipus was one of Apollo's men, everyone knew that. He steps forward as a kindly and capable father. He calls the suppliants his children. There is dignity and tenderness in his address. He and Apollo will ward off the harm. He was remembered as the slayer of the hateful Sphinx. He says he did this with his own intelligence (398); the priest says he had the friendship of a god (38): the two remarks are not contradictory, at least not in the ordinary way of thinking.

Oedipus' marriage was a good one, too, so far as we can see. In their scenes together, husband and wife show affection and respect. We are given the impression that there had been years of happiness for all. Oedipus was excellent as a ruler, a husband and a father. (The scene with his daughters is very touching.) No one would have been the wiser—if *Apollo* had not acted. A deadly plague settled on the city. Then all Apollo had to say was that the killer of Laius must be found; for the rest he could depend on Odeipus' character. As the solver of the Sphinx's riddle and a conspicuously successful head of state, he naturally put a high value on the role of intelligence in overcoming difficulties. Nor was he arrogant or forgetful of the limitations of human understanding: he asks to be the instrument of Apollo's will. (He will act, he says, δρῶν, after he learns from the Pythian what he should do—with a pun on Πυθικά and πύθοιθ', 70–1.) He tries to disentangle himself from divinity only later, when Teiresias and the various announcements from Delphi suggest sheer chaos, a nightmare, a world gone mad.

The innocence of Oedipus is maintained right to the end of the play. His hope that seers and oracles could not be trusted is short-lived. It was not so wicked a lapse, after all. The chorus expresses its disapproval of this dodge, and it may be that Sophocles was conservative in his attitude toward oracles; but there is no suggestion that Apollo tricked Oedipus into patricide and incest in order to punish him for being capable, when oracles and seers start saying things that sound insane, of hoping that they could have got things wrong. Oedipus learns only that his relation to Apollo is—and had been all his life—quite different from what he had been led, by his general success in life, to believe that it was.

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2.

Emotionally we accept this extraordinary plot, apparently. It is deeply satisfying somehow, even though the mind may be puzzled or repelled by it. Could Plato be right that, whatever the mind makes of it after we leave the theater, the play really gets its power, in part at least, from an unconscious delight in the acts that Oedipus is tricked into?

Just before Dmitri Karamazov's trial, Alyosha visits Lise. She is screaming as usual, on and on, and then she says, "Listen, your brother is being tried now for murdering your father and everyone loves his having killed your father!" "Loves his having killed Father?" "Yes, loves it, everyone loves it! Everybody says it's so awful, but secretly they love it. I for one love it." And at the trial, the other brother, Ivan, who actually had killed their father, unconsciously (by giving the signal to the illegitimate fourth brother who lived under the stairs), cries out, "Who would not wish his father dead?" and throws the courtroom into an uproar. Maybe we really do secretly love Oedipus' having killed his father and made love to his mother, but like Alyosha and the others in the courtroom we rebel at the idea. The mind rejects it. Part of our pleasure in the *suffering* of Oedipus, therefore, may come from the need to punish ourselves for having loved what he had done. It has been discovered that we often dream in pairs: one dream allowing us to indulge in a forbidden pleasure, the other punishing us for this. And a child who knows that he has done something wrong can be made happy again by being given some palpable punishment that he considers just. Some people when they dream in pairs are tricky and have the punishment dream first so that they can really enjoy themselves in the forbidden part, but in dramas it is usual (though not inevitable)[4] to have the suffering follow the fulfillment, as in our childhood dealings with our parents. This kind of "justice," however, sometimes has a logic of its own, unlike our ordinary, conscious sense of right. Above all, its basic course is governed, not by a need for civic order, like the other kind, but by the demands of a desire *forbidden* by the *civitas*.

This aspect of tragedy seemed very important to Plato, as we have seen. He thought that dramas got their power by appealing to yearnings that the conscious mind rejected. Tragedies allow us to lapse back into the immoral world of our dreams even when our sense of right ought to be in command. Because Plato believed that mind was that part of the psyche that perceived the true well-being of the whole man, what the mind rejected was, in his eyes, inevitably dangerous. Tragedy "awakened" things in us

[4] Sophocles' *Electra* might be an example of a dangerous desire indulged in freely after it has been paid for by previous suffering.

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that ought to be left sleeping. And since he had an unusually vivid appreciation of misery that is due to having the wrong things in control within one's psyche, Plato was prepared to take drastic steps. He banned tragedy from his ideal community.

Plato's suggestion about the possible connection between imaginative literature and that unconscious part of our lives which can be detected in dreams, went unappreciated from his time almost to our own. Between Plato and the beginning of psychoanalysis very little indeed was said about our "loving" what Oedipus had done. A rhetorician in the Renaissance warns agains the "sin" of imagination. A nineteenth century member of the Plymouth Brethren forbids his son to read, hear, write, speak or think anything that cannot be assumed to be factually true (Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son.*) And the church from time to time manifested an instinctive distrust of fiction. On the whole, however, people simply did not believe that they loved what Oedipus had done. It was not bad people but the best and most high minded that appreciated great tragedy. There were naughty playwrights, like Euripides and Ibsen, but surely the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine and Goethe were unobjectionable, the crowning achievement of the greatest nations, works only the most sensitive and best educated could appreciate!

Aristotle was the first to try to reconcile the intellectual demands of the good man with his emotional response to a plot like that of the *Oedipus.* He simply did not believe that the critical faculties that we might bring to bear on a plot *after* the play is over are in abeyance during the performance. He agreed with Plato that our experience at a tragedy was pleasurable, but he denied that this was due to a secret indulgence in a forbidden yearning. He set out to discover what the "proper" pleasure of tragedy was. Partly, he decided, it was love of rhythm, melody, ornamental speech, and the like (though he did not explain why we like such things.) Then too, he thought, we have an irrepressible—and fortunate—liking for mimicry. All children learn by mimicking. Had Plato not said that? Plato had gone on to say that therefore we must not allow anyone to mimic foolish or trivial people—let alone men who commit incest and patricide. Ah, but all we are doing, says Aristotle, is delighting in the recognition that another's mimickings are true to life. What is so dangerous about that?

Neither Plato or Aristotle says in so many words that we identify, either consciously or unconsciously, with the protagonist, or have a parallel phantasy in which we suffer what the protagonist is suffering. Yet both come close to recognising this. Plato, in Book Ten of the *Republic,* speaks of the "pleasure" of indulging in unstinted grief when the protagonist is weeping. We *think* that we are weeping for the man depicted on the stage, he says, but really we are taking this as an excuse to indulge ourselves in a

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forbidden yearning. And Aristotle's theories of "fear" and of "imitation" would not make sense unless we assumed that we in the audience imagined ourselves in the protagonist's place. But Plato thought that the pleasure felt at tragedies was profound, so the yearnings that they awakened must also be profound. Aristotle, on the other hand, thought that the pleasure was a minor one and, far from undermining the mind's control over the whole psyche, left it refreshed—"cleansed" of excess pity and fear. Plato is forever asking *what* we are imagining ourselves as doing when we hear a story. Aristotle reduces the question to the quantity of pity and fear: the more the better. Does a play about patricide and incest produce the greatest pleasure? Then it must perform the function of refreshing the psyche uncommonly well.

But that is not quite all. If it is all right for good men to enjoy the *Oedipus*, then surely the plot cannot be entirely mad or contrary to the way a good man thinks of life or of the actions of the gods. Or so Aristotle assumed. And most lovers of literature have agreed with him in this. Surely Oedipus, not the immortal gods, must be responsible for the forbidden particide and incest! Otherwise the mind would revolt and the "proper pleasure" would not be achieved. But *of course* it revolts, say Plato—after we leave the theater and "wake up"!

3.

Sophocles was thought to be a pious man and heir to the role of Aeschylus in the education of his fellow Athenians. In the *Oedipus*, then, he may be supposed to have been saying something that appealed to the "minds" of his countrymen, something that made excellent sense in the light of day. Euripides was an angry man and an iconoclast; he deserved and got much mockery and abuse from Socrates and Aristophanes, and probably from others, too, of the older set. But surely not old Sophocles! Did the Athenians not twice elect him general—once, it is said, out of admiration for the understanding he showed in the *Antigone*? A naive reading of the *Oedipus* suggests that it has a Euripidean, not an Aeschylean plot: the story of a man who suffers cruelly at the hands of unjust gods. But surely, say the followers of Aristotle, this cannot be the right way to take the play.

Sophocles' reputation for piety was in fact very great indeed. Plutarch (*Numa* IV.6) say that he had ample evidence that Sophocles was host, while still alive, of the *daimôn* Asclepius. Pausanias (II, xxi,2) says that the god Dionysus appeared to the Spartan general and told him to pay his respects to "the new Siren," which he took to mean Sophocles who had recently died. (cf. the anonymous *Vita*, p. 130, Westermann, and Frazer on Pausanias *loc. cit.*) The scholiast on *Electra* 831 says that Sopho-

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cles was held to be a particularly religious man. He was probably made a priest in the cult of Asclepius (Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, ch. 29, Boissonade. The anonymous *Vita* also mentions the cults of Halon(?) and Heracles the Denouncer.) After he died he was himself worshipped as a *hêrôs* or *daimôn*, under the name Sophocles Dexion, "the Host," because he had been host to Asclepius (Philostratus, Life of *Apollonius* 3.17, Kayser, and Lucian, *Encomium of Demosthenes* ch. 27). We are lucky to have a gossipy account of Sopholces by a contemporary, Ion of Chios (quoted by Athenaeus, 13,603e): it shows him as witty and easy going, a confident member of the Establishment. Plutarch (*How the Young Man Should Study Poetry* 21F) seems to assume that Sophocles was an orthodox and unimaginative (that is to say, unphilosophical) believer in the Eleusinian mysteries. And then there is the well-known story about how Sophocles, in order to show his soundness of mind even in extreme old age, recited the ode in praise of Athens from his latest play, the *Oedipus at Colonus* (Cicero, *De senectute* 7.22 and many later places—see Jebb, *O.C.* p. xL, n. 1). The jury, which may have included some who voted for Socrates' execution not long afterwards, voted overwhelmingly for Sophocles. Even Plato seems to go easy on Sophocles. He mentions him by name only twice (*Republic* I, 329b, *Phaedrus* 269a), both times without a hint of disrespect. Surely, then, the *Oedipus*, correctly understood, cannot be the story of a man tormented by the gods for no discernible purpose and without any apparent justice whatsoever. Aristotle would seem to have had a lot on his side when he implied that the *Oedipus*, as a model play, avoided the shocking, "unclean," pattern of the downfall of a good man through no fault of his own, and exemplified instead the pattern of the downfall of a good man with some "major fault" in his character that led directly to his fall. In fact, so insidiously sensible is his suggestion that, whatever we feel while we are watching this play, as soon as it is over and the mind is in command again, we misremember what we saw and heard or we find ingenious ways to satisfy our need to make good "sense" of the action.

The theory that if Oedipus had been a better man he would not have found himself in this extraordinary situation—his father's murderer and his mother's lover—is held in a straightforward way less frequently now than it was only a few years ago. By a straightforward way I mean the identification of some genuine human weakness in Oedipus' character that led directly to his downfall. There are still many readers, however, who feel that Oedipus' anger, especially in his scenes with Teiresias and with Creon, is quite damning enough to account satisfactorily for our lack of outrage at his suffering in the dénouement. Let us, therefore, look at these two scenes.

Teiresias' opening speech (316ff.) is very odd for one who is

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famous for god-given wisdom. To have wisdom (*φρονεῖν*) when it is of no help to the possessor is a terrible thing (*δεινόν*); he had *forgotten* this, he says, otherwise he would not have come when summoned. He begs to be sent home again. Oedipus remarks that Teiresias' words make no sense, and, inasmuch as he has been asked to help lift the plague from the city, his response shows a surprising lack of gratitude toward the land that gave him life. Teiresias explains his silence in very obscure words. He notes that Oedipus has kept a timely silence himself, and says that he will do likewise so that *it* will not happen to him—"it" being apparently the experience (*μηδ' . . . παθῶ*) of uttering the untimely word. Teiresias is probably not under the impression that Oedipus already knows the truth and is deliberately concealing it, however, because in answer to the king's entreaty, in the name of "all these suppliants," to tell what he knows, Teiresias says "None of you understands!" He now says that he will *never* reveal his—which are also Oedipus'—troubles, *κακά*. Oedipus points out (with some passion, no doubt) that if Teiresias possesses the knowledge needed to save the city but refuses to divulge it, that must mean he wants the city to be destroyed. You will never get it from me, is all that the seer says. Oedipus calls him "basest of the base." Oedipus is really angry now, but he explains that such selfish stubbornness would anger a stone. Teiresias replies:

> You blamed my anger, but that that lives
> with you you have not seen—finding fault with me instead.
>
> *ὀργὴν ἐμέμψω τὴν ἐμήν, τὴν σὴν δ' ὁμοῦ*
> *ναίουσαν οὐ κατεῖδες, ἀλλ' ἐμὲ ψέγεις* (337–8)

Oedipus had not in fact blamed Teiresias' *anger, ὀργή*, only heartlessness and the possibility that he was harboring traitorous designs. Teiresias picks up the word *ὀργή* from Oedipus' statement that the seer would anger (*ἂν . . . ὀργάνειας*) a stone. What is Teiresias' meaning? He says, "You have not seen (or "noticed") that (literally "her," because the words for anger happens to be feminine) which (or "who") lives with you (the words for "lives with," *ὁμοῦ/ναίουσαν*, mean "cohabitate," "occupy the same dwelling or city" and naturally suggest a *person*, here a woman): *that* is why you look for the fault in me!" On the surface, Teiresias is saying that the real reason why he will not tell what he knows is that Oedipus harbors a violent temper of which he is unaware; but he is also saying (as Jebb saw) that the reason for his silence is Oedipus' ignorance of the identity of his wife.

Oedipus answers (reasonably enough, considering what he knows) that what Teiresias calls anger is just what anyone would feel upon hearing his homeland so dishonored. What will come will come, regardless of his silence, says Teiresias. Then why not

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speak? asks Oedipus. No, replies the seer, however savage this may make the king's anger (ὀργή). Indeed, so angry is he now, says Oedipus (ὡς ὀργῆς ἔχω), that he will spell out everything as he now sees it: Teiresias must have collaborated with the murderers of Laius. Now Teiresias in turn is angry. He tells Oedipus straight out that he is himself the object of his curse. He it is that killed the king and brought the plague. Once more, Oedipus' fury is quite reasonable, considering what he knew. Teiresias is talking without any sense of shame (ἀναιδῶς), he says.

Oedipus provokes Teiresias to say once more that he, Oedipus, killed Laius. Then the seer hints broadly at the incestuous marriage. Oedipus and Teiresias are equally passionate in their furious responses. They are each equally certain that the other is not telling the truth. Teiresias *happens* to be right, but, given what he knows, Oedipus' sense of what is going on is just as *reasonable.* Finally (378) Oedipus hits upon what seems like a shrewd guess —a theory that accounts for everything. Creon (who stands next in line were Oedipus to be deposed) must be the man behind Teiresias! His motives were surely the usual ones, money, power, envy (380). Another thought dawns on him (390): if Teiresias had a better sort of knowledge with his skill in birds than Oedipus had with his intelligence, why was it Oedipus and not the seer who saved the city from the Sphinx? A brilliant thought, actually. When Teiresias then gives a long and horrible description of what lies in store for Oedipus, the king is not shaken in his confidence: he orders Teiresias out of his sight (429). Once, a few lines later, Oedipus stops, intensely interested, when Teiresias mentions the king's parents. But when the seer then says more obscure and quite impossible sounding things, Oedipus gives up in weary exasperation. He clings to the thought that it *was* he, not the seer, who saved the city. Teiresias has the last word—quite a long speech, really. It is hard to say whether Oedipus waits until Teiresias is through and then goes in without a word, or whether he walks away at the beginning, leaving the blind man talking to the air.

The one time that the chorus spoke in this exchange (404–7), they said no more than that *both* men were obviously speaking in anger (ὀργῇ), and indicate that they therefore find neither side convincing. After Oedipus and Teiresias leave the stage they sing a brief ode, praying that the murderer of Laius be caught soon. They say they are disturbed by the strange accusations against their king, simply because of Teiresias' reputation. The accusations fit nothing that they know about Oedipus, however (490ff.), and they conclude that as things stand now, they cannot believe ill of their friend. Their main source of comfort is Oedipus' also: the *fact* that it was he, after all, who saved them from the Sphinx.

The scene with Creon follows immediately. Creon asks the chorus if it is true that Oedipus had accused him of treason

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(513 ff.). They reply by belittling the importance of the charge, suggesting that it came under the compulsion of anger (*ὀργῇ βιασθέν*). Oedipus returns (532) and speaks to Creon in energetic scorn. He is so completely convinced that Creon really must be plotting against him, the thought that Creon had neither money nor men enough to accomplish a successful *coup* only makes him jeer at his stupidity. In the exchange that follows Creon comes off a little better than Oedipus: his tone is one of slightly sententious, yet dignified pride. He *knows* he is innocent, a good man, a loyal friend. Oedipus, equally convinced that Creon is dissembling, snaps back sharply, unjustly. If you think that the possession of a stubborn will (*αὐθαδία*) unqualified by intelligence (*νοῦς*) is a good thing to have, says Creon (549 f.), your understanding is faulty (*οὐκ ὀρθῶς φρονεῖς*). If you think you can harm one close to you and get away with it, says Oedipus, *your* understanding is not good (*οὐκ εὖ φρονεῖς*). Oedipus then demonstrates to Creon why the evidence points toward him: Teiresias who had never mentioned Oedipus in connection with the murder of Laius all those years ago, now suddenly, after *Creon* had advised the king to send for the seer once more (555), accused him of this ancient crime for the first time. The accusation is false, says Oedipus, therefore suspicion must rest on Creon as the mover.

Creon in reply to this gives a long speech on the advantages of being, not the man in power, but the brother of the wife of the man in power (583–615). We must assume that Creon is sincere, but what a specious sounding argument this is! Once more, Oedipus happens to be wrong, but all reasonableness is on his side. The man is clever, says Oedipus; we must be alert and move quickly if we are not to be undone. Banishment? asks Creon. Death! Creon suggests that Oedipus has lost his wits (*οὐ γὰρ φρονοῦντά σ' εὖ βλέπω*, 626). On the contrary, says Oedipus, he understands exactly what must be done, for his own safety and the city's.

Suddenly Jocasta steps out from the palace. She scolds them both. Creon tells her what her husband meant to do to him; Oedipus tells her why. When Creon swears a great oath that he had done the king no harm, Jocasta turns to Oedipus and begs him to accept this oath—for her sake and the city's. The chorus take her side. Creon is an old and trusted friend, they say; surely he should not stand condemned on the strength of an unproved theory. Oedipus asks if they want him to be put to death or exiled. (For that is what would follow if the accusations of Teiresias were accepted.) In a long and moving oath, the chorus swears that that is the last thing that they want. Then let him go, says Oedipus, even if it means his own death or exile. He hates Creon still—he is convinced of his guilt, that is—but the chorus has moved him to compassion (669–72).

Certainly the words that dominate these scenes are "anger,"

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ὀργή and "understanding," φρονεῖν. Everybody, Teiresias, Creon and the chorus, tells Oedipus that his anger is standing in the way of his understanding. Oedipus does not deny that he is passionately worked up, but he does deny that this is damaging to his judgment. It is part of the equipment of an effective king: he must hate liars, plotters, enemies of the state. And surely he is correct—*in general.* This just happens to be a special case. Oedipus' rage is directed against targets that sound reason tells him must be dangers to the state. He is not selfish or perverse; merely wrong.

How seriously are we to take Teiresias' remark that he will not speak out because there is an anger lurking in Oedipus that Oedipus did not know was there (337–8)? Surely the fact that this statement is a grim *double entendre,* apparently fully intended as such by Teiresias even though none of his hearers could understand it, prevents us from taking the words quite at face value. The statement could be a reference to the anger of Oedipus those many years ago when he killed Laius (Oedipus himself says that he struck the old man "in anger," δι' ὀργῆς, 807), in the spirit of the seer's simultaneous reference to the incestuous marriage; but the question would still arise whether or not we should take this as the identification of a major flaw in the king's character. The fact is that Teiresias is not really in danger. The truth will stun Oedipus when it comes, then make him violate *himself,* not the bearer of the news. It is really Teiresias' *silence,* as he himself knows full well (344), that raises the king's fury to its highest pitch. And even then, Oedipus does not attack him except by accusing him publicly of plotting treason. In the end the king dismisses him with disgust. Even Creon, although Oedipus says that he will have him put to death, is not actually arrested. At the request of Jocasta and the chorus he agrees to do nothing—even though he assumes that his own life is jeopardized by this decision!

In these scenes, anyhow, it does not appear that Oedipus' understanding is really hurt by his anger. Teiresias, as the chorus points out, is just as angry. The chorus concludes that neither of them can be right, therefore. But they are wrong: Teiresias happens to be right. Both men were angry, both made accusations which sounded incredible. One turns out to have had real understanding, the other not. Their anger was simply irrelevant. The unearthly Sphinx was something that a native and a seer ought to have been able to deal with, Oedipus points out, yet he, a stranger, using his wits only, had had the requisite and saving understanding on that occasion. Now, when it is the question of a political murder, it is the seer, not the shrewd statesman, that can deal with that. But it is not Oedipus' *anger* that makes him wrong. It is just the way things are: the truth cannot be got at through intelligence.

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Everything turns on what Oedipus did at the place where the three roads meet, then. He says freely that he struck the rude driver "in anger" (δι' ὀργῆς, 807), but Laius' reaction to this—panic and a brutal determination to kill him by coming down on his head with an ax—was apparently utterly unexpected. "I killed them all," says Oedipus (κτείνω δὲ τοὺς ξύμπαντας, 813). Oedipus appears to relish the memory of his revenge. Neither he nor Jocasta nor the chorus show any interest in this story, however, except for the alarming possibility that that frightened, ill-tempered old man might have been the king. If Sophocles meant us to feel in this narrative that Oedipus to some significant extent deserved the accidental patricide and incest, he was surely far too delicate. To be against the qualities that Oedipus displays just makes no sense. The location of the cross-roads, incidentally, is another of Sophocles' innovations. He alone (so far as we know) puts it close to Delphi, under the shadow of Apollo. Apollo the destroyer rigged an impossible situation which Oedipus could have got out of (as Sophocles has him say in *Oedipus at Colonus*) only by letting himself be killed on the spot.

4.

Oedipus is called a *tyrannos*,[5] and everybody knows that Athenians, like ourselves, hated tyrants. Perhaps this is the way to explain our satisfaction at Oedipus' downfall, then. Yet as a tract on the evils of tyranny the *Oedipus* would be a spectacular failure. Oedipus, though nobody knows it, turns out in fact to be the legitimate ruler. And Sophocles' portrait of his gifts—vigorous (if violent) intelligence, conscientiousness, (even to the point of his own undoing), spectacular deciseveness, and not a little compassion— might make good propaganda for a monarchist pamphlet. True, Oedipus brought the plague and had to be deposed, but that hardly helps the democratic cause. We just get Creon as the next king.

The chorus at one point sings eloquently of insolence breeding tyranny (ὕβρις φυτεύει τύραννον, 873). Perhaps then Sophocles really did mean us to dislike Oedipus as being a *tyrannos*. If so, however, the play got out of hand. It is not easy to see why the chorus should choose this theme just then. Since their last ode they had watched the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon, the intervention of Jocasta, the long narrative by Oedipus, and Jocasta's suggestion, half believed by Oedipus, that oracles should not always be taken seriously. If Apollo's oracle cannot be trusted,

[5] The word is often used of any head of state not subject to democratic control, provided only that he did not come to power by inheritance. That it tended to carry unflattering overtones, however, is obvious from Thucydides, also *O.T.* 873 ff., discussed below.

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they say, why should they dance the sacred dance? (*τί δεῖ με χορεύειν*; 896). What is the connection between this and tyranny? Perhaps just that a vigorous and popular leader is more likely to trust his own intelligence, rather than omens and utterances from seers, than is the ordinary man. But Oedipus, who had been trying all his life to get a straight answer from Apollo, and who had always declared his willingness to fight on the side of the gods and the things they approve of, is not an obvious example of this fault. The chorus has just heard Oedipus say that Apollo once predicted that he would have sexual intercourse with his mother and be his father's murderer (*μητρί . . . μιχθῆναι . . . φονεὺς δ' ἐσοίμην τοῦ πατρός*, 791–3). Is it not outrageous of them then to pray that Apollo prove to be infallible? But of course they are thinking of Jocasta's "proof" that Apollo was wrong when he predicted Laius' death at the hand of his son. And yet even in that case is it pious to wish that the prediction had turned out to be literally correct?

The chorus would make a very confusing guide, in fact, if we took its attitudes as the correct ones. When the messenger comes with the announcement of the death of Polybus, Jocasta tries to get Oedipus to see that all predictions of the future are vain. It is best to accept life as it comes (*εἰκῇ κράτιστον ζῆν*, 979). People are always being unnerved by dreams and other portents, but that man lives most easily, she says, who takes such things as worthless (*ταῦθ' ὅτῳ/παρ' οὐδέν ἐστι, ῥᾷστα τὸν βίον φέρει*, 982–3). Oedipus is finally persuaded that this muse be correct at the very moment when Jocasta sees that it is *not* correct. As Jocasta realizes that the chorus got its wish—all of the oracles and the pronouncements from the seer are right—Oedipus, who is still missing one piece of information, is wonderfully relieved. How magnificent to be the son of chance (*τύχη*, 1080)! All these grim pronouncements from Apollo need not have upset him after all! And where is the chorus in this? Entirely on Oedipus' side. Gone suddenly is all their pious hope that oracles could be trusted.

5.

Another line of thought has occurred to some readers. Perhaps it is not Oedipus as an individual human being who has a fault that led inevitably to catastrophe, but something else that Oedipus is representing—Athenian hegemony or pride in secular learning. And it appears to be quite true that Sophocles has chosen words again and again to bring out associations that Athenians might have with Pericles, or the empire (which Pericles called a *tyrannis*, according to Thucydides), or humanism, or the new science. Only in *Prometheus Bound*, which is certainly concerned in part with man's struggle for dignity and independence through in-

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genuity and self-reliance, are there so many of the terms that are commonly found in medical writings, physicists, and the like. And in no other play are there so many (albeit delicate, subliminal) parallels between the working assumptions of the protagonist and those of the men in command of Athens' destiny at the time of the first performance. It is not impossible that a little shudder went through the audience when Oedipus boasted, "But I, when I came along, Oedipus who had no knowledge, stopped the Sphinx, finding the answer by my wits, not learning it from birds!"

ἀλλ' ἐγὼ μολών,
ὁ μηδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπους, ἔπαυσά νιν,
γνώμῃ κυρήσας οὐδ' ἀπ' οἰωνῶν μαθών. (396–8)

Certainly at the end of the play he knows only one thing (καίτοι τοσοῦτόν γ' οἶδα, 1455), that his own ingenuity is and always had been worthless. Perhaps then Sophocles is not showing us a flaw in Oedipus himself so much as a flaw in Modern Man.

Anxiety about the things that had recently led men to trust themselves and not the omens, that the tendency was wicked and a little dangerous, may well be part of the play. Efforts to make intellectual sense of the main action on these lines, however, have not been successful. The political references are lost on a modern audience, when the play is put on in translation, and yet the tragedy still grips the imagination in these circumstances. As for the new science, the "sin" of Oedipus and Jocasta in hoping that predictions of the future prove to be impossible, that all is "chance," throws out not only divination but also physics, medicine, statecraft—the lot. The fear that our daily reliance on secular intelligence may be less sound than we hope it is, is surely tapped in the *Oedipus*, but in a very strange way, after all. We are shown good men trying to do good things by means of their intelligence, and what the god intended for them was senseless, destructive and contrary even to "religion." This play would make a very strange tract in support of the thesis that modern man is wicked to rely on intelligence and should instead rely on dreams and omens.

6.

And yet, stung by Aristotle's question, people still do look for a flaw somewhere—or if not a flaw, exactly, some significant connection, at least, between the kind of man that Oedipus was and the things the gods predicted he would do. If a reader broods long enough, this thought may finally occur to him: should any man who is told by an oracle what Oedipus was told, ever, under any circumstances, kill any man at all, especially a man old

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enough to be his father, or sleep with any woman old enough to be his mother? The only alternative at the crossroads may have been to let himself be killed; well, maybe that is what he should have done. As for marrying Jocasta, what was so difficult about getting out of that? Perhaps we could even bring Freud in at this point. Oedipus did not know the true identity of Laius and Jocasta, but all older men whom we resent are our fathers and all women whom we desire are our mothers. The fact that he went ahead and killed Laius and married Jocasta even after he had been told that he would kill his father and take his father's place in his mother's bed shows that he really did have a flaw. If you do not like the Freudian part you can say that it was just bad thinking; if Freud is to your taste, you can say his flaw was that he had not grown out of the stage where the Oedipus complex ruled his actions. Despite the warning and the doubt about his parentage, or maybe *because* of them, he found the killing of the older man an exhilarating experience ("I made short work of him; I hit him with my staff held in this hand, and he rolled clean out of the carriage and lay there on his back!") (*συντόμως / σκήπτρῳ τυπεὶς ἐκ τῆσδε χειρὸς ὕπτιος / μέσης ἀπήνης εὐθὺς ἐκκυλίνδεται*, 810–12), and when he met Jocasta he successfully suppressed all memory of the oracle or the taunt. Do not their scenes together show that Oedipus quite liked the mother type? At last we have found a flaw.

But this theory has the same difficulty as the last one. It cannot be used to square the plot with Aristotle's demand for a modicum of justice. For justice in quite a usual sense is what his notion of the best kind of plot requires. (In Ireland the censorship of the cinema comes under the Ministry of Justice; both Plato and Aristotle would have approved.) Now the question is this: does Oedipus suffer from Oedipal weaknesses—or forgetfulness and bad reasoning, if you prefer—*more* than the rest of us, or only to the degree that we are all liable to these faults? Surely, whatever we may conclude in the quiet of our study, we are given no reasons *during the play* for feeling that he was strikingly abnormal in these respects. In the case of the previous theory we noticed that there was nothing really wrong about Oedipus' reliance on his intelligence, that no attractive alternative was offered; so also here, there would seem to be nothing unusual about Oedipus' feelings toward (or his ability to think about) his parents or those who take his parents' place in later life. And unless we can show that Oedipus was significantly different from the rest of us in these respects, we cannot assume that our intellectual demand for justice has been satisfied. His fate was infinitely worse than ours; justice demands that his fault must therefore have been worse than ours as well. That is, if it is true that we are all *equally* guilty—that we really "loved" Oedipus' doing what he did—then the feeling of rightness must come, not from

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the perception of justice in the ordinary sense, but from the satisfaction of our need for *self*-punishment because we have ourselves harbored these Oedipal feelings. But then we have capitulated to Plato: the tragedy gets its power from letting us indulge ourselves unconsciously in yearnings that the mind knows must be rejected. If the only difference between Oedipus and you and me is that, by a sheer accident or the malevolent interference of divinity, not because of any unusual weakness at all, he actually did what we all have wished to do, then this is still the kind of plot that Aristotle said was shocking or "unclean": a man who was as good as men *can* be was brought to ruin through no fault of his own.

This theory depends, then, on the assumption that Sophocles has presented the story in such a way as to make us feel that Oedipus, had he been a better man, would have done anything rather than kill an older man or make love to an older woman. But surely the plot is so constructed as to prevent us effectively from thinking, during the performance, about the various ways in which we, if we were in Oedipus' place, might have avoided doing what he did. If such thoughts occur to us they come long after the play is over and in response to Aristotle's kind of question. And indeed, Sophocles, years later, wrote another play about Oedipus in which the blind, old outcast bitterly defends his innocence both in the killing and in the marriage (*O.C.* 960ff.). For the purposes of that play, anyhow, Oedipus is assumed to have been guilty of no lack of judgment, self-control or perspicacity. The apologia is very full and very earnest; could it be that Sophocles had become aware of the possibility that people could misunderstand Oedipus' innocence (when they *thought* about the story, that is), and that he wanted to make certain that such preconceptions would not complicate the response to his new drama?

Still, once raised, it is difficult to get these doubts out of our head. Oedipus had had a strong clue to the effect that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents. They themselves declared indignantly that they were his parents, and Apollo, when asked, just avoided the question. But there it was: Oedipus was told by Apollo that he would commit incest and patricide and he had had *some* reason to believe that he did not yet know the identity of his parents. Was it not astonishing that he should have forgotten this the next day (or maybe in the same day) when he killed that older man, and again a day or so later when he agreed to marry that older woman? It is implied that he never told Jocasta any of this in the sixteen or so years of their married life. Aristotle took these facts as merely "improbable" and commended Sophocles for putting them "outside" the action depicted on the stage. Apparently he did not locate Oedipus' flaw in these events, therefore. A modern reader might be tempted to find it there, however.

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Indeed, if we think about it, Oedipus' actions seem to be those of a very sick man.

And yet if we go back to the play again, thoughts like these just disappear. Oedipus is not a sick man. Once he has been reminded of the old predictions, when horrible conclusions begin to work up to the surface in his mind, he has a rather bad attack of nerves. "He agitates his mind too much," Jocasta tells the chorus, "over every sort of grief. Nor does he, like a man of sense, conclude from past experience what he should do next. He is at the mercy of any man who speaks of fearful things."

ὑψοῦ γὰρ αἴρει θυμὸν Οἰδίπους ἄγαν
λύπαισι παντοίαισιν· οὐδ' ὁποῖ' ἀνὴρ
ἔννους τὰ καινὰ τοῖς πάλαι τεκμαίρεται,
ἀλλ' ἔστι τοῦ λέγοντος, ἢν φόβους λέγῃ. (914–17)

But this is hardly enough to convince us that we have a man here with a criminal or neurotic tendency toward patricide and incest. It is indeed an "improbability" that Oedipus should have married Jocasta within days of his visit to Delphi, but Aristotle is right: Sophocles deftly puts that detail outside of our consideration and concern while we are watching the play. Oedipus is an unusual and wonderful man, unique in many ways—but not in this way, at least not to a noticeable degree. It was important for the plot that he should have some doubt, be haunted by a nagging fear and have some reason never to go "home"; but Sophocles arranged this without giving us a reason for doubting Oedipus' ability to cope with the universal sexual puzzle *at least* as well as the rest of us do.

7

Suppose that Oedipus had "reverently" accepted Apollo's horrible predictions. What would he have done then? Return to Corinth, murder Polybus and rape old Merope? True, the oracle did not command; it merely predicted. What should he have done, then, when he was offered Jocasta's hand? He might (having been alerted by his very recent concern about the identity of his parents and by the extraordinary verses from Apollo) have subjected her to a careful questioning. Suppose he had concluded that here indeed must be his mother. It would not have been hard. She had had one son who would have been just about Oedipus' age had she not exposed him as an infant. (Jocasta has no hesitation about recalling that incident.) How sure was she that her son died? Well, she had not seen the corpse, but his ankles had been pierced and his feet tied together. Pierced angles? He had pierced ankles himself—an old trouble. He got his name from it. By the way, how did she say the boy's father died? Aha! That old man

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at the place where three roads meet! If Jocasta was his mother, then one half of the prediction had come true already! What should they do now—reverently fulfill the other half? Or should they prove the oracle *half*-wrong, anyhow, by refusing to go through with the marriage?

The absurdity of these questions shows why Sophocles could not afford to dwell on this part of the story. He takes pains to make Oedipus' moves seem as natural as possible. Certainly his decision not to go back to Corinth is presented as just what anybody would do. And it is important to remember that no Greek automatically assumed that every oracle, even every oracle from Delphi, meant exactly what it said. Sophocles' friend Herodotus (I, 6ff., 26ff.) tells with delight the story of how Croesus, a foreign king after all, was ruined by his assumption that Apollo's words carried one clear meaning. Apollo could be very tricky sometimes. Why had he not answered Oedipus when he asked him who his parents were? Nor had Apollo been all that clear about the plague. The chorus says that surely it was now up to the god to give them the name of the assassin (278). Oedipus replies—from his own experiences, one can imagine—that unfortunately no one can force the gods to do what is not in their plans. Jocasta later (724–5) says that only when the god is ready will he act: there is nothing one can do about it. As Heraclitus says (fr. 93), the god at Delphi neither quite explains nor hides —he gives a sign. Instant recognition of the meaning of an oracle was not expected, and an easy, literal interpretation was statistically improbable. When the answer seemed to be in one's favor, as in the case of Croesus, one had better beware; when it seemed ominous, one could at least hope that it did not mean exactly what it said.

If the veracity of the oracles had depended on their most apparent, literal meaning, their reputations would not have lasted very long. On little things, like border disputes or penances, Apollo could give straight, unambiguous answers; but not on things where he might be wrong, and therefore be discredited. It was accepted that a prediction could be considered to have been true even if the words had to be interpreted in a sense that no one could have imagined at the time. Hippias, for instance, dreamt that he would make love to his mother—and dreams, like oracles were thought to be portents sent by gods. He supposed, good Freudian that he was, that this meant that he would be successful in his invasion of his homeland. (Compare Freud's trouble in entering Rome.) It did not turn out that way; nevertheless the portent was interpreted as having been correct because a tooth fell out and stuck into his native soil! (Herodotus VI, 107.) Even the most conservative could, without fear of impiety, wonder what an oracle would turn out later to have meant. One started with a literal interpretation of the verses, but then won-

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dered if the words were not intended in some other sense—as with the "wooden walls" during the Persian invasion, for instance. Apollo said that Socrates was the wisest of all mortals, but Socrates took this announcement to be true only in a very private sense. He conceived it to be a service to the god to go around and demonstrate that he was *not* the wisest in the way that anybody but Socrates would take the word "wise." Nor did this kind of game seem to the ancients to be unworthy of serious literature. There are plenty of examples in the very best authors. The harpies tell Aeneas that he will someday be forced to "eat his tables"; modern readers of Vergil are likely to be disgusted when they find that the prediction comes true, but that the "tables" are not wood, but cakes. (*Aeneid VI*, 106 ff.)

Bad words, once out, if they are not to undermine our courage, must be made harmless somehow. This is the way of superstition. One knocks on wood or mutters "omen absit." Or, if a curse or grim prediction comes from a dying man or a god, we may be sure that it will come to pass, but we can always harbor the hope that it will not be terrible. Peter wept bitterly, we are told, when he first realized, at the crowing of the cock, that three times that night he had denied that he was a member of Christ's company; but we can guess that he was also relieved that he had not "denied" Christ in a graver sense. Oedipus, when he first hears about the death of Polybus is sad, but also relieved. He toys with the idea that perhaps the oracle had been correct even though his father had died through no violence and while he, Oedipus had been far away. The explanation would be that Polybus had pined for him and died of a broken heart (969–70). Oedipus concludes, understandably, that if this is correct, then we need hardly allow ourselves to be upset by oracles.

A minute later, however, Oedipus *is* upset by the thought of the other half of the prediction. How was that to be explained? One never could rule out entirely the possibility that oracles meant exactly what they said. That is why he had not returned to Corinth, after all. And in fact, of course, every prediction in this play turns out not only to have been correct, but literally so, horribly, without any saving trickiness for once. Should Oedipus have assumed from the start that this would be so? What vision of the gods or of justice would that have implied? Oedipus, like Socrates, assumed that life made sense. Is that an impious thought? No; merely wrong, according to the *Oedipus*.

And there was another problem. Even those who supposed that the gods were never wrong might have their doubts about the ability of priests or seers (certain ones or all of them) to pass on or to interpret the gods' words. This was Plato's opinion, although he did certainly have great respect for the priests at Delphi (*Laws V*). Jocasta, when she saw a case where Apollo's prediction turned out to be completely wrong (as she thought) con-

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cluded that the ministers of the god were probably to blame (712). The world was full of prophecies, after all, that were given very different weight or interpretations by different men. The Spartans and the Athenians had each cited ancient curses to prove that the other's leaders should be driven out. Pericles was one of the intended victims (Thucydides I, 127.1). Plutarch says that the charge only made the people more loyal to him (*Pericles* 33.1–2). The story of one of these curses, by the way, includes an excellent illustration of the impossibility of knowing whether or not one has interpreted Apollo correctly (Thucydides I, 126.5. For the role of Apollo in the curse against the Spartans see I, 134.4). Thucydides complains about the way oracles were cited, altered, remembered, forgotten or re-interpreted, according to what happened later (II, 54; II, 8.2). He gives only one example of an oracle that was realized literally and unambiguously, and at that he has to fudge the evidence a bit (V, 26.3–4). It is true that Jocasta and then Oedipus himself, as they struggle with the strange predictions that have caused them so much worry over the years, inch, finally, a little too close to scepticism. The chorus is upset (863, ff.). For if it is impossible to accept any prophecy as a straightforward statement, and if one can in fact never know from a priest's report what the god wants us to do or what he has in store for us, then reverence for the gods is made very difficult. But neither Oedipus nor Jocasta doubts long that a divine will is working in the events, however they may hope that the priests have been mistaken in their interpretations. Their exultation in the thought that life was just a series of chances—an exultation shared by the chorus—is short lived.

In the end, the chorus' earlier pious hope that the oracles be vindicated comes to pass. The messages from Delphi—all of them, even the strange ones sent long ago—turn out to have been, not only genuine, but quite ungarbled and in need of no tricky interpretation. Was Sophocles a fundamentalist, then? Does he want to suggest that all oracles are always literally correct? And was it Oedipus' flaw that he had not seen this? There may have been an odd Euthyphro in the audience who derived a pious satisfaction along these lines, but surely they were in the minority. Given the great number of oracles abroad in the Greek world, also the cryptic or partisan nature of many of them, literal acceptance of all utterances from sources supposed to be divine was not a possible creed. And besides, the *Oedipus* would make a strange tract in support of such a cause. One could just as easily draw the conclusion that we would be well advised never ever to enquire of Delphi about anything. Oracles *must* come true in plays, after all. You cannot have a man whispering hoarsely in Act One, "Beware the Ides of March," then have nothing happen when the Ides come in Act Two. And when it was to Sophocles' purpose, as it was in the *Women of Trachis,* to have a prediction come true in

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a sense contrary to what was expected, he did not hesitate to use this all too common phenomenon.

It is important for this play that all of the improbable, senseless, outrageous predictions come true according to the plainest meaning of the words. But the importance lies in the surprise. It makes all these horrible occurrences not just coincidences but the workings of a divine machinery. The Sphinx, the plague, Teiresias and the Pythian are all instruments of Apollo's presence. What was the Sphinx doing there, anyhow? Apparently she started terrorizing Thebes just *after* the death of Laius. What function did she serve? She straddled Oedipus' path. Then when she had demonstrated in a spectacular way to all of Thebes that here was an ideal person to take Laius' place, she mysteriously destroyed herself. The Pythian sent Oedipus into the path of his father, the Sphinx facilitated the incestuous marriage,[6] Teiresias was vouchsafed information only when it could do no one any good, and the plague was sent in order that the victims should not have the benefit of ignorance. No wonder Oedipus refers to his crimes as *πάθεα*, things done to him as opposed to things that he had done (1330)! This is not only a clear example of the kind of play that Aristotle said would be shocking or "unclean," it is the most cruelly self-conscious example of Greek literature.

8.

But then how are we to explain Sophocles' reputation for great piety? The Athenians who grumbled when Euripides portrayed the gods as immoral and arrested Socrates when they believed that he had substituted a private *daimôn* for the state's gods heaped honors and affection on Sophocles. How did he get away with it?

A number of people have noticed that Sophocles shows a liking for stories about the martyred dead who had become local chthonic divinities, minor *daimones* who were often worshipped as sources of great blessings. The fact that he regularly shows these heroes suffering cruelly through no fault of their own evidently bothered the Athenians no more that the depiction of Christ's undeserved miseries upsets Christians. On the contrary, this is the kind of story that religious people like. There is only one reference in the *Oedipus* to the protagonist's eventual deification, and that is when he looks forward to an unnatural death, a terrible evil, *δεινὸν κακόν* (1457). Later, however, Sophocles wrote another play actually depicting the transfiguration of the aged and rejected Oedipus

[6] The earliest plastic representations of the Sphinx that have survived are some dedicated to Apollo at Delphi.

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into a *daimôn*. His tomb, which was held sacred in Sophocles' time and long afterwards (see Pausanias I, 28.7 and Frazer's notes) was right in Athens—in Colonus, in fact, which was Sophocles' own district. It was associated with the Furies, guardians of familial justice, and was thought to be a mighty protection against invaiders.

The fact that Oedipus in the earlier play refers to his future death as evil and not good is the very essence of Sophocles' religious insight. The important thing is that the tomb be that of a man who had suffered unjustly. There must be no softening circumstance. Christ, of course, knew that he would soon be in heaven, but if he had allowed this though to ease his burden, his martyrdow would not have been so efficacious in relieving readers of *their* burdens. And so it is said that Christ cried out on the cross, "Lord, Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?" Sophocles has a similar problem in the story of Antigone. She was a bit too sure that she was going to be rewarded for heroism after she was dead. He, too, has his martyr waver at the end and wonder fearfully whether or not she knew what she was doing.

The *Ajax* is probably the earliest of the surviving plays of Sophocles. It is the story of an excellent man suffering pitiable and totally unmerited[7] degradation at the hands of men and gods alike. Ajax commits suicide in the middle of the play. The remainder of the action consists of a fight over the custody of the body. Sophocles' preoccupation with the tomb and the spirit of a man unjustly treated is unusually clear. The Athenians knew well where Ajax was: he was in Salamis, just off the coast of Attica, dispersing benevolence to all the countryside around.

Not all of Sophocles' plays—not even all of the handful that have survived—are of this pattern. Some of them probably get their power from quite different sources. But unmerited suffering is very common, anyhow (e.g. *Antigone, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes*), as it is in all tragedy. And the preoccupation with chthonic *daimones* like Ajax, Oedipus, Orestes, Theseus, Philoctetes and others is obvious. In a way, *Oedipus at Colonus* has the place among Sophocles' works that *The Brothers Karamazov* has among the works of Dostoevsky: it seems to be the play that Sophocles has been trying to write all his life. The despised and

[7] Athena (127) and Calchas (762) both condemn Ajax as a criminal, as do the sons of Atreus, of course; but it is clear from the last speech before his suicide that Ajax does not agree, and Sophocles, mainly through the words and attitudes of Odysseus, makes us side with him. What would have happened in Book One of the *Iliad* if, when Achilles drew his sword against the son of Atreus, Athena had not cared for him and stopped him but had hated him and made him mad instead? Would this automatically have made Achilles a criminal? In the hands of some authors, yes, but not of Sophocles, surely.

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rejected Oedipus, precisely *because* he did not deserve the misery and horror that he suffered so long, is transformed before our very eyes into a *daimôn* who would bless the land.

Are we to think of Ajax and the Oedipus of the earlier play as blessed now, enjoying a reward for their ill treatment in life? Though Heracles, like Christ, rose from the dead and all is well with him now, and the aged, purified Oedipus in Sophocles' last play became all fire and air before he disappeared in the mysterious woods, the general tone of the earlier plays suggests that it is our shock at finding that the suffering was not and could not be made up to them that gives the heroes their strange beauty. And if we dwelled on the thought that all had been settled with them now, that might let us feel less disturbed and so less moved. That is why, at the end of *Oedipus the King*, the presentiment of his unusual fate must come to Oedipus in the form of an evil, not a reward.

Belief in the reality of the divinity depicted in stories of this sort—whether Christ or Oedipus—is apparently not necessary in order to be moved. What is needed is an identification (undoubtedly unconscious in the main) with the protagonist, and a willingness to accept the proof that "we" are not the author of "our" wretchedness. Far from being a shocking or "unclean" plot, it is the most cathartic of them all. It is a thrilling lightening of our burdens, if only for a moment.[8]

Euripides also favored this kind of plot and often brought it off very well. In Artemis' parting speech to Hippolytus (in which she tells him, among other things, that he will be worshipped as a *daimôn* after death), there is a nice balance between heartlessness and dignity. For in such a story the god *must* be the destroyer. Sometimes, however, as in the *Orestes*, he seems to have brought out one of the plot's logical consequences just a little too clearly: he portrayed the gods, not as fearful and inscrutable merely, but as beings who were obviously loathsome, unfeeling, unhealthy, even insane. Apparently the line must be drawn very carefully if believers are not to be shocked. It is not too difficult to imagine a re-telling of the passion of Christ which would upset a Christian: one in which the omnipotent father's decision to send his son to be stripped, whipped, spat on and nailed between two thieves suddenly looked difficult to justify. One can imagine how Euripides might have told the story.

Both Plato and Aristotle, like Euripides, seem to have thought

[8] This assertion, that conscious belief in the historicity of the protagonist is of less importance than unconscious identification with him, or the generation of a phantasy parallel with his experiences, obviously requires more defense. I shall take the question up at length in Part III of this paper.

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about such stories logically. They asked why we should not find them revolting, "unclean." Plato decided that there was a part of us that revelled in the revolting and the unclean. This is not the whole truth, obviously. But Aristotle's solution was surely worse: he denied, in the teeth of the poets' words, that there was any *real* injustice in these stories at all. He simply did not believe what he saw on the page.

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