Oedipus the King: 
The Two Dramas, the Two Conflicts 

SIMON O. LESSER

The word "two" has an almost magical relevance in any modern scrutiny of Oedipus the King. In a sense it is motive for writing, for when the drama was first presented it won only the second prize, and this was an injustice that any close reader of our century must feel an urge to rectify. Though Sophocles' play has its peers among the tragedies of Shakespeare, it has never been surpassed by any subsequent work in insight, concision, cunning of construction, or profundity and range of meaning. It is primus inter pares.

The word "two" must also be used repeatedly in any attempt to write about Oedipus the King. Though Sophocles scrupulously observes the unities of time and place and only one action is dramatized, there is an important sense in which it may be said that Oedipus the King is not one play but two. Formally, the play is constructed like a box containing a smaller box, though this metaphor, like anything which has been said about the play or can be said about it, seems inadequate. The boxes are permeable; the background drama arises out of the foreground one: it is composed of what is repressed and wins its way to the light despite and against resistance. At the same time the drama with which the play begins, ends and is chiefly occupied, the foreground drama, is in a sense the continuation and completion of the background drama; each of the plays is born of the other. Because of this, and because Oedipus is the protagonist in both dramas, there is some overlapping and there are intricate relationships and parallels, substantive as well as formal, between the two parts of the play. Coleridge regarded Oedipus the King as one of the three great plots in all fiction. During the many centuries in which men have been writing plays no more sophisticated formal structure has been devised.

A parallel tribute must be paid to the play's subject matter. Like Hamlet, Oedipus the King is a drama of internal conflict;² both the foreground and back-

¹Freud must have half-perceived this. He noted that the drama proceeded like an analysis without pursuing the observation. It was of course what I call the background drama that most interested him.

Simon O. Lesser teaches at the University of Massachusetts. He is the author of Fiction and the Unconscious and has published psychologically oriented critical articles in, among others, Daedalus, the Yale Review, and College English.

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ground dramas revolve around such conflicts. In each drama one conflict is central but traces of another may be discerned, and in each case the second conflict, the minor one, echoes the major conflict of the other drama: though each of the dramas deals with two conflicts, there are only two conflicts in all. If not universal, these conflicts are almost certainly the most widespread, and the most critical, with which western man has had to struggle through the centuries and must struggle today. *Oedipus the King* is not simply a superbly constructed and written play; it is the archetypal tragedy; and Oedipus, who never rationally "resolves" either of the conflicts though he is belatedly forced into what may look like a resolution of one of them, is the archetypal tragic hero—the ancestor of us all.

The word "two" has significance also for most of the speeches and developments which comprise the play: nearly every detail of the play has at least two different meanings, one for one or more of the characters and another meaning for others, or one for all the characters concerned and another for the audience. In a veiled way Teiresias tries to tell Oedipus why he does not wish to speak, but Oedipus assumes that he is balking for a completely different reason. When Teiresias finally blurs out the truth, Oedipus again misunderstands—or understands nothing whatever. Conversely, words sometimes have a more significant meaning for the person who hears them than for the person who speaks them: when Jocasta tries to reassure Oedipus, some of the things she says penetrate the film which has kept him from understanding what Teiresias told him. This doubleness of meaning of so much in the play is the source of the famous reversals on which Aristotle rightly set so much store: the "good news" the Messenger from Corinth brings is in the larger context of the play the beginning of the end for Oedipus; the reassurances to which the news leads spin a major part of that web of objective evidence from which Oedipus cannot escape no matter how desperately he struggles. Throughout the play we nearly always unconsciously see and understand more than the characters do at any given point, and Sophocles sometimes communicates with the audience over the heads of his characters in a way which more obviously prepares us for the reversals; when Jocasta tells Oedipus that the one servant who escaped the massacre of the king's party asked to be sent as far from the city as possible once he saw the situation at the palace, the alert spectator or reader immediately infers the reason for his request whereas Jocasta and Oedipus disregard the possibility that it has any significance.

Finally, Sophocles makes even time do double duty: it marches simultaneously forward and backward. Each scene, each encounter, carries the action relentlessly forward; but it does this by carrying us progressively back in time. We go back finally to Oedipus' infancy, to his birth, and even beyond this to King Laius' fear of his unborn son. The action that fear precipitated is in one sense the beginning of *Oedipus the King*; in another sense, it seems part of a drama which goes on without end, a drama of which *Oedipus the King* is only a segment.

2.

Though ours is reputedly an age of psychology, most literary critics, even those who write *about* Freud, make little or no use of his findings in their examination of literature. They seem blind—sometimes, one feels, they are determinedly blind—to indications of internal conflict and resistance and unconscious motivations, even when the evidence for these is copious and fairly obvious. Hence though it is disappointing, it is not surprising that, so far as I have been able to discover, only one non-analyt-
ically oriented critic of *Oedipus the King*, Lillian Feder, shows an awareness of the fact that Oedipus is in conflict about discovering the truth, a perception which is indispensable, I believe, for explaining much of the ambiguity in the play and penetrating to a deeper and fuller understanding of it. Unfortunately, though Miss Feder's essay is searching and stimulating she does not exploit her insight to the full; she notes only a few instances of Oedipus' aberrant behavior and is not able to explain these satisfactorily in dynamic terms. Miss Feder expresses regret that a number of recent studies of the tragedy by classicists "lead only to traditional and rather narrow conclusions." The fact is that *Oedipus the King* is only one example of an important group of works which are unlikely to yield their deepest secrets to critics who neglect depth psychology. The criticism which utilizes the findings of psychoanalysis has long been on the defensive. Let me make one modest affirmative claim for it: it has decisive advantages over alternative approaches in the explication of works in which unconscious motives and conflicts, and behavior reflecting these, are of central importance.

To analyze the foreground drama in *Oedipus the King*, which involves grasping its meaning and nature consciously, we must somehow get "outside" the play, and in particular Sophocles' manipulation of time, and put all the events of the play in their correct chronological sequence. This is not easy, for the purpose of the manipulation, which is adroit and successful, is to regulate the disclosures of information so that they will have maximum dramatic impact and hold us enthralled. Still, the job must be done. By some deliberate effort of will we must either try to reread the play in relatively disengaged fashion or coolly rearrange its events in our mind.

The foreground drama is chiefly about seeing. Thebes is suffering from a grievous plague, and Oedipus, a responsible king, has anticipated the wishes of his subjects and sent his brother-in-law Creon, co-ruler with himself and Jocasta, to the temple of Apollo to find out what can be done to end it. Creon returns and relays what he has learned. The failure to discover and punish the murderer of the previous king, Laius, is the pollution responsible for the plague. The murderer must be found and driven from Thebes or put to death. Now Oedipus assumes responsibility for discovering the unknown murderer.

But how can such an enterprise be a source of conflict and dramatic tension? One possibility, of course, would be to have the inquiry opposed by some person or persons, and an unwary reader might suppose that this explanation holds for *Oedipus the King*: both Teiresias and the Herdsman are opposed to the inquiry and try to withhold information and at one point Jocasta implores Oedipus to abandon the inquiry. But she quickly sees the uselessness of her attempt and gives up, and in quite different ways the resistance of both Teiresias and the Herdsman is soon overcome. If the source of the resistance to discovering the unknown murderer were external, the tension it leads to would be felt only intermittently and briefly. No observant reader can fail to feel that it is continuous and mounting. Moreover, it continues to increase even when the reader, with Jocasta, becomes consciously aware of the truth; indeed, it is most intolerable between that point and the point when Oedipus himself finally perceives it.

The explanation is simple: the source of the resistance is not external—it is in Oedipus himself. From first to last he fights his own inquiry. He has undertaken it in his public capacity as king,
out of a sense of what he should do, of what is expected of him. As a man, as Oedipus, he has no stomach for the inquiry from the start and resists it at every step.

Still, there is one important shift. Towards the end of the scene with Jocasta, shortly before the arrival of the Messenger from Corinth, Oedipus finally realizes—consciously realizes—that he may be the murderer of Laius; at a deeper level he may no longer have much doubt about the matter. To the extent that he may be said to continue the inquiry at all, he now changes and perverts its original purpose. His conscious intent, which has been to discover the murderer of Laius, shifts to disentangling himself from the thickening web of evidence indicating that he is the murderer: he asks Jocasta to send for the Herdsman in the hope that he will confirm the single discrepancy between his original account of what happened at the three crossroads and Oedipus' revivified memory of what took place there. Oedipus is taking a risk, but the need to free himself from the anxiety which envelops him is so urgent that it overrides all other considerations; and he is still able to keep the possibility that the Herdsman may confirm his guilt from the forefront of his mind.

Strictly speaking, Oedipus is no longer prosecuting the inquiry: he is desperately trying to prove his own innocence. He no longer has even a nominal interest in serving his subjects and discovering the truth. Nevertheless, the inquiry continues. To some extent during the talk with Jocasta and, more markedly with the arrival of the Messenger, it acquires a momentum and, it appears, a will of its own. Oedipus' unconscious resistance continues also, but the basis of the resistance undergoes a significant shift. Up to the fateful exchange with Jocasta the chief purpose of the resistance was to keep the idea that he might be the murderer of Laius from reaching awareness. At the very time that he becomes able to face this fear, at least momentarily, he becomes increasingly preoccupied at the unconscious level with more terrifying fears—fears centering around his identity, the two prophecies, the emerging but still amorphous notion that he may be guilty of parricide and incest. Once the Messenger arrives, these fears become the focus of his resistance. He tries to keep from consciousness any information or any implication of information which threatens to give them shape or validity. From first to last the crucial question in the foreground drama is not whether sought information can be uncovered, but whether Oedipus can be brought to accept information, much of it information he already knows. The primary movement is not from ignorance to knowledge but from denial to confrontation.

Once all the events in Oedipus the King, those recounted as well as those dramatized, have been arranged in chronological sequence in our minds, the reasons for Oedipus' resistance seem obvious enough. Shortly before he arrived at Thebes, we know, he had killed, he believes, every member of a party of five men which included one older man of authority who might well have been a king; once at Thebes, he married the widow of the former king, a woman far older than himself. Shortly before these events he had been told by the oracle at Delphi that he was destined to murder his own father and lie with his own mother. Granted that he discerns no connection between the prophecy and the events—and he of course wards off the very possibility of there being any—he has understandable reasons for feeling guilty and frightened.

Once we have all this information firmly in mind, we may notice that there are indications of fear and conflict in Oedipus even before the inquiry begins. Perhaps the plague stirred feelings of guilt and unworthiness which had
long slept under the nurtured feelings of competence and pride. Oedipus may have even felt that in some obscure way the plague was aimed at him. Though he acts before his countrymen directly ask him to, it appears that he was slow to act; the plague has clearly gripped Thebes for some time. When his help is besought, he first tells the Chorus that he has already dispatched Creon to the temple of Apollo and that he is overdue, and then adds a nervous, gratuitous comment, as we shall see him do on subsequent occasions also:

But when he comes, then, may I prove a villain,
if I shall not do all the God commands.
(76-77)\(^3\)

It is a curious addition. Even as early as this, we may fugitively wonder why he should even entertain the possibility of disregarding the God's commands.

Once Oedipus is told the exact nature of the task the God has laid upon him, his ambivalence is constantly and, for the psychologically oriented reader, sometimes conspicuously in evidence. It is not simply that he is fainthearted about the inquiry and irresolute, even resistant, in his quest of the truth. His repressed fears and guilt feelings reveal themselves in many other ways. Sophocles seems to know everything there is to know about unconscious psychological processes. In a way it is naive to be surprised: the unconscious has been a part of man and a prime mover of his actions since the beginning of time. Still, only a few writers have been vouchsafed so comprehensive and specific a knowledge of it as Sophocles. He shows a faultless familiarity with innumerable mechanisms which were not to be isolated, named, and conceptually analyzed until Freud achieved that breakthrough.

In knowledge of the unconscious, as in other areas, Sophocles has few peers.

3. When Creon tells Oedipus the God's command, which is to punish King Laius' murderers, Oedipus responds with a speech which is not far from a whimpering complaint:

Where are they in the world? Where would a trace of this old crime be found? It would be hard to guess where. (108-109)

The speaker is Oedipus, who had the courage, resoluteness and intelligence to confront the sphinx, though the cost of failure was death, and who a little before that had not hesitated to become involved, over a trifle, in a struggle with five men. Still, it is early in the play; we might fail to note how far short Oedipus' response falls from what might be expected of him. But Creon's reply gives us a second chance to achieve perspective: it is part reproof, part pep-talk. Creon finds himself in the curious position of having to inspire his king:

The clue is in this land;
that which is sought is found;
the unheeded thing escapes:
so said the God. (110-111)

As though this were not enough, a little later on we find Oedipus giving himself a pep-talk. After a series of questions about the murder of Laius and the reasons it was not investigated, he accepts the duty of conducting an inquiry in words that have a firm ring (132-135), then weakens the force of what he has said by an addition which suggests that he is still having to convince himself to do something we thought he had already decided to do.

For when I drive pollution from the land
I will not serve a distant friend's advantage,
but act in my own interest. Whoever he was that killed the king may readily

\(^3\)This and all subsequent references are to the superb David Grene translation of the play.
wish to dispatch me with his murderous hand;
so helping the dead king I help myself.
(136-141)

None of these indications of the faintheartedness of Oedipus is obtrusive. They are woven into the warp and woof of the play with a skill which renders them akin to nature's protective adaptations. But they feed that unconscious understanding which eventually—as it seems in a flash—leads us to realize consciously that Oedipus himself is the murderer of the previous king, and they help to explain our acceptance of that revelation and the curious intellectual satisfaction it gives us.

In the same fashion Sophocles gradually makes us subliminally aware of the guilt and fear which explain Oedipus' ambivalence. The indications of these feelings, too, are usually inconspicuous or indirect. Typically they take the form of remarks which on casual reading seem entirely natural. For example, when Creon first mentions Laius to Oedipus, he remarks:

I know of him by hearsay. I have not seen him. (105)

Even though we do not pause over this, we may sense that the second comment is gratuitous and defensive. The words with which Oedipus begins his proclamation to the Chorus, "... what I say to you, I say / as one that is a stranger to the story / as stranger to the deed" (219-220), have a more pronounced defensive ring.4

Later in the same speech, after soliciting the help of the Chorus in tracking down the unknown murderer and pronouncing a curse upon anyone who withholds information and the murderer himself, he adds a comment which, even

on first reading, may strike us as curious and superfluous:

If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth
I pray that I myself may feel my curse.
(253-254)

In this early part of the play Sophocles makes still more frequent use of a form of evidence which is likely to pass completely unheeded unless one is already observing a person with close attention, even suspicion. He has Oedipus betray his guilt repeatedly by slips of the tongue.

The first of these occurs in the opening scene with Creon. He tells Oedipus that one man survived the slaughter of Laius and his party and that, though too frightened to give a clear account of what happened, he provided one piece of information which may prove helpful:

This man said that the robbers they encountered were many and the hands that did the murder were many; it was no man's single power. (122-123)

The idea of plurality, of "many", is heavy in that speech, yet Oedipus replies:

How could a robber dare a deed like this were he not helped with money from the city, money and treachery? (124-125)

Is this a meaningless slip, perhaps simply stemming from carelessness on Sophocles' part or his translator's? Hardly. Sophocles has Oedipus make the same slip a half dozen additional times.

Even police who have never heard of Freud are unlikely to disregard discrepancies of this kind. Moreover, the slips occur in connection with a matter of pivotal importance, and Sophocles emphasizes its importance by an irony. Later, in the scene with Jocasta when Oedipus begins to realize consciously

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4 The "irony" of these words has been commented upon innumerable times, but so far as I am aware their significance in terms of Oedipus' psychology has gone unremarked.
that he may be the murderer he seeks, the
one thing that sustains him is the hope
that the Herdsman will stick to his story
that a band of men killed Laius.

Following the opening scene with
Creon, in the proclamation to the Chorus
from which I have already quoted, Oedipus
absentmindedly refers to the
murderer of Laius in the singular five
times. Indeed, it is not until relatively
late in the speech that he mentions as a
possibility what he has already been told
as a fact—that the murderers were
“many;” and even after this he again
lapses into the singular.

Later, the Chorus tells Oedipus what
Creon has already told him:

It was said
that he was killed by certain wayfarers.

(292)

Once again Oedipus disregards what he
has just been told:

I heard that, too, but no one saw the
killer.

This slip and the one it echoes, made
after Creon gave him the same infor-
mation, are the most significant. It might
be argued that in the long speech to the
Chorus, the references to the murderer in
the singular were dictated by
convenience—this though Freud has
demonstrated that factors of this sort
play no more than a facilitating role in
parapraxes. In the slips directly follow-
ing those in which the murderers have
been referred to in the plural the argu-
ment is not even admissible: it would
be more convenient, and more natural,
for Oedipus to stick to the same num-
ber. To a greater extent than the other
slips, moreover, these do double duty.
They of course reveal Oedipus’ secret
fear that he is the murderer. In addition,
they—or more accurately the conflict
responsible for them—keep him from rec-
ognizing what he does later recognize
in the reassuring presence of Jocasta,
the possible value of these accounts in
establishing his innocence. He throws
away two ready-made public oppor-
tunities to eliminate himself as a suspect.

4.

The fears Oedipus is struggling so
desperately to repress rise to a peak
during the scene with Teiresias. He has
reason to be afraid of the prophet, “in
whom alone of mankind truth is native,”
and whom the Chorus also describes as
“[seeing] most often what the Lord
Apollo sees.” Might not these very words
have stirred faint memories in Oedipus
of what Apollo’s oracle had told him?
Oedipus has summoned Teiresias not on
his own initiative but at the suggestion
of Creon. His fear may help to explain
the fact that he does refer to the mur-
derers in the plural in speaking to
Teiresias; indeed, it may be partly re-
sponsible for the self-control evident
throughout his initial speech. Later his
fear is to reveal itself in far more obvious
and ugly ways.

His sense of duty dominates him at
the start of the interview, and for a time
he continues to urge Teiresias to divulge
whatever he may know. But this victory
of conscious purpose is achieved at a
heavy cost. Oedipus is able to keep
pursuing the truth only by blinding him-
self to what Teiresias is broadly hinting
—that he, Oedipus, would be hurt by
what would be disclosed if he were to
speak. In one way or another the ir-
reconcilable conflict between wanting
to uncover the truth and wanting to
keep it hidden prevents Oedipus from
functioning competently throughout the
inquiry. A little later in this scene he
becomes so obtuse that he becomes in-
capable of grasping things which are
openly said. Sophocles knew the effect
emotional conflict has upon understand-
ing as he seemed to know everything
else.

Once Oedipus gives up the attempt to
persuade Teiresias to speak, it becomes
clear that *unconsciously* he has understood the blind prophet's hints all too well: he accuses Teiresias of being "complotter" of the murder of Laius, charges that he planned the crime, and expresses regret at his inability to claim that Teiresias executed it single-handedly. There is of course no scintilla of evidence to support these charges. The only possible explanation for them is that the prophet's hints have so alarmed Oedipus that his guilt feelings have become literally intolerable: he must project them upon someone else. Teiresias, who clearly knows more than he says, is a natural person for him to select. Later we shall see that the choice is influenced by a deeper lying factor also.

Ironically, Oedipus' baseless charges achieve what his reasonable appeals could not: they induce the prophet to speak out. Now he accuses Oedipus directly of the murder of Laius: "... you are the land's pollution." In the exchange which follows we see one effect of anxiety upon understanding—the mechanism of repression at work—in almost diagrammatic fashion. Oedipus owes his election as king to his intellectual power no less than to his intrepidity. But now, shortly after Teiresias has spoken, he is forced to confess that he cannot recall, and did not really understand, the plain words of the prophet:

I did not grasp it,
not so to call it known. Say it again. (361)

Now Teiresias is even more explicit:

I say you are the murderer of the king whose murderer you seek.

Oedipus' reply shows clearly that unconsciously he had understood the first accusation also:

Not twice you shall
say calumnies like this and stay unpunished. (italics added)

Angry himself, Teiresias threatens to say more and, when Oedipus refuses to mollify him, hints at the incestuous nature of the king's marriage. In the angry exchange which follows he suggests that blindness and ruin lie ahead for Oedipus. By this point Oedipus is frantic. Projection explodes into a related but more comprehensive form of irrationality: a paranoid outburst. He charges that the whole inquiry is a plot by which Creon and Teiresias hope to depose him and gain power—Creon the throne, Teiresias a place at his side. There is, of course, no evidence whatever for this charge either. Indeed, there is some counter-evidence: Oedipus himself refers to Creon as "friend from the first and loyal." The charge is wholly a product of forces in Oedipus himself—most obviously of his rage and unendurable fear. It is fed also by his ambivalence toward the inquiry. It reflects a wish to give up the inquiry and regret that he ever undertook it; it is a way of saying, "They tricked me into this."

In the last part of this scene Teiresias amplifies his accusations sufficiently so that we should be able to foretell all the revelations to come. But, consciously at least, we are no more ready to acknowledge the truth at this point in our immersion in the play than is the Chorus—to say nothing of Oedipus himself. The main reason, I believe, is that we are in league with him. If it seems strange that we should be, that may be because this attempt to identify the disavowed sources of his behavior has made him seem a less sympathetic character than in fact he is. In more ways than can be specified, his predicament is our own. Each of us has tried, perhaps many times, to look into his heart and past, only to encounter almost insurmountable resistance; how many men have succeeded more than momentarily and partially in penetrating the amnesic veil which forms over their infancy and early childhood. So with the conflict between Oedipus' public and private roles—we have all experienced it, even if we have not

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waged the struggle for such momentous stakes. We ourselves know what it is to be trapped into pursuing a given course out of some sense of what is expected of us while all our instincts pull us in a different direction.

5.

The short second scene with Creon furnishes confirmatory evidence of the irrational nature of Oedipus' charges. Though he has learned nothing new, he now says that it is "proved" that Creon murdered Laius and is plotting with Teiresias to seize the crown. His own hostility to the man he accuses of hostility to him is openly avowed; he tells Creon that he will be satisfied with nothing less than his death. Some other secret springs of his behavior come into the open—his desire to remain king and the need he feels, even as he pursues the inquiry, to safeguard his own interests. He tells Creon bluntly, "I'll not be proved a murderer."

Neither the baselessness of his charges against Creon nor his general intertemperance is lost upon the Chorus, which here and elsewhere represents public opinion. In effect, the Chorus judges between the two men and entreats the king not to "cast [Creon] away dishonoured on an obscure conjecture." Oedipus' reply reveals the essentially irrational nature of his accusations:

I would have you know that this request of yours
really requests my death or banishment.

(658-659)

At first glance this reply may seem so wild as to be incomprehensible. Theoretically there are innumerable people, in and out of Thebes, who might have murdered Laius. There may seem to be no justification for Oedipus' feeling that he will be found guilty if he does not succeed in pinning responsibility for the crime on the particular scapegoats he has selected. But the unconscious has its own logic which on occasion is swifter and more unerring than that of the conscious mind. While it is not necessary that Creon and Teiresias be proven to be murderers, it is necessary that they—the prophet, in particular—be discredited as witnesses. In addition to easing Oedipus' sense of guilt, his accusation serves this defensive function.

6.

With Teiresias and Creon, Oedipus has been on guard. We can almost see him relax when his brother-in-law leaves and he is left with the Chorus and Jocasta. There is relatively little fear or competitiveness in his attitude toward the Chorus, which has been respectful and considerate even when it sided against him, and the refusal of the Chorus to be too specific in telling Jocasta about his quarrel with Creon in Oedipus' own words softens his anger. And he clearly loves Jocasta. She is the one person in whom he feels he can confide.

Jocasta for her part begins to comfort her troubled lord. She sees that he is frightened; she later uses this word to describe his state in speaking to the Chorus. What she says at that point supports the reader's feeling that she also understands that the accusations and predictions of Teiresias are responsible for his fright. Now, to reassure him and to lessen his fear of Teiresias and prophecy in general, she tells him the story of the prophecy made to her previous husband shortly before she bore him a son, of the way they treated that son and of the way Laius met his death—a way which she thinks is completely at variance with the way it was predicted he would meet it.

It is of course yet another "irony," in a play replete with them, that instead of reassuring Oedipus her story has the opposite effect. A single detail—the fact that Laius was killed "at a place where three roads meet"—rivets itself upon
'Oedipus' attention and intensifies his fear. He carefully questions Jocasta and each additional fact she gives him about the murder of Laius further increases his fear. For the first time he faces the fact that he may be the slayer of Laius.

To explain that fear, he gives Jocasta a succinct account of the essential facts of his life before his encounter with the Sphinx. We shall save most of that account for later consideration, for in telescoped fashion it seems to me to describe a drama which deserves separate attention. But the climax of the account must be looked at now. It is a confession: a confession that shortly before Oedipus arrived in Thebes he had become involved in a fight with five men and, he believes, killed them all. Nor does he blink the fact that his memory of the party he fought with and the outcome of the fight squares in nearly every way with the description of King Laius' party and the way the members of it met their death.

Dramatically, the turn of events in this great scene is ironic. Psychologically, it is entirely realistic. It is natural that Jocasta should want to reassure her troubled husband—and equally natural, in view of what we already know or expect, that the attempt should backfire. It is also natural that Oedipus should be able to divulge hidden facts about his past and achieve some degree of insight while talking to a woman he loves, after going to bizarre lengths to avoid seeing anything while talking to Teiresias and Creon, whom he fears and hates. It is far easier to look into one's self and acknowledge one's weaknesses and misdeeds when one is in the presence of someone from whom one expects love and sympathy. The understanding Sophocles displays here conforms not only with what we ourselves know and find to be true in our daily experience; it tallies with much that has been subsequently learned about the transference situation in psychoanalysis and other forms of therapy and with the way insight usually occurs there.

At the same time the power of unconscious resistance is not forgotten, either in this scene or anywhere else in the play; what is perhaps most amazing is how much Oedipus still fails to perceive. By this point he has compelled himself to face many terrible aspects of his past and knows almost everything he is ever to know about the murder of Laius and his retainers. He knows that the prophecy made to Laius shortly before the birth of his son matches the one the oracle at Delphi made to him. He knows that he may not be the son of Polybus and Merope, and we might suppose that he would be very much aware of this. He has just told Jocasta of the failure of both of his attempts to discover if they were his real parents, and we recall that the one taunt vented by Teiresias that he could not cope with by denial or projection was a reference to his parents. "What parents?" he cried. "Stop! Who are they of all the world?" (437)

Oedipus now knows too that the murder of Laius and his party almost certainly occurred at the place where he committed his murders and occurred at about the same time. He knows that the composition of Laius' party tallied exactly with that of the party with which he became embroiled. He must recall too that the leader of the party, the man in the carriage, looked like Laius as Jocasta has described him; if time and circumstances did not permit Oedipus to note his victim's resemblance to himself, he must at any rate have seen that his hair was "grizzled . . . nearly white." Finally, Oedipus knows that when the one survivor of Laius' party returned and found Oedipus king, he asked to be sent as far as possible from the city.

This request provides almost certain evidence that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius; later we will find it has a still more horrendous significance. But
Oedipus appears to glide over this item of information as he does most others. Though he begins to see, and this is a significant breakthrough, all that he sees, in the sense of being willing to acknowledge, is that he may be the murderer of Laius and his party, and because of this and his marriage to the former king’s widow, the pollution of the land. On the basis of a single discrepancy between the reports stemming from the Herdsman’s account and his own memories, a discrepancy which with a little thought could be understood, he clings to the hope that his fight was with a different party of five. He remains completely blind to the possibility of any kinship between himself and Laius. We might suppose that he would be struck by the way the prophecy made to Jocasta and Laius dovetails with the one made to him. In fact, he keeps his attention fixed on some of the facts Jocasta throws out about the murder of Laius and hardly seems to take in the point those facts are intended to illustrate or to hear the rest of the account of which they are a part.

In contrast, by the end of this scene, the reader, I suspect, is unconsciously prepared for all the revelations to come. Even before Oedipus tells his story, it seems clear that he is the murderer of Laius. His fright and the request of the one survivor of Laius’ party seem to admit of no alternative explanation. When Oedipus does tell his story, we sense the ominous way in which it meshes with Jocasta’s revelations and all that we have learned before.

Jocasta is in a position intermediate between the reader and Oedipus. When towards the very end of the scene, he tells her that he awaits the arrival of the herdsman with hope, she voices questions which have a skeptical, even dependent quality. At least momentarily, it appears, she consciously suspects that Oedipus is the murderer of her former husband. To be sure, when Oedipus reminds her that the Herdsman spoke of Laius having been killed by a band of men, she too clutches at this straw. The further remarks she makes, however, suggest that she does this to strengthen her defences against more intolerable fears about the identity of Oedipus and the prophecy made years before to Laius and herself. If these fears prove justified, calamity looms ahead for her also, and though the fears are assuming shape in her mind and are closer to the fringe of consciousness than they are in Oedipus, she is struggling almost as desperately as he to repress them and to keep from seeing the overall pattern which the reader is now ready to perceive.

7.

Oedipus’ reply to Jocasta’s questions about his reasons for wanting to talk to the Herdsman inadvertently reveals that he has forgotten the original purpose of the inquiry. But with the arrival of the Messenger matters are taken out of his hands. From this point on everything follows what appears a foreordained course.

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5 The account the Herdsman has given of the death of Laius, which is of course false, provides an excellent illustration of the economy, subtlety and sophistication of Sophocles’ art. The purpose of the falsification was to let Oedipus know, in case he sought to find out if any member of Laius’ party had returned, that the Herdsman would protect Oedipus’ secret—this so that Oedipus would have no motive for killing him. As matters work out, Oedipus learns of the account when he is so upset and guilt-ridden that, far from wondering if it is not a deliberate falsification and then asking himself why the survivor would want to lie, he is incapable of taking in its plain sense; he overlooks the emphasis on plurality. Later his hopes are so exclusively fastened on this aspect of the account that he again fails to consider whether the account might not be untrue and, if so, why the Herdsman would have wanted to lie. The final irony is that when Oedipus finally talks to the Herdsman he does not even ask him whether one man or many killed Laius and his attendants. The question of whether he killed Laius has been supplanted by a more terrible one—whether he is guilty of parricide and incest.
The Messenger's news and revelations are a source of profound and bitter irony. Though he believes he is a bearer of good news and is originally accepted in this light, his presence on the scene and the information he volunteers bring about the discoveries which draw the play to a climax. The irony is heightened by the skillful way Sophocles uses another facet of his knowledge of the way emotional factors affect understanding.

The Messenger enters just as Jocasta uses the word "frightened" to describe her lord. In fact, both she and Oedipus are frantic with fear. That is why they react to the Messenger's news with hysterical relief and elation. Their almost willful misinterpretation of the significance of Polybus' death sets the stage for the ironic reversal, though in this scene, as in the previous scene with Jocasta, it stems immediately from an attempt to reassure Oedipus.

Actually the Messenger has brought no news which is unequivocally good. We know, even if he does not, that the prospect that Oedipus is to be elected king in Corinth is meaningless unless he can clear himself from the web of guilt forming round him in Thebes. In construing the news of Polybus' death as good both Jocasta and Oedipus are simply deceiving themselves. Grateful for any opportunity for escaping from their fear, they shift their attention to the question of whether correct prophecy is possible, then answer the question in the negative by falling back on the assumption that Oedipus is the son of Polybus. Of course, the deception is not deliberate. However unjustifiably, Oedipus has thought of Polybus and Merope as his parents most of his life, and, until the talk Jocasta has just had with her husband, she had no reason to doubt that they were. But now there are cogent reasons for doubt, and as we know both Oedipus and Jocasta should have these fresh in mind. As a result of the information they have just exchanged, moreover, they both know that the prophecy made to Laius and Jocasta before the birth of their son matches the prophecy made to Oedipus at Delphi. Both also know that Oedipus may be the murderer of Laius. Examined closely, all this information fits together. It is precisely because Oedipus and Jocasta secretly fear that he is the son of Laius that they resort to wishful thinking and accept as certain something they know to be doubtful—the assumption that he is the son of Polybus.

Their irrational elation provides the basis not only for the irony but for the stunning impact of both this scene and the next one. The revelation that Oedipus is not the son of Polybus and Merope and the later revelation that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta would have less force if they had been openly faced as possibilities instead of being denied.

Once the Messenger has told Oedipus that Polybus and Merope are not his parents, the pace of the play perceptibly quickens. Under Oedipus' questioning enough comes out about his origins to make it all but certain that it was he whose ankles Laius had pierced and then given to a servant to abandon "upon a pathless hillside." All the essential facts for understanding Oedipus' predicament are now either known or easy to infer. There can be no doubt that the two prophecies have been fulfilled. Jocasta perceives this and begs Oedipus to drop the inquiry. In contrast, he refers to the Messenger's revelations as "clues" and sticks to his intention of examining the Herdsman, who has been sent for because he is the only survivor of Laius' party but is also the man who years before gave the infant child of Laius and Jocasta to the Messenger. Jocasta rushes off—as we surmise and are shortly to be told, to self-inflicted death.

Oedipus attributes Jocasta's plea to the fear the further questioning will re-
veal that he is baseborn. Since neither she nor anyone else has said anything about such a possibility, at first glance the accusation may seem random and incomprehensible. In fact, the motive Oedipus ascribes to Jocasta explains why he feels compelled to see the Herdsman: he wants to find that he is baseborn, and thus not guilty at any rate of parricide and incest.\(^6\)

The fact that he clutches at such a straw, however, betrays the desperateness of his situation. He is ignoring not only everything he has learned but the real significance of Jocasta’s fright and appeal to him, though it is not difficult to discern. If anyone would know the parentage of the fettered infant handed over to the Herdsman years before, the reader realizes, it is Jocasta herself.

8.

Oedipus has insisted on questioning the Herdsman because he is desperate. He persists in questioning him for the same reason. He persists even though more and more evidence emerges which shows the futility of persisting. He ignores the probable significance of the Herdsman’s reluctance to speak and his attempts to hush the Messenger, just as he has previously ignored, misinterpreted, or refused to understand whatever he did not wish to understand. Even after the Herdsman has told him that the child he gave to the Messenger was Laius’ and was given to him by Jocasta, Oedipus continues to ask questions, some of them clearly gratuitous or irrelevant. As Morton Kaplan observes, he behaves like a patient in analysis resisting an insight which is dangling in the air, crying to be voiced;\(^7\) he strives to escape the truth or at any rate to defer the moment when he must face and accept it. It comes out in spite of his exertions.

Like so much else in *Oedipus the King* which has evidently been missed by many of those who have written about it, this is stated in the play itself.\(^8\) After Oedipus rushes to his self-inflicted punishment, the Chorus declares:

> Time who sees all has found you out against your will... (1213-1214)

The fact that the truth comes out despite Oedipus’ resistance is worth stressing because it should dispel the common misconception that his self-blinding is punishment for his *hubris* in seeing. In fact, he punishes himself, among other reasons, for having been *unwilling* to see, for refusing to look into himself and find out who and what he was. Oedipus has grown to manhood, dealt with problems of the external world in ways which have won him renown, and achieved a position of authority and power—all without making a single sustained attempt to know his own past or to understand his own nature and the reasons for his actions, past and present. In this respect also—in somewhat magnified fashion—he typifies western man.

9.

Earlier in his life Oedipus had experienced an even more crucial conflict between unconscious desires and conscious intentions: a conflict over whether to master or act out what today—such is the waywardness of language—it is most convenient to call his “Oedipal” impulses. We of course now “know,”

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6. As we shall see, the idea that such a motive may impel one to abandon an inquiry into one’s origins may have a still earlier determinant.


8. Among those who have written about the play without recognizing that Oedipus resists his own inquiry, I must in candor include myself. While my discussion of the play in *Fiction and the Unconscious* indicates I had become aware of at least one bit of evidence of Oedipus’ ambivalence, something inhibited me from pursuing this and examining the whole pattern of his behavior.
conceptually, that this conflict is intimately related to the conflict—a variant of which Oedipus experiences in the foreground drama—between the conscious desire to bring the truth to light and unconscious tendencies to keep unwelcome aspects of it hidden. As we grow up and discover that sexual feeling for the mother and hatred of the father are abhorred—hence "bad" and dangerous, involving the risk of dread punishment at the hands of the father and the loss of both parents' love—we become reluctant to acknowledge that we harbor, or even harbored, such feelings. That reluctance is a prime motive for repression; and repression involves not only a "forgetting" of the Oedipal (and other forbidden) impulses of infancy, and thus the loss of the most significant part of our early affective experience, but also a resistance against recapturing that experience if we should seek to and a tendency, which becomes progressively stronger, to deny later manifestations of Oedipal (and other disavowed) tendencies access to consciousness and to thrust them out of awareness quickly if they do break through. By extension, our fears of our erotic and aggressive impulses may come to have a still more calamitous consequence: since so many of them are suspect if not guilt-ridden, we may be gradually overcome by a diffuse and powerful tendency not to look inside ourselves at all, since that way danger lies, but to concentrate our attention on the external world—and even in exploring that world to focus on matters not likely to remind us of our own unacceptable drives.

Intuitively, men must have always known of this intimate connection between forbidden impulses and repression; otherwise Oedipus the King could not have been written, or understood and enjoyed. The play twice stresses the connection. In what I have referred to as the foreground drama, precisely what Oedipus resists seeing is the past and present fulfillment of his Oedipal desires. The connection is emphasized in the background drama also.

In form this "drama" is of course a narrative: the brief, elliptical account Oedipus gives Jocasta of his early life. But Sophocles is instinctively dramatic; he makes it easy for us to flesh out this account into scenes comprising a coherent drama. Moreover, he is so unerring in his choice of details that we can even reconstruct the motives for each of Oedipus' actions.

This drama, too, begins with a conflict about seeing. At a dinner, a drunken man accuses Oedipus, already a young man if not a full grown adult, of being a bastard and not, as he had assumed, the son of Polybus and Merope. Oedipus goes to them and reports the incident, thus at least inferentially asking them to tell him if the charge is true. They angrily deplore the drunken man's words but, it appears, do not flatly deny them; and Oedipus evidently does not press them for a yes-or-no response.

He is probably held back in part, as any young man might be, by timidity about prying intimate information from parents. But he deterred also, it may be surmised, by a far more unusual and powerful fear, one which is the polar opposite of the wish which years later impels him to question the Herdsman—the fear of discovering that he is of lowly origin. During latency and early adolescence, we now know, most children become more aware of their parents' limitations and become dissatisfied with them or even ashamed of them. These feelings may lead them to imagine that their "real" parents are more exalted personages than the ones they live with—and may even impel them to establish relationships with people who can easily be recognized as idealized replacements of mother or father.9 Oedipus is in pre-
ciscely the opposite situation of these fugitives from ordinary parents; as he himself puts it, "I was held greatest of the citizens/in Corinth. . . ." He must feel that he has everything to lose and nothing to gain from the discovery that Polybus and Merope are not his real parents.

Nevertheless, the story rankles, he is still troubled, and he makes one further attempt to discover the truth: he secretly goes to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. But the oracle not only refuses to satisfy Oedipus' curiosity about his past but proposes him to horrors in his future:

that I was fated to lie with my mother, and show to daylight an accursed breed which men would not endure, and I was doomed to be murderer of the father that begot me. (791-793)\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\)It is hard to resist the speculation that in the real world known to Sophocles, and perhaps also in the archaic period from which the Oedipus myth stems, such predictions as this were sometimes based on the capacity of someone associated with the oracle to gauge the character of inquirers. The chapter on "The Procedure of the Oracle" in H. W. Parke's and D. E. W. Wormell's monumental work, The Delphic Oracle (Oxford, 1956), shows how this might come about. Because the Pythia only prophesied no more than nine days a year, the priests might have had ample time to perceive, for example, the rebelliousness, fractiousness, uncertain self-control and instability of any real-life prototype of Oedipus who may have presented himself. And the priests had abundant opportunity to interpret, and even influence, the Pythia's prophecies: "... the confused and disjointed remarks of a hypnotized woman must have needed considerable exercise of imagination to reduce them to the form of a response. In this must have lain the chief temptation for the priests. Where must they draw the line and confess that they were merely reading their own thoughts into the Pythia's gabble? No doubt in this matter individual priests on particular occasions took a very different course. In a special emergency

Though Oedipus does not realize it, he now faces a crisis on which his entire life depends. All the terrible acts he is later to commit and all the consequences which flow from those acts stem from his failure to face his situation resolutely and deal with it wisely. But he cannot face it; he is overcome by panic and flees:

When I heard this I fled, and in the days that followed I would measure from the stars the whereabouts of Corinth—yes, I fled to somewhere where I should not see fulfilled the infamies told in that dreadful oracle. (794-798)

Though this is a terse description, it is not too terse: it covers all that Oedipus knows and believes about his behavior and the reasons for his behavior. It is essential, however, that at this point we interpolate and achieve an understanding of what Oedipus should have done and of the reasons he acted as he did.

What he should have done, as Morton Kaplan has pointed out, is return to Corinth and insist that Polybus and Merope tell him if they are his parents and, if they are not, provide as much information as they can about his birth and lineage. It is now essential that he have this knowledge to escape the dire prophecies of the oracle. He has a right to demand that he be told the truth—

when it seemed expedient that one particular answer must be given, the priest may have consciously or half-consciously substituted his own predetermined reply as the authentic utterance of the prophetess. Perhaps some of the priests may have found means to implant suggestions in the Pythia's mind which would emerge as though they were spontaneous utterance when she was under a trance. At any rate, the history of Delphi shows sufficient traces of a consistent policy to convince one that human intelligence at some point could play a deciding part in the process" (pp. 39-40).
and every reason to suppose his demand would be met.

At first glance it might seem that here again the failure is in the area of seeing, that Oedipus' desire to learn the truth succumbs to the unconscious forces which inhibit him from discovering it. But he flees because he is in a state of panic, and nothing he might discover by pursuing the inquiry seems capable of arousing such terrible dread as he feels. Moreover, it is the prophecy which has terrified him. He is now afraid, not of what he may see, but of what he may do—lie with his mother and murder his father. His panic fear is proportionate to the intensity of his unconfessed desire to commit these acts. It is the other side of the desire—the dread of the dimly perceived but frightening punishment he expects to follow if he yields to the desire. The conflict about seeing has been supplanted by a still more urgent one: a conflict about whether to control his Oedipal impulses or surrender to an almost irresistible urge to satisfy them. It is inauspicious that the unconscious impulses and the fear they arouse are so overpowering that Oedipus acts without thought. Under such circumstances the ego has little chance to defend itself successfully against forbidden impulses. To a greater extent than in the foreground drama, it appears that Oedipus' desire to do the right thing is outmatched from the beginning by the forces arrayed against it.

If we have any doubts about this, they are quickly dissipated. Oedipus runs into his fate, not away from it. Before following his actions, however, we should look more closely still at the factors which impel him to make the calamitous decision he does.

10.

Oedipus' fears are not only intense; they are specific. Polybus is the primary target of his still unsubdued competitive and hostile feelings; Merope, the still unrelinquished primary object of his sexual desire. What tells us this is some words already quoted:

When I heard this I fled, and in the days that followed I would measure from the stars the whereabouts of Corinth. (italics added)

The fact that Polybus and Merope were the original objects of Oedipus' "Oedipal" impulses should occasion no surprise. He lived with them, they were his parents—so far as he knew, his real parents—during the Oedipal and post-Oedipal periods. Naturally his Oedipal feelings were directed toward them.

The fact has some important implications. In the first place, it must affect our judgment of Oedipus' conduct, not only in the background drama but throughout the play. Oedipus' decision—if that is even the word—to flee from Delphi after hearing the oracle's prophecy was of course "wrong" in the sense of being undesirable and unfortunate. But we could call it wrong in the moral sense only if we assumed, what is patently false, that Oedipus was capable of seeing the alternative possibilities open to him and deciding upon his course calmly and rationally. The distinction suggests the inadequacy of a purely moral approach to tragedy. Oedipus flees and acts as he does at many points throughout the play because he is under the sway of irrational tendencies in himself of which he has no understanding. Under such conditions, the idea of responsibility, as that term is usually understood, has little relevance. This does not mean, however, that his acts are without consequences. Nor does the fact that Oedipus acts irrationally disqualify him as a tragic hero. On the contrary, Aristotle appears to have had him in mind in framing the requirements of the hero. Oedipus is not only "highly renowned and prosperous" but a middling
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good man, and his downfall is brought about, not by vice or depravity, but by a frailty or weakness. That weakness is precisely his incapacity to look within himself, much less master the impulses he would find there if he did. To an unappreciated extent all his disastrous acts flow from this weakness, rather than being the result of "fate."  

11 Oedipus the King is a drama of character, in the same sense that Hamlet, Othello and Lear are. Fate enters only as a kind of editor, underscoring here and there to make some of Oedipus' deeds still more horrible than they first seem.

The fact that Polybus and Merope are the original objects of Oedipus' parricidal and incestuous impulses also means that the acts of Oedipus which culminate this part of the tragedy, his murder of Laius and marriage to Jocasta, are far more complex and significant than has been recognized. Biologically, of course, Laius and Jocasta are the parents of Oedipus, and Sophocles could have found no better way of both vicariously satisfying the Oedipal impulses of his audience and showing the dread consequences of satisfying them than

11 Interestingly, though no previous commentator to my knowledge has explicitly identified this as Oedipus' weakness, a good many have recognized that what happens to Oedipus is related to his character. George Devereux maintains that Greek drama in general is set in motion by 'man's character structure and latent conflicts' and that this is "simply obscured by the Greeks' habit of personifying character structure as 'Fate.' ..." "Why Oedipus Killed Laius," International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, XXXIV, 2. Reprinted in Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek, ed., Psychoanalysis and Literature (New York, 1964). However, most of the critics who have sensed that there is a relationship between Oedipus' character and life have either ventured no explanation of how they are related or have offered explanations which seem to me to be questionable or clearly wide of the mark. Bernard Knox, for example, attributes Oedipus' destruction to his greatness and his "relentless pursuit of the truth," Oedipus at Thebes (New Haven and London, 1957), pp. 50-51.

by having his hero kill his actual father and wed and beget children by his actual mother. But psychologically Laius and Jocasta are surrogates for the parents—surrogates who happen to be the actual parents; Sophocles has it both ways. Because Oedipus' climactic acts in the background drama have this double significance, he invites identification for a wider range of reasons than has been recognized. As Freud perceived, all men have psychic affinities with Oedipus. His fate moves us "because it might have been our own... we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers." 12

As Freud also proceeds to point out, in slaying Laius and wedding Jocasta, Oedipus provides vicarious wish fulfillment of desires which are still extant in us, however firmly they may be repressed and subdued. Though Freud stopped here, there is still more to be said. In extreme form, Oedipus also exemplifies the actual behavior of an inestimable but undoubtedly large number of men—the countless thousands in every generation who never successfully resolve their Oedipal tendencies and achieve that successful identification with the father which is a prelude to full maturity. He is the first literary representative of the innumerable men who go through life, as he did, acting out their unresolved Oedipal tendencies. Such men may unconsciously seek father figures on whom they can vent their hatred, their competitiveness and their sullen insubordination. Similarly, their selection of sexual partners is always influenced and often governed by the fixation on the mother.

11 Oedipus' behavior throughout the drama reveals the strength of his un-

12 The Interpretation of Dreams in The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud (New York, 1938), p. 308.
resolved Oedipal strivings. He could flee Corinth and the couple he unjustifiably thought of as his parents, but he could not flee from his own character and destiny.

Soon after hearing the oracle pronounce his fate, he encounters a party of five men, including a herald and one man being carried in a carriage. It seems reasonable to suppose that only kings, princes, and a few other people of position and power traveled in this fashion. Oedipus could not have failed to realize that this was a party of someone of importance; and very possibly, therefore, of someone considerably older than himself. It seems reasonable to suppose also that most solitary travelers deferred to such parties, giving a little ground so that they could pass unimpeded. But Oedipus would not give way. An attempt had to be made to thrust him aside by force. To some extent his behavior might be attributed to the fact that Oedipus had been brought up as a prince and was not used to yielding to anyone save, necessarily, Polybus. But other forces must have been working upon him also. Consider: under ordinary circumstances the prudent course would have been to step aside—he was one man against five. And Oedipus was traveling under circumstances which were anything but ordinary. He was fleeing, presumably, to escape the fate predicted for him and did not know who “of all the world” his parents were. The only way he could be sure of escaping his fate was by avoiding potentially murderous conflict with anyone old enough to be his father and sexual union with any woman old enough to be his mother. Yet Oedipus now “permits” himself to become embroiled in mortal combat with a party which, he must have known, included at least two men who might have been old enough to have sired him: the Herdsman and the man in the carriage.

Oedipus’ behavior was ill-advised to the point of seeming perverse. But it will be immediately understandable to anyone aware of the difficulty men who have not worked through their hostility to the father are likely to have with authority figures from teachers and bosses to kings and presidents—and even institutions. It was precisely the fact that Oedipus was, in effect, being asked to yield to someone who possessed power and authority—and was in this sense a father—which roused his combativeness.

Thus the last person in the world who should do so, Oedipus, becomes involved over a trifle in a to-the-death struggle with five antagonists. He continues his journey only when, he believes, he has killed them all.

Oedipus’ next encounter is with the Sphinx, and there is no evidence that, in the more intellectual mortal struggle he now has with her, guilt either diminished his self-confidence or interfered with his mental agility. Routing the Sphinx may have further bolstered his confidence—made him feel a child of “beneficient Fortune”—for with the same rashness with which he risked or even invited a head-on struggle with Laius’ party he not only assents to becoming king of Thebes but accepts the widow of the former king as his wife. There was no chance that the disparity between her age and his could have passed unnoticed.

12.

The foreground drama also contains evidence of both the intensity and diffuseness of Oedipus’ unresolved Oedipal feelings, in particular his parricidal impulses. Though here the Oedipal feelings are subordinated to the conflict about seeing and developed somewhat sketchily, in hidden ways they significantly influence Oedipus’ behavior. He is the hero of the entire drama, and he is the same man who fought with and, he believes, killed five men rather than give way to them. The hostility and iras-
cibility which were mobilized then live in him still.

It is possible that Sophocles meant this to be evident in the scene in which Oedipus tells Jocasta of that early murderous encounter, particularly at its climax:

I became angry and struck the coachman who was pushing me. When the old man saw this he watched his moment, and as I passed he struck me from his carriage, full on the head with his two pointed goad. But he was paid in full and presently my stick had struck him backwards from the car and he rolled out of it. And then I killed them all. (806-813)

Certainly there is no evidence of contrition here. Relating the experience may rekindle Oedipus’ wrath against those who expected him to docilely yield the right of way. As he talks he may re-enact the killings, and this may be indicated by his voice and gestures.13

The rage is displayed anew and dramatized in the scenes with Teiresias and Creon. We have glanced at the immediate determinants of the paranoid accusations Oedipus makes against them. Oedipus has some reason to seek to discredit Teiresias, who says many things which fill him with fear and clearly knows more than he says. Yet if Oedipus had been capable of calm reflection, his fear would have been easy to control. Whatever Teiresias knew he had long kept secret; and when summoned, his wish—his offense—was that he wanted to remain silent. The basis for Oedipus’ fear and suspicion of Creon seems more tenuous still. Indeed, the only justification he can find for his feelings and charges is the fact that Creon anticipated the Chorus in suggesting that the blind prophet be consulted. No suggestion could have been more obvious or more guileless.

Even when allowance is made for Oedipus’ fright and need to prove his innocence, it seems clear that his behavior toward Teiresias and Creon cannot be entirely explained on the basis of the immediate situation. One is impelled to ask whether his hostility toward them did not have earlier determinants also. Might not their very position in the community have made them the target, from the time of Oedipus’ arrival in Thebes, of the unextirpated negative feelings toward the father which asserted themselves so violently just before his arrival. Like the unknown head of the party met at the crossroad, both Creon and Teiresias had attributes which would have led Oedipus to look upon them as fathers. As Jocasta’s brother, Creon was a member of the royal family, with some of the aura of a king. As a quasi-religious figure, Teiresias enjoyed a kind of respect Oedipus may have felt he could not aspire to and a status which was not affected by the vicissitudes of politics.

While there is no evidence of earlier friction with Creon, the whole pattern of Oedipus’ behavior suggests that it would not have been easy for him to share authority with any man. There are tangible indications that Oedipus had negative feelings toward Teiresias long before the action of the play begins. Unlike the paranoid accusations in Oedipus’ bitter tirade (380-403), the denunciations of the prophet—as, for example, a “juggling trick devising quack”—do not seem improvised. Indeed, the taunt that Teiresias was unable to do what Oedipus could and did do, solve

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13 I am indebted to a brilliant student production of the play at the University of Massachusetts in 1962 for this suggestion. The young man who played Oedipus delivered the lines in the way here described, and once one had seen and heard him, no other way of interpreting them would seem satisfactory.
the riddle of the Sphinx, suggests that Oedipus may have regarded the prophet as a rival from almost the time of his arrival in Thebes. It appears that Oedipus was irritated by the twice-offered suggestion that he solicit the help of Teiresias. If so, one of the reasons, it may be conjectured, is that the suggestion stirred feelings of competitiveness long present in dormant form.

The way Oedipus speaks to Teiresias and Creon suggests another source of his tendency to regard them as fathers and then feel envious and hostile toward them. Both men have personal qualities which are not native to Oedipus and which he cannot assume for long. When we look closely, we see that even the presently used title, Oedipus the King, has overtones of irony. Though Oedipus is king and thus in a sense father of his people and though he has children of his own, throughout this play—in contradiction to Oedipus at Colonus—he is a son figure, not a father figure. He lacks the inner assurance, composure and poise to sustain the role of king more than briefly. He very quickly ceases to speak to Teiresias as king to subject—to command him or beseech him to serve the common good. Instead he talks to him as a feared and hated rival, as he later talks to Creon also; indeed, in the exchange with his co-ruler he lapses more obviously into a childish and pettish tone. Though from his youth he has longed for authority and power, even when he has them he does not possess them.

Of course, all of the past determinants of Oedipus' behavior operate in dynamic fusion with the factors playing upon him in the drama we witness. It is because Sophocles makes us feel this that we accept the frenzied lengths to which Oedipus is driven. His envy of what must seem the secure position of Creon and Teiresias grows more intense as his own position becomes more precarious. Similarly, his envy of certain personal qualities of Teiresias and Creon which proclaim their maturity is exacerbated as his own hold on those qualities becomes more uncertain. Whereas Oedipus is maddened by fear during the scene with Teiresias, the prophet, though old and physically helpless, is unintimidated by his threats. Similarly, even when Creon's life is threatened, he retains his poise and self-control and reasons with Oedipus calmly and well. Oedipus must sense that he appears and is weak in comparison with the men he is attacking. The feeling fans his jealousy and brings his hatred to a boil.

Only the feared or actual presence of other people keeps that hatred from following the same trajectory it took in the fateful meeting at the three crossroads. Death would be the only suitable penalty for the treason and participation in the murder of Laius of which Oedipus accuses Teiresias. Only a realization of the esteem in which the prophet is held, it may be surmised, deters Oedipus from proposing it. He does propose the death penalty, almost offhandedly, for Creon:

Creon
What do you want to do then? Banish me?
Oedipus
No, certainly; kill you, not banish you. (622-623)

As James Schroeter has pointed out, murderous onslaughts upon father surrogates occur before our eyes in the dramatized portion of Oedipus the King.14

14 "The Four Fathers: Symbolism in Oedipus Rex," Criticism, III (Summer, 1961). Reprinted in Albert Cook, Oedipus Rex: A Mirror for Greek Drama (Belmont, Cal., 1963). This is a stimulating essay, which makes many valuable and valid observations. The premise of Schroeter's interpretation is that all four of Oedipus' antagonists in what I have called the foreground drama—Teiresias, Creon, the Messenger, and the Herdsman—are father figures. Schroeter justifies grouping the four men on the basis of two considerations: (1) their age; and (2) the fact that they have all functioned
13.

The punishments Oedipus inflicts upon himself express many things. Schroeter maintains that the first pun-
in some conserving or protecting capacity toward Oedipus. But surely the relevant consideration for a psychological interpretation of the play (Schroeter also offers an anthropological and a poetic interpretation) is not what various characters have done for Oedipus but how he views them. He actively dominates the course of events from the time he learns that he may not be the son of Polybus and Merope until late in the play. If Oedipus' feeling toward other characters is used as the basis for classifying them, it is clear that the Messenger and the Herdsman cannot be placed in the same series as Teiresias, Creon and, on the basis of a reconstruction of the background drama, Polybus and the unrecognized leader of the party encountered at the crossroads. These men belong together. They all have the mana of the father—the power and authority which Oedipus so much coveted that the recognition that someone else possessed them automatically aroused feelings of envy, competitiveness and hatred. Conceivably the Messenger and the Herdsman could fit into the series in other ways; for example, one or both of them might inherit the reverence and love which may be felt for the father, as the Ghost does in Hamlet. But in fact they do not function as fathers in any way. It does not matter in the least that they are old or that they have tried to help Oedipus in the past. The Messenger is just that—a person who brings news, most of which at first seems good and later bad. The Herdsman is a frightened servant from whom confirmatory and additional facts must be extracted. Both men appear upon the scene too late for their past services to be recognized. The information they give eclipses them and usurps Oedipus' entire attention.

No weakness is more widespread in the symbol hunting now so common among English students or the symbolic criticism engaged in by those who teach them than the failure to distinguish between what may function symbolically and what in fact does. Thus the distinction being made here may be of general importance.

As I indicate in note 15, I believe that Schroeter's assumption that he can casually lay claim to the advantages of a number of critical approaches, even approaches for which he feels scorn, leads him to make other errors also. However, the errors do not nullify the many fine insights which stud his essay.

ishment, exile, is "a voluntary depriv-

tion of the highest good—citizenship—
confounded by the political community" and thus "a fitting expiation of the pat-
ricide;" and that the second punishment—blinding—is "a deprivation of the highest good conferred by the gods" and thus appropriate for "the more pri-
ivate . . . yet more hideous crime of incest." However, it is doubtful that acts done at such a moment would fall into quite so neat a pattern as this. Oedipus has been finally forced to see who he is and what he has done and, before he could begin to digest the horror of this, has found his wife-mother dead—a suicide, it appears, but, as he must immediately feel, another victim, rather, of his misdeeds. To some extent both punishments must be a response to all that he now knows and feels, and it would be surprising if there were not close connections between them.

The sentence of exile may be a pun-
ishment for having settled down before he felt he had earned a right to—before he knew who and what he was and could reasonably hope to assume a place in society without uneasiness. At a deeper and more concrete level it may express the wish to undo his having settled down as King of Thebes and husband of the previous king's widow—in the haven which was no haven. Per-
haps he feels he should have wandered always, or at any rate until he knew himself. There is something congruous between not knowing who or what one

15 Eclectic criticism has undeniable advan-
vantages, and taken as a whole Schroeter's essay demonstrates this. However, the passage about punishment suggests that it has its dangers also, perhaps most especially when a critic lacks commitment. The passage reflects no awareness of the close connection, genetical-

dy and dynamically, between incest and par-
ricide, no awareness of the concept of over-
determination, and, though Schroeter invokes the word "madness," no awareness of the way the mind works under emotional stress, to say nothing of madness.
is and being a homeless wanderer, though it is a congruity hard to define in words.

Among other things, Oedipus' self-blinding expresses his shame. We must credit his repeated statements that he feels unworthy to look upon his city, his people, his children, or, when he dies, his father and mother. To an even greater extent the act expresses his need to punish himself for his failings and transgressions. Self-blinding is a condign punishment for Oedipus' failure to see while he had the gift of sight. Perhaps as early as during the first scene with Jocasta, when Oedipus expressed the fear that the blind seer had eyes, he was comparing himself invidiously with him. Now in any case he is ready to accept the taunt Teiresias hurled at him—that though he has the gift of sight, he has been blind all his life. Oedipus is also punishing himself for the taboos he violated during his "blindness." Psychoanalytic studies show that blindness is a displaced and disguised equivalent of castration. Thus the mutilation Oedipus inflicts on himself is also a condign punishment for the interrelated crimes of parricide and incest, the talion punishment the unconscious would demand. Oedipus' choice of punishments is overdetermined.

Even while Oedipus feels compelled to punish and main himself, the vitality, sturdiness and insensitivity which are part of his character do not entirely desert him. They assert themselves, in negative fashion, in his refusal to sentence himself to death, though this too would be an appropriate punishment, though in some respects, as the Chorus observes, it is a more tolerable one, and though the model for it is before him as he gazes upon Jocasta hanged. The qualities which distinguish Oedipus even as he errs assert themselves also in the punishments he does inflict upon himself. The physical punishment expresses other unconscious wishes besides the need to injure himself. After cutting the dangling noose, he tears away the brooches which fasten Jocasta's robe, thus baring the body of the woman from whose womb he was born. May not one faintly discern here a stubborn wish for physical union with the mother, though the wish must immediately travesty itself, since Jocasta is dead, and must be immediately atoned for by Oedipus' self-mutilation? The wish to be reborn—to undo the whole shameful life he has led, to be granted a second chance—makes itself felt more obviously. In using Jocasta's brooches to gash out his eyes he is reconstituting as best he can the condition he was in when he came from her womb: he is once again weeping and blind, weak and helpless. The wish to start afresh could scarcely be better pantomined with the scanty and dreadful materials available to him.

The sentence of exile dovetails with the self-blinding. As Mark Kanzer has pointed out, "in giving up his kingdom and his eyesight Oedipus [is renouncing] the gratification of his drives in the outer world ..." We have seen that both punishments are admixed with an expiatory wish—the wish to be granted a second chance. Perhaps a more specific wishful element also lurks under Oedipus' blinding of himself: the hope that, once he is blind, he, like Teiresias, will be granted the gift of sight—more specif—

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16 At some deep level Oedipus may even know that there was a connection between his "Oedipal" desires and his blindness—that his initial failure was his refusal to face and try to subdue those desires.

17 This wish is fulfilled in attenuated and sublimated fashion in Oedipus at Colonus, where Antigone can be viewed as a surrogate for the mother.

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ically, insight, the self-knowledge he has hitherto resisted rather than sought. As an alternative to suicide, exile has the advantage of permitting the fulfillment of such hopes. And in the great sequel to the play, Oedipus at Colonus, as Dr. Kanzer has brilliantly shown, some of the hopes which impelled Oedipus to cling to life are realized. Though he never acknowledges his guilt, he achieves a degree of understanding, gives up his selfishness and dependence on his infantile sense of omnipotence and belatedly makes his peace with a surrogate father and with the customs and values which alone can safeguard society from a wholesale repetition, generation after generation, of the transgressions of which he has been guilty in Oedipus the King.

Chaucer's The Book of the Duchess: A Study in Medieval Iconography and Literary Structure

JULIA G. EBEL

The relevance to medieval and Renaissance poetry of the Horatian doctrine "Ut pictura poesis"1 emerges clearly from such works as Panofsky's Studies in Iconography, Wind's Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, and Seznec's The Survival of the Pagan Gods—works which are as vital to our understanding of the literature of these periods as to our comprehension of their visual and graphic arts. Medieval art and poetry are often intertwined in a unique fashion. Not only do they share a common mythography;2 not only are their most characteristic techniques analogous;3 but, in the medieval manuscript, also a poem. It really implies only this: 'As sometimes in painting, so occasionally in poetry.' There is no warrant whatever in Horace's text for the later interpretation: 'Let a poem be like a painting.'

"And yet elsewhere in the treatise (11. 1-9) there is implicit a doctrine that underlies the pictorialism of later literary criticism." (p. 9)

D. W. Robertson in A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton, 1963) writes: "A medieval poet had at his disposal various sources of figurative material: scriptural signs and concepts, moralized natural history from non-scriptural sources, and figurative materials derived from mythography, or astrology and from commentaries on the classics. In addition, iconographic materials of various kinds which developed in the visual arts were sometimes used for literary purposes." (p. 389) This work will be cited henceforth as A Preface.

This is a point more often than not implicit in D. W. Robertson's comments on the principles of Romanesque art in A Preface. Robertson observes, for instance, that just as "the Romanesque artist took . . . little care to reproduce exactly the models he saw around him in 'real life' . . . " (p. 147), Chaucer used "iconographical details as a means of calling attention to an underlying abstract reality. . . . Details of biography, action, costume, physiognomy, and manners are sometimes mixed in what seems to be a random order." (pp. 247-248).

Julia G. Ebel, who teaches English at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, is studying medieval art and iconography on an ACLS Study Fellowship.

1I am using the phrase not as Horace meant it in the Ars Poetica but in the way that the Renaissance used the phrase.

Jean Hagstrum, in The Sister Arts (Chicago, 1958) comments extensively on the Horatian phrase, and notes that "In the passage in the Ars Poetica (11. 361 ff.) that provides the context of his famous phrase, Horace is saying that some poems please only once but that others can bear repeated readings and close critical examination. Ut pictura poesis: so it is with painting! . . . This, and no more, is what the critic says in connection with his illustration from painting. Actually the phrase means less than what it says, which is, 'As a painting, so