

Oedipus: From Man to Archetype

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Oedipus: from Man to Archetype

I PROPOSE TO EXPLORE the several meanings assigned to the myth of Oedipus by a few of the dramatists who have presented stage versions of this famous Theban saga for over two thousand years. The essence of the myth of Oedipus is the son slaying his unknown father and subsequently marrying his own mother, thereby fulfilling a decree of fate. Such is its unvarying core—and as an anthropologist, the late Clyde Kluckhohn, has pointed out, this myth is universal—perhaps even the prototype of all human myths.¹ Although this may be true, many moral meanings are projected into this core of experiences. Apparently the creative writers do not agree on the significance of this complex, much less the classical scholars who have carefully studied Sophocles.

I

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (c. 427 B.C.), the first relatively complete extant version of this myth in drama, the supernatural agency that dominates the action is Apollo. Unfortunately, however, there is no certainty concerning the meaning of the role of the Apollonian god in Sophocles' work. Apollo appears to use a man of noble, innocent, and pious nature to undermine social and religious values, despite his horror of sinning against them. But it is obvious that interpretations of this fundamental conflict between the irresistible power of destiny and the sacredness of natural ties will vary, depending upon what tone is read into the richly human and ambiguous lines. Here a representative selection from the vast resources of Sophoclean scholarship, particularly the work of modern American and English scholars, will be made in order to illustrate the diversity of interpretation and provide a basis for understanding the adaptations of the creative writers.

Sir Richard Jebb, taking the traditional position in the nineteenth century, sees in Oedipus a symbol of modern man facing a religious dilemma. Both Oedipus and Jocasta, he points out, do not reject the gods—both are reverent,

both believe in the wise omnipotence of the gods. But, on the other hand, both also reject the gods' moral ministers—Oedipus the prophet Tiresias, and Jocasta the priests at Delphi. Oedipus, Jebb states, is a rationalist, intellectually self-reliant; Jocasta, likewise, is a sceptic who questions the reliability of the oracles. Considering their views, Jebb feels that they represent a "spiritual anarchy" that not only unbalances the "self-centered calm" of Sophocles' mind but also endangers "the cohesion of society." Thus, through their experience, "a note of solemn warning, addressed to Athens and Greece, is meant to be heard." But Jebb concludes by reading into the drama the nineteenth-century problem of adjusting religious faith to the findings of science: "It is as a study of the human heart, true to every age, not as a protest against tendencies of the poet's own, that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* illustrates the relation of faith to reason."² Jebb's view is interesting because it illustrates in scholarship the possibility of accommodating the myth to changing life—in general, the attitude of the later imaginative critics of the myth. The modern trend in Sophoclean scholarship, however, is historical in orientation, for the scholars look at Sophocles' work not in the light of universal values but in the light of the ancient Greek past, particularly that of Sophocles himself in the Periclean Athens of the fifth century.

For example, Sir John Sheppard, the first to demonstrate carefully the possibility of presenting Sophocles' opinions in fifth century terms, relates ancient Greek meanings given to the maxims of the Delphic oracle, "Know Thyself" and "Nothing Too Much," to an understanding of Oedipus' character, and concludes that they provide the final moral of the play.³ Sheppard interprets the philosophical theme of Sophocles' play as a mild agnosticism or neutral fatalism. Oedipus, he declares, behaves normally, commits an error in ignorance, and brings suffering upon himself. "Sophocles justifies nothing. . . . His Oedipus stands for human suffering. His gods . . . stand for the universe of circumstances as it is. . . . He bids his audience face the facts. . . . Oedipus suffers not because of his guilt, but in spite of his goodness."⁴

Sir Maurice Bowra also synthesizes the two Delphic maxims, his point being that Oedipus has learned that he must do what the gods demand, and in his life illustrates what the Platonic Socrates means when he says the commands "Know Thyself" and "Be Modest" are the same. Oedipus finds modesty because he has learned to know himself: "So the central idea of a Sophoclean tragedy is that through suffering a man learns to be modest before the gods." Bowra argues that Sophocles' *Oedipus*, reflecting such tragic contemporary events (noted by Thucydides) as a catastrophic plague in Athens and an unsuccessful war with Sparta, as well as current disbelief in the oracles, dramatizes a conflict between gods and men. He concludes that "Sophocles allows no doubts, no criticism of the gods. . . . If divine ways seem wrong, ignorance is to blame. . . . For this conflict the gods have a reason. They wish to teach a lesson, to make men learn their moral limitations and accept them."⁵ But Bowra appears to be too committed to supporting the religious establishment, and as a result misses the subtle and humane questioning suggested in the dramatic situation. For example, is not a very critical

irony intended by the dramatist when Jocasta's offering at the altar of Apollo on center stage is seen still smoking at the time the messenger informs us of her suicide by hanging? Another such irony may be intended in the *epilogos* when Oedipus, blind and polluted, craves to be sent out of the land as an outcast only to have Creon reply that Apollo must first pronounce. This need not only suggest respect for the power of the god; it may also suggest the god's failure at empathy. For it is as if the dramatist were asking Apollo to show a little charity, love, and forbearance towards erring man.

On the basis of such evidence, Cedric H. Whitman takes issue with Bowra. He states that the picture of a pure and pious Sophocles never questioning the oracles and serenely supporting the traditional belief in the Greek theodicy is completely wrong. Sophocles, Whitman believes, appears in the *Tyrannus* to have suffered a loss of faith; he is bitter, ironic, and pessimistic because of the irrational evil perpetrated by unjust gods on a morally upright man who wishes to be and do good. Whitman's point is that the ancient Greeks used the gods to explain where evil came from, especially that irrational evil which seemed to have no cause or moral meaning. Thus Sophocles was doubting the moral trustworthiness of the Greek gods: "The simple fact is that for Sophocles, the gods, whoever they are, no longer stand within the moral picture. Morality is man's possession, and the cosmos—or chaos—may be what it will." Sophocles dramatizes the theodicy "with a kind of agnostic aloofness. Sophocles was religious rather than pious."⁶

Such, briefly, are a few of the more significant prevailing views in American and English scholarship concerning Sophocles' handling of the myth in his masterpiece. They demonstrate, despite differences of opinion about Athenian life and Sophocles' character, that the meaning of the myth in the *Tyrannus* derives from the society and culture of Athens during the fifth century, and that Sophocles accommodates the basic story not only to his own time but also to his personal ideological and spiritual needs. So, depending upon how the critic reads the complexities and ambiguities of Athenian culture and the author's tenuous character, Sophocles, in this play about King Oedipus, is impious or pious. But whatever the stand on Apollo and his oracles that Sophocles has really taken, there is no doubt about the depth, conviction, and art with which he expresses his credo. These qualities have always been admired, and, as a result, the form in which Sophocles has cast the myth has often been imitated.

These imitations, it will be seen, have their unique qualities and are by no means pale reflections of the ancient Greek masterpiece. They, too, like the *Tyrannus*, speak vigorously for the culture and the personality which gave birth to them. Although imaginative re-creations, they are critical in effect, as they invite comparison with Sophocles' work and reveal what meaning the myth might have had to the writer and his audience. They prove that in dramatic art the Oedipus myth is a dynamic organism, that it has a life of its own, because as a particularly vital myth it has the property, as Jebb intimates when he makes Oedipus into a nineteenth century man, of assimilating to

itself related ideas and thereby becoming an extremely complicated culture symbol.

II

The English *Oedipus* (1678), the joint work of John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee, is an incredibly sensational melodrama, far removed from the classical restraint and sophisticated subtlety of Sophocles' tragedy.⁷ It is not an understatement to claim little serious and sustained thought for this noisy English version with its screaming ghost, incantatory rites and oracles, sleepwalking, mad and mob scenes, quarreling, dueling, fighting, and general massacre of all the major and minor characters in the climax. Occasionally, however, incidental comments are suggestive of something profoundly meaningful—for example, Dryden's defense of the divine right of kings. When Oedipus learns of the murder of King Laius, he states that the gods are justly offended by "the guilt of Royal Blood": "What, touch annointed Pow'r! / Then Gods beware; Jove would himself be next" (I, i, pp. 366-67, 370). Thus the Tory Dryden suggests a personal political interpretation of the plague ravaging Thebes.

Nor are there any strongly sustained protests against the gods and their religious ministers in this play. This serious theme, unlike that of most of the other versions, is minimized. Once Dryden does argue, through Tiresias, for the ultimate justice of the gods in terms of the conventional chain of being (III, i, p. 388); but Dryden does not develop this theme any further. Once again, through Oedipus, he vents his fury at the priests—"O why has Priesthood privilege to lye / And yet to be believ'd!" (III, i, p. 393).⁸ Here, as Dryden insults the clerical profession (which Sophocles avoids doing, although his Oedipus quarrels vigorously with the prophet in the parallel scene), he anticipates the anticlericalism of Voltaire, who pursues this theme with great pleasure. At the end of Act III, Oedipus blames the "good Gods" for his crimes (III, i, pp. 397-98). But his defense of himself and his accusation of the gods are not presented consistently; for, after blinding himself, he submits: "Gods, I accuse you not. . . ." (V, i, p. 416). Similarly, Jocasta has no faith in oracular reliability; but in her last scene with Oedipus, she can only weep weakly: "O wretched Pair! O greatly wretched we! / Two worlds of woe!" (V, i, p. 419). Jocasta does, on the other hand, continue to protest the innocence of their married love, and Oedipus himself cannot completely suppress his passion, "the pangs of Nature," despite his strong sense of guilt:

Oedipus: I feel a melting here, a tenderness,
Too mighty for the anger of the Gods! . . .
Jocasta: In spite of all those Crimes the cruel Gods
Can charge me with, I know my Innocence;
Know yours: 'tis Fate alone that makes us wretched,
For you are still my Husband.

And then Oedipus replies in kind:

Swear I am
And I'll believe thee; steal into thy Arms,
Renew endearments, think 'em no pollutions,
But chaste as Spirits joys. . . . (V, i, pp. 419-20)

Better than any other portions of the play, this extract from the dialogue exhibits precisely its outstanding quality. For here, it must be remembered, Oedipus is seen blinded, self-mutilated because of the supposed horror of his incest. Yet, unable to suppress his erotic feeling, he persists in glorying in it. Indeed, contrasted with the reserved manner in which Sophocles speaks of incest, this motif is sustained in the Restoration version with such passionate intensity (see, especially, II, i, pp. 377, 380-81; V, i, pp. 425-26) that we suspect decadence—simple, crude, sensual titillation for no other purpose than the pleasure such gross perversity might afford the audience.

Undoubtedly, the chief theme of the English *Oedipus* by Dryden and Lee is tragic love (as we must also include the effect of the supporting subplot concerning the frustrations of the noble lovers, Adrastus and Eurydice)—sexuality, not religion or philosophy. The reasons for this emphasis on sensual love are threefold. First, the extraordinary development of the incestuous passion between the protagonists is an attempt to satisfy the expectations of eroticism in the notoriously bawdy Restoration audience. The decadent aristocratic audience needed constant shocks to sustain its interest. Second, the writers simply prefer to palliate the crime by converting incest into romantic love.⁹ Third, the change in theme has been dictated by a new critical canon, the rule of love. Dryden, in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), had put in the mouth of Eugenius a defense in drama of romantic love, “the most frequent of all the passions.”¹⁰ And in his *Heads of an Answer to Rymer* (c. 1678-70), composed approximately the same time as the *Oedipus*, Dryden advanced two other arguments typical of the time for introducing the love theme into tragedy: love is “heroic,” and therefore admirable; and second, it is “the best commonplace of pity.”¹¹ In general, that is to say, the neo-classical justification for introducing love into tragedy rests upon the psychological need to reinforce the soft emotion of pity. Owing to near kinship, the “soft passion” of love easily arouses the emotion of pity, its “gentleness” thereby “tempering,” as Dryden states, the black passion of fear and terror.

That Dryden and Lee have succeeded in producing an unusual sentimental reinterpretation of the classic myth cannot be denied. In its day at least, their romantic *Oedipus* was a resounding success, and (what is surprising) at least one perceptive contemporary, John Dennis, took it seriously enough to give it careful consideration in his dialogue, *The Impartial Critic* (1693).

III

Written when the author was but nineteen years old, Voltaire's *Oedipe* (1718) contains a good deal of talk about honor, courage, fame, virtue, love and passion, all earmarks of the fashionable heroic tragedy of the neoclassic period in France and England. The rule of love particularly irritated Voltaire. For example, the almost motiveless return of her former lover Philoctetes causes Jocaste dismay and heartache. Wretched because she had been twice compelled to marry without love, to King Laius and then to King Oedipus, she confesses to her confidante Aegina her true feelings, her frustrations, and the conflict of virtue and passion within her (II, ii, p. 72).¹² The pathos is

painful. Clearly, as he himself complains in his prefatory letter to his former classics teacher, Father Porée, the young Voltaire was at the mercy of the Parisian actors who would not play an *Oedipus* without love.

Yet it is this pathetic and sentimental Jocaste who competes with the tragic hero Oedipus for audience attention. Thus the psychology of love, a legacy of the seventeenth century theory of tragedy, becomes a major problem of Voltaire's play—at least for the first half of the action; and, naturally, Voltaire had to describe his version of the curious nature of her feelings for Oedipus in order to satisfy the romantic expectations of his audience:

Je sentis pour lui quelque tendresse;
Mais que ce sentiment fut loin de la faiblesse!
Ce n'était point, Égine, un feu tumultueux,
De mes sens enchantés enfant impétueux;
Je ne reconnus point cette brûlante flamme
Que le seul Philoctète a fait naître en mon âme. . . .
Je sentais pour Oedipe une amitié sévère. . . . (II, ii, p. 73)

But after these false starts that continue up to the middle of the play, the direction suddenly shifts. Voltaire puts the romantic hurdle, the insipid and sentimental amour between middle-aged Jocaste and her old flame Philoctetes, behind him so that he can turn to the real business of the austere Oedipus story. Immediately we sense a notable change in point of view, tone, and intellectual energy. For Voltaire focuses intensely upon the religious theme; and unhesitatingly, almost shrilly, expresses an anticlerical bias. Of course, for the sake of dramatic irony, he, like Sophocles, makes the suffering Oedipus pious and reverent. But nothing like the rationalistic Voltairean advice given to Oedipus appears in the Greek version, when the pathetic hero, disappointed at his failure to have the gods cease punishing the hapless Thebans with the pestilence, listens to his confidant Araspe who urges him to trust only himself, to forego the ritual of the priests:

Ces dieux dont le pontife a promis le secours,
Dans leurs temples, seigneur, n'habitent pas toujours. . . .
Ne nous endormons point sur la foi de leurs prêtres;
Au pied du sanctuaire il est souvent des traîtres,
Qui, nous asservissant sous un pouvoir sacré. . . .
Ne nous fions qu'à nous; voyons tout par nos yeux:
Ce sont là nos trépieds, nos oracles, nos dieux. (II, v, pp. 79-80)

This rationalism is exactly like that maintained by Gide in his *Oedipe* two hundred years later.

Nor does Sophocles' Oedipus, when suddenly accused of regicide, use such strong language as does Voltaire's Oedipus in the parallel scene. Voltaire's Oedipus responds angrily, as we should expect, and charges the High Priest (Voltaire's vacuous version of Tiresias) with disloyalty to the monarchy:

Voilà donc des autels quel est le privilège!
Grâce à l'impunité, ta bouche sacrilège,
Pour accuser ton roi d'un forfait odieux. . . . (III, iv, p. 88)

However, as in Sophocles' play, Oedipus' fury here may simply be the result of momentary passion. Therefore this detail may not represent Oedipus' fixed opinion regarding priests or religion. But, on the other hand, when noble Philoctetes generously comes to Oedipus' defense we feel the gratuitousness of Voltaire's bias:

Mais un prêtre est ici d'autant plus redoutable
Qu'il vous perce à nos yeux par un trait respectable.
Fortement appuyé sur des oracles vains,
Un pontife est souvent terrible aux souverains. . . . (III, v, p. 89)

Furthermore, Voltaire's Jocaste, following Sophocles' development of this motif, defends Oedipus against the High Priest and vigorously challenges the reliability of superstitious oracles and fallible mortal ministers:

Cet organe des dieux est-il donc infaillable?
Un ministère saint les attache aux autels;
Ils approchent des dieux, mais ils sont des mortels.
Pensez-vous qu'en effet, au gré de leur demande,
Du vol de leurs oiseaux la vérité dépende? . . .
Non, non: chercher ainsi l'obscurité vérité,
C'est usurper les droits de la Divinité.
Nos prêtres ne sont pas ce qu'un vain peuple pense,
Notre crédulité fait toute leur science. (IV, i, p. 93)

Voltaire, it is clear, makes more of the problem of religion, especially the rites of the priests, than did his predecessors. Except for the distracting discussion of love in the first half of the play, he uses the Oedipus story for religious commentary. But he goes further than the ironic ambiguities of Sophocles and evidently betrays in his straightforward language his hostility towards the priests.

What of the larger philosophical question of moral guilt, free will, and divine responsibility for sin? Does Voltaire take up this problem of the role of the gods who, despite man's virtuous intention, yet compel him to pollute himself and society? Yes, briefly, but very significantly in two crucial scenes—the first because it is the only soliloquy of the play, and the second because it occurs at the last curtain. In great anguish Oedipus confesses to incestuous parricide, but he very definitely absolves himself from moral guilt. It is not difficult to sense the power and pathos of Voltaire's complaint:

Impitoyables dieux, mes crimes sont les vôtres,
Et vous m'en punissez! . . . (V, iv, p. 108)

Unlike Sophocles, Voltaire does not in the conclusion draw any simple moral from the action. Certainly, he need not insist that a noble and pious man is being unjustly treated by the gods. We get the point. But in order to make sure that we do, Voltaire drives it home in the finale.

As soon as Oedipus is forced to confess his sins, the plague miraculously ceases, for, as the High Priest announces, the wrath of the gods is appeased. Then, to add to the drama of the climax (as if Jocaste's suicide off stage were not effective enough, because bloody and blinded Oedipus does not appear in Voltaire's version), Jocaste stabs herself, insisting upon her innocence and

the guilt of the gods for her calamitous marriage. Her complaint, the very last words of the play, indubitably demonstrates a certain degree of religious bias:

. . . songez à jamais
Qu'au milieu des horreurs du destin qui m'opprime,
J'ai fait rougir les dieux qui m'ont forcée au crime. (V, vi, p. 111)

Unfortunately, because this statement obviously parallels Oedipus' self-defense and rounds out the theme of the play and because Voltaire had not previously developed or dramatized richly enough the religious thought of his Jocaste, we cannot help feeling that these lines lack imaginative conviction. They fail to spring from the depths of Jocaste's character. Yet despite this criticism and for precisely the same reasons, it is possible for us to say that they do exhibit the author's personal conviction.

Therefore we may well speculate upon the impression produced by these powerful last words gasped out by the dying Jocaste, even if they are not spoken entirely in character. They represent an earnest and poignant, if obvious, protest against thoughtlessly maintained religious belief. Taken together with all the other adverse comments on religion and divinity, they cast aspersions upon the unrelenting cruelty of primitive gods who force pious mortals to commit abominable crimes, and they challenge the authority of their barbarous priests who blindly and inhumanely practice superstitious rites. Thus in stressing the failure of reason in religion, in priests and the gods, Voltaire challenges conventional belief. Unlike the dramatists who precede him in the treatment of the Oedipus story, he protests man's innocence to the end of his thoughtful problem play. He asserts the moral guilt of the cruel gods and rejects their irrational omnipotence. He is unwilling to admit that man's tragic defeat implies complete pessimistic despair. In his early *Oedipe*, Voltaire expresses his personal philosophy and thereby anticipates his later uncompromising rationalism.

IV

In André Gide's *Oedipe* (1931), the drama develops around a debate over the measure of being and the source of authority. The question posed is as follows: Is God or Man the measure and authority for policies implemented in the world? A subordinate but closely related question concerns man's goal in life: Should it be earthly happiness, progress through invention and discovery, or grace and eternal salvation? As we should expect, occasional sorties against the established church are made in the course of the action. For example, near the opening, Gide has the Chorus state cynically, "Certes, il est bon de mettre les dieux de son côté. Mais le plus sûr moyen, c'est de se ranger du côté du prêtre" (I, p. 254).¹⁸ An ironic epigram like this immediately establishes the tone, as it goes to the heart of the matter concerning human conduct on earth. It is just such a paradox—the possibility of irreligious priests—that creates the ambiguity of the philosophic theme of Sophocles' play. But while we cannot be sure of Sophocles' position on the question,

we are very sure of Gide's position.¹⁴ His is, indeed, the kind of play in the tradition of the sceptical Voltaire: its free thinking is unmistakable. "Le peuple préfère toujours à l'explication naturelle l'interprétation mystique: rien à faire à cela" (I, p. 260).

For Gide's answers to his questions posed above come through incisively. It is made thoroughly clear that some men wish to have the freedom to experiment, socially and morally, even to the extent of committing incest; or, as Gide says, the freedom to behave indecently—"l'approbation de l'indécence" (II, p. 279). To complicate these shocking matters, the irrepressible Gide has in mind two varieties of incest: the Oedipal mother-son as well as the brother-sister type. But other men, their prototypes symbolically represented by Creon and Tiresias, the politician and the priest, are equally assertive in their conservative checks upon freedom on the basis of divine sanctions and order and tradition.

Written at a time when he was moving closer towards communism in the late twenties and early thirties, his *Oedipe* demonstrates that Gide does not wish to place any brakes on human thought. He wants freedom for men at any price. Thus, as his Oedipus declares in a powerful speech, there can be only one answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, no matter what questions she might have asked: Man or Oneself—by which he means Man's Reason (II, pp. 283-84).¹⁵

In essence, Gide makes a kind of Faustian morality play out of the Oedipus legend. His hero is a twentieth-century, self-confident radical and rationalist who, in his debates with the guardians of society, the cautious and conservative politician Creon and the shrewd but rigidly orthodox Tiresias, contemptuously denies the past, religion and the gods. He is Oedipus, the forward-looking intellectual who, because he knows nothing of his parents, his past, shows initiative and can invent, discover, and build civilization anew without the restraints of tradition. His individualism looks forward to the goal of civilization when "la terre couverte d'une humanité désasservie" (II, p. 283). Eventually, of course, Oedipus is made to pay for his daring rationalism, his atheistic blasphemy and secular happiness. Such is his tragedy. His knowledge, proved to be incomplete, is in effect ignorance; trapped by God to commit crimes against his will, to kill his father and marry his own past in his mother, he learns in anguish that he is a cruel god's puppet.

At the conclusion of the action, however, the buoyant optimism of Gide's hero is restored. True, he has blinded himself; but it was in grief and exasperation—an error in judgment, Gide implies. True, he is an outcast; but he is spiritually undefeated. At the very end he is once more intransigent and unsubmissive. He confidently reasserts his humanist philosophy and reaffirms the superiority of earthly happiness over heavenly salvation, of his light over Tiresias' night. So as Oedipus becomes an emblem of a humane, secular, and rational individualist who has been temporarily defeated by superstition, even the pious Antigone comes to believe that her tormented father is a far more sacred figure than the priest: "En m'échappant de toi, Tiresias, je resterai fidèle à Dieu. Même il me semble que je le servirai mieux, suivant mon

père. . . . Je t'écoutais m'enseigner Dieu jusqu'à ce jour; mais plus pieusement encore, j'écouterai maintenant le seul enseignement de ma raison et de mon cœur" (III, pp. 302-03).

The moral theme of Gide's *Oedipe* is fundamentally optimistic and rational; his play appeals to the intelligence. "L'intérêt de ma pièce," Gide explains in his *Journal* (Juin, 1932; 2 Janvier 1933), is "dans le combat des idées":

Je ne me pose pas en rival [à Sophocle]; je lui laisse le pathétique . . . je prétends vous laisser voir l'envers du décor, cela dût-il nuire à votre émotion, car ce n'est pas elle qui m'importe et que je cherche à obtenir: c'est à votre intelligence que je m'adresse. Je me propose, non de vous faire frémir ou pleurer, mais de vous faire réfléchir.¹⁶

Gide's hero is not so much the polluted incestuous parricide and scapegoat of the ancient legend, the man who must be cast out so that the community can be cleansed, as the proud individualist who struggles to make men independent of irrational deities, reactionary taboos and superstitions. Gide's Oedipus is an intellectual martyr who symbolizes the freedom and pride of thinking man; this Oedipus would like to be atheistic, an individualist who, if he is forced to, creates his own gods and owes nothing to anyone but himself. But, according to Gide's ironic and detached conception of his tragedy, Oedipus is almost made to wonder if his case is not one of predestination (I, p. 253).¹⁷

V

The last *Oedipus*, Jean Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale* (1934), also attempts to adapt the myth to the age in which it was written. But it is also unlike its predecessors in that it represents in some detail that part of the myth which precedes the fall of the hero, the meeting with the Sphinx, and the wedding night of young Oedipus and his middle-aged bride. The foregone conclusion is brief—an anticlimactic epilogue that follows the outlines of Sophocles' play—with a neat denouement to round out the plot and theme.

Like his predecessors, Cocteau modernizes the story. For example, he evens out the wrinkles and stretches the meaning of the old myth¹⁸ to include the political state of Europe between the first and second World Wars—the period of the rise of fascist dictatorships and the concept of "the leader." The state of ancient Thebes, like that of Europe, is rotten, it is indicated in an interlude during Act II, and what it needs is a strong political leader to save the people, to make an end of corruption, and to kill the Sphinx. Ambitious and energetic, the adventurer Oedipus turns out to be that person.

Cocteau's version of the Sphinx story is also an attempt to make the classic myth attractive to a contemporary audience. But this it does in an amusingly negative way, for it shows Cocteau rejecting the psychoanalytic interpretation for his own, which, it must be admitted, is whimsical and appealing, if not psychologically, historically, or even probably true. His Sphinx is not the monstrous theriomorphic cannibal of myth. On the contrary, she is a lovely young goddess cast in the role of the Sphinx, and she has a distaste for her ghastly work. Succumbing to the charms of the attractive and self-

confident young man who bravely faces her, she attempts to save his life and seduce him by providing him with the solution to her riddle. But she herself is driven by superior gods, for she complains of acting without aim or understanding. Thus, ironically, she drives Oedipus deeper into the destined trap, "la machine infernale," prepared for him by the gods, and she is metamorphosed into Nemesis who helplessly sighs (at the end of Act II) as Oedipus moves closer to his destiny, "Les pauvres, pauvres, pauvres hommes. . . ."

Cocteau's interpretation of the Sphinx's role is not entirely modern, at least not in any psychoanalytic sense. It is neither Freudian, wherein the Sphinx (according to Theodor Reik) is a reduplicating symbol of the mother, and so, in reality, that is, in the unconscious, represents Jocasta; or (according to Erich Fromm) a symbol of a matriarchal culture and its downfall; nor is it Jungian wherein the Sphinx unconsciously symbolizes the archetype of the Terrible Mother who devours her own children.¹⁹ Cocteau's view is uniquely personal. But it is effectively subordinated to his major theme. To Cocteau the Sphinx symbolizes romantic love. For is it not true that Oedipus must reject such love in order to achieve his regressive destiny—which is to break the incest taboo, to desire and wed his mother?

With regard to the treatment of incestuous love, Cocteau has the tremendous advantage over Dryden and Lee of knowing a good deal about psychoanalysis and its basic concept, the Oedipus Complex.²⁰ Although Cocteau consciously rejects Freud, it is easy to sense through the tone of his play how much he indirectly owes modern psychology. He can therefore be almost clinically frank without morbidly moralizing over taboos. Nor does he recoil with counterfeit horror from the incestuous situation in the manner of the Restoration dramatists. On the contrary, he audaciously makes the most of it, improvising symbolic details and action with subtlety, sophistication, and humor. A few examples will suffice to support this generalization.

In the first act, we are introduced to a mature but dissatisfied Jocasta, in whom her sorrow for her lost infant mingles with her attraction towards handsome young men whose thighs she cannot help pinching. Typically, she has premonitions of her disastrous future, but, ironically, she is unable to concretize them: "Je sens les choses," she informs Tiresias; "Je sens les choses mieux que vous tous!" (Elle montre son ventre.) [Cocteau's stage direction.] "Je les sens là!" She also dreams of incest, but again is unable to comprehend the dream symbolism. She even adopts for the moment the modern Freudian view about mother: "Les petits garçons disent tous: 'Je veux devenir un homme pour me marier avec maman.' Ce n'est pas si bête, Tirésias. Est-il plus doux ménage, ménage plus doux et plus cruel, ménage plus fier de soi, que ce couple d'un fils et d'une mère jeune?" Indeed, it appears that Cocteau enjoys dealing with the dramatic irony implicit in the tragic situation. This impression is borne out by the events in the bridal chamber, which are boldly dramatized in Act III.

In this act, blind Tiresias, who comes close to guessing the truth about Oedipus, asks a probing question of the hero and thus is able to expose his psychological immaturity: "Aimez-vous la prendre dans vos bras?" Oedipus'

reply is in character, as he naively and unconsciously reveals the truth about his neurosis: "J'aime surtout qu'elle me prenne dans les siens. . . . J'ai toujours rêvé d'un amour de ce genre, d'un amour presque maternel."²¹ Much is also made of the cradle in the Queen's bedroom. Jocasta cannot part with this treasured memento of her lost child. Her youthful husband Oedipus, who is her unidentified returned child, leans his head back on the edge of the cradle and, as Jocasta gently rocks it, he (her husband-child) falls asleep. Both are unconscious, of course, of Oedipus' simultaneous regression to infancy and mother. There is humor and pathos in this fruitful symbolism.

Cocteau's dramatic intention, as we have seen, is to make the incest and the political situation at Thebes credible to the twentieth-century mind. But this is not all; he also wishes to present his personal philosophy of life—as the title of the play and the careful staging of the action suggest. In this respect, his version is generally pessimistic in its overtones, somewhat like Sophocles' play with its conception of superior deities cruelly tormenting helpless man. But Cocteau does not provide a satisfactory and intellectually convincing explanation for Oedipus' downfall other than that of the psychological compulsion to return to mother. This is Cocteau's real infernal machine. And it is precisely through this mechanical, built-in compulsion dramatized in the myth, Cocteau concludes, that Oedipus can live forever, contrary to the design of the gods who wish to obliterate him and contrary (ironically enough) to Cocteau's professed pessimistic theme. At long last, in the creative criticism of the Oedipus myth, a writer has come to terms with the Oedipus Complex and frankly accepts its basic thesis—even at the price of inconsistency!

Thus in the brief last act, which Cocteau reserves for details from Sophocles' play, Oedipus, Jocasta, and their daughter Antigone achieve immortality through the myth. Jocasta reappears as a ghost, cleansed of her overt sexual desire and restored to motherhood so that she can help her blind son: "Les choses qui paraissent abominables aux humains, si tu savais, de l'endroit où j'habite, si tu savais comme elles ont peu d'importance." The three belong "au peuple, aux poètes, aux coeurs purs," those who intuitively grasp the significance of their tragic story, particularly those "qui s'en chargera, qui les recueillera" and so endow them with fame, or, as Cocteau says through Tiresias, "La gloire."

Cocteau's treatment of the myth is sentimental; he skirts the philosophical question that underlies it—that which concerns religious determinism, man's free will, and his responsibility for his destiny and his relationship to the gods of the cosmos. But is there not a faint suggestion that even these gods have been outwitted? Such is Cocteau's contribution to the history and the criticism of the Oedipus myth. For by a curious twist of irony, the mortals in the story are made immortal through the suffering induced by their psychological compulsion: they achieve glory as mythical archetypes whose destiny it is to have their experience repeated in all the generations of man. Cocteau's *Oedipus* stands for man under the direction of an interior compulsion, the immortal Oedipus Complex.

Of all the plays dealing with the Oedipus story, Cocteau's has the strongest sense of the archetypal quality of the myth and the clearest recognition of continuity, of tradition. So, for example, when his Oedipus declares to Tiresias, "De toute éternité nous appartenions l'un à l'autre" (Act III), Cocteau thereby suggests these effects far more profoundly than Oedipus can ever suspect. The archetypal quality is Cocteau's unique achievement in *La Machine Infernale*, and it is this that will permit his play to endure—certainly *not* its superficially dressed-up topicality, the talk of the state of Thebes as Europe in the 1930's, its view of Oedipus as political adventurer, "leader" or dictator, and *not* its view of the gods as cruel, this being too stagy. But Cocteau does frame the psychology of the myth neatly in the perspective of eternity.

Does his play, which frankly adopts the Oedipus Complex of our time, mark the end of the Oedipus myth in literature? The chances are against anything like this ever happening. This myth as a core or envelope symbol has performed a cultural function effectively for over two thousand years, a function that we have briefly explored. As we have seen in a few representative examples, the Oedipus story has symbolically stood for religious piety, rational religion, religious scepticism or agnosticism; it has also stood for tragic romance, intellectual and moral freedom, or the archetype of the Oedipus Complex. Oedipus is latent in the unconscious of all men in all cultures. Therefore the only certainty appears to be that with the personality of Oedipus as catalyst and his story as frame for an ever-changing social context the search for moral meaning will continue.

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NOTES

1. Clyde Kluckhohn, "Recurrent Themes in Myths and Mythmaking," *Daedalus*, LXXXVIII (Spring, 1959), 273-78.

2. *Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments: The Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. Richard Jebb (Cambridge, England, 1893), I, pp. xxvii-xxix.

3. John T. Sheppard, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles* (Cambridge, England, 1930), pp. lvii-lxxix.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. xxxv-xxxvi, xl-xli. Sheppard's view is adopted by H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London, 1956), p. 76; and *Greek Tragedy* (New York, 1954), pp. 135-41. In the latter work Kitto specifically takes issue with Bowra's view. Sheppard's interpretation of Oedipus as a Greek *tyrannos* is also developed by Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven, 1957), pp. 53-66.

5. C. Maurice Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1944), pp. 365, 367, 376. This religious interpretation is supported by Sinclair M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto, 1957), pp. 17, 81; and by Gerard Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 424-33, 436-39.

6. Cedric H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, 1951), pp. 40, 127, 129, 50. Whitman is criticized by Bernard Knox, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-211 (notes 96, 98).

7. *Dryden: The Dramatic Works*, ed. Montague Summers (London, 1932), IV. Dryden declared that he wrote the first and third acts, but prepared the whole scenario. See his *Vindication of the Duke of Guise* (1683), in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. by Walter Scott and George Saintsbury (Edinburgh, 1882), VII, p. 203.

8. Jeremy Collier, Dryden's contemporary, objected to this anti-clericalism, what he calls "swaggering against Priests in Oedipus," and he cited this quotation in particular. Such satire, Collier felt, even though directed at pagan priests "may work by way of Inference, and be serviceable at Home. And 'tis a handsom Complement [*sic*] to Libertines and Atheists." See his *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (London, 1699), pp. 105-06.

9. Cf. Roswell G. Ham, *Otway and Lee* (New Haven, 1931), p. 160. "In the more startling insertion of a love motif into the major plot of Oedipus and Jocasta, the collaborators were less squeamish than the Greek or the French authors. A certain perversion of national taste—clearly recognizable from Elizabethan times—delighted in all sorts of unnatural relations. . . . Lee and Dryden were inclined to palliate the crime to the extent of a recall for one final scene of mad love. The English dramatists made much of the fact that Jocasta would have buried the secret, and that Oedipus himself, enslaved by the love god, trembled upon the brink of compromise."

10. *The Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1926), I, p. 54. Dryden is probably adapting a similar idea expressed by Saint-Evremond in his essay "Of Ancient and Modern Tragedy" (1672).

11. *Works of Dryden*, ed. Scott-Saintsbury, XV, pp. 383, 390. Cf. Clarence C. Green, *The Neoclassic Theory of Tragedy in England During the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), pp. 28-29. Dryden debated this problem of love with Thomas Rymer, who in his *Tragedies of the Last Age* (1678) objected to love in tragedy.

12. *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1877), I.

13. André Gide, *Théâtre* (Paris, 1942).

14. See D. J. Conacher, "Theme and Technique in the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus* of André Gide," *UTQ*, XXIV (1955), 121-35.

15. As Gide himself says (1927) in a context that shows he was thinking of Oedipus, "J'abandonne volontiers ma bourse, mais non pas ma raison—ma raison d'être." Thus for him, *Oedipus*, as he wrote in his *Journal*, is "le triomphe de la morale," an ethics, we could say, based on man's freedom to choose rationally and responsibly. See *Journal 1889-1939* (Dijon, 1948), p. 837.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 1129, 1151.

17. In an afterthought, however, Gide admitted that his introduction into the play of the motif of predestination was an irrelevant indiscretion. See *Journal* (22 Janvier 1932), pp. 1106-07; "dans ma pièce même, me paraît moins important, moins tragique, que la lutte . . . entre l'individualisme et la soumission à l'autorité religieuse. . . . N'importe: on peut ne plus s'inquiéter du déterminisme (soit qu'on l'accepte, soit qu'on le nie), le drame reste pourtant le même et l'opposition entre le perspicace antimystique et le croyant; entre l'aveugle par foi et celui qui cherche à répondre à l'énigme; entre celui qui se soumet à Dieu et celui qui oppose à Dieu l'Homme. . . . S'il n'y avait que cela de 'mis en cause' dans mon drame, il n'aurait pas été d'actualité, mais justifierait ceux qui ne consentent à y voir qu'un jeu d'esprit."

18. Jean Cocteau, *Oedipus Roi: Romeo et Juliette* (Paris, 1928), p. 2.

19. Theodor Reik, "Oedipus and the Sphinx," in *Dogma and Compulsion* (New York, 1951), pp. 289-322; Erich Fromm, "The Oedipus Myth," in *The Forgotten Language* (New York, 1951), pp. 196-231; Carl G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, ed. Herbert Read et al., Vol. V, *Symbols of Transformation* [1912] (New York, 1956), pp. 179-182.

20. See, for example, Cocteau's discussions of Freud, myth, and the Oedipus story in his *Journal d'un Inconnu* (Paris, 1953).

21. Are these comments of Oedipus in this paragraph, as well as the comments of Jocasta indicated in the previous paragraph, deliberately Freudian, but reversed, echoes of Jocasta's remark made to Oedipus in Sophocles' version?—"Do not fear concerning wedlock with your mother. Many men before now have so feared in dreams also" (ed. Jebb, p. 133).



Oedipus Rex as the Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle

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service on behalf of the Association. We have now over 500 members, and over 500 subscribers; before April 30 next we ought to have 750 members, and 750 subscribers. In this connection I venture to urge upon the present members prompt payment of dues for the current year, which began on May 1 last, and prompt notice to the Secretary of change of address. The management of the business of the Association and of *THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY* requires much labor and much money; the labor can be greatly reduced and the possession of the needed funds guaranteed if the members will give fair heed to the suggestion in the preceding sentence.

The members of the Association are reminded that the special rates for *The Classical Journal* and *Classical Philology*, allowed by the University of Chicago Press to them if they subscribe through the Secretary-Treasurer of the Association, are available again for the new volume of *The Classical Journal*, which will begin in October, and for the volume of *Classical Philology* which will begin in January next. Members desiring to take advantage of these offers should communicate at once with the Secretary-Treasurer, making remittance (\$1.00 for *The Classical Journal*, \$1.67 for *Classical Philology*). Last year some members who delayed sending in their subscriptions found it impossible to secure copies of the early numbers of the volumes.

C. K.

OEDIPUS REX AS THE IDEAL TRAGIC HERO OF ARISTOTLE¹

If we give ourselves up to a full sympathy with the hero, there is no question that the Oedipus Rex fulfils the function of a tragedy, and arouses fear and pity in the highest degree. But the modern reader, coming to the classic drama not entirely for the purpose of enjoyment, will not always surrender himself to the emotional effect. He is apt to worry about Greek 'fatalism' and the justice of the downfall of Oedipus, and, finding no satisfactory solution for these intellectual difficulties, loses half the pleasure that the drama was intended to produce. Perhaps we trouble ourselves too much concerning the Greek notions of fate in human life. We are inclined to regard them with a lively anti-

quarian interest, as if they were something remote and peculiar; yet in reality the essential difference between these notions and the more familiar ideas of a later time is so slight that it need not concern the naïve and sympathetic reader. After all, the fundamental aim of the poet is not to teach us about these matters, but to construct a tragedy which shall completely fulfil its proper function. Nevertheless, for the student of literature who feels bound to solve the two-fold problem, 'How is the tragedy of Oedipus to be reconciled with a rational conception of life?' and 'How does Oedipus himself comply with the Aristotelian requirements for a tragic hero?', there is a simple answer in the ethical teaching of the great philosopher in whose eyes the Oedipus Rex appears to have been well-nigh a perfect tragedy. In other words, let us compare the ideal of the Ethics with the ideal of the Poetics.

Aristotle finds the end of human endeavor to be happiness, that is, an unhampered activity of the soul in accordance with true reason, throughout a complete lifetime. This happiness, as Aristotle discovered by careful observation during the length of his thoughtful life, does not result principally from the gifts of fortune, but rather from a steady and comprehensive intellectual vision which views life steadily and distinguishes in every action the result to be attained. By the light of this vision the wise man preserves a just balance among his natural impulses, and firmly and consistently directs his will and emotions toward the supreme end which reason approves. He has, therefore, an inward happiness which cannot be shaken save by great and numerous outward calamities, and, moreover, he attains an adequate external prosperity, since, other things being equal, the most sensible people are the most successful, and misfortune is due, in large measure, to lack of knowledge or lack of prudence. Even if he is crushed beneath an overwhelming catastrophe from without, the ideal character of the Ethics is not an object of fear and pity, for 'the truly good and sensible man bears all the chances of life with decorum, and always does what is noblest in the circumstances, as a good general uses the forces at his command to the best advantage in war'.

Such is the ideal character, the man who is best fitted to attain happiness in the world of men. On the other hand, the tragic hero is a man who fails to attain happiness, and fails in such a way that his career excites, not blame, but fear and pity in the highest degree. In the Poetics, he is described as not eminently good and just, not completely under the guidance of true reason, but as falling through some great error or flaw of character, rather than through vice or depravity. Moreover, in order that his downfall may be as striking as possible, he must be, as was Oedipus, of an illustrious family, highly renowned, and prosperous.

¹ This paper Miss Barstow prepared when she was a Sophomore at Cornell University (1909-1910). In *Harvard Studies*, Volume 23 (1912), 71-127, Dr. Chandler Rathfon Post, under the title *The Dramatic Art of Sophocles*, discusses "the distinctive quality of Sophocles as a dramatist . . . his stress upon delineation of character". On page 77 Dr. Post says, "But with Sophocles it was a foregone conclusion that the interest should be centered upon psychological analysis". On pages 81 ff. Dr. Post argues that "First and foremost, in his delineation of the protagonist, he [Sophocles] lays emphasis upon the strength of the human will. From the very beginning the principal character is marked by an iron will centered upon a definite object; and the drama, according to Sophocles, consists to a certain extent of a series of tests, arranged in climactic order, to which the will is subjected, and over all of which it rises triumphant". On page 83 he illustrates this dictum by a brief discussion of the Oedipus Rex. The whole paper is well worthy of careful study.

C. K.

When we analyze the character of Oedipus, we discover that, in spite of much natural greatness of soul, he is, in one vital respect, the exact antithesis of Aristotle's ideal man. He has no clear vision which enables him to examine every side of a matter with unclouded eyes, and to see all things in due perspective; nor has he a calm wisdom which is always master of his passions. Oedipus can see but one side of a matter—too often he sees that wrongly—and it is his fashion immediately to act upon such half-knowledge, at the dictates, not of his reason at all, but of the first feeling which happens to come uppermost. His is no deliberate vice, no choice of a wrong purpose. His purposes are good. His emotions, his thoughts, even his errors, have an ardent generosity which stirs our deepest sympathy. But his nature is plainly imperfect, as Aristotle says the nature of a tragic hero should be, and from the beginning he was not likely to attain perfect happiness.

When the drama opens, the thoughtless energy of Oedipus has already harnessed him to the 'yoke of Fate unbending'. Once at a feast in Corinth, a man heated with wine had taunted him with not being the true son of Polybus. These idle words of a man in his cups so affected the excitable nature of Oedipus that he, characteristically, could think of nothing else. Day and night the saying rankled in his heart. At last, too energetic to remain in the ignorance which might have been his safety, he eagerly hastened to the sacred oracle at Delphi to learn the truth. The only response he heard was the prophecy that he should kill his father and marry his mother. Absorbed in this new suggestion, he failed to consider its bearing upon his question, and, wholly forgetting his former suspicion, he determined never to return to Corinth where his supposed father and mother dwelt, and hurried off in the direction of Thebes. Thus his disposition to act without thinking started him headlong on the way to ruin. At a place where three roads met, all unawares he encountered his real father, Laius, King of Thebes. When the old man insolently accosted him, Oedipus, with his usual misguided promptness, knocked him from the chariot, and slew all but one of his attendants. Thus, by an unreasonable act of passion, Oedipus fulfilled the first part of his prophetic destiny.

But in the crisis in which he found the city of Thebes, his energy and directness served him well. By the flashing quickness of thought and imagination which, when blinded by some egoistic passion, so often hurried him to wrong conclusions, he guessed the riddle of the Sphinx. Then he married the widowed queen, seized the reins of government, and generously did his best to bring peace and prosperity back to the troubled land. In this way he was raised, by the very qualities that ultimately wrought his ruin, to the height from which he fell.

And yet, admirable as these performances were, he displayed in them none of the wisdom with which Aristotle endows his happy man. A thoughtful person, one who acted in accordance with true reason, and not merely with generous impulse, might have put two and two together. Adding the fact that he had killed a man to the Delphic prophecy and the old suspicion concerning his birth, he might have arrived at the truth which would have guided the rest of his life aright. But it never was the habit of Oedipus to do more thinking than seemed necessary to the particular action upon which all the power of his impetuous nature was concentrated. His lack of the 'intellectual virtues' of Aristotle is only paralleled by his inability to keep the 'mean' in the 'moral virtues'.

Between his accession to the throne of Thebes and the opening of the drama there intervened a long period of time in which Oedipus had prospered, and, as it seemed to the Chorus, had been quite happy. The play of Sophocles is concerned with the complication of the rash hero's mistakes; this complication, which is suddenly untangled by the words of the old Herdsman, forms the last chapter in the tragic career of Oedipus. In the first scene the land is blasted by a great dearth. Old men, young men, and children have come as suppliants to the king, seeking deliverance from this great evil. Oedipus appears, generous, high-minded, and prompt to act, as ever. When Creon brings the message of Apollo, that the slayer of Laius must be cast out of the land, he immediately invokes a mighty curse upon the murderer, and we thrill with pity and fear as we see the noble king calling down upon his own head a doom so terrible. His unthinking haste furnishes the first thread in the complication which the dramatist so closely weaves. Teiresias enters. When Oedipus has forced from his unwilling lips the dreadful words, 'Thou art the accursed defiler of the land', he forgets everything else in his anger at what he deems a taunt of the old prophet, and entangles a second thread of misunderstanding with the first. Still a third is added a moment later, when he indignantly accuses Creon of bribing Teiresias to speak those words. In his conversation with Jocasta the tendency of Oedipus to jump at conclusions does for one moment show him half the truth. He is possessed with the fear that it was he who killed Laius, but here again he can think of only one thing at a time, and, again absorbed in a new thought, he forgets his wife's mention of a child of Laius, forgets the old story concerning his birth, and misses the truth.

Then comes the message from Corinth. After his first joy in learning that his supposed father did not die by his hand, Oedipus loses all remembrance of the oracle concerning his birth, and all fear concerning the death of Laius, in a new interest and a new fear—the fear that he may be base-born. Eagerly

following up the latest train of thought, he at last comes upon the truth in a form which even he can grasp at once, and, in his agony at that vision, to which for the first time in his life he has now attained, he cries out: 'Oh, Oh! All brought to pass—all true! Thou light, may I now look my last upon thee—I who have been found accursed in birth, accursed in wedlock, accursed in the shedding of blood'. In a final act of mad energy, he puts out the eyes which could not see, and demands the execution upon himself of the doom which he alone had decreed. In the representation of Sophocles, this is the end of a great-souled man, endowed with all the gifts of nature, but heedless of the true reason in accordance with which the magnanimous man of Aristotle finds his way to perfect virtue or happiness.

Perhaps we are not entirely reconciled to the fate of Oedipus. Perhaps the downfall of a tragic hero never wholly satisfies the individual reader's sense of justice, for the poet, by the necessity of his art, is bound to make the particular embodiment of a universal truth as terrible and as pitiful as he can. Surely this result is attained in the *Oedipus Rex*. Every sympathetic reader will agree with Aristotle that, 'even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place'. Whatever 'fatalism' there may be in the drama—in the oracles, for instance, and in the performance of the prophesied crimes by Oedipus in ignorance of circumstances—directly increases the tragic effect. Aristotle himself mentions crimes committed in ignorance of particulars as deeds which especially arouse pity. The oracles, such a source of trouble to those who muddle their heads with Greek 'fatalism', have a threefold function. They have a large share in the dramatic irony for which *Oedipus Rex* is so famous, and which is a powerful instrument for arousing tragic fear. They serve as a stimulus to set the hero's own nature in motion without determining whether the direction of the motion shall be right or wrong. And lastly, they point out in clear and impressive language the course of the story. Shakespeare in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* introduces less simple and probable forms of the supernatural, for similar purposes. The oracles of Sophocles, like the ghosts and witches of Shakespeare, are but necessary means for attaining an end. The representation of their effect upon the action of the characters is not the end of the drama, and must not be so regarded. They embody the final teaching of the poet as little as the words of particular dramatic characters, in particular circumstances, express the poet's own unbiased thought and feeling.

The central conception of the *Oedipus Rex* is plainly no more fatalistic than the philosophy of Aristotle. If any reader finds the doctrine hard, he may remember that Sophocles himself completed

it somewhat as the Christian Church completed Aristotle, and, in the representation of the death of Oedipus at Colonus, crowned the law with grace. Nevertheless, for the understanding not only of Sophocles, but of the great 'master of those who know' the laws of life and art, it seems important to recognize the relation between these two ideal conceptions—the magnanimous man of the *Ethics*, ideal for life, the tragic hero of the *Poetics*, ideal for death. According to Aristotle, the man who attains perfect happiness in the world is the wise man who sees in all their aspects the facts or the forces with which he is dealing, and can balance and direct his own impulses in accordance with reason. In the *Oedipus Rex* Sophocles had already shown the reverse. The man who sees but one side of a matter, and straightway, driven on by his uncontrolled emotions, acts in accordance with that imperfect vision, meets a fate most pitiful and terrible, in accordance with the great laws which the gods have made.

This philosophy of Aristotle and Sophocles is clearly expressed in the drama itself. 'May destiny still find me', sings the Chorus, 'winning the praise of reverent purity in all words and deeds sanctioned by those laws of range sublime, called into life throughout the high, clear heaven, whose father is Olympus alone; their parent was no race of mortal men, no, nor shall oblivion ever lay them to sleep: the god is mighty in them and grows not old'.

MARJORIE BARSTOW.

REVIEWS

Horace, *The Epistles*. Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by Edward P. Morris. New York: American Book Company (1911). Pp. 239. Price (with *Satires*) \$1.25.

In 1909 Professor Morris published an edition of Horace's *Satires* (reviewed in *THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY* 3.229); he now edits the *Epistles*, and the two are issued in a single volume. In conformity with the plan adopted for other books in the same series the notes accompany the text—one can hardly say that they are at the foot of the page, for almost always they occupy at least half of the available space. By this I do not mean to imply that they are too full; on the contrary it is obvious that the editor has endeavored to be succinct and to present only that which is of direct value to the student. The recent edition of Kiessling, revised by Heinze (1908), shows how much more voluminous a commentary on the *Epistles* may be and still avoid, for the most part, the seductive by-paths of irrelevant pedantry.

The text of these poems does not present many difficulties; originality on the part of the editor is here hardly possible. Perhaps we can detect in Professor Morris a tendency to adopt even more of



The Existential Oedipus

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The Existential Oedipus

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EXISTENTIALISM has suffered the fate, certainly rare among philosophies, of becoming a fashionable byword. The results of this are such as might have been expected: satire, contempt, and misunderstanding on the part of the general reader; hostile criticism and supercilious interpretation on the part of the professional thinker. Generally speaking, philosophers outside of Germany and France find it hard to take existentialism seriously, being committed to an orthodoxy of a very different kind. Nor has the school's reputation been helped by the political vagaries of some of its leading exponents, by Heidegger's flirtation with the Nazis, Sartre's recently exploded romance with Red Russia, or Simone de Beauvoir's expressions of hatred for America and all its works. In spite of all this, existentialism deserves to be taken seriously, if for no other reason than that it addresses itself to a serious task.¹

The task of the existentialist thinker is similar to that of Socrates in the late fifth century B.C.: to bring philosophy back from a preoccupation with merely linguistic and narrowly pragmatic considerations—such a concern with ancillary studies being certain to lead to moral indifference—and to focus on philosophy's only proper point of concentration, a concern with ethics, thereby setting again for the activity of human thought the only goal that can evoke in a human being a sense of personal urgency. From Socrates' time onward the ancient world never

forgot that the Groves of Academe are indeed barren ground unless they bear fruit in ethics.² Yet in most schools of philosophy today, if the layman asks for bread he is given a calculus.

For the nineteenth century largely forgot Socrates' lesson. The abstractness of absolute idealism, the impersonality of scientism, the absence of moral challenge in bourgeois optimism stirred the bile of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, just as the continuing ethical indifference of twentieth-century positivism provokes the reaction of Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre, and others. Existentialism has thus mainly arisen in protest against the excessively abstract and the excessively impersonal tendency of the mainstream of modern rationalistic thought. It may be defined, then, as including all thinking that by a method of introspective empiricism throws particular emphases on the ethical issues involving the individual self.³ These emphases are placed on the following: on a rigorous inspection of concrete, primary experience, experience, that is, as it presents itself to the individual, as opposed to the interpreted, secondary data of science and abstractive reflection; on the actual situation in which the individual finds himself, *la condition humaine*; on the individual's personal commitment or lack of commitment of himself to that situation, his willingness or lack thereof to become *engagé*; on the peculiarly human character of pledges, promises, and loyalties, which commit a human being

to the ethical life in contrast to the life of the lower animals; on the individual's relationship to fate and freedom; on the emergence or non-emergence of what may be called a Self.⁴ Hence, because of their very method, emphasizing self-involvement as it does, certain existentialists are inclined to recognize the existence of mysteries, as distinct from the existence of problems or riddles, which alone are recognized by positivists and scientific analysts. Gabriel Marcel says in *Being and Having*:

A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I myself am involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as "a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity." A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined; whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique.⁵ It is, no doubt, always possible (logically and psychologically) to degrade a mystery so as to turn it into a problem. But this is a fundamentally vicious proceeding, whose springs might perhaps be discovered in a kind of corruption of the intelligence. The problem of evil, as the philosophers have called it, supplies us with a particularly instructive example of its degradation.⁶

There is no intention in this paper of presenting Sophocles as an existentialist philosopher.⁷ But it would perhaps not be too anachronistic to maintain that Sophocles wrote at a time when the intellectual situation was somewhat analogous to our own, that his reaction to it was somewhat similar to that of our existentialists, and that consequently his works deal with issues that are substantially the same as those treated in modern existentialist literature. Oedipus, in *Oedipus Rex*, confronts the dilemmas of personal commitment as opposed to intellectual abstraction, of his own relationship to fate and freedom, of apparent existence and true being, of the acceptance or rejection of emergent selfhood: his story then, as

handled by Sophocles, if it is not strictly existentialist, may at least be called existential.

That Sophocles was opposed to certain intellectual tendencies of his time, that he set himself against the trend toward a facile and narrow rationalism: these have become critical commonplaces.⁸ He is usually contrasted with Euripides⁹ in this, frequently to the advantage of the latter, who is admired for his liberal-progressive spirit, whereas Sophocles is likely to be depicted as a somewhat dimwitted conservative, pietistic, obscurantist, devoted to the intuitive and the irrational. Such epithets are the usual weapons of rationalists in their quarrel with anyone who—as Sophocles undoubtedly does in *Oedipus Rex*—attempts to point out the limitations of human reason. This quarrel is almost always conducted in false either-or terms: after all, there is no such person as an "irrationalist." No one has ever consistently argued for deliberately hampering the activity of reason, if only because he could not allow his own reason to be hampered in defense of his position; no thinker has ever thought that human reason should not be permitted to go as far as it can: there have simply been many to add that, having gone so far, it must not rest in the unreasonable conclusion that it has gone all the way, or that, having gone farther than it can, it must not conclude that it is any longer reasonable. Sophocles in the *Oedipus* surely attacks intellectual pride; he does not attack the intellect as such.

Intellectual pride arises from the exaltation of the intellect to the neglect of other parts of the soul, and seems most likely to be a common vice of ages when there prevails a system of psychology that treats human behavior in simple terms of appetite and of schemes for its satisfaction. The Sophistic psychology of Sophocles' day was like this, if we are to believe Aristophanes and Thucydides, and in a somewhat similar way modern psy-

chological thinking virtually ignores the human will. And precisely here is the source of the difficulties encountered by modern commentators in applying Aristotle's *hamartia* theory to *Oedipus Rex*.¹⁰ *Hamartia* must mean either a "moral flaw" (an isolated misdeed or a persistent defect of character) or an "error in judgement." Cedric Whitman sums up the controversy:

There are two fundamental ways of explaining the tragedy, corresponding in general to the two possibilities involved in *hamartia*. One is to attribute Oedipus' fall to the rash, self-willed temper already mentioned. But others maintain that no such moral failing is involved, but rather an intellectual slip, an error, entailing no moral guilt, but merely the well-known cataclysmic sequel. This error—"trifling," as Aristotle said—occurred when Oedipus slew his father and married his mother. He was innocent, in that he acted in ignorance, but he was wrong in that he did these things. . . . The relative significance of these two views for tragedy itself is, of course, immense. But the important question for the present is, which did Aristotle mean? Did he intend us to find a morally culpable act or merely a mistake as the cause of tragic catastrophe?¹¹

An either-or dilemma again. Whitman quite rightly decides that neither theory is adequate and rejects a *hamartia* explanation altogether.¹² But instead of answering "Neither" it is possible to answer "Both." Possession of knowledge or the lack of it, exercise of reason or the failure to exercise it, are never ethically neutral in all their aspects. Modern thought, with its fundamental neglect of the will, or rather its submergence of the will into desire, leads to a mere ethics of custom, *mores* instead of morality, which is impersonal and does not truly engage the individual will. Surely the relationship between the parts of the soul is more complex; there are an ethics of epistemology and an ethics of logic. *Hamartia* is neither mere intellectual error nor misconduct; it is blindness to a whole phase of universal reality, blindness to such a degree that it af-

fects all of a man's attitudes and all of his behavior.

What is Oedipus' *hamartia* then? Obviously it is not bad temper, suspicion, hastiness in action—for his punishment does not fit these crimes; nor ignorance of who his parents are—for ignorance of this type is not culpable;¹³ still less murder and incest—for these things are fated for him by the gods.

No, Oedipus' blind spot is his failure in existential commitment;¹⁴ a failure to recognize his own involvement in the human condition; a failure to realize that not all difficulties are riddles, to be solved by the application of disinterested intellect, but that some are mysteries, not to be solved at all, but to be coped with only by the engagement, active or passive, of the whole self.¹⁵ Oedipus' punishment, then, is not really punishment at all, but the only means by which the gods may enlighten a blindness of such profundity.¹⁶

The action of the play begins when the King undertakes a project, the discovery of the murderer of Laius, and binds himself with the most solemn promises to carry this project to its fulfillment. The concept of the project and the promise is dear to the existentialists: only Man can so engage himself, for only Man, unlike the other animals, has knowledge of past and future as well as present.¹⁷ Yet the celebrated irony of the scene, as has been obvious to every reader, consists in the fact that the engagement is far more real than Oedipus knows. From the audience's point of view, therefore, this commitment has something of falsity about it, of incompleteness; it becomes to them a symbol of our common human failing to look for evil everywhere but in ourselves.¹⁸ This last is the prime temptation of the intellect, which in its essential direction points from the self to the exterior world. Oedipus is willing to avenge the death of Laius as though Laius were his own father (264-65); he is willing to suspect even a member of his own

household (249-51): these ironies are obvious. He says that the griefs of his people are his own, that he feels them even more deeply than others do (60-64), speaking more truly than he knows. He undertakes to solve the riddle as a father would solve a difficulty for his children,¹⁹ little realizing that, as Teiresias warns him, this very day is to make him and his children equal (425).²⁰ The project, then, has an air of dissociation about it, because it lacks the last full measure of personal commitment; a promise may not be a real promise, cannot, in fact, be a real promise until it is fulfilled. That at the end Oedipus fulfills it to the letter is the measure of his moral grandeur.

It may be objected that Oedipus is personally interested in solving the murder. This is true, but not because he feels any real involvement of himself in the general human condition. Rather he feels his own external fortune affected by the threat to his power. "The man who did this to Laius has reason to do this to me" is a quite different attitude from "What Laius' murderer did I may have done." "We must punish criminals in order to protect ourselves" is only the beginning of morality, the end of which is "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Oedipus is involved only as regards his self-interest, not as regards his own self; hence his quickness in directing his suspicion toward Creon.²¹

The person who wholly projects morality into the outer world loses his own selfhood in the process. Sophocles does not waste his time and the reader's patience by making Oedipus lament at the last that he could not help doing what he did or being what he is.²² To look upon oneself as the mere product of external causes is to make oneself a thing instead of a person, as the existentialist philosophers never tire of pointing out. Oedipus is horrified at having been his own self-accuser, but he does not therefore retract the accusation. He realizes that he is a scape-

goat; he does not complain that he is a goat. Determinism, theories of heredity and environment, fatalism: all are devices, not for explaining guilt and evil, but for explaining them away, away from ourselves, at all costs; Oedipus disdains to avail himself of these devices. Rather he reaches his true moral stature at the end of the play. For a man is never more conscious of being a person and less conscious of being a thing than when the self is accusing itself and accepting its own guilt. The willingness to accept guilt is an indispensable step toward the goal of self-knowledge; an animal, a savage, or a child cannot fully grasp the concept of guilt; similarly an adult who falls into deterministic excuses for his behavior shuts the door on the possibility of self-development. But a person reaches his greatest intensity of self-consciousness when he simultaneously plays the part both of the accuser and the accused. To such intensity the individual will not rise as long as his external fortunes are in a condition of prosperity; herein lies the necessity of tragedy. Albert Camus remarks,²³ "The human heart has a tiresome tendency to label as fate only what crushes it. But happiness likewise, in its way, is without reason, since it is inevitable. Modern man, however, takes the credit for it himself, when he doesn't fail to recognize it." Sophocles, needless to say, knew better than the "modern men" of his day.

Even the recognition of an unpleasant truth is a moral act; if a man is hideously ugly, he deserves some praise for taking an honest and steady look in the mirror. Morality is not a matter of putting some goodness or wickedness into a slot and receiving in return a proportionate package of pleasure or pain. *Oedipus Rex* is not a crime-and-punishment play; it is a moral drama of self-recognition. That the recognition is neither prompt nor willing is natural, and increases our feelings of pity and fear. The view that repre-

sents Sophocles as an advocate of mere religious conventionality and ethical conformity is inadequate. Oedipus as a scapegoat is singled out,²⁴ but, by accepting the role, he singles himself out and differentiates himself from the mass, the Chorus. His acceptance of the wretched creature that he is makes him a hero. His life is henceforth to be unique, a life set apart, as he well recognizes, and in this respect it is to become the being of a Person in contrast to the existence of a Thing. But the Chorus are quite willing to dissociate themselves from him and to withdraw into the anonymity of convention, a withdrawal which, as Heidegger²⁵ repeatedly emphasizes, is one of the chief methods of evading human freedom. The Chorus say that they take Oedipus as their *parádeigma*, their model from whom they may learn a lesson, but their wish never to have known him shows that his is a lesson that they are not actually prepared to learn. Thus they fall into the same error from which Oedipus is emerging.

It is ambiguous, therefore, to say that Sophocles does not offer a solution to the problem of evil such as Aeschylus gives. This is usually taken to imply an attitude of pessimism on his part, at worst marked by befuddlement or bitterness, at best stoical or pietistic.²⁶ But, after all, evil by definition is that to which there is no ultimate solution. It is a mystery, for even exterior evil always has inextricable connections with the self. Any evil outside myself, once acknowledged, immediately offers an ineluctable challenge to me; if I refuse to act or react — and strictly speaking I can only apparently refuse — I compound it. And interior evil, the evil of my own limited destiny, is the precondition of my action or reaction. Let it be said again that Oedipus' prime *hamartia*, his blind spot, his moral ignorance, is precisely his tendency to suppose that evil is a problem rather than a mystery, a something exterior to the self that can be solved without involv-

ing the self. To quote Marcel again:

A mystery is a problem which encroaches upon its own data, invading them, as it were, and thereby transcending itself as a simple problem. . . .

It will be seen at once that there is no hope of establishing an exact frontier between problem and mystery. For in reflecting on a mystery we tend inevitably to degrade it to the level of a problem. This is particularly clear in the case of the problem of evil.²⁷

In reflecting upon evil, I tend, almost inevitably, to regard it as a disorder which I view from outside and of which I seek to discover the causes or the secret aims. Why is it that the "mechanism" functions so defectively? Or is the defect merely apparent and due to a real defect of my vision? In this case the defect is in myself, yet it remains objective in relation to my thought, which discovers it and observes it. But evil which is only stated or observed is no longer evil which is suffered: in fact, it ceases to be evil. In reality, I can only grasp it as evil in the measure in which it *touches* me—that is to say, in the measure in which I am *involved*, as one is involved in a lawsuit. Being "involved" is the fundamental fact; I cannot leave it out of account except by an unjustifiable fiction, for in doing so, I proceed as though I were God, and a God who is an onlooker at that.²⁸

Sophocles found in the Oedipus myth the perfect material for his purposes; he it was, perhaps, who converted the peripety from a mere penalty for transgressing a taboo into a means of moral enlightenment.²⁹ Doubtless already in the myth as he received it the solution of the Sphinx's riddle was the cause of the King's prosperity and intellectual pride.³⁰ Sophocles' contribution was to bring out the fact that Oedipus' apparent success at explaining away the evil of the Sphinx was to mislead him into supposing that he could similarly explain all evil away. But the answer to the Sphinx's riddle was a mere abstraction.³¹ "What is it that goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet at eventide?" The answer is "Man," but Man in General means nothing to the Individual Man. So the success of

this answer led inevitably to the marriage with Jocasta and the obligation to track down the murderer of Laius. As the drama unfolds, Oedipus finds himself doomed in his own person to live out his abstract answer; his own day's journey is to be the journey that the Sphinx's riddle hinted at;³² the Sphinx has her revenge. "This day shall bring you to birth and destroy you," Teiresias tells him (438); and this day, at the height of his manhood, he shall first truly learn what he was as an infant and what he shall be as an old man (454-60):

Out of the man of sight shall be made a blind man, out of the rich man a beggar, and he shall make his way into an alien land testing the ground ahead of him with his staff. And he shall be shown to be in like case with his children, brother to them and father; to the woman from whom he sprang he shall be seen to be son and husband; the seed of the father shall have sown seed where the father sowed,³³ and he shall have cut his father down.³⁴

The solver of all problems is himself the problem beyond all solution. What appeared to Oedipus as a riddle—Man—is in reality a mystery—Myself.

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NOTES

¹ Treatments of Sophoclean drama from an existentialist standpoint are nothing new; well known are Heinrich Weinstock's *Sophokles* (Wuppertal, 1948) and Karl Reinhardt's *Sophokles* (Frankfurt, 1947), both of which represent third editions. Weinstock's suggestive theory about *Oedipus Rex*, that man's limited knowledge, in contrast to the omniscience of the gods, inevitably involves every human action in guilt and evil ("Wer unwissend handelt, muss schuldig werden"), thus leading to a state of existential "Angst," which is best converted by the individual into a reverence strictly religious—this theory has been justly criticized, on the grounds that Weinstock's Original Sin (the "Allverschuldung" and "Allverantwortung" of every human being) is only glancingly treated by Sophocles, whereas Oedipus' anxieties and fears arise from quite definite occasions and are by no means identical with the "Daseinsangst" or "Weltangst" of existentialism. Reinhardt, in a discussion equally suggestive, if rather rhapsodical, develops the implications of the "Schein-Sein" antithesis in the play—an issue by no means strictly existentialist—while having much also to say about "Angst."

² Even scientific studies in ancient times were pursued for ethical ends; cf. F. M. Cornford, "Greek Natural Philosophy and Modern Science," pp. 81-94 of *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950).

³ For a discussion of the difficulties involved in defining existentialism and of the inadequacy of Jean-Paul Sartre's widely quoted definition, "Existentialism is the philosophy which declares as its first principle that existence is prior to essence," see Marjorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism* (Chicago, 1948) pp. 1-4. Actually the Sartrean definition smuggles in Sartre's peculiar doctrine of freedom; cf. Wilfrid Desan, *The Tragic Finale* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954) pp. 162 ff.

⁴ Concise characterizations of existentialism may be found in H. J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (London, 1952) esp. pp. 149-65, and in Jean Wahl, *A Short History of Existentialism*, tr. Forrest Williams and Stanley Maron (New York, 1949).

⁵ Worth quoting is H. T. Wade-Gery, *The Poet of the Iliad* (Cambridge, 1952) p. 45: "With the death of Patroklos, or of Mercutio, we are suddenly, in General Mihailovich's phrase, caught in the gale of the world: no contrivance now will work, all contrivances are now insignificant. This is what we recognize as tragedy: it was the pattern of thought of Shakespeare's and Homer's mind. The greatness of life, to these two, is when intrigue, the moral or hedonistic calculus, is caught in the gale." That our culture is almost exclusively a contriving, intriguing, "problem-solving" one, with an almost total non-recognition of tragedy and mystery, a glance into any periodical, from the most popular to the most specialized, will confirm.

⁶ Quoted by Marcel himself in *The Mystery of Being*, tr. G. S. Fraser, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1950) pp. 211-12.

⁷ Max Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Göttingen, 1954) p. 6, remarks of the existentialist (specifically Weinstock's) approach to Sophocles: "Es war gewiss eine zeitgebundene Illusion, wenn Schillers Humanismus sich die Griechen als ein seliges Geschlecht vorstellte, das von den Göttern an der Freude leichtem Gängelbände geführt wurde; aber ebenso einseitig und verfehlt ist es, wenn man heute eine nicht minder zeitgebundene Daseinsicht in das Griechentum hinein trägt." (Cf. also vol. 1, pp. 9-11.) There is some justice in this, yet Pohlenz himself is victim of an illusion equally "zeitgebundene," namely the Hegelian notion that cultures develop in the direction of greater freedom for the individual. As a matter of fact, this post-Enlightenment interest in personality-development constitutes the bulk of Sophoclean criticism; examples are to be found in T. B. L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles* (Oxford, 1936); T. D. Goodell, *Athenian Tragedy* (New Haven, 1920); Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1928); J. T. Sheppard, *Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1934); and many others.

⁸ See, among many, John A. Moore, *Sophocles and Areté* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938) esp. chs. 2 and 3; Victor Ehrenberg, *Sophocles and Pericles* (Oxford, 1954) ch. 7; Enrico Turolla, *Saggio sulla Poesia di Sofocle*, 2nd ed. (Bari, 1948).

⁹ See Cedric Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study in*

Heroic Humanism (Cambridge, Mass., 1951) p. 228. Whitman's "heroic humanism," incidentally, might also very properly be described as existentialist, in spite of Whitman's explicit rejection of Weinstock's and Reinhardt's approach (pp. 26-27) and aside from his advancement of a dubious Sophoclean belief in the possibility of apotheosis (ch. 11).

¹⁰ It has become the fashion to repudiate Aristotle's theories about tragedy, either on the ground that they were tailored to fit only a few plays—or even this very play alone, *Oedipus Rex*—or on the ground that he followed the great tragedians by a century. To the first objection it should be answered that Aristotle had many more plays to examine than we have, and was thus better able to formulate the ideal toward which he thought the whole *genre* was striving; in reply to the second, one can only ask, "Then what price the criticism of us who are twenty-four times further removed?"

¹¹ Pp. 32-33. Whitman discusses the chief rival theories fully. It will be seen that the present paper is not so much a contradiction as a reconciliation of these.

¹² Other interpreters have been reduced to far more desperate expedients than Whitman's. Most numerous of anti-critical critics are "The play's the thing" advocates, who evade the primary task of answering the obvious question, "Yes, but what kind of thing?" Most influential of these was Tycho von Wilamowitz, *Die Dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin, 1917) with his insistence on the essential disunity of the plays; most entertaining was A. J. A. Waldo, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1951) with some excellent demolitions of others' interpretations; most typically Romantic was Gennaro Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Messina-Milan, 1935), who vehemently denied that any of the plays is a "dramma a tesi" or any of the poetry "poesia di pensiero," affirming rather that all is "soltanto poesia" and Sophocles himself "sopratutto poeta," whatever that may mean; most recent perhaps is Herbert Musurillo, "Sunken Imagery in Sophocles' 'Oedipus,'" *AJP* 78 (1957) 36-51, who, after an analysis of the dominant images in the play—interesting, but rather pointless unless shown to be illustrative of an underlying theme—concludes rather surprisingly, "And thus it may be said that the *Oedipus*, in a sense, has no interpretation." The last word on such negative criticism has been said by Charles Williams, in regard to a similar non-interpretation of Dante (*The Figure of Beatrice* [London, 1943] p. 100): "It is a tender, ironic, and consoling view. It is consoling because it shows us that, though we cannot write like Dante, yet we shall not be taken in by Dante. It is also consoling because it relieves us from the necessity of supposing that Dante may be relevant to us." (Italics mine.)

¹³ Though it becomes so, of course, if the individual, on being apprised of his condition, refuses to acknowledge the truth.

¹⁴ Cf. Weinstock (2nd ed., Berlin, 1937) p. 181.

¹⁵ See Hans Diller, *Göttliches und Menschliches Wissen bei Sophokles* (Kiel, 1950) esp. pp. 18 ff., where there is developed a very suggestive opposition between the analytic habits of human thought, "das seiner Natur nach trennende, isolierende menschliche Denken" (p. 22) and the

unitary nature of reality, "die Eindeutigkeit der göttlichen Antwort." Cf. also p. 30: "Auch im sophokleischen Oedipus erscheint der Mensch als der Rätsellöser, der das Rätsel seines Daseins nicht lösen kann, solange er in Gegensätzlichkeit isoliert sieht, was doch zusammengehört. Ihm erscheint als fremd, was in Wahrheit seine eigenste Sache ist. . . ." All the way through the play there is a contrast between what is theoretically known and what is personally known—between what is perceived with the intellect alone and what has penetrated to the depth of the soul—between knowledge, in short, and wisdom: see, for an example, the interplay between Oedipus and Teiresias, 359 ff.

¹⁶ That Sophocles was not interested in telling a crime-and-punishment story is shown by his leaving the "crimes" themselves out of the action, which begins years later; many commentators have remarked on this, e.g., Whitman, p. 125, and Perrotta, p. 199.

¹⁷ Compare Heidegger's doctrine of the "Entwurf," and see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956) esp. pp. 34-35, 39, 40-43, 367-71, 433-556 *passim*. It must be admitted, however, that the Sartrean "project" has very little in common with Oedipus' in regard to nobility and altruism.

¹⁸ Tragedians love this ironic device; one thinks of Clytemnestra prating about justice, rash Hamlet commending the stoical Horatio, and Lear praying for Heaven to give him patience, which Heaven does by letting fall on his own top all the stored vengeance he wants poured on his daughters.

¹⁹ Throughout the Prologue, beginning with the first line, Oedipus addresses the Thebans as "children."

²⁰ Imagery based on the idea of equation is scattered throughout and is fully discussed by Bernard M. W. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven, 1957) pp. 147-58.

²¹ That Oedipus' suspicions of Creon begin quite early in the play is noticed by J. T. Sheppard, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles* (Cambridge, 1920) p. 111. Probably the suspicions are first aroused by Creon's desire to report the oracular response in private (91 ff.).

²² Oedipus is not merely passive in the last scene, as is amply shown by Knox, pp. 185 ff. This scene, far from being the protracted piece of sentimentality some critics have found it, is the *raison d'être* of the play. See Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Sophokles und das Leid* (Potsdam, 1947) esp. pp. 28-29: "Im Leiden aber, welches ihn zu sich selber bringt, wird er in der Vernichtung seines Menschseins inne, und während er zuvor im Genuss der Kraftentfaltung, nur immer unbekannter mit sich selbst, immer mehr den Grund seiner Existenz zu verlieren drohte, rückt er im Leiden nun mit dem richtigen Verhältnis zu sich selbst auch in das richtige Verhältnis zu seinem Gott, und tauscht für die 'Hybris,' die ihn hinriss, die Nüchternheit der 'Sophrosyne' ein, welche, als eine Art Zusichkommen, der festeste Grund des Menschseins ist."

²³ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, tr. Justin O'Brien (New York, 1955) p. 128. Camus has disavowed being an existentialist, but his so-called "Absurdism" is obviously Kierkegaardian in origin.

²⁴ Which is not to deny that every man is similarly singled out in the gods' own time and way; otherwise Oedipus could not truly serve as a *paradēigma*. This lack of universal application seems to be the weakness of C. M. Bowra's theory in *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1944) pp. 209-11, that Oedipus' fate is something essentially unusual, that his catastrophe is a warning from gods to men, and that by taking heed the latter may somehow escape.

²⁵ Cf. Blackham (see note 4) pp. 92-98.

²⁶ The fullest discussion of this whole problem is J. C. Opstelten, *Sophocles and Greek Pessimism*, tr. J. A. Ross (Amsterdam, 1952). Cf. also Schadewaldt (see note 22) who proposes an interesting theory about the necessity of suffering to effect the emergence of the self; e.g., p. 26: "Denn, das Leid *versammelt* den Menschen zu sich selbst, *versammelt* ihn zur Gestalt. Es ist darum plastisch im umfassenden Sinn (während der einseitige Ausdruck der Freude, die ausser sich bringt, erhebt, lockert, löst, exzentrisch und wider den Sinn der Plastik ist)." But Turola (see note 8) pp. 110, 214, 215, 221, supposes that Sophocles brings a message of utter despair.

²⁷ Whitman's interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* (ch. 7) as a tragedy of "irrational evil" is marred by vagueness in the use of the word "irrational." Sometimes evil appears to be "irrational in the way that any datum of experience is," i.e., non-rational; sometimes "irrational as an animal is," i.e., sub-rational; sometimes "irrational beyond the scope of human reason," i.e., super-rational. (Whitman is aware of the distinction, but fails to observe it.) This confusion carries over into the discussions of Sophocles' religious beliefs (cf. pp. 235, 245 for example). If Sophocles believed at all that evil, though god-sent, was "irrational" in the third sense, he was *ipso facto* committing himself to a theodicy and eschewing the utter pessimism that Whitman supposes he fell into in the *Oedipus Rex* and the *Trachiniae*. (Of irrational evil as a mystery Whitman has no hint.) Francis Ferguson in *The Idea of a Theater* (New York, 1953) p. 29, is similarly unclear: "For the peculiar virtue of Sophocles' presentation of the myth is that it preserves the ultimate mystery by focusing upon the tragic human at a level beneath, or prior to any rationalization whatever."

²⁸ *The Philosophy of Existence*, tr. Manya Harari (London, 1948) pp. 8-9.

²⁹ It is interesting to note that in some versions of the myth Oedipus continued to rule in Thebes for many years after the disclosure of his transgressions, apparently unaffected by Jocasta's suicide. For the development of the myth see Carl Robert, *Oidipos* (Berlin, 1915); Opstelten (see note 26) pp. 102, 103; Lord Raglan, *Jocasta's Crime* (London, 1933) chs. 22, 23, 26. Perhaps the most teasing puzzle about myth—and one that our increasing anthropological knowledge has done little to solve—is the provenance of its ethical and spiritual elements. It seems pretty well established by now that the story of Oedipus must have been originally a fictionalization of some sort of murderous contest wherein a new aspirant to the hand of the incarnate Great Mother, the Lady of the Crossways where the three roads met, had to kill his predecessor and undergo death or expulsion as a community scapegoat in his turn. All done, we are told, to

ensure fat crops and full bellies for the tribe. And we can object only when assured that this explanation explains all. If this is all, whence come these ideas of atonement, of altruistic self-sacrifice, of kinship with nature, this striking symbolism of man's ineluctable fate and circumscribed existence? Astounding coincidence that these bumbling aetiologies called myths should be so hospitable to profundities of philosophical and theological interpretation! Shocking as the thought is to our post-Enlightenment sense of intellectual superiority, could it be that such ideas were already present in "primitive" religion?

³⁰ Cf. lines 440-42: the source of Oedipus' intellectual greatness is at the same time the source of his foolishness.

³¹ The significance of the answer to the riddle is remarked upon only, to my knowledge, by Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (New York, 1951) p. 212.

³² Hence the frequent references to journeying and wandering. For the play on the word *pous* cf. Knox (see note 20) pp. 182-84. (I venture the suggestion that *Oidipous*, "Swollen Foot," may originally have been a euphemism for the ithyphallos or its wearer in a fertility rite.)

³³ For the translation of *homósporos* here, see Knox, p. 115.

³⁴ Admittedly the last phrase is not a translation, but a paraphrase. The "cutting down" idea is imported in order to complete the "sowing" imagery.

MEDICAL LATIN AND GREEK

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