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Oedipus - detective and psychoanalyst?[*]

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Prologue of Oedipus Rex, highlighting not only the plot of the self-recognition of Oedipus (in search of himself). What is at stake objectively speaking in this play? Is there not a realistic level of meaning on which Oedipus' subtle ears detect unsettling signs of real plotting in the behavior of the other characters of the play (Creon and Jocasta mainly)? In this perspective, the oracle my be considered by Oedipus as a means of investigating Creon's thoughts, memories and deductions - rather than as a revelation of divine truth. This first scene introduces the reader into the discovery of a real detective story, which is part of the famous tragedy.

Key-words

Oedipus Rex*; Sophocles; psychoanalysis.*

Resumo

Este artigo analisa o Prólogo de Édipo Rei*, destacando não apenas o enredo da auto-identificação de Édipo (em busca dele mesmo). O que está em jogo, falando objetivamente, nesta peça? Não há um nível realista de significado no qual os ouvidos sutis de Édipo detectam sinais perturbadores de conspiração verdadeira no comportamento de outros personagens da peça (principalmente Creonte e Jocasta)? Nesta perspectiva, o oráculo pode ser considerado por Édipo como uma forma de investigar os pensamentos, lembranças e deduções de Creonte – ao invés de uma revelação da verdade divina. Esta primeira cena apresenta o leitor à descoberta de uma verdadeira história de detetive, que faz parte da famosa tragédia.*

Palavras-chave

Édipo Rei; *Sófocles; Psicanálise*.

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We all know, and somehow loathe, Freud's idiosyncratic reading of Oedipus Rex. Rediscovering his childhood passion for his mother and the resulting jealousy and wrath against his father, Freud reads the Greek tragedy through the filter of this supposedly universal incest dilemma and derives the greatness and emotional impact of the drama from the spectators' unconscious knowledge of the hero's conflict[1]. Needless to say, we won't come back to this rather transferential projection, this anti-historical and anti-artistic comprehension. A century after the well discussed and refuted Freudian reading, psychoanalysis does not need Sophocles any more to justify its theory and practice.

On the contrary, psychoanalysis is independent enough to admit what Freud himself believed: that the discovery of the psychoanalytical unconscious is part of the progressive *poetic* discovery of deep-seated, unconscious complexities, which appear as forces outside the subject's or hero's willpower and intentions – in the strange, savage and enigmatic formulations of poetic language. Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche and Schnitzler are Freud's most famous precursors. Their translations, dramas and theories have been recognized as the poetic correlative of Freud's discovery of the unconscious. Their readings of tragedy and comprehension of drama pay more attention to the language games - which occur involuntarily in life, but are intentionally used by the poet in order to bring out the complicated superpositions (acavalamentos, encastelamentos) of contradictory laws, duties and orders, desires and intentions, whose conciliation is difficult or impossible to achieve.

It is now easier to see than it was for Freud that tragic ambiguity has many sources. Political, social, and religious complexities distort the language of tragic heroes just as much as emotional conflicts do. Reading in perspective Hölderlin and Nietzsche, Freud, Knox, Dodds, Loraux and Lacan, Vernant, Segal, Pucci, Easterling and B. Williams and so many other scholars, it should be possible to add their

[1] Letter no. 71 to Fliess, Vienna 15th October, 1897. *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904*, translated and edited by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Belknap Press, Cambridge, 1985. p. 272. "Ihave found, in my own case too, (the pohenomenon of) being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood… but the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy, and each recoiled in horror from the dream-fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one."

contributions to the understanding of ambiguous art and artifacts and make their knowledge fructify together, rather than make their approaches compete.

Even within psychoanalysis, attention has spread out from the (all too simple) *Lustprinzip* towards the pre-oedipal structures of 'free floating anguish' due to 'helplessness' and the ambiguous (schizoid-paranoïc) defense mechanisms. These Kleinian and Lacanian hypotheses of the 'paranoid" or alienated' constitution of human subjectivity confirm the linguistic and structural shifts which have proved so illuminating in historical anthropology. We will show that the now classical (Knoxian) reading of *Oedipus Rex* as an investigation shaped on Greek tribunal customs and political patterns can be fruitfully complemented by a more aesthetic reading, attentive to Sophocles' elaboration of emotional ambiguity. The intense use of puns and wordplays, corresponding images, assonances, etc. shows, however, that there is a deeper and more subtle investigation of the (aesthetic and poetical) logic of implicit (unspeakable) feelings[2].

According to Aristotle[3], the very specific tragic feelings pity and terror (*eleos, phobos*) arise where right and wrong are not clearly distinguishable. The hero is neither an example of virtue, nor of vice, but of the frightful (d*einos*) instability of ethical patterns and *eudaimonia*. In one of his essays on myth and tragedy, Prof. Pucci has shown how this blurring of frontiers is artistically elaborated[4]. In successive stages of the Aeschylian tragedy, the hero, Agamemnon, who at moments was considered utterly wrong, proves (by his success in war, or his supernatural powers after his death) to be cherished by the gods. Clytemnestra's triumph, which seemed to prove her right of vengeance of Iphigenia's death, dwindles when the anguish of her dream takes over and confirms her sacrifice to be a sacrilege.

"Aeschylus dichotomizes in order to produce the opposition of laws, rights and justice at the same time as these opposed principles show affinities so deep that they cannot be separated nor distinguished." (Europe, 219). Building on Aeschylus' poetic

[2] Cf. F. Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus* , pp. 168 ss. On the imaginary and linguistic links between *phantasia* and fear; cf. also the chapter "The Interpreter of Fears" pp. 169 ss.. Cf. also Pietro Pucci, *Oedipus and the Fabrication of the Father,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
[3] Cf. Aristote, *La poétique*, (Dupont-Roc et Lallot, éd.), Paris, Seuil, 1980; chapter 13, on the 'specific effect' (1452 b 28 ss.) and the 'intermediary case' of the hero (1453a 7 ss.).
[4] Pietro Pucci, "Écriture tragique et récit mythique", in: *Europe. Revue littéraire mensuelle*, janvier-février 1999, pp. 209-234.

achievement, Sophocles develops an "enigmatic writing" and a poetic "dialectics of conscience" (Pucci 222) which intertwines these dichotomies in ever more subtle and cunning ways. Nicole Loraux analyzed this poetic construction of enigma in its linguistic consistency, as a 'tragic grammar' developed by deliberate distortions of the normal linguistic habits in order to produce the tragic effect: paradoxical and ambiguous emotions.

From Aeschylus' conflict between heterogeneous laws (the Erinyes' matriarchal right to vengeance as opposed to Athena's and Zeus' patriarchal prerogatives) to Sophocles' much more humanly ambiguous drama, we observe a shift from two conflicting justices (and the different language games, or rhetoric attached to these laws) to a conflict within the law and within the language themselves.

My argument will be that *Oedipus Rex* is among the finest tragedies and probably one of Sophocles' finest plays because this fictional character invented by the poet's extraordinary skill compresses into highly *ambiguous human* feelings, actions, thoughts and laws the tensions and ambiguities which used to be represented through *competing divine* forces. Paying more attention to this extraordinary fictional achievement, we can avoid the trap of the mythical reading - which still occurs, again and again, even among the best scholars - and which reduces the plot to a conflict between human investigation, rational but blind, and divine truth dictated and proclaimed by the oracle.

Against this mythological comprehension of the tragedy, this essay will concentrate on Sophocles' subtle alterations of the archaic stereotypes in order to reduce the naïve opposition of divine and human spheres. The first step of this analysis presents the cunning twist that Sophocles introduces into the traditional conception of the oracle: divine or demonic-cosmic power is not reigning any longer **over** humans, because tragic poetry presents the divine operating **within** the human action. There is a clear enlightenment tendency in this tragedy – which is precisely the atmosphere which enchanted Freud. The father of psycho-analysis, as we know, identified himself with Oedipus' relentless search for truth – even when this search means that we have to fight our own blind spots and the (half deliberate) forgetfulness of others.

Before starting the analysis of the text, I would like to point out that Sophocles chose for this play a rather exceptional hero. Oedipus is both a warrior-hero and an

intellectual and a wise king (Oedipus-philosopher[5]), which is an unusual detail in Greek mythology. This choice leads to an exceptional construction: an investigation in which everything depends on the perception of either unsaid things (which may transpire in gestures, looks, hesitations) or of ambiguous double meanings, Freudian slips, redundancy and hesitation, strange rhythms of pronunciation or too slow delivery of speech, etc..

I will start with the Prologue of the play – which is normally understood as the revelation of divine truth. Even the best scholars, who explain the context of Greek Enlightenment, tend to accept Creon's Delphic message as a fatality which the gods or Destiny imposed on Oedipus and Thebes. I will show, however, that this reading, which may be true in other versions of the myth, is slanted by Sophocles' oblique treatment of the story. Paradoxical obliqueness suggests that, under the mythical trappings, there is a modern detective story[6]. So far, my reading does not differ from what has been said by several renowned scholars. However, I would like to emphasize Sophocles' poetic cunning when he elaborates *his* Oedipus as an intrinsically ambiguous figure: simultaneously strong and weak, triumphant and fragilized. Not only when it comes to his princely status is Oedipus insecure (as Knox has stressed). Already in the very first lines of the Prologue, Oedipus *at the same time* seems to embody *both* the assurance and security he offers, like a powerful father, to the helpless children of the city, *and* the exact opposite of assurance and strength. He emphasizes explicitly that he is totally at a loss, not knowing what to think and how to proceed. He suddenly descends to the same level as the supplicants (vv. 65 ff.), admitting that, like the rest of Thebes, "many a tear I have been shedding, every path of thought I have been pacing; and what remedy, what single hope my anxious thought has found that I have tried."

This is a truly surprising and paradoxical procedure: Sophocles shows right from the beginning that his powerful, rationally convinced investigator is totally at a loss. More so, the king not only presents a public self-assurance, covering up his insecurity,

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[5] Jean-Joseph GOUX, *Oedipus, philosopher*. trad. Catherine Porter, Stanford University Press, 1993.

[6] I am reluctant to rehearse the well known analyses of this investigation folding out into the patterns of the hunter who hunts himself down, the purifier who is the *pharmakos*, the pilot who turns out to be the shipwreck… Cf. the latest summary in Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus. Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*. Second edition.Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

he also admits and *states emphatically* that he doesn't know what to do. This is the point where the detective takes on the characteristics of the psychoanalyst. Oedipus dramatizes ambivalence of feelings and of attitudes. He is concerned, he is determined, but at the same time he stresses that he doesn't know a thing and that – against his previous successful habit – he has decided against heroic activism. He did not, for instance, go to Delphi himself (as Laius had done), but he delegated this delicate task of riddle reading to Creon. Wouldn't we all agree that Oedipus would be a better consultant – much subtler and much faster? We would, and Sophocles shows that Oedipus agrees with us. Although Creon has been entrusted with the Delphic oracle, Oedipus does not really trust him. He is impatient with the delay of his brother-in-law; he does not believe the favorable signs (laurel) nor the words Creon pronounces. He is irascible and suspicious and sceptical. But why is Oedipus so harsh and cutting before Creon has even uttered a word of the oracle? Why would somebody who does not trust Creon, entrust him with that important task?

All this starts to make sense if we consider that Sophocles constructed a hero who is both a proto-detective and a proto-psychoanalyst. It does make sense to send Creon to Delphi if Oedipus has had reason to suspect something hidden going on in the palace previous to the disasters the city is suffering at the opening of the play. What I would like to point out is a tiny shift of perspective: Oedipus is not only the hero who trusts his rational procedure, but is also an investigator who knows, like the psychoanalyst[7], that truth needs a certain stage on which it can appear through the veiling movements of dissimulation. Our hero provides this stage, feigning and stageing ignorance in order to make sufferers talk about their sufferings.

The Dialogue Between Oedipus and Creon

Sharp and impatient, Oedipus seems to want to investigate Creon himself as much as the oracle that Creon has just reported. As a native Theban, Creon knows things about the Theban past that the outsider Oedipus doesn't know. Oedipus suddenly wants to know some of these things. He cross-examines Creon mercilessly, and Creon to some extent cracks under pressure. His answers throw doubt on the value of the oracle, and we are left with the feeling that there is something in Thebes which has been covered up – and has been "forgotten" for a long time.

[7] And the poets whom Freud considered to be proto-psychoanalysts.

Before the start of the play, Oedipus had sent Creon to Delphi to consult the oracle of Apollo. Oedipus specifically asked “what I, Oedipus, need to do, what I need to say, to save this city” from the plague that ravages it.[8] In this scene, Creon has just returned from Delphi. He is wearing a laurel wreath, a sign of blessing, and he begins his report with buoyant optimism and vague rhetoric. But Oedipus is unimpressed. He cuts off Creon’s flowery preamble with a brusque observation: “I’m neither encouraged nor discouraged by what I hear.” And he refuses Creon’s request to reveal the oracle in private, inside the palace. Oedipus wants everything literally out in the open.

The Historical or Sociological Interpretation

Bernard Knox[9] links these facts to the complex of historical Athenian tyranny. He shows that Oedipus’s demand for democratic transparency has something defensive about it and interprets it in the framework of power struggle and political legitimacy. As a foreigner who won the throne of Thebes by his own skill in outwitting the Sphinx,[10] Oedipus has what we might call a weak political base, and wants at all costs to avoid the appearance of behaving like an autocratic tyrant. Knox writes:

> There is another facet, one equally democratic, to this foreign-born tyrant: he immediately suspects a plot. His reaction to the story of Laius’s murder is to suspect a political intrigue.

Knox thinks that Sophocles modeled his Oedipus after the actual leaders of Athens in his day, a perspective that opens many interesting insights and gives the play a realistic dimension. But a consistent loyalty to this approach tends to impoverish the drama. In the play, after all, Oedipus has good reason to suspect a plot. Creon’s report on the oracle is so evasive that anyone would be suspicious. Political mistrust is not necessarily a sign of autocratic paranoia. Knox himself takes note of Creon’s strange subterfuges, without, however, attributing any meaning to them:

Creon returns from Delphi to make his report to Oedipus, and he meets the tyrannos outside the palace, surrounded by a crowd of suppliants. When Oedipus asks

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[8] In the French edition: Sophocles, *Ajax*, *Oedipe Roi et Electre*, Paris, ed. P. Mazon – A. Dain, Les Belle Lettres, 1989.

[9] Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes,* New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1957, p. 19.

[10] This is the positive meaning of the word *tyrannos* in classical Antiquity. The negative meaning denounces the usurper of power.

him to report, he answers in vague language, calculated to produce a feeling of relief in the minds of the crowd, without revealing the nature of the oracular message. His cautious, diplomatic language reveals nothing and is useless to those who need the facts. He begins with "Good news!" (*esthlen*,) continues with "perhaps it doesn't seem so good" (*dysthor*,) and ends with "everything will be all right" (*eutukhein*.) For his part, Oedipus demands the exact wording of the message (toupos, 89): his word can mean either "speech" or "hexameters," the usual meter of Delphic responses. He prods Creon to stop speaking in allusions and get to the point. (Knox, pp. 18-19)

In other words, although Knox sees a whole range of details which show Creon's diplomatic evasions, he doesn't follow up this observation, because he is mainly interested in Oedipus' position as a tyrant. Let us see what would emerge if we focused not only the hero, but also the 'complexes' of the other protagonists.

The Psychological Interpretation of Reciprocal Fantasies (Suspicion and Shame or Guilt)

What Knox curiously doesn't mention is the fact that Creon's diplomacy postpones the revelation of urgently-needed information, and thus indicates shame or guilt feelings which make him hesitate and prettify embarrassing information. This increases Oedipus's doubts and enhances his previously conceived suspicions (which may have been raised by strange silences, euphemisms and rumors in the Palace). As we shall see, Creon not only delays the proclamation of the prophecy, but gets around several direct questions before beginning to tell of the murder of Laius, of the failure to purify the city, of the Sphinx, and of the suspicions, never verified, of a plot against Laius. Nor does he mention the curses that fell on the reign of Laius (the oracle and the exposure of the baby,) although these miasmas weigh heavily on the minds of Creon and Jocasta, as we might see in the following episodes (which we will not have time to discuss here).

When Creon finally begins to repeat the words of the oracle, Oedipus reacts as a meticulous investigator and asks his brother-in-law for additional interpretations. He wants to hear the exact verses of the pythoness *and* Creon's thoughts or reminiscences about them! Curiously enough, Oedipus refuses to interpret the riddle himself, and he so hounds Creon for memories and interpretations that we no longer know where the oracle stops and his interpretation starts. Nor do we know if Creon, the "ambassador of

Oedipus and Thebes," followed the Delphic "custom of asking the pythoness new questions,"[11] or if his memories of the death of Laius returned under the pressure of Oedipus's questioning. Be that as it may, it is significant that Oedipus should have delegated to his brother-in-law the assignment to interpret the oracle, as if he somehow felt that the oracle might bring to light some dark Theban secrets that he, a foreigner, would not know.

Oedipus makes use of the words of the oracle in a way that seems very modern, and this modern attitude makes sense in the context of Athens in the time of Sophocles. Modern historians speak of an "enlightenment" in classic Athens, and the word has the same meaning as when it is applied to Europe in the 18th century. Pericles and Themistocles, who held power in Golden-Age Athens, and Thucydides, who wrote its history, questioned oracles with a secular boldness worthy of Voltaire, to the point of changing them to fit the needs of the moment. The Athenian leader Antiphonus spoke for the age when he said that "Prophecy is what an intelligent man is able to grasp intuitively (to guess)." That is the enlightenment-breach where the strange philosopher-hero takes the form of a detective or a proto-psychoanalyst.

Oedipus Psychoanalyst and Detective

Although Oedipus listens to the prophecy, he always interests himself in the bits of human experience that the other characters can give him. Everything happens as if the holy word served primarily as an auxiliary suggestion (or, if you will, a bait) to bring forth information from his fellow citizens. His investigative attitude was first pointed out by the German poet Friedrich Hoelderlin,[12] renowned (among his contemporaries and by modern scholars like Nicole Loraux) as one of the finest readers of Greek literature and of Sophocles. To Oedipus' inquisitive suspicion corresponds an evasive attitude on the part of Creon, the Chorus, and Tiresias. For them, the enigmatic character of the prophecies appears to represent a welcome refuge where they can feel safe from embarrassing questions and disagreeable memories. For them, Oedipus can

[11] Cf. Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Prophesying Tragedy. Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1988, pp. 69-72; also Knox, *loc. cit.,* p. 35; cf. also the fragment of Antífon, A (Diels-Kranz, 9).

[12] Cf. F. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe,* 3 vols., Frankfurt am Main, Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1983, "Anmerkungen zum Oedipus und zur Antígone", vol. 2, ,p. 849 *et seq.*.

only seem to be stirring up trouble when he presses Creon to remember the murder of Laius.

Let us have a look at how Hoelderlin[13] analysed the rhythmic organization of the announcement that this interpretation suggests:

> The judgment of the oracle is:
> Command us clearly, Phoebus, O King,
> To pursue the curse of the country, nourished in this land (soil),
> And not to nourish anything unhealthy.

This could mean: "judge, in a universal way, a tribunal firm and pure, maintain a good civic order." Oedipus, however, speaks immediately, in a priestly way:

> To bring about purification, etc.

He (Oedipus) looks for the individual [particular].

> And to which man does he assign this fate?

And this mood changes Creon's thoughts into his fearful words:

> Formerly, O King, Laius was guide
> Of this land, before you ruled this city.

This is how the oracle becomes linked to the story of Laius' death, which does not necessarily fit into the Delphic oracle. (Hölderlin, *loc. cit.,* 851 s.)

Let us turn, for a moment, to the opening observation of the German poet – his distinction of the 'particular' and the 'universal' meaning. Unlike all the other interpreters of this tragedy, Hoelderlin observes that the first three verses already form an oracle. They speak of a curse (ignominy, filth, stain, pollution) which touches the land and must be purified. Hoelderlin argues that this information would permit a generic interpretation – as Oedipus had divined the universal meaning of the riddle of the Sphinx. That is why the German poet points out the difference between a "particular" meaning as opposed to the "universal" or generic one. Taken in their general sense, the first verses could mean, for example: "maintain a good civic order," or watch over purity in general. This universal concern would lead to practical decrees

[13] It is enough to remember Tiresias's reprimand in *Antigone:* he warns that the blood scattered by the birds has angered the gods, and he recommends speedy burial for the corpse of Polyneices.

as the present situation might dictate. The plague might demand, for example, the burial of corpses, or the reproval or punishment of women who neglect religious burial rites. The universal meaning would occur to somebody who is untouched by previous knowledge and free of suspicion and guilt. Oedipus' insistence and particular information has been triggered by the (perfectly justified) feeling that there are things that have been hidden from him and that his closest friends show signs of uneasiness or guilt.

Caught in this disquieting ping-pong sequence of uneasiness, both Oedipus and Creon ignore the most probable meaning of the riddle – which is remarkable because, after all, the oracle speaks of things in the present, of a stain of filth or decomposition of the corpses of unburied children which the Chorus mentions with all signs of terror and disgust. In spite of this **present** miasma which contaminates the land and its inhabitants, Creon (pressed by his brother in law's suspicion) reaches far back in time and remembers the unpurified blood of Laius. Hoelderlin is right to say that this association is not the only, nor the most plausible or direct explanation of the prophecy. The prophecy said that the pollution "was nourished in the soil" the Chorus sees the land of Thebes as "bringer of death" fostering a plague that the priest describes as a "bloody tide." The oracle recommends that this stain be cured "before it becomes incurable." For an ordinary listener, hearing all this for the first time, this puzzle would be a clear recommendation to find ways to bury the corpses whose blood is defiling the land and the altars – a religious pollution that arouses divine anger as much as murder does.[14]

Specific Questions, General and Evasive Answers

Oedipus, however, does not try to interpret the oracle on his own, as he had interpreted the riddle of the Sphinx "without instruction from the Thebans." Creon, probably wondering why the great interpreter has suddenly refused to do his heroic

[14] The primary meaning of *miasma* is the noticeable effect of contamination and the visibility of putrefaction. Only in the second meaning does the word carry the connotations of a crime of blood that is the source of an affliction. Enlightened Athenians, proud of their medical knowledge, believed in a clear causal link between decomposing bodies and epidemics. Beyond this, the neglect of funerary rites was a "miasmatic" crime, punishable in some cases by death. Cf. Robert Palmer, *Miasma*, London,Clarendon Press, 1996. All the same, at the beginning of *Oedipus Rex,,* two options are open: either act rationally and practically to end the plague by removing its immediate medical cause; or – as Oedipus does – to demand a deeper and more winding path of thought, distracting attention from the obvious facts in order to find the true cause deep in mythic history.

specialty of solving riddles, is forced to answer a series of questions. Let us bear in mind that nothing contradicts the hypothesis that Creon tried to end his report on the oracle after the first four verses, in case Oedipus had jumped quickly to conclusions. But Oedipus questions him meticulously, requiring Creon to answer and interpret. How to perform the purification? That is his first question, which Creon wriggles out of with an oily platitude two verses long, with a range of meanings from nothing to everything: "Driving out one/some/every man, or washing death with death, for the one who devastated the city with blood." (I 100 s.) "Driving out one man…. every man…." this baggy formula specifies no particular crime in the past and could easily mean every crime that ever left blood to pollute and "devastate" the city.[15] The judgment of the oracle prescribes punishment for every kind of criminal – from murderers to desperate mothers (or other female parents) who leave their dead children and relatives unburied.

Creon's evasions and delays, and those of the other Thebans, show that they are all expecting Oedipus to come up with another brilliant piece of magic, as when he defeated the Sphinx. The priest and the Chorus show explicit confidence in his extraordinary – almost divine – powers. In the case of Creon, this confidence remains implicit. Even so, it appears in the contrast between the diplomatic optimism of his opening words and his discomposure at the end of the scene. And his interpretation of the oracle contradicts and makes absurd the joyous bluster of his entrance. Everything suggests that Creon counted on the possibility of encouraging his brother-in-law to use his "magical" gifts. Everything shows that he did not expect Oedipus to round on him like a prosecutor, - sharp, dry, skeptical – and force him to tell of embarrassing secrets hidden for many years.

Mistrust: Dealing with the Contrast between Words and Gestures

Oedipus's cross-examination finally forces Creon to drop his diplomatic vagueness and to begin, with visible reluctance, the story of the unpurified murder of Laius.[16] Let us look at the rhetorical strategies of both men. The whole dialogue

[15] Oedipus is not the only one troubled by premonitions of something terrible. Creon and Jocasta show considerable anxiety in their evasive answers and their repressed memories and thoughts. Their words attempt, unsuccessfully, to conceal their worries.

[16] In the Theban Cycles of poems and myths, the Sphinx guards the throne. She used her riddles to test claimants. Only the legitimate heir could find the right answer. Oedipus may understand Creon's words as a veiled admission of an attempted coup against Laius. In such a case, the gods would have sent the Sphinx, the keeper of the royal secrets, to foil the plot. The second irony has to do with the failure to see what is "in front of our feet" and to "permit" (leave to the side) the "invisible." The allusion to feet recalls

between Creon and Oedipus can be seen as a mutual game of hide-and-seek. To Creon's ceremonious slowness and diplomatic optimism Oedipus responds with impatience. Creon, for his part, wants above all to keep things vague, to put things off, and he is offended by the hero's deeply suspicious anxiety, his hunger for concrete facts and empirical observations. After all, Creon did not kill or plot against Laius and his embarrassment and silence refer more to the very remote oracle which led to the shameful suppression of Laius' son.

Creon seems to hope that a bold front and smooth words will allow him to control Oedipus's investigation. Supporting this view is the fact that Creon puts off his own ideas about the prophecy and begins his report with a rhetorical formula that is facile and empty. It's the same thing when Oedipus questions him: his answers (twelve of them!) keep postponing a revelation of the practical measures that Creon learned from the oracle. Thus his first few answers deflect attention from the reason he consulted the oracle in the first place. Creon is visibly unwilling to talk about the practical measures that need to be taken in response to the oracle – or, better: the measures he thinks need to be taken… in response to what he thinks the oracle said!

After his delaying, Oedipus wrenches another six answers from him. But the interpretations that pop into Creon's mind contradict his earlier optimism and ruin any hope of a quick happy ending. The interpretations of the oracle reveal nothing but… the known facts: known, at least, to all who lived in Thebes' palace before the arrival of the hero! Only Oedipus is ignorant of the shameful deeds that the residents of the palace have hidden from the eyes of their new sovereign. They must have had good reasons to do so, as Creon evasively answers the questions of his brother-in-law by stretching, blurring, and prettifying the shocking facts that he is forced to reveal. He finds diplomatic formulas that never respond exactly to the questions but distract attention with confused facts and long digressions.

For example, when Oedipus asks Creon to name the criminal, Creon's answer shifts the focus. He begins a story that sets the reign of Laius in a remote and misty past. He tries to flatter Oedipus with by using a title, *anax,* of exaggerated and almost

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the hero's scarred ankles. Beyond the riddle of the Sphinx, which no other Theban could solve, these words allude also to the mark by which Oedipus will be recognized – the wounded and swollen feet which no one in Thebes seems to have noticed-or wished to notice.

ridiculous respect, a word used only for monarchs in the mythical past. A modern English equivalent might be "Sire." To Laius, by contrast, he assigns a much inferior title, the basic word that means any leader, "guide," *hegemon:*

> "Our guide, Sire, was Laius, before you ruled this country." (I 102-3, BL 103-4[17].) [is a truly evasive answer.]

Before we pursue this dialogue, let us observe that Creon could easily have answered Oedipus' question with more matter and less art. In his capacity as counselor to the throne, he had certainly heard, along with Jocasta, the testimony of Laius's slave after the murder of Laius. If he had wanted only to satisfy the driving curiosity of Oedipus, he could have answered with a series of facts that both he and Jocasta knew. Had he not been so evasive, he could, for instance, have said something like this: "We need to find the murderers of Laius. They attacked the king at the triple crossroads where the road from Thebes splits for Delphi and Corinth. Four men of his suite were killed. One only survived." These facts would eventually come out, very disjointedly and often through careless slips, in the stories told by different characters, in such a way that the clues emerge like broken fragments, and the story remains unclear through most of the play.

All the same, it is strange that Creon should be reluctant to reveal the least of these facts, and that even this little fact should come to light only gradually. Interrupting his story constantly, Creon forces Oedipus to ask a number of questions. Creon's answers shimmer with euphemisms that weaken or veil the real facts. Murder, for instance, is neutered into "death:"

> He (Laius) died; and now he (Apollo) ordains clearly
> To punish the assassins, whoever they may be. (I 105-6)

Creon's way of reporting, his mixing of vague information with imprecise judgments, sounds like a delaying tactic, with fragments of the oracle thrown in. When Oedipus asks for the whereabouts of the murderer, he has to listen to some vague platitudes:

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[17] I and BL refer, respectively, to the Iustina edition Hoelderlin used and to the French edition (Les Belles Lettres).

> Here in this country. What is sought is found. What is not looked for, escapes. (I 110-111)

Again Oedipus returns to his investigation. His question focuses on where the murder took place:

> Did Laius fall under the mortal blow [1] in one of the houses of Thebes, or [2] in the fields around the city, or [3] in a foreign land? (I 112-113, BL 112-113)

Straightforward enough. Oedipus narrows down three alternatives - but Creon will not be boxed in. He refuses to say where the murder took place. He prefers to go on as before, giving out facts in an apparently random order, some before the murder, some after, avoiding to mention the exact time and place of the crime under investigation:

> He left on a journey to consult the god [as a god-consultant, says the Greek text], as he said himself, and never returned. (I 114-115, BL 114-115)

Creon speaks as if the body of the late king had never been found. And he does not mention any of the details that he himself and Jocasta will reveal later[18]. It is also noteworthy that his narration oscillates between an excessive vagueness and an excessive precision. When asked if there were any witnesses to the crime, he answers evasively. First, he denies the existence of witnesses: "the whole suite of Laius was killed." Only after saying that no one can give information on the murder does he admit that "only one, who fled in fear, might say anything about the deed." (l. 118 et seq.) Then, with great emphasis, he repeats that, "it was robbers (lestas) who attacked him," repeating that, according to witnesses, "there wasn't just one assassin, but many." (l. 122 et seq.) When Oedipus says that he suspects a plot, Creon agrees. But he does so again with words that are more than vague: "so it was believed and spoken of" (*dokountaut en* l.126,) and suddenly changes the subject to the Sphinx that has been

[18] What Creon explains in v. 130 ss. (any search was impossible because of the Sphinx) will be contradicted by v. 567 ss. (where Creon says that they did search for the murderers but couldn't find them); both accounts are again contradicted by Jocasta's account (vv. 758 ss., according to which the only witness arrived when Oedipus was already ruling the city).

ravaging the city, justifying, in advance, two grave omissions: how to explain the failure to investigate so scandalous a crime, and how to admit the failure to purify the curse of a regicide?

Errors of Sophocles or Creon's Smokescreen?

Creon's will-o'-the-wisp affirmations leave Oedipus to think of questions that can stimulate memories and interpretations. From beginning to end, Creon's answers always wander off in narrative diversions. Where Oedipus demands enlightenment, Creon offers more confusion: his way of speaking makes it harder, rather than easier, to tell what happened or when it happened. He omits or camouflages the connections between facts, in such a way that it is hard for Oedipus to see how to relate the time, the place, and the possible causes of Laius's death. Creon's report makes it almost impossible for him to form a clear picture of how the body was discovered, how the news of the king's death was made public, how he was buried (if indeed he was buried.) And how does Laius's death relate to the devastation wrought by the Sphinx, the disquieting rumors, the return of the surviving slave, and the triumph of Oedipus over the Sphinx? (I and BL 117 – 130/1)

This vagueness of Creon's is not a failure of Sophocles as a writer – and let us do without Segal's list of "eight errors" of construction in this play[19]. Creon's imprecision makes sense as a piece of deliberate dramatic writing. Here is a royal counselor being forced to reveal scandalous doings in which he himself was implicated. His vagueness, the smokescreens that he throws out, are entirely realistic.

It is curious that, although Oedipus has been king of Thebes for years, he has somehow never come to know how and when Laius died, nor that the former king had had a son, and even less that this child, doomed by a curse weighing on his father, had been mutilated and exposed. When Laius' name is mentioned, he can only say: "Yes, I have heard of him, but I never saw him." In other words, Oedipus depends on second-hand reports that the Theban elite is little disposed to give him. In fact, the same strategy of confusing spatial and temporal connections reappears in every one of Creon's answers. Yes, there was a death (in the past,) and the murders must be punished (in the preent.) He segments the death of Laius by some theory, suspicion or memory of

[19] Charles Segal, *loc.cit.,* pp. 55 s..

the action that caused it. The syntactic hiatus is part of a rhetorical strategy which clouds an interval totally vague and indeterminate on which Creon refuses to commit himself, making it harder for the sovereign to act.

Consider the evasive explanations offered by Tiresias, and the incongruencies offered by Jocasta[20]. This is not an artificial or "merely literary" construction, designed to put off the recognition and create a hollow kind of suspense. There is something in the form and the content of Creon's actions that reveals his attempt to change the subject and put things off. In order not to speak of the suspicions of a plot and of the failure to bury the dead king, Creon evokes the Sphinx, who supposedly subjected the city to inaction and despair:

The dark and tricky songs of the Sphinx kept us from contemplating what was pressing (before our feet: *pros posi*)/ and forced us to ignore whatever we could not see. (l. 130 *et seq.*)

An ironic excuse, this. Creon's admission that the rites of purification had been omitted makes reference to the feet, in the metaphor that emphasizes the blindness of the Thebans with relation to the sign of recognition carved into the feet of the newborn Oedipus. Everything in these two verses indicates that there was a subjective blockage, an unwillingness to see a sign that obviously related to the old oracle about Laius. The Thebans "ignored" (literally, left on the side) not only the dark riddles and the "invisibility" of the Sphinx, but also the obvious signs that marked the son of Laius, the mutilated feet, visible to everyone.[21]

What is "invisible" to the Theban royals is not invisible to the other characters. Tiresias recognizes the signs of the cursed baby, and, at the end of the drama, the Corinthian messenger says with guileless simplicity that he recognized Oedipus by his swollen feet, and points to his scarred ankles as visual proof. But the Thebans of the

[20] In other papers and the forthcoming book we showed the non-sequiturs and contradictions arising from Creon's and Jocasta's accounts of Laius' death. Creon's testimony situates the return of the slave before Oedipus' arrival, Jocasta says that the servant returned when Oedipus had already been enthroned. And, strangely enough, she also maintains that the servant had delivered his testimony "before the entire city" – which cannot be true, because Oedipus never saw that slave, nor heard about his testimony.

[21] Marie Delcourt (*La légende du conquérant*) showed how the legends of the conqueror many times invert and distract by a final blessing the violence involved in the exposure of an stigmatized infant who escaped death. When he survives, he returns as a wonder-working hero to the house or city of his birth. In this context, we could read Sophocles's tragedy as the tragic inability (or slowness) to recognize the logic of this kind of story.

palace, motivated by old nightmares and guilts, refuse to remember or recognize any sign that might connect any of this with *Oidipous*, with the "swollen feet" that they themselves inflicted on the doomed baby – all the more so that the signs are obvious and constantly visible, "in front of our feet" or pointed out "by the feet" of the hero (*pros podi Oidipou*.)[22]

With a stunningly modern realism Sophocles builds a case in which "prophecies" shrink into embarrassing revelations of basic human shortcomings which build up (like Hannah Arendt's *Banality of Evil*) to the most frightful atrocities (filicide, mutilation, parricide, incest). In our perspective, the oracle is – exactly what it used to be for Pericles and Themistocles – an opportunity to give form to human intuitions. Things go wrong when these intuitions are handled by lesser creatures than courageous Oedipus or other ideal Athenian heroes (we know that Freud identified with the heroes: Oedipus and, also, Sophocles and his illustrious contemporaries). Non-heroic protagonists yield to the primary processes. Thus, the paranoid logic prevails: fear creates a climate of suspicion, of mistrust and of defensive aggressions, which end by forming (without objective necessity) a self-fulfilling prophecy. The successive curses that fall on Thebes may have sharpened Oedipus's perceptions. But the strange silence that reigns in the palace and suppresses all memory of the late king is a reality, like the reality inside Elsinore Castle in another play about court intrigue. It is against this backdrop that Oedipus now considers the diplomatic evasions of his brother-in-law. In the poisonous silence of the palace, Creon's refusal to tell a straight story really does seem to be part of a plot. It is possible to perceive a double meaning (sacred words and words that refer to everyday reality) in the ironic quip of Oedipus, when he promises to investigate the crime "from the beginning".

Now that Apollo has spoken with great dignity, with dignity also Creon, let the death be avenged. (I and BL 133 s.)

The practical means of purifying the city were ordained both by the "great dignity" of Apollo and by the "dignity" of Creon – who, both of them, knew (all along!) what was necessary to purify Thebes… Oedipus will attempt immediately to fill in the

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[22] Critics since Knox have emphasized this tension, attributing it to the hero's excess of rationality, which reflects the pride of enlightenment Athens in its scientific progress and its ability to explain important things in a secular way. This perspective has led them to interpret to conflict as a dichotomy between abstract reasoning and historical reasoning.

gaps in Creon's vague and confused report of past events. He calls the whole city to witness – first the Chorus, but also Tiresias and Jocasta, and, at the end, the slave and the messenger. His words and his investigative procedures always focus on hard facts. However, the text does not suggest a polarization between human knowledge and divine knowledge – as if the conflict of this play made Oedipus and Tiresias the "representatives," respectively, of human and prophetic knowledge.[23] In fact, many readers have followed this road into a kind of innocent error: they have ended by believing that Oedipus "sins" through an excessive thirst for knowledge, by arrogating to himself a kind of knowledge reserved to seers.

To believe this is to forget how much Sophocles is a part of the Athenian enlightenment, an active opponent of metaphysical explanations of human actions. His dramas show how "the divine" is actually an uninterrupted chain of human causes and human effects. The movement of this play shows the working out of a profane prophecy, an earthly and human prophecy. This kind of self-fulfilling prophecy – entirely brought about by human beings – is the stuff detectives and psychoanalysts deal with today. We would see (if we had time to proceed) further on that Oedipus and Tiresias both make use of equally empirical knowledge. Everything that Tiresias knows and announces is compatible with observations, deductions, and probabilities based on human experience in earthly time and earthly space.

Enlightenment and Psychoanalysis

Concentrating too much on the protagonist Oedipus, literary critique has failed so far to realize that *Oedipus Rex*, like *Antigone*, is a double tragedy: the unveiling of Oedipus' own crimes goes together with the unveiling of the former crimes committed in the same palace against the defenseless victim – a victim doomed less by the oracle than by the humans who are anguished by fantasies, speculations and violent defenses involving an oracle.

This takes us back to the psychoanalytical perspective we proposed in the title. There is actually no contradiction between Athenian enlightenment and the psychoanalytical enlightenment we propose. In both perspectives the oracle can be seen as the basically contingent nucleus of the anguished, defensive behavior stemming from

[23] If Oedipus competes with Tiresias, he does so as a human being who seeks to replace magico-religious lore with verifiable knowledge. Of course there is nothing supernatural about Tiresias's lore.

helplessness and free floating anguish. Phantasmatical dissemination makes it spread out into a net of interlinked paranoid gestures, oscillating compulsively between aggressive-defensive extremes.

Stressing once again the central point of this lecture: what is at stake is the transformation of the archaic oracle (conceived – before the V century B.C – as a fatality imposed on humans by the gods) into a fatal mechanism imposed by human fantasies and actions. What Oedipus' inquiry will discover is not really the truth of a prophecy, but the logic of anxiety. Oedipus' investigation rests on a plausible and realistic insight of an enlightened citizen – and that is precisely the way in which the most important politicians, like Pericles, Antiphonus, Themistocles, conceived the 'oracles'. Our perspective will show that the tragedy can be analyzed as the discovery of the defense mechanism of primary human anguish, which transforms free-floating anxiety into hatred and aggression (fixing it to an object), reemerging, after violence and crime, as guilt and shame, producing the defense mechanism of repression, silence, lies, and all sorts of euphemistic masks (and then the return of the repressed) Expand this a little?

In an enlightened perspective, it is not the gods nor the oracle, but human anguish which causes the truly tragic knot. The Theban palace and the new king are imprisioned in the web of archaic anguish and primitive defense mechanisms. Cruel, bloody repression, like the killing of the newborn child, produces a host of secondary anguishes which are the very center of Sophocles' play. The old and well cemented structure of fear-aggression-guilty silence leaves Oedipus a very narrow and unfortunate margin of freedom: he is free only to discover the intricate connections wielded by primary (paranoid) processes. Through the solemn veil of divine curses and sacred oracles, Sophocles makes us perceive a sequence of very banal human causations.

Changing the conventional approach of psychoanalysis (focusing on parricide and incest) the detective story we are presenting in this paper might also be read as a story developing around human helplessness as an unending source of anguish, idealization and defense-mechanisms. As in Freud's, Melanie Klein's and Lacan's account of the human condition, everything starts with helplessness, *Hilflosigkeit* doubled by fantasmatic terror of disintegration (*angoisse de morcellement* in Klein's and Lacan's

terminology). Under this primary pressure, the logic of human action follows the fatal trend of pre-oedipal defense mechanisms[24] linking amorphous anguish to aggression, aggression to remorse, remorse producing shame, and the whole sequence of defensive behavior: forgetfulness, silence, lies, half-truths and euphemisms: in one word – the masks of a palace intrigue, justifying (and covering up) infanticide. The prophecy is an all too noble alibi covering a totally human atrocity – the infanticide is not part of Laius' oracle but the result of a human interpretation (needless to say a very bad – paranoid – interpretation) of a prophecy which never ordered the killing of the supposedly doomed child! In other words, from an enlightened (or psychoanalytical) standpoint, Oedipus Rex does not show the Necessity of divine will (Fate), but the fateful necessity of human anxiety and aggression.

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[24] Cf. Melanie Klein's essays *Psychoanalyses of Children,* 1932 and Contributions to Psychoanalysis, 1921-45 (1948), which introduce the concept of the partial object (good/bad breast) and the structures of projective identification, which fixes free floating anguish in diametrically opposed images of active and passive aggression: the schizoid (aggressive) and the paranoid (victimized) position of early childhood fantasies. Klein's analysis of the ambiguous identification of the helpless infant with the nourishing-and-poisonous breast which transforms the infant and his yet deficient physical organization into the highly ambiguous *locus* of aggressor-victim hallucinations (confounding two diametrically opposed gestures: devouring the idealized maternal breast, the helpless infant compensates his own fantasies of (cannibal)aggression with the fantasies of being annihilated by the suffocating mother). Freud's theme of 'helplessness' and Klein's pathbreaking analyses of very small infants prepare the way for Lacan's theoretical account of the 'stade du miroir' (mirror stadium, cf. the space-time metaphor of the French terme 'stade' (Ècrits, 1966,), which confounds stadium and stage): the imago of unity (perceived in the mirror) makes the infant anticipate his own, physically still deficient unity in the idealized image of the 'other-ego' (Klein's breast). What distinguishes this pre-oedipal ego is the lack of distinction between the terms I and You: the 'other' being 'parasited' and 'cannibalized' by the not yet differentiated 'ego'. This fusional indistinction accounts for the highly ambivalent and dangerous oscillation between love and hate, affection and aggression – unmediated reciprocity and ambiguous reflexivity which ar the basic features of the 'grammaire tragique' of the Sophoclean Oedipus myth. Cf. Nicole Loraux, "La main d'Antigone" (Lês Belles Lettres, 1997) and Kathrin H. Rosenfield, *Antigona – de Sófocles a Hölderlin*, L&PM, 2000 (Second edition, Topbooks, Rio de Janeiro, 2008) or the French edition, *Antígone – de Sophocle à Hölderlin*, Paris, Galilée, 2003.