

## **Part I: Sophokles**

-----

## 1. The True History of Oedipus

-----

### A. Introduction

Freud's reading of the Oedipus myth hinges on the claim that the story reveals desires that all male children have, but which they are forced to hide from themselves. These desires are taboo; and from this (together with the fact that the father who is to be displaced has godlike power compared with the child) there springs *fear* of the appropriate penalty — castration — which is symbolized by Oedipus' putting out of his own eyes.<sup>1</sup>

The myth itself hinges on the *Oracle*. Apollo has decreed that these things shall be. But because of the way Oedipus is marked, his parents *must* recognize him (the very name is a recognition signal). So the early versions all make the marriage into a formal affair intended to fulfil the God's decree — there is no bed, and no children (Oedipus has a secondary wife for all of that).

Sophokles is the first to make the marriage into a real (Freudian) relationship. And his problem is with Jokasta, not Oedipus. The Chorus says: "How could thy father's furrows have borne thee in silence so long?" The question is asked. Does the play give an *answer*? Yes it does, if we put the story back in order the way Sophokles has constructed it (and of course he had to tell the story to himself, before he could make a play about *how the truth became public*). The story is one thing, the play is another. The play is just the last page of the story. But there couldn't be a play without the story; it is a story of mother-love on one side, and of loyalty to the God on the other — and of the wish of a foundling for a kingly father.

We shall here follow the procedure recommended by Aristotle:

---

<sup>1</sup>Sophokles and Plato both recognize the existence of Oedipal *dreams*. Plato regards them as *wishes*, Sophokles as *fears*.

At the time when he is constructing his Plots, and engaged on the diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. . . . As far as may be, too, the poet should even act his story with the very gestures of his personages. . . . His story, again, whether already made or of his own making, he should first simplify and reduce to a universal form, before proceeding to lengthen it out by the insertion of episodes.”<sup>2</sup>

Obviously step 3 comes first, then steps 1 and 2. What happens when we apply the procedure to Sophokles’ *Oedipus*? For the “universal” form we might write: “A certain king receives an oracle that his unborn son will kill him (and marry his Queen). He exposes the child, having first driven a stake through its ankles. The boy is nevertheless preserved, and learns his own destiny from the Oracle when he reaches manhood. Thereafter he meets a stranger and kills him, then comes to a city, and marries the widowed Queen. A long time afterwards the stranger and the Queen are revealed to be his parents.”

Sophokles’ *plot* “puts the actual scene” of this final discovery before our eyes, and “the very gestures of the personages” during the revelation of the truth. But the real problem Sophokles faced lay in the “incongruities” of the *story*. Aristotle seems to have regarded the Oedipus myth as a mass of incongruities; and he therefore congratulates Sophokles on leaving the events themselves in the far past away from the action (*Poetics*, ). But if we examine the “episodes” which Sophokles has “inserted into his plot to lengthen it out,” we find I think that Sophokles took quite a different view of the matter. He had to know what it was that had happened in order to show what his principals would feel and say when the dramatic moment of the revelation came; and he does not regard any of it as at all incongruous.

---

<sup>2</sup>*Poetics*, chapter 17 (trans. I. Bywater). Aristotle provides the simplified story of *Iphigenia in Tauris*; also of the *Odyssey*. Why did he not use *Oedipus*? Because the *story* is not identical with the bones of the *plot* — as it is in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*.

The revelation begins with the arrival of the messenger from Corinth. This scene impressed Aristotle as great play-making, and so it is. The dramatic climax is the encounter between that messenger (formerly a shepherd) and his acquaintance of long ago, the Theban shepherd. The Theban shepherd is the pivot upon which the action turns; the Corinthian is the impulse that makes everything tip over. But the Corinthian is only a stroke of genius in *stagecraft*; he was hardly essential to the *action* at all (though his part in the *story* was essential). Oedipus is the *real* moving agent in the plot — and he *could* have pushed the Theban shepherd into a confession without the help of the messenger.

The Theban shepherd was the invention by which Sophokles made the *story* work. To understand Sophokles' story is to understand the shepherd's part in it. In order to see that, we must recognize how frightfully difficult it is to make the story work in human terms (specifically in terms of Aristotle's theory, which we may take to be a pretty fair account of what worked well in the Greek theater, and which was also much influenced by this particular play). Let us begin with the central character. In terms of Aristotle's theory of the "universality" of poetry (one aspect of which is exemplified in his reduction of plots to "universal form") the Oedipus myth is a paradox, for in this case the *naming of the character* gives the whole game away. Aristotle's theory of tragic drama is based upon the notion of "reversal through recognition." But as soon as we know that the baby was named *Oedipus* by its preservers we know that the truth about his feet (if it could be physically hidden at all) would not remain hidden once the stranger had named himself. *Given that name* a self-respecting dramatist could not even consider the possibility of the truth being concealed. Someone called "Swellfoot" must in the Greek theater be a *walking recognition signal*. By some conventional means his identity must be made known instantly to the large audience viewing from a distance. How can it be overlooked, then, by the other agents in the story without the very sort of "incongruity" whose avoidance prompted Aristotle's suggestion that the playwright must "put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes"?

As far as the story is concerned, the killing of Laios can still happen, even though Oedipus is a walking recognition signal. For Oedipus does not have to be immediately recognizable in the circumstances of that encounter; and if he *was* recognized by Laios, the one-sided recognition can help the story rather than hinder it. It provides a motive for the otherwise rather gratuitous

affray between chance-met strangers. The Oedipus of Sophokles *was* taken by surprise, when he was spitefully attacked by the man in the chariot, and only the amazing rapidity of his violent reflex (and the utterly unthinking and uncontrolled ruthlessness of his violence once unleashed) enabled him to do what he did. He killed at least four men (including a herald whose person ought to have been sacred) even though he was certainly not as quick on his feet as he might have been. So much for that episode, and what it reveals. But now, how could the *marriage* happen?

Sophokles makes the Chorus itself ask this question. By the time they know enough to ask it Jokasta is dead, and the only sensible inference is that she killed herself because she preferred not to answer it. No dramatist faced with Oedipus as his protagonist could dodge the fact that “the mother” (of all people) had to know her own child once his name was given (if not sooner). Sophokles’ greatest problem was to motivate the marriage on her part, in spite of her certain knowledge of the pedigree of the stranger called “Swellfoot.”

But no, you say, she *must* be supposed ignorant. That poor flat-footed pedestrian Aristotle is refuted by his favorite play. The *Oedipus* shows that the audience will accept any “incongruity” as long as the story is “interesting” enough. Others, more sensitive than Aristotle (his master Plato, or the great rhetorical Sophist Gorgias), recognized that the poets do enchant us, they do make us willingly suspend our disbelief, and cheerfully accept the incredible as a fact for the purposes of the story. Aristotle can comfort himself (as he does) with the reflection that the marriage is left far away and long ago — and the dramatist makes the action here and now credible enough precisely by having the Chorus suggest that Jokasta must have known the truth for a long time (and it is not our concern to decide just when she first discovered it).

This is, I believe, Aristotle’s own view — because he was not really a flat-footed pedestrian at all. But it is *not* the view of Sophokles, for it makes the pivot of his whole play into a veritable nest of “incongruities.” Sophokles’ pivot is the Theban shepherd who becomes the agent of the revelation (in the plot) because he was the instrument of the historic events (in the story). Sophokles *invented* him. This single character exposed the child, and thereafter became the body-servant of the King; he witnessed the killing (but he must have run and hidden himself quickly, since Oedipus never even knew that he was there); he recognized

Oedipus (not just as the killer, but as the son of Laios) and he recognized him the very minute that he returned and found Oedipus established as King.<sup>3</sup> It is Jokasta herself who tells us this (indirectly), for she says that the shepherd came to *her* as a suppliant and asked to be sent away. She also says that she granted his request because “though only a slave, he had deserved this favor and a greater one” (764). The disciples of Aristotle can clap their hands here if they want to, over the dramatic irony of a mother’s being made to reveal that the humble shepherd and house slave recognized the child in the man, though she herself did not. But they should first explain why, on that hypothesis, the Queen felt this man was worthy of any favor (⌘⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡) at all? If the shepherd recognizes the stranger because he knows the child was preserved, and the mother does not because she thinks the child died, why should she be doing favors for the man who exposed the child (and why should she acknowledge him to be worthy of more than she does for him)? On this view he was her *husband’s* man, and the very one who took her child from her. How can she owe *him* anything but bitterness and hatred?

This is indeed a remarkable slave — and one whom Aristotelians ought by no means to admire, for he played a *noble’s* part in the events. He saved the child because he pitied it; and amazingly the Corinthian, who is a more conventional slave-type, mainly notable for his garrulity and for his perfectly open desire to earn rewards, joined this quite unnatural slave in saving the child because — according to himself — he pitied it too. The young mother, meanwhile, sat at home weeping and knowing nothing about all this; and then the older woman, childless by the God’s decree, failed to recognize the stranger who came at long last to give her children. What kind of poetic psychology, what kind of “universality,” is all that? One who is a “good man, for a slave” (as everyone who knows him says — Jokasta and the Chorus agree) but emphatically not someone who has the free man’s virtue of *andreia* (as his conduct at the killing, and again before our eyes in his examination by Oedipus, proves) finds somewhere the manliness to do a brave thing for a womanly reason; and *he* knows the grown-up hero although the mother does not. This may, for all I know, be “history,” but it is not “poetry” in the aristocratic tradition.

---

<sup>3</sup>The actual order of events was almost certainly rather different. But that need not trouble us for the moment.

Sophokles makes the shepherd himself tell us that he received the baby *from the mother* (1173). What did she say to him when she gave it up? What did she promise him? *She* was brave enough. Why did the Corinthian, with his character and propensities, agree to take the child? Would he not have wanted something for his trouble? He knew, of course, that his Queen, Merope, at Corinth, was childless, and old enough to be in despair about it. But was it just *luck* that the Theban came to him with the child and the story? He seems an unlikely confidant for a timorous and secretive man! He was a foreigner and one who (as Sophokles makes plain) could easily be bribed. When we meet him he is all bubbling over with his good news from Corinth because he expects to benefit from the gratitude of that baby whom he preserved years ago. Now at last he can cash in. (It looks as if he never did get much from Polybos and Merope; it is easy to understand that they couldn't keep him round the palace because he evidently has no notion of how to keep his mouth shut.)

*Surely* at that private interview before the exposure Jokasta was promising heaven and earth to *her* Theban shepherd if he would preserve the child — and whatever money or valuables she could lay hands on there and then, passed from her to the Corinthian via the Theban. For *she* is the one whom Sophokles presents as having both the courage and the resourcefulness to make the plan; and therefore she knew as well as the Theban shepherd that the baby had been preserved (and at least roughly, she knew where he was). The poor shepherd, made body-servant to a man of whom he was for the very best of reasons mortally afraid, only did his best to be a man, slave-fashion. That is the actual scene from long ago, that Sophokles “set before his eyes.” Let us now see how the action that he puts before our eyes confirms it. If we pick up all the hints that he gives us, we shall understand why both Oedipus and Jokasta act and speak as they do.

**B. The True History of Oedipus as it was reconstructed by Sophokles from the old myths (“proceeding to lengthen it out by the insertion of episodes”)**

**Episode 1: Laios, King of Thebes**

A long time ago — a matter of some centuries at least, for it was only a few generations after the founding of the city by Kadmos — Laios son of Labdakos was King of Thebes. He was in the prime of life when the kingship came to him, but he was a bad man, and he made a bad king. He was arrogant, harsh-tempered and selfish; and he was subject to terrible rages. His rages were the expression of deep-seated suspicion and fear. For although he was a legitimate king, Laios was a textbook example of the tyrant, cruel with all the malice of one who is forever obsessed by a gnawing anxiety about his personal security.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Sophokles makes no reference to any of the events of Laios’ life before his marriage. But the character here ascribed to him is evident in his treatment of his wife and baby. It is also reflected in the behavior of his supposedly loyal body-servant, the erstwhile shepherd. The shepherd’s flight from the affray at the place where three ways met, would have cost him dear had Laios survived. He was, of course, a timorous man, but his conduct was not simply dictated by fear, for where his sympathies were engaged he was capable of a limited bravery. He defied the King’s command in preserving the child, and he displayed a trembling resolution in preserving Jokasta’s secret until torture was applied to him. Finally, the general willingness to accept the fact of Laios’ death, and leave his murderers undiscovered, surely indicates the consensus of opinion that Thebes was well rid of him?



Apollo's eye was upon Laios and he tested him.<sup>5</sup> For when the King took as Queen and consort his first cousin Jokasta, then just old enough to be a bride, he inquired of the Pythia (as men of all conditions were very wont to do)<sup>6</sup> about his prospects of getting a son. The response was terrifying (as responses to this inquiry generally were in the *mythical* cases) and more than usually explicit.<sup>7</sup> Apollo declared "that he was fated to be killed by the son that Jokasta would bear him" and further, that that same child was "fated to have intercourse with his mother and show to men a progeny they could not bear to see."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Unlike Aischylos, Sophokles is not concerned with the passing of the curse from one generation to the next (except in the naturalistic form of Laios' ungovernable temper, which Oedipus inherits). Nor is he interested (as Aischylos is) in justifying the way of the God with men, but only in exploring the human response to the divine challenge. The oracle comes to Laios, as it does to Oedipus, as an unexplained fact. The response of Laios is important for two reasons. First because (like his whole relation to the Oracle) it contrasts so sharply with that of Oedipus; and secondly because it caused the very different response of Oedipus to have fateful consequences.

<sup>6</sup>See Parke and Wormell, pp.       ; and J. Fontenrose (1978), pp.       .

<sup>7</sup>The prophecy to Aegeus about the conception of Theseus is typical of the Oracle's usual manner in the myths. For the whole topic see Parke and Wormell, pp.       ; and J. Fontenrose (1978), pp.       .

<sup>8</sup>The first part of the oracle is given as reported by Jokasta (712). I have borrowed the second part directly from the oracle given to Oedipus (790-1). Confirmation that the second part was given to Laios can be found in the declarations of Teiresias (866-7). Teiresias' behavior is inexplicable if he has received a special oracle (whether intended for himself alone or for publication). Therefore we must assume that his knowledge derives from the oracle given to Laios.

Apollo said that Jokasta *would* bear him a son. Only the fixing of the sex absolutely required prophetic insight, for the Queen was already pregnant; but in the God's honor it should be added that the fact was at this time known only to Jokasta, and perhaps not even to her.<sup>9</sup> Had she not been pregnant she would never have become so; for from the moment that he received the oracle, Laios became an hysteric impotent. He could not have given Jokasta a child — to the day of his death he never gave her another. He could always point to the oracle as a bar; but Jokasta — and probably she alone — knew that Apollo's word was matched by his deed.<sup>10</sup> So she had come to hate the Oracle even before her baby was born. Later on, no one spoke openly of the lack of an heir, though it must have occasioned some concern among the responsible elders of Thebes. If strangers were tactless enough to comment upon the childless condition of the Royal House one agreed that it was indeed very unfortunate — and then changed the subject.

---

<sup>9</sup>Why would Laios inquire of the Oracle if Jokasta's pregnancy was evident already? And why would he become impotent, or resolute in avoiding Jokasta's bed, only *after* the conception of Oedipus, unless Oedipus was already conceived before he had a motive for continence?

<sup>10</sup>The only evidence on this point is what Oedipus says (265) about his predecessor's "unfortunate" lack of issue. This is certainly more consistent with my Aeschylean alternative of a direct physical restraint imposed by the God, than with a policy of self-imposed abstinence (which some may think more Sophoklean, at least in the context of the present play). The one absolute certainty is that Jokasta's seventeen years of childlessness requires explanation, and the cause can hardly lie with her. Sophokles must have had some view about that. The basic hypothesis of the present account is that the comment of Oedipus reflects the fact that Jokasta told him Laios "couldn't" have children, not that he "wouldn't." The trouble is that this is what she would have told Oedipus in any case, since the suggestion that he *chose* not to do so would be so surprising (especially for a king) that further explanations would be called for, which Jokasta would on no account wish to provide. So, in the end, the reason for thinking that Sophokles would have preferred this hypothesis is his known interest in the psychology of sexual relations. I take it as certain that he would have heard of cases of hysterical impotence in men, and that he would think it natural for an oracle of this kind to have such an effect.

When the baby arrived, Laios took the most drastic course open to him. He was not at all squeamish about the shedding of blood, but he could not risk the pollution of his house (and hence of his city) that would inevitably follow upon the open murder of his own infant son. Exposure was the accepted way of avoiding this; but he needed to ensure that no busybody with a barren wife would take the exposed child in and raise it. So he took the infant “not yet three days old” (Jokasta — 717) and drove a sharpened stake through its ankles, “yoking the joints of the feet” (718). *Then* he ordered one of his shepherds to leave it on the slope of Mount Cithaeron (i.e. in the most out-of-the-way spot he could think of). Laios assumed, quite reasonably, that anyone who came upon a child exposed in that place, and in that condition, would be overcome by religious horror, recognizing at once that this was not just an ordinary unwanted baby, but one who was somehow accursed. He also calculated that the sort of people who frequented that locality would not be likely to take a *crippled* child home for the wife to raise.

His plan failed because he made just *one* mistake. He allowed the heartbroken mother to talk *privately* with the man who was to take the baby away.<sup>11</sup> It needs no great imagination to reconstruct what she said to him. She besought him, weeping, to do anything he could to preserve the child. Finding him open to her plea, and even ready with an idea for getting the child away from Thebes altogether, she gave him money and assured him of her undying gratitude and constant favor for the future, if he did manage to save the child. Of course, she also told him about the Oracle — since Laios had not done so, she had to.<sup>12</sup> So the man knew well enough the risk he was running, and the certain death that he would face if the King ever discovered that his orders had not been obeyed properly. But the shepherd, though not very “manly” by aristocratic standards, had a kind of courage that arose from his own gentleness. He could neither bear suffering himself, nor stand the sight of it in others. He felt sorry for the baby — as he told Oedipus some thirty-five years later (1178). But probably he was even more sorry for its mother (though *that* he could not say publicly later because Jokasta was not supposed to be involved in what he had done for the child).

---

<sup>11</sup>We should note that when Jokasta tells the story to Oedipus she, quite legitimately, makes Laios the doer of everything. But Oedipus, passionately determined to know the whole story of his “birth-tokens” and of the exposure, drags from the shepherd the confession that he had the baby, *and the order for its disposal*, “from the mother” (1173-4). Oedipus puts the wrong construction on this. But since he has already absorbed the shock of his own mother’s acceptance of marriage with him, and she had at that stage the opportunity to talk with him privately about the reasons that drove her to this extreme, we should take his outburst against her

Anyway, the shepherd took the baby, and gave it to the shepherd of Polybos, King of Corinth, who was pasturing his master's flocks close to the Theban's summer steading on Cithaeron. With it he gave the Corinthian Jokasta's money. For, as he well knew, the Corinthian would do anything for a reward. He had to tell him something of the baby's history — but it was a case of “no names, no pack-drill” because of his fear of Laios.<sup>13</sup> The most that he dared to reveal to the blabber-mouthed Corinthian was that the child was of noble birth, that the father had pierced its feet and ordered that it be cast out on account of an oracle, and that the mother had paid him secretly to preserve it. The Corinthian took the baby, and so for seventeen years Oedipus passed out of the ken of anyone at Thebes.

---

here as a deliberate “cover-up” rather than a passionate mistake. He needed to distract attention from anything that would tend to show that Jokasta knew what she was doing when she married him. Jokasta has deliberately put herself beyond the reach of questions; and the shepherd keeps faith with her, as well as he can, by concealing her part in the preservation of the child.

<sup>12</sup>As the shepherd tells it, he heard about the oracle from the mother. Laios was the kind of master who gave orders accompanied by threats rather than by explanations. The secretiveness of which Sophokles here gives us an oblique glimpse has important implications for the explanation of the *general* failure to recognize Oedipus when he returns to Thebes as a young man. (From Jokasta's point of view, although she must have hated the Oracle, she could tell herself that she was obeying the God in preserving the child. This is even more important when the oracle is fulfilled later and she marries her own son.)

<sup>13</sup>The Corinthian is very frank about his motives when he returns to Thebes thirty-five years later; and we should remember his motive, when we consider his whole account of his part in the affair. Frankness comes naturally to him, and concealment is difficult for him. Alone among the characters of the play he seems to have no secrets, and to be incapable of keeping anyone's secrets. He speaks without being pressed, and even when others are pressing him to be silent. But he is clearly capable of slanting the story in his own interest. When he emphasizes his own good-heartedness in taking care of the infant Oedipus we must remember that he is telling his story to the grown man who is now his King; that he has already asked for and been promised a reward; and that he certainly wants to make the reward as big as possible. (We might ask, for example, what made him think that this particular foundling would be acceptable to *his* Queen.

The people of Thebes knew that the child had been cast out, and they knew why. But it was not safe to talk about it, and so most people forgot about it, and the younger generation did not generally hear of it. Laios said nothing to anyone about the maiming of the baby — except that at some point he told Teiresias, with a sneer, of how he had foiled the God. Or perhaps it was Jokasta who told Teiresias — both of them respected the seer, though neither of them had any love left for Apollo.<sup>14</sup>

But everyone who frequented the palace knew the man who had cast the baby out. For King Laios kept him close at hand. He was no longer a field-serf but a house slave and body-servant to the King himself. Laios wished to be certain of his silence; and the shepherd had the very best of reasons for preserving it. Living in the King's shadow he became ever more timorous and anxious, until he was notorious for being unable to say "boo!" to a goose.<sup>15</sup> At the first opportunity the Queen got from him a halting account of what he had done. But as far as was possible in his new situation, he avoided her. The Queen followed the same policy for the same reason. It was what Laios would expect, and anything else would have aroused his instant suspicion. Everyone assumed that the man feared the Queen, and the Queen loathed the man.<sup>16</sup>

---

Obviously the Royal House was the best place to look for a reward, but surely he would need to be able to assure them that the baby was of noble blood?)

<sup>14</sup>Teiresias boasts to Oedipus that his parents respected him — and this fires Oedipus to solve the riddle of his personal identity (436-7). This is far more important, both to him and to the city, than the riddle of the Sphinx. For the blood guilt of Oedipus, and the unwitting pollution has brought a far greater plague on his family and the community than the one caused by the Sphinx.

<sup>15</sup>Some critics have regarded it as implausible that the Chorus should know so much about this obscure field serf when he is finally brought in from his flocks. The Chorus know that the same man who exposed the infant was also the eyewitness of the King's death; and they are able to recognize him when he appears. When they say of him that he is "Laios' man and loyal as any — for a herdsman" they are remembering how Laios took him from his proper place, and brought him among *them*, the freemen of good family who *belonged* around the palace and the court. He is *not* the sort of man a wise ruler would choose for a bodyguard. As soon as we reconstruct the shepherd's career and reflect on the social status and background of the group of

Jokasta told her younger brother Kreon about the stake through the baby's feet. At that moment she was completely hysterical and hardly knew what she was saying, or cared who was listening. Later, when she had plotted with the shepherd, and knew that the baby was probably safe, she kept her own counsel. But when Oedipus returned to Thebes, Kreon soon realized who he was. He had learned the art of political survival early, so he gave nothing away.<sup>17</sup>

---

"Theban elders" who form the Chorus we can see that there is nothing surprising in their knowledge of him, and their informed judgement of him. (See further the following note.)

<sup>16</sup>The Chorus knows that it was Jokasta who sent the man back to his shepherding after the King's death (1052). Of course, they have by this time heard her story of how he *asked* her to send him away and she granted his request as a boon that he had more than earned. But they would be bound to regard that way of putting things as highly euphemistic. The shepherd might well want to get away, and the Queen might well want him out of her sight. But there could be no question in the minds of the Chorus, of the Shepherd's deserving any favor from her. (Why Jokasta should give Oedipus such an *ironic* account of the begging of this "boon," after she had already told him how the shepherd had first earned the favor of King Laios, is a puzzle that remains quite unexplained in the traditional reading of the play. This is the principal hint that Sophokles has given us that there is more in the relations between the Queen and the Shepherd than meets the eye.)

<sup>17</sup>There is very little to go on here. Kreon is the one person in the play whose secrets remain completely his own. He withstands some fairly fierce pressures put on him by Oedipus without saying a word out of place. The two things that suggest that he recognized Oedipus quickly upon his return are first, the fact that he abandoned the inquiry into the death of Laios very soon, and readily handed over the reins of government (which should have come to him) to the stranger; and secondly, the fact that Jokasta is obviously anxious to persuade Oedipus *not* to quarrel with him. (It is probable that Kreon and Jokasta have strong ties of affection.) Kreon seems to be well aware of his own limitations. He cannot handle political responsibility, and he does not want it. When he does, eventually, find himself saddled with it, he begins at once to rule mechanically "by the book." That is the path that brings him to his collision with Antigone. In the *Oedipus Coloneus* he behaves very vindictively to Oedipus. If we assume that he really is deeply committed to the defense of the conventions, it is easy to see why he would hate Oedipus for dragging the family shame into the light of day (and driving Jokasta to her death).

Nothing else of importance to our story happened at Thebes for some seventeen years. Everyone grew older. Jokasta suffered most, for she was a natural mother with no children. But the people loved her. Laios suffered, and made others suffer for it. Him they feared and hated. Apollo bided his time; and when the time was ripe he prevailed upon Hera to send the Sphinx as a scourge upon the city to avenge her right (as Goddess of the marriage bed) against Laios.<sup>18</sup> Apollo himself armed the monster with her riddle, which pointed to man's mortality — just as the injunction “Know thyself” over the portal of Apollo's temple at Delphi points to it. It was a riddle about the number of our feet. It was very appropriate that one for whom his own identity was a riddle about his feet should solve it. But to that point we must return later.

---

<sup>18</sup>Sophokles leaves the whole episode of the Sphinx in obscurity. I have simply appealed to the established traditions about her Olympian connection, and to the tradition about her riddle (which is obviously an appropriate symbol for Oedipus' problem about his own identity). The use of “the stick” — which Aristotle remarks on (*Poetics*, ) — is an obvious reference to the riddle. Perhaps it was because he wanted to make the riddle element of the Sphinx story central that Sophokles made no attempt to give a naturalistic account of the scourge that the Sphinx brought on Thebes. Oedipus solved whatever problem it was that Thebes was faced by when he arrived — surely it was a plague upon fertility, like that with which Thebes is afflicted when the play opens? — but he did not solve the problem of his own identity. Thus the crucial visitation of the Sphinx is the plague upon fertility that comes again seventeen years later. The play itself deals with the real confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx, and his proper solution of the riddle. (This view is strongly suggested by Teiresias, when Oedipus twits him about *his* failure to save the city in the earlier crisis — 443 etc.)

Laios did not dare to face the Sphinx. But he realized that he needed the aid of Apollo (if he needed a hint, Teiresias was there to give it to him). Once again, therefore, he set out for Delphi to inquire what should be done to save the city.<sup>19</sup> But he never reached his destination. Somewhere on the road he met with his death, and no one knew how or why it happened, except the one survivor of the party, the ex-shepherd who hid himself and watched. When he got back to Thebes, he told a pack of lies about it, but the committee of inquiry accepted his story without pressing him, and without attempting to check on (or act upon) what he reported. From his point of view, the story that he told was a necessary piece of self-protection. Everyone knew that he was no hero, and they did not expect any prodigies of valor from him. But the truth was too disgraceful to be excused. Perhaps he *might* have told the truth anyway (for with Laios out of the way, Jokasta's protection would be worth much). But it was not at all convenient for Jokasta that he should tell it; and so he told lies in her interest now, just as he had done seventeen years earlier.

---

<sup>19</sup>We know that Laios was on his way to consult the Oracle (Kreon — 114-5); and we know that the Sphinx was then menacing the city (Kreon — 130); and we know that Teiresias understood more of the real significance of the Sphinx than Oedipus did (Teiresias — 443 etc.). I take Teiresias' remark that he is "slave of Loxias" (410) to be a glancing reference to his own failure to face the Sphinx. He knew that Apollo did not want him to intervene.

What Laios meant to ask Apollo, is something that Sophokles does not tell us. Parke and Wormell say that he was going to inquire whether his son was dead or alive (I, 300). But they give no authority; and it is hard to see why he should make *this* inquiry unless Teiresias prompted him to do so. Without being more explicit than he is (and presumably wished to be) about the threat that the Sphinx posed for Thebes, Sophokles cannot very well make clear what the rationale of Laios' actions was. (The version of Parke and Wormell makes good mythic sense, because for Laios the real Sphinx was the stranger whom he met at the place where the road forked.) What is chiefly important for us, however, is to notice that Laios always goes to the Oracle himself. He does not trust anyone else to bring back true answers. This becomes significant when we have to interpret the wavering of Oedipus in his interpretation of the oracle brought by Kreon.



Laios was left unburied. No one found the body, and the birds and beasts defiled it.<sup>20</sup>

## **Episode 2: Oedipus, Prince of Corinth**

The Corinthian shepherd took the baby, and removed the stake from its feet (1034). He had taken money for ensuring its preservation; he knew it was of noble birth; he could see that it was not going to be easy to raise, but it was a natural object of pity; his Queen was childless, and if not yet past the age for childbearing, she was by now old enough to be in despair of ever getting a child of her own.<sup>21</sup> The Corinthian had already decided what he would do before he agreed to take the child. He would take it to the Queen, tell her what he knew of its history, and hold out his hand for another reward, or better still, he would ask her to take him in as a house-servant instead of a field-serf. He did this and it worked out, though he did not get all he had hoped for. The Queen soon sent him back to the fields, as far from the palace as possible, because he had no idea how to keep a still tongue.

---

<sup>20</sup>For the importance of this aspect of Kreon's failure to press the inquiry into Laios' death see the *Antigone*. It is another pointer to the general feeling about Laios.

<sup>21</sup>We know that when he died (about thirty-five years later) Polybos had exceeded the Psalmist's "three score years and ten" (963). How old Merope was we can only guess, but it is a reasonable assumption that she was not much younger than her husband.

In the palace, what could be done for the baby was done. The boy grew up healthy, tall and strong. His feet were swollen and misshapen; but without the medical attention that he received promptly and continually, he might have been badly crippled. In fact, this did not happen; but the young Prince was psychologically bewildered. His feet were his “birth-tokens” ( ). From them he had received his name, and not from his grandfather, like other eldest sons both royal and common. His feet were the first thing about himself that he was distinctly aware of, and he remained a walking riddle to himself throughout his youth and manhood. For, after all, he was a prince — yet no one would treat a slave child as he had been treated. How had it happened, who did it, and what was the reason for it? He tormented everyone that he could reach with his problem. (The Corinthian shepherd who could answer most of his questions was by this time well out of his reach.)<sup>22</sup>

When Oedipus asked his parents (who surely must know the answer?) why he was “Swellfoot,” they disclaimed both knowledge and responsibility. Yet how could they be ignorant? Even a slave would know how his child came to be maimed; and surely such a thing *could not* happen to a king’s son without the King’s consent? The young Oedipus often looked at Polybos with eyes full of suspicion and incipient hostility, as he pondered the mysterious replies about “fate” and “the will of the Gods.”

There were many about the court who could have told Oedipus that he was a foundling. But everyone in the Royal Household knew very well that Merope did not wish him to be told this. Being a highly intelligent boy,<sup>23</sup> he very soon hit on this hypothesis himself, as the most probable explanation for the embarrassment with which his supposed parents continually turned his questions aside. But it was some time before he could get confirmation of his guess from a courtier whose tongue was loosened by wine (779-82).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>This is a necessary hypothesis unless we are to assume, with Vellacott, that Oedipus had virtually solved this riddle by the time he set out for Thebes. If we do that, then the real drama of the play vanishes, and only a Freudian pseudo-drama remains. (Vellacott’s answers are completely unsatisfactory. But it was he who first showed me what questions must be asked.)

<sup>23</sup>That Oedipus is as intelligent as a human being can be, is one of what Aristotle calls the “unbreakables” of the myth. All of his blood-relations (even Laios and Kreon) must be assumed to be above average in intelligence. When Oedipus appears to be doing something stupid, Sophokles is setting us a riddle about him. Only the passionate fury that passes from Laios through Oedipus to Antigone (another “unbreakable”) can be allowed to overwhelm this

As soon as he had confirmed his guess in this way, Oedipus resolved to go to Delphi. But he knew that he must go alone, for he reasoned as well as his father had hoped any potential preserver would. He was certain that the secret of his “birth-tokens” was a dreadful one, not to be spoken of in public. So he had to wait till he was old enough to set out on the journey without let or hindrance. He was just seventeen when he set out.

---

aristocratic superiority. Thus the reconstruction of the story by C.B. Daniels and S. Scully goes wrong from the beginning by claiming that “Oedipus is anything but a highly intelligent man” (19 , 1).

<sup>24</sup>This is as far as it is plausible to go in accepting Oedipus’ public account of the matter. But there is no need to go even this far. It is more natural to assume that he would form the hypothesis when he was very young, and get confirmation of it (perhaps even from Polybos and Merope) before he was much older. Only he could not take the next step in the search for the truth about his “birth-tokens” until he was old enough to get to Delphi by himself. In that case, the drunken courtier story is simply a plausible explanation for a decision reached much earlier. Once he had received and interpreted the oracle it was no longer right (i.e. consistent with his duty to the God) for Oedipus to confess that he had long known of, and accepted, his foundling status. Hence he speaks as if he was impelled to go to the Oracle by a newborn uncertainty, and as if once he had received its response he regarded the impelling doubt as a sort of “call” from the God, which could at once be laid to rest because it was only meant to bring him to hear what Apollo had to say to him. No one can believe that the story Oedipus tells about his youth expresses what he really felt about his feet. His urgent need to find out the truth about his “birth-tokens” is evident from the moment that Teiresias gives the first hint that he knows the answer (436-7).

When he told the story for public consumption years later, on the day of reckoning, Oedipus did not say what precise question he put to the Pythia. He did not, at that point, want to admit that he had fully accepted the report of his foundling status. Even on the day of the drama, when he certainly knew that everything must come out (though he still did not himself know “everything”) there was an aspect of the oracle, and of his interpretation of it, that was private to the God and himself; and for the good of the city it must remain so. All the same, he did then admit that once he had dragged the truth out of the drunkard, he found that it was generally known or believed by everyone (786). Of course, the actual question that he asked Apollo was “Who are my parents?” — and not (as he reports it) “Are Polybos and Merope *really* my parents?”

The reply was a repetition of the oracle given to Laios. This was not a direct answer to the question he had asked. But it was a response to the question in his mind. For it did explain — and he grasped this at once — why he was not just an ordinary foundling, but a foundling with those horrifying “birth-tokens.” And, in any case, it was more immediately relevant to the question he had asked, than it appeared to be in his “public” version of the story years later.

This was the point at which Oedipus began to reveal what manner of man he was. In the Oracle's answer he came face to face with his divinely appointed destiny, and his response to the challenge was very different from his father's. He lay awake for a whole night somewhere near the Oracle, thinking about his situation.<sup>25</sup> In spite of his concern about his "birth-tokens," and his certainty of his foundling status, he had grown up as a prince, with the expectation that in due time he would become King of Corinth. He saw now that the God had barred this destiny. For although Polybos and Merope were not his natural parents, they had assumed the place of his parents and he had accepted the position of their son. Hence, to go home and live with them as if nothing had happened, would be a horrible impiety.<sup>26</sup> If Polybos were somehow to be killed through his agency, how could he ever be quit of the blood-guilt, after he had received such explicit warning? Oedipus did not need to consider the alternative possibility that the God might be dishonored if he lived out his life peacefully with his foster parents. The giving of the oracle *to him* obviously meant, to begin with, that he could not stay with those who were his parents in the eyes of the world. Beyond that, there was a riddle still to be solved.

---

<sup>25</sup>C.B. Daniels (19 , 22-3) points out that he "measured the Corinthian land by the stars" (794-6). So he spent one night, at least, deciding what road he was to take in order to avoid it.

<sup>26</sup>The way he told the story in the play reflects his thoughts on that sleepless night. He *says* that the Oracle came in response to the question "Are Polybos and Merope my parents?" It is not likely that he actually asked that question, but he saw that he must accept what he had been given, as an answer to it.

As far as the *positive* meaning of the oracle — its “fulfilment” — was concerned, there was only one other thing that Oedipus was immediately sure of. His “birth-tokens” were such that the word of the God *could not be literally fulfilled*. He did not know who his natural parents were, but he could now enter into their minds well enough to understand that his feet, confirmed by his name, were for them, recognition signals. He did not know them, but they would know him, and they could be trusted to avoid him, if he happened to come into their neighborhood. His preservation was now a sign to him that he was in the hand of the God; the oracle had some meaning that he must be clever enough to recognize when the moment came. But, because of his feet, there was no need to contemplate the appalling possibility that Apollo meant exactly what he said. One must recognize one’s finite human status, one must trust the Gods, and be obedient to them; but who could be reverent and obedient in a matter of this sort if he took it literally? In its literal sense the oracle was a warning (referring to Polybos and Merope) and it must be reverently observed as such. Beyond that one could only trust the God; and since he was still alive, there was every reason for Oedipus to think that he could do so with security.

The moment of apparent fulfilment arrived very soon. As he came down the steep slope from Delphi Oedipus encountered a cortege traveling with the ceremony of a king. At the point where the road forked he was going by them. The herald was already behind him when he was struck by the charioteer — who felt perhaps that this unaccompanied wayfarer had not shown adequate respect for his master’s dignity, in that he had not stood aside altogether. We can be sure that the charioteer had a vivid sense of how his master expected others to behave towards him. Oedipus, hot-tempered and quick to feel insulted, returned blow for blow. Now the unknown king or noble struck him, and not with his fist, but with the goad used for driving the horses. The insult here was unforgivable, and Oedipus’ blood was already up. He remembered the moment vividly forever after, and he told the exact truth as he remembered it, years later (800). In that moment itself he was so carried away by his rage, that after he knocked the King out of the chariot, he had no idea what he did or how he did it. There were five men in that company: the herald at the front; the charioteer leading the horses and the master riding; and two footmen behind. When Oedipus came to himself four of them were dead, and he was not aware that the fifth one had ever been there. From the moment of the blow with the goad he went berserk; and as far as he knew afterwards he had killed them all (813). He himself marveled at what he had done, for he was not normally quick on his feet. In that moment he was in truth his father’s son; but it seemed to him afterwards that a demonic force had taken possession of him. The finger of a God was upon him — and what God could it be in that place but Apollo?

This man whom he had killed with his servants was tall and gray-haired (473). He also had something of a look of Oedipus himself. But Oedipus was not likely to notice that, for although there were mirrors in the palace at Corinth, they remained in the women's quarters; and until he became a wanderer, he was less apt than baser men to see his own face in a pool as he drank or filled his water bottle. What Oedipus realized was that this man, who was clearly coming to the God, was old enough to be his father; and Oedipus himself was a foundling; he could be the son of *anyone*. Surely the solution of the riddle that the Oracle had set for him was here somewhere? The God had caused him to kill this chance-met stranger. Surely he must somehow be, in the God's eyes, this man's "son"? As soon as the question came into his mind, Oedipus saw how the other half of the oracle gave him the answer. A son would assume his father's place and duties in the world. By finding and marrying this man's wife, he could assume that place and those duties. Thus he, the orphan, the "child of chance,"<sup>27</sup> would be "son" to this man *through* the marriage, and through the "sonship" and the marriage he would be husband to his "mother." He had only to trust that this man had a widow somewhere, and no natural heir. Then the oracle would be fulfilled in just the sort of riddling metaphorical way that was consistent with the natural pieties of family relations. The God would be at once justified and obeyed. He had killed this man with full justification according to his code. Now, in obedience to the God, he must take this man as his "father."<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>This is what he calls himself (1080), when he can no longer keep up his official pretense that he is really the Prince of Corinth. By the time he openly refers to himself in this way, he really *knows* whose child he is, so this is only a new pretense. But when he speaks at this point of chance as the "giver of good gifts" he is revealing how he has hitherto regarded his good fortune at Thebes. His *real belief* until the day of revelation was that he was a foundling, to whom the God had sent a chance-met stranger to stand in both for his natural father, and for his foster father (Jokasta — to whom he has told the "child of chance" story for years — urges him to stand by this view of his destiny at 977).

<sup>28</sup>Oedipus speaks of himself as standing in the place of a son to Laios when he utters the curse (264-5); and he does so as the man who now holds the throne of Laios, and his wife (259-60). At *that* moment he is accepting the hitherto unrecognized filial duty to take vengeance on his "father's" killer. Until then his "trust" in the God had been precisely the belief (well warranted by events) that there would be no direct heir to seek vengeance upon himself as the killer. (From that moment he knows that he must become a banished wanderer.)

Oedipus did not know that one of the servants had run away and hidden himself when the trouble began. He did not know that there was a living witness of what he had done. Had he known that, he would surely not have done what he did next. By the time he discovered the man's existence he was committed to his course; and finding that the man had told an acceptable pack of lies in self-protection, and was only too willing to keep out of the way, he saw here another proof of the God's favor.<sup>29</sup> But the existence of the eyewitness underlines the rashness of his decision to go back along the road that the unknown king was travelling on. Any normal person in his situation would have taken the other fork in the road.<sup>30</sup> But Oedipus did not hesitate long. Within a few days he was in Thebes and he immediately recognized that this was the city of the man he had killed — for the city was in trouble, and its King had gone to Delphi. Already it was known that the King was dead;<sup>31</sup> the story was spreading that he had been killed by a gang of brigands (122).<sup>32</sup> But the city was too concerned with the troubles brought on it by the Sphinx to make full inquiries about that (130). The elders believed they were well rid of Laios anyway. The idea that the killers might have been hired by someone in Thebes did occur to them (Kreon — 126); but they decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

---

<sup>29</sup>Oedipus presumably never met the shepherd until the day of reckoning came. But he must have known the story which at the beginning of his inquest he gets Kreon to tell. He affects not to know whether Laios died at home or abroad (112-3). But that is essentially a *judicial* pose.

<sup>30</sup>It was Sophokles who placed the encounter of Oedipus and Laios on the road *to and from* the Oracle; and it is Sophokles who silently underlines the fact that Oedipus had a choice which way to go, and that he made it in a quite “unnatural” way. For the “place where three ways met” is the recognition signal that prompts Oedipus' confession (729ff).

<sup>31</sup>Jokasta speaks as if the shepherd-witness only arrived back in Thebes after Oedipus was established as tyrant (758-9). But this is impossible, since Oedipus could never have married the Queen before the death of the King was known. On the other hand, her statement that Laios was killed shortly before Oedipus arrived in Thebes (736) concerns a matter of public fact for which there were many witnesses. The only plausible hypothesis is that the shepherd-witness got back to the Queen, and the swollen-footed stranger arrived in the city at about the same time. The ex-shepherd's story must be regarded as having been invented in collusion with the Queen. This explains her confidence that he will stand by it (847-50). (In saying that the shepherd came back *after* the arrival of Oedipus, Jokasta is not trying to conceal anything, or to confuse any issue.



The Sphinx was Oedipus' opportunity. Her riddle was another confirmation that he was in Apollo's hand. Having answered her on behalf of the city, he presented himself to the Queen in fulfilment of the oracle. But now poor Jokasta was in an impossible situation. She had been the first to hear the ex-shepherd's story (truly told); she recognized the stranger as soon as he arrived; and she saw to it that the tale of the brigands was given the widest currency possible.<sup>33</sup> But she did not expect that Oedipus would become the savior of the city, and so her own husband. She, not Apollo, was his real protector at this juncture. But now she found that Apollo must be paid, or else she must confess everything. If she did that, however, the life of her son would surely be forfeit. For he was already a patricide. Why should he suffer for what was — in her eyes at least — all his father's fault? The God had declared what must be. Let it be then! No one must ever know what had happened because she was determined, above all, that Oedipus should never know what he had done.<sup>34</sup>

---

Her mind is fixed on the *withdrawal* of the shepherd — not his initial *return*. His withdrawal occurred only after the marriage was arranged.)

<sup>32</sup>There *were* robbers in the story somewhere. For Laios was no doubt bearing valuable gifts for Apollo, and they vanished. The people would know this and, for this reason, they would accept the survivor's story readily. (Oedipus was certainly happy to let the whole matter die without further inquiry.)

<sup>33</sup>All this is implicit in her remark that “the city heard the report, not only I” (848-50). Why should she speak as if she might conceivably have been the only one to hear the story, if she heard it in the same way, and at the same time as everyone else? We should notice that she always speaks of the story as if it might well be a cover story — 715-6: “Laios — so at least the story said — was murdered by foreign bandits”; 731: “that is what was said; and *it has not ceased yet*”; 848: “this is how the report was first put forth.”

<sup>34</sup>One of the great tragic moments of the play comes when she is forced to tell Oedipus of the oracle that came to Laios (711-25). She thinks that Oedipus will accept the situation, and let everything remain hidden. “My suffering is enough,” she cries desperately (1061) in trying to turn him from his purpose at the last. She knows, of course, that she must die if he forces the truth into the open; and she thinks that he will have to die too.

Had it not been for *this* determination, she could have told Oedipus the truth, and lived chastely with him in a “white” marriage. But she understood something of the dedication of his service to Apollo, and to the city Apollo had given him, when she tried at first to keep him from her bed by arguments. She must have realized almost at once that here was someone who would tolerate no shams in his performance of duty to God and city. The Royal House *needed* an heir — Apollo would never have sent him there otherwise! Hot-tempered and god-intoxicated as he was, Oedipus took her by violence often, until she was pregnant; and Jokasta had had a “white” marriage against her own will for too many years already. Once the thing was begun, and the twin boys conceived, she resigned herself to the situation as the will of the God; and she soon came to feel that the incest taboos were only a matter of custom. It did not matter if the custom was violated as long as no one knew.<sup>35</sup>

The poor shepherd wanted only to get back to his flocks, and stay out of the way of that terrifying whirlwind of wrath who had killed four men in as many minutes at the place where three ways met. To the Queen he confessed everything; and after she had coached him in his story, and had him tell it to the Elders, she sent him away willingly enough. He had, indeed, deserved this “boon” and more of her; while, in the eyes of the world, he had deserved this banishment and worse.<sup>36</sup> When the marriage was solemnized he went away to a quiet corner in the countryside. Oedipus knew where he was, but it was the Queen’s affair, and he was happy that she had settled it like that.

---

<sup>35</sup>Jokasta urges Oedipus to take no account of the oracle about marrying his mother (980-2). At that stage they both know what the real situation is, and it is the real situation that they are privately arguing about behind the cover provided publicly by the name of Merope. The attitude Jokasta urges upon Oedipus is the one she has long ago adopted for herself. And her explicit reference to Oedipal dreams (981) shows that she has a *Freudian* consciousness of the sexual impulse.

<sup>36</sup>Anyone who does not believe that there is a secret between the Queen and the shepherd must find some hypothesis to explain why she continually speaks of him as she does. Why should she speak so emphatically (and graphically) of a “boon” which must at the time have appeared a punishment? Why should she be confident that he will not change his “story,” though she always emphasizes that it is a “story”?

### **Episode 3: Oedipus, Tyrant of Thebes**

The dead man was indeed a king; and he was childless. Moreover, the way to the succession was plain. The Queen's brother had promised to give her hand and the kingdom to the man who could solve the riddle of the Sphinx, and so free the kingdom from this god-sent curse. The "know-nothing — know-foot" did it. When Oedipus heard the riddle and grasped the answer, he felt confirmed in his conviction that Apollo was guiding him. For the riddle was the God's command: "Know thyself!" set as a problem.

But the Sphinx posed another riddle on behalf of Hera: and this one he did not solve because he had not really solved the riddle of self-knowledge. He was in the presence of the Sphinx (*Hera's Sphinx* — the riddle of *marriage*) when he stood before Jokasta for the first time as her appointed bridegroom. His confidence that his birth-tokens would save him from moral disaster was misplaced. His mother knew him of course.<sup>37</sup> But she knew more than he bargained for; and her attitude to the oracle had never been what he assumed the attitude of his unknown parents *must* be. She had hated and circumvented his father; she had hated and defied Apollo. Now she must either hate the God still, but obey him; or else she must betray her son to the death which his father had appointed for him. For she knew that this stranger who was her own son had killed Laios. The eyewitness had come to her and confessed it all. He recognized Oedipus as the killer at once; and almost at once he realized that the oracle was being fulfilled. His only thought was to get as far away from the whole situation as he could, and to do it as quickly as possible. He had seen Oedipus kill four men in a matter of moments. What would his life be worth once he was identified to this terrible stranger as "the eyewitness"? He could not plead the debt that Oedipus owed him for his original preservation; that would only bring the doom of the oracle into the open and so bring ruin on all of them together. He loved the Queen. As well as he could, he stayed faithful to her to the very end. So now he clasped her hand and asked a boon; and she gave it to him willingly "for he was worthy of this grace and more" (763-4).

---

<sup>37</sup>Once the truth was out the Chorus realized that Jokasta must have known it: "However could your father's furrows bear you, unhappy man, in silence for so long" (1210-2). Had Jokasta been alive the question would have been put to her. Since she had no answer she had to kill herself.

Jokasta saved Oedipus the first time, in spite of the oracle; now she saved him again by accepting the oracle. The one thing she was determined on was that he should never know of it. She adopted and supported his own image of himself as the “child of chance.”<sup>38</sup> She tried hard to get her stranger-husband to accept a “white” marriage. Then, with the oracle to calm her guilts, she rejoiced at last in the children she had always longed for.

Oedipus could never be more than a “tyrant” in legal right. His title to the power he exercised came from his marriage into the Royal House, and in a ceremonial sense, at least, he shared the royal dignity with Jokasta and Kreon.<sup>39</sup> He shared power in fact, not just in name, with Jokasta, who gave him much advice in a motherly fashion that sometimes irritated him.<sup>40</sup> Oedipus was sensitive about this, proud of making all his own decisions and unwilling to admit dependence on anyone.<sup>41</sup> He suffered all the inward insecurity of the tyrant, and yearned in his heart for a more legitimate claim to the position that he held.<sup>42</sup> Like any tyrant (and most kings) he was forever tormented by the suspicion that others coveted the position that he held.

---

<sup>38</sup>In the play, she is in fact the first to mention it; and she does so in a way which betrays that this had been their private understanding of the true situation (977-8).

<sup>39</sup>See especially Kreon’s comments on the charge of conspiracy (577-82).

<sup>40</sup>The cruelty of his retort to Jokasta in the last agonies of her despair (1067) is probably carefully calculated, since his whole position at this stage is an act. But it is calculated precisely to carry conviction to the listeners; and it does so because they have heard him being spontaneously resentful about being “mothered” before. As for Jokasta’s real influence we have the clear example of her prevailing over Oedipus in the quarrel with Kreon; and the even more revealing way in which the Chorus appeals to her in this crisis, and relies on her to get Oedipus to behave properly, and not like the typical “tyrant” that he is showing himself to be at that moment.

<sup>41</sup>Note how quick he is to deny Kreon’s suggestion that he shares power equally with Jokasta (579-80).

<sup>42</sup>Others have remarked on the longing that is evident in his recital of the pedigree of Laios (267-8). We should notice also the aggressive truculence with which he tells Jokasta that *she* has no need to be ashamed for his birth no matter how low it may prove (1063-4). This is again a

Yet, in spite of all this tyrant-psychology from which he could not escape because of his “birth-tokens,” Oedipus was a true king, and not a tyrant in fact. Where Laios, King of Thebes, had been a very tyrant, “Swellfoot the Tyrant” was a proper shepherd of the people. The elders who remembered Laios, soon came to love and admire the young stranger. He had enough popular support to take the tyrant’s road, and rid himself of all potential rivals in the legitimate line. But he did not do that. He had the royal temper of his father, and others stood in awe of him. Even Jokasta has to be very cautious when giving him advice in public (though she could generally talk him round in private). But he did listen to dissentient opinions; and he never failed to respond to an appeal for aid. Men remembered the Sphinx, and his success with her was the foundation of the wide fame that he enjoyed. But the story was only remembered and retold because he continued to live up to it. He really could solve problems, and decide what was the best thing to do in a crisis.<sup>43</sup>

The “chance” whose child he was, was one that had come from Apollo at that parting of the ways. Apollo had first taken Corinth from him, and then given him Thebes. He was duly grateful; and he knew that to be worthy of the God’s gift he must be ready to give his life for the city. When the day of reckoning came, he did not flinch. Teiresias, Apollo’s slave, who had seen the oracle fulfilled, warned him on that day that the real cost of his vaunted triumph over the Sphinx was his own perdition. His answer was “Well, if I saved the city, I don’t care” (443). This answer explains almost all aspects of the extraordinary public performance that he gave upon that fatal day.

#### **Episode 4: Oedipus and Apollo**

---

calculated part of his act. But it is well-calculated. Indeed now that he certainly knows that he holds the throne by legitimate right, both of them must be wishing very bitterly that he was really the child of a slave.

<sup>43</sup>Whatever one believes about the “unbreakables” of the Oedipus myth, the view that C.B. Daniels and S. Scully take about Oedipus is completely inconsistent with the career that Sophokles has implicitly ascribed to him.

Thebes is beset by a plague. This plague has two principal aspects: it destroys the “Children of Kadmos” and it destroys the fertility of Thebes generally. Thus it is a natural recoil for the sins of Oedipus.<sup>44</sup> It is plain to everyone that the plague is a divine visitation, but no one knows whence it has come, or how to avert it. At least they do not volunteer suggestions to Oedipus, when they appeal to him for aid. In fact they have already done everything they can think of; only the appeal to Apollo, which their King must authorize, remains. The suppliants come, meaning to see to it that his thoughts are nudged in the right direction if he needs it; but they find that he did not need telling. He has done his part and is already expecting Apollo’s answer.

The suppliants draw a close parallel between the situation that exists now, and that which existed when Oedipus first arrived. Sophokles probably meant to suggest to the more thoughtful members of his audience that the situation was actually quite similar. Oedipus arrived some seventeen years ago bringing aid from Apollo; now he has sent Kreon to get help from the same source. He is worried because Kreon seems to be taking longer on the journey than he should (73-5). Already the seed of suspicion has germinated in his mind. But the Priest can see Kreon coming; and the laurel wreath on his head proclaims that Apollo has not failed them (82-3).

Kreon (who knows what really happened to Laios) would prefer to consult with Oedipus behind closed doors. But Oedipus wants everything to be public.<sup>45</sup> So they go through a solemn charade, because he must be told (and everyone else reminded) about the unavenged murder of Laios. Two facts are brought out by the distinction between Oedipus and the Chorus. First, Oedipus was not in charge when the inquiry into Laios’ death took place; and secondly there is a witness who is known to everyone else, but not to him. Oedipus knows the facts as well as anyone present. The artificiality of his being told what he already knows is justified by the setting up of the drama as the resumption of a judicial inquiry with a new judge. The emergency created by the Sphinx caused the original inquiry to be broken off; but Oedipus is now taking it up again, as a duty that he ought never to have neglected.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>It seems that the plague was one of Sophokles’ own additions to the myth (compare Cameron, p. 10).

<sup>45</sup>C.B. Daniels claims that Oedipus “is foolishly obsessed with being in the public eye” (Daniels and Scully, 19 , 47). But on the one hand (politically) a “tyrant” must not quite visibly keep secrets from the people; and on the other hand (religiously) a pious ruler must not make any

The Chorus describes the plague as a war upon the city by Ares himself. Zeus and Athena, together with Apollo, Artemis and Bacchus must come to their aid. Apollo is named first as “child of golden hope” (158). The crisis has created doubt about the reliability of his Oracle. (This is the vitally important religious context of the whole drama.)

Oedipus now makes a two-sided proclamation: on the one hand, if the murderer will confess he shall suffer no worse penalty than banishment; on the other hand, a terrible curse will fall upon him (and anyone who aids him) if he does not come forward. Oedipus says that he proclaims this as “stranger to the story and stranger to the deed” (219-20).<sup>47</sup> But he knows very well that he is no stranger to either; and the penalty that falls upon him will be a combination of the banishment with his own curse. As far as the death of Laios is concerned, he does “tell everything” (226); it is what he does not know that brings the curse upon him. He will indeed “wear out a miserable life miserably” (248). But he does not deserve to be “forbidden from this land” (336-7) when he dies. For it is, indeed, his native earth.<sup>48</sup>

---

secret of his dealings with Apollo. (This last is the controlling factor for the conduct of affairs in public throughout the action.)

<sup>46</sup>The recognition of this long-neglected duty reinforces the hypothesis that the present plague situation should be identified as a *recurrence* of the problem posed for the city by the Sphinx. (The Sphinx was an “unbreakable” in the myth; so Sophokles could only suggest a naturalistic interpretation for it indirectly.)

<sup>47</sup>B.M.W. Knox (1957, 160) notes that Oedipus uses a formula of the Delphic Oracle at the beginning of this speech (216-8). He cannot admit at this point that he is the actual culprit. But he is careful to include himself as a possible accessory after the fact (249-51).

<sup>48</sup>Sophokles will wait more than twenty years before telling the story of how Kreon pushes the curse to its last extreme. But we should take note that Oedipus does not shield either his loved one (Jokasta) or himself (cf. 233-4). He is no “traitor.”

The man who has perished is “one of the best and a King” (257) says Oedipus. He knows just how far that is from being ethically accurate.<sup>49</sup> But he reveals his own interpretation of the Oracle when he says that as “holder of the authority that he had before me, holder of his bed and wife, I will fight on his behalf *as if he were my father*” (259-65). By taking his throne and his wife, Oedipus has given Laios a son. He does not know what a terrible irony there is in their “common sowing” (260). He knows that he was himself the “Chance that leapt on that man’s head” (263); but not what a *mischance* it is that they actually have children in common (261-2). It is the “child of chance” who unknowingly recites his own pedigree with a longing that will turn to horror when *that* truth emerges (266-8).

The Chorus responds that Apollo, who has laid the task on them, must identify the killer for them. Perhaps Teiresias, who often sees with his master’s eyes, can do this. Once more, Oedipus is ahead of them; and again, he is wondering why Teiresias has not already arrived.<sup>50</sup> The poison of tyrannical suspicion is working steadily in his mind; but he asks for the seer’s help with a ceremonious reverence that will soon be revealed as the cloak of actual contempt.

Teiresias knows the truth — and there is nothing remarkable about his knowledge, for he recognized Oedipus on his return, and he understood why the shepherd went back to the fields. But he knows that Jokasta does not want the truth to come out; and he naturally assumes that Oedipus would not want that either, if he knew what he was asking for. No one knows better than Oedipus, that Teiresias was not involved in any plot against Laios; but he uses this accusation to make Teiresias lose his temper; and Teiresias tells him that he must apply the edict to himself. It is he, Oedipus, who is the “unholy pollution” of the land (353).

---

<sup>49</sup>The gulf between the conventional social supposition, and real ethical commitment is the fundamental concern of the drama. It is what divides Oedipus even from Jokasta (and from Kreon).

<sup>50</sup>It was Kreon who suggested that Teiresias should be sent for; and Oedipus has now summoned him *twice* (288).



Oedipus knows that this is true. But how does Teiresias know it? If he claims to know it “from his art” (357) Oedipus will be certain that there is a plot in train. Kreon came back from Delphi with the old oracle repeated and renewed; and he has delayed Teiresias in order to prime him with it. If that is what is going on, then it is not Apollo himself who now requires a reckoning; for Oedipus has understood and obeyed that old oracle. When Teiresias repeats in plain words the accusation that it was Oedipus who killed Laios, the question is not settled. But when he goes on to say that Oedipus is “mingling most shamefully with those dearest to him” (367) Oedipus becomes certain that his suspicion is justified. Teiresias is as blind in his mind, as he is in his body. It is Oedipus who is the true seer. The time of the Sphinx has come round again. Teiresias could do nothing then. His prophetic powers were worthless. It was the ordinary wisdom of one who came along the road (393), “the nothing knowing Oedipus” (397)<sup>51</sup> that saved the city.

Teiresias does not explain how he knows what he does know. (That would undermine his oracular authority.) But he does indignantly reject the accusation that he is engaged in a plot with Kreon; and he now *prophesies* plainly to Oedipus what his eventual fate will be.<sup>52</sup> This prophecy is fulfilled, because when Oedipus understands that there is no plot, and that the old oracle was *literally* true, he accepts the words of Teiresias as the commandment of Apollo.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Oedipus is confident that he is the true servant of Apollo. But he shows himself here to be a *new kind* of servant. There is a clear suggestion that *oracles* ought not to be trusted. We must put our faith in human *judgment* (ἄνθρωπος κρίσις). Apollo will show Oedipus that he really does “know nothing” (a pun on the other reading of his name: “Know Foot”).

<sup>52</sup>C.B. Daniels rightly says that Teiresias poses the truth about his birth to Oedipus as a *riddle* (C.B. Daniels and S. Scully, 19 , 13). There is also a riddle for Oedipus in the fact that Teiresias knows that he killed Laios. But Oedipus thinks he has the answer to that; and hence he does not see that there is any riddle to be solved until Teiresias speaks of knowing his parents.

<sup>53</sup>We should notice that Kreon later understands this oracle of Teiresias more literally than Oedipus. Oedipus wants to go straight into exile; but Kreon will not allow that. It is his own sons who eventually send Oedipus into exile; and he complains in the *Kolonos* play that he was not banished until such time as he no longer wanted to go (*Oedipus at Kolonos*, ). But Teiresias warns him that there is no corner of Cithaeron that “will not echo with his cry” (420-1).

When Teiresias says that (unlike Oedipus) his parents did not take him for a fool (436), the reversal begins. For the “child of chance” has always wanted to know who his natural parents were; and if Teiresias knew them, then perhaps he is not just a political plotter who is simply relying on the old oracle. But Teiresias leaves the riddle unsolved; and Oedipus is able for a time to cling to his “political” hypothesis. Teiresias tells him to go inside and think things over; and that must be what he does.<sup>54</sup>

The Chorus now sings about the unknown murderer. It is clear that they are much impressed by the prophecy of Oedipus’ fate that Teiresias gave. But they know of him as the son of Polybos, King of Corinth (490). That he has left Corinth behind must be a puzzle to them; but how he can be the source of harm to the “children of Labdakos”<sup>55</sup> is an even greater mystery. Hence the Chorus accepts the “doom” pronounced by the prophet, but not his identification of the man upon whom the doom is to fall. The identity of the criminal remains to be clearly established.

---

It is hardly likely that Sophokles is already plotting the *Kolonos* play; but when he does, he keeps rigorously to the story that he has already worked out.

<sup>54</sup>We might suppose that when they are both indoors, Oedipus gives Jokasta some hint of his thinking. But if so, she does not tell him anything important; and if he told her what is in his mind, we would expect her to intervene much sooner than she does in his quarrel with Kreon.

<sup>55</sup>The “children of Labdakos” must include Jokasta (and her children). For otherwise, Laios would be as determinately singular as “the son of Polybos.” Of course, the plural is *prophetically* correct. Oedipus and his children are actually “children of Labdakos.” But that is a paradoxical way to take the supposed quarrel with “the son of Polybos.”

Someone has now told Kreon what Oedipus believes. Kreon remains remarkably calm and reasonable.<sup>56</sup> Oedipus accuses him not merely of conspiracy with Teiresias in the present crisis, but of being the murderer of Laios. He does not seriously believe that Kreon arranged for that murder; but as he says to the Chorus, a secret conspiracy should be met quickly by a counterplot (618-9). The plotters are accusing him of killing Laios, so he is turning the accusation back upon them. (They will only be *scapegoats*; but that is just what they deserve.)

Kreon responds to this quite outrageous attack by saying that royal responsibility is the last thing that he wants. He is very happy to have all the advantages of a royal position, without the burdens of kingship. When Oedipus emphasizes his responsibility for the welfare of Thebes, Kreon only says that *he* is a Theban too (629-30). He might well have said “I am a *native* Theban, and you are not.” This is certainly the implication that Jokasta hears. She intervenes at this moment, because of the danger that lies down that road. She knows why Oedipus is tempted to make Kreon into the city’s scapegoat for the present crisis; and she knows what will come out if he persists on that course.

Even the Chorus can see what is happening. We cannot suppose that they know who the stranger was, who arrived about seventeen years ago — for he would never have been made King in that case. But, having heard Teiresias, they must now suspect that there is a secret about him which some others know (cf. 483-511). Oedipus tells them plainly that if he lets Kreon go, then he will die or be banished himself (658-9). They do not want that, and they are clearly hoping that it will not be necessary (689-96).

---

<sup>56</sup>Kreon is far less reasonable, when he is in authority. It is easy to claim that the Kreon of the *Antigone* (and again in *Oedipus at Kolonos*) is quite a different character. But that is a mistake. Sophokles (who has already written the *Antigone*) wants us to understand that the obstinate tyrant and the sensible critic of tyrannical behavior are one and the same. Kreon shows himself well aware here that he is quite unfit to exercise royal authority. He is an extremely conventional person, who can only rule “by the book.” Even here, on this very day, he begins to exhibit his wooden authoritarian character, as soon as he has to assume the responsibility of the King.

Jokasta is now forced to reveal to Oedipus the reason why he must not look for a scapegoat — or even pursue the inquiry. She has to tell him who he is, and how Teiresias knows who his parents were. In a marvelous stroke of dramatic irony, Sophokles makes her tell how the oracle was fulfilled, while pretending to show that oracles are quite worthless. We can be quite certain that Oedipus long ago told her his story of what happened at the fork in the road. But now Oedipus must come to terms with the fact that the King he killed *was* his own *real* father. It is no wonder that he says “a wandering of the soul, and overthrow of the mind takes me” (726-7) at this point.

But from this moment onwards, his course is set in the directly opposite direction from that which Jokasta intended. From the moment that he knows the whole truth, Oedipus recognizes that it must all come out. As long as he believed that Teiresias was a false prophet, he could hope to escape. But Apollo must be justified, no matter what the cost. The one witness must be sent for at once; and although Jokasta holds onto her hope that he will exonerate Oedipus, it is clear that Oedipus does not mean to let the official cover story stand. He tells his own story of his youth at Corinth, and of how *he* received the oracle. The fact that what sent him to Delphi was the fear that he was a bastard (780), is now ignored without any further consideration. Oedipus explicitly declares that, in seeking to avoid the death and pollution of his conventional parents, he has killed and polluted his real parents (820-7).

There is no unavoidable need for the story to come out. For in the account that Jokasta gives for public consumption, the baby was exposed and perished; and if the shepherd stands by his story that the King was set on by a gang of brigands — which makes his own flight look natural, and almost respectable — then Oedipus cannot be the killer. But in that case the Oracle will be dishonored; and Oedipus has made clear just how closely the oracles received by his father and himself were matched. So the alibi would be transparently false.

Jokasta says that she will never again pay attention to prophecy (857-8). But the Chorus sings a great ode about the *hubris* of human lords against the Gods — “If such deeds are in honor, what need is there for my sacred dance . . . the oracles about Laios are set aside to perish, and nowhere does Apollo shine bright with honors; piety perishes” (895-6, 906-10). Jokasta, who retired into the palace with Oedipus, emerges again with repentant prayers and offerings for Apollo. She has discovered that Oedipus has no intention of letting the Oracle be dishonored in this way. Piety shall not perish.

With the arrival of the Corinthian shepherd at this point, a new opportunity for Oedipus to evade his fate arises. Polybos is dead, and the Corinthians want him for their King. Oedipus could accept banishment from Thebes, and return to his original career. It is the opening up of this option which makes it clear that the justification of Apollo's Oracle is what is important to Oedipus. As long as he thought he was dealing with human opponents who were simply using the oracle for their own purposes, he was prepared to defend his secrets ruthlessly. But now he will not take the easy way out. He pretends to be willing to take it (as Jokasta wants him to). But his only object is to make clear what the cost would be for Apollo: "Alas, alas! why indeed should one look to the hearth of the Pythian seer" (964-5). The "Alas" is crucially important.

Oedipus never thought that the oracle *really* referred to Polybos and Merope. But he understood that Apollo meant to bar his return to Corinth; and since Merope is still alive, that bar still exists. When the Corinthian understands what Oedipus is ritually fearful about, Jokasta's earnest effort to maintain the "child of chance" view of his parentage (977-9) begins to break down. The Corinthian tells Oedipus how he got to Corinth; and he learns now that he is really Theban-born (1026).<sup>57</sup> There may even be someone here, who knows how he came by his "birth-tokens"; for the Corinthian received him from one of Laios's shepherds.

The Chorus knows that this shepherd must be the very man who has been sent for; and so the last link in the chain closes. Jokasta tries one last time to turn Oedipus from his course. He pretends that she is afraid that he will turn out to be base-born. But everyone present must know by now, what the examination of the Theban witness will reveal. The Chorus understands just what "evils" will "burst forth" from Jokasta's silence (1074); and when Oedipus reaffirms his view, he is telling them (in no uncertain terms) to be silent. This is where he calls himself "the son of chance" (1080); but he is well aware what an awful chance he must now unmask. In obedience to his wishes the Chorus sings a lovely little ode about the possible parentage of Oedipus upon Cithaeron itself. But the Chance that gave him such good things (1081) is kind to him no longer, and even as he speaks her praises he knows that.

---

<sup>57</sup>But he got his name in Corinth (1036). The way that Sophokles underlines the recognition-signal aspect of the name shows that he means us to have no doubt that both Laios and Jokasta recognized their grown-up son *instantly*.

With the appearance of the Theban shepherd, the play reaches its climax. The Corinthian knows him at once, but he does not know the Corinthian, until he is reminded of the circumstances of more than thirty years ago.<sup>58</sup> As soon as the Corinthian identifies Oedipus as the baby he received, the Theban tries to shut him up. The truth has to be forced out of him, but very little force is needed. Obedience to his master's will is habitual for him. He answers the questions as briefly as possible, and keeps as much of the story secret as he can. In the end he is not even *asked* about the death of Laios. He takes all of the credit (which has now turned to blame) for the preservation of the child; and all attention is focused upon the terrible sin of Jokasta in accepting the marriage.<sup>59</sup> The Chorus sings a great lament about that — and the killing of Laios is not mentioned.

Now a servant comes from the palace, to tell us that Jokasta is dead. They *heard* her bewailing her double marriage (as if the truth about that were as much of a shock to her as it was to Oedipus); but she was in her bedchamber with closed doors; hence they only saw that she had hung herself, when Oedipus broke the doors open. He got Jokasta down, and put his own eyes out with her brooches.

---

<sup>58</sup>He certainly does not *want* to recognize the Corinthian, because he does not want the Queen's secret to come out; and he has probably been told why he was sent for. But he is not expecting to be faced with the Corinthian, so we have no good grounds for suspecting him of deceit here. He is an honest man in general.

<sup>59</sup>Sophokles wants us to decide for ourselves *why* Jokasta accepted it. As soon as we begin to think about that, we realize that she *must* have besought the Shepherd to preserve the child, because his continued preservation as a grown youth provides her only possible motive in the marriage crisis. (The clear assumption of the Chorus that Jokasta *must* have known what she had done, is the end of the thread that Sophokles has given us, through which the whole story can be drawn out into the open.)

Oedipus, self-blinded, comes on stage again to join the Chorus in a great lament. When they see him, the Chorus asks “who is the *daimon* who leapt beyond bounds upon your ill starred fate?” Oedipus gives his answer in the ode: “Apollo it was, friends, Apollo who brought these evils to pass, these sufferings of mine. But it was my own hand, and none other that struck, wretch that I am” (1329-32). He is referring directly to his blinding, but his declaration covers all that has happened. Apollo is responsible for the blindness of all his actions. He thought he could see what he was doing with the eyes of the God himself; but that is not possible for a mere mortal. His physical blindness expresses how he now “knows himself” (as the Oracle commands). He calls down a curse upon the two shepherds (1349-52).<sup>60</sup> None of this would have happened if they had let the baby die.

At the present moment it seems right to Oedipus that he should remain alive, because he could not face either father or mother in the Underworld. Now he will be blind even in death; and here in life he cannot see the children (or the city) who are so terrible for him to look upon. He thinks that he is doomed to lose them by his own decree. But he has still to learn that the truth of that (by *Apollo's* own decree) is different than he supposes (and more painful). “Hide me abroad, or kill me, or cast me in the sea” (1410-2) he says; but none of this will happen *while he wishes it*. Apollo will not suffer him to be a conscious, willing servant any more. Forth he will go in due time; but only when he has become accustomed to his new condition and does not want to lose his quiet life at home with the children.

When he begs the boon of banishment from Kreon, the new King tells him that Apollo must be consulted first. What is right and proper at the moment is that he should be taken indoors, out of public view. Kreon is very willing to banish him, but the conviction of Oedipus that he knows Apollo's will cannot be decisive.

---

<sup>60</sup>It was actually the Corinthian who did the things of which Oedipus speaks. But it was the Theban who saved him first; and only the politic silence of the Theban keeps Jokasta beyond the range of his direct curse.

We have to wait more than twenty years to learn what Apollo's will was. In the *Kolonos* play Oedipus rails at Polyneices that he was sent forth by Kreon and the two sons, only when he no longer wanted to go. The scandal had died down, and the brothers were ready to take over the kingship (which Kreon was, no doubt, quite willing to resign). Oedipus talks as if only the desire of his two sons was important; but, knowing Kreon, we can be certain that Apollo was duly consulted again. Probably the Pythia gave the answer that she knew was wanted; when the questioner was influential, that was what she usually did. So the indignant fury of the aged Oedipus was well-founded. But the lesson of the present play is driven home: the will of the God is *not* the will of his servant.<sup>61</sup>

Even about his children Oedipus does not get his own way. The twin boys do not need protection, he says; but he begs Kreon to look after the girls. On that side we already know what actually happened because the *Antigone* was there to be read. The royal claims of the boys were duly observed; and they ended by killing one another. The girls went on the road with their father, when his time of exile came. They did "wander as beggars without husbands" (1506) as Oedipus prays that they shall not have to. Kreon betrothed Antigone to his own son; but (as we know) Apollo brought even that project to disaster.

---

<sup>61</sup>Oedipus is so urgent about the fulfilment of his own edict, that Kreon even seems to promise that he will be banished forthwith (1519-20). But Kreon has just said again that "the gift is the God's"; and although we know from the *Antigone*, that he "does not like to speak in vain," he yields to Apollo's prophet even there. So he cannot keep his promise here.



Oedipus is destined at the last to be reconciled with Apollo, but not with Kreon or with Thebes. The contrast between mortal and divine affairs is maintained to the end. The *Oedipus Tyrannos* ends with a dawning reconciliation between Oedipus and his fellow citizens; but he is as radically alienated from Apollo as he ever can be. No doubt it was the *Eumenides* of Aischylos that gave Sophokles the idea for setting the scene of his final reconciliation in the grove of the Furies. More than anyone — even Orestes — Oedipus had been their victim; and it was Apollo — the God of the Oracle who saved Orestes — who was the peculiarly personal Fury of Oedipus. Sophokles himself was born at Kolonos; and there was perhaps a local myth about the death of Oedipus. That may very well have been the origin of Sophokles' lifelong obsession with the Theban saga. Much of what he wrote down only when the shadow of death was on him after a long and happy life, probably took shape in his mind when he was much younger. Certainly, the grove of the Furies is at the heart of his conception of the story — and indeed of human life itself. “Good tempered” was the verdict that Aristophanes gave for Sophokles;<sup>62</sup> but no one ever had a deeper comprehension of Blake's Tyger.

---

<sup>62</sup>*Frogs*,

## Notes

## References

Bowra

Cameron,

Daniels, C.B. and Scully, S.

Ehrenberg, E. *Sophocles and Pericles*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1954.

Fontenrose, Joseph. *The Delphic Oracle*, Berkeley, U. of Calif., 1978.

Goheen, R. *The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone*, Princeton, 1951.

Kitto, H.D.F. *Greek Tragedy* (1939), Garden City, Doubleday, 1950.

Knox, B.M.W. *Oedipus at Thebes*, New Haven, Yale, 1957 (rpt. New York, Norton, 1971).

Knox, B.M.W. *The Heroic Temper*, Berkeley, U. of Calif., 1964.

Waldock, A.J.A. *Sophocles the Dramatist*, Harvard, 1951.

Whitman, C.H. *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, Harvard, 1951.