The Oedipus Rex of Sophocles and Psychoanalysis

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ABSTRACT

Sophocles’ universal classic, ever relevant to psychoanalysis in its continual development, dramatizes a gamut of psychodynamic factors, ranging from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal and post-Oedipal. Shedding light on those psychodynamics, the present analysis of Oedipus Rex stands apart in three interlocking ways. First, it focuses nearly exclusively on the play’s text and not on the broader Oedipal myth in classical times. Secondly, based on a close examination of the original Greek text, including all-important signifiers, it uncovers such elements as the previously neglected extensiveness of Sophocles’ erotically charged language and the suggestiveness of his apparent, though conflict-laden tautologies. Thirdly, the study at hand deepens as well as harmonizes a psychoanalytic approach to Oedipus Rex with the orientation of classicists who are wont to emphasize the very role of the divinity that is usually downplayed by psychoanalysts. A hermeneutic integration of the classicists’ outlook on grandiose hubris involves an appreciation of the role of the ideal ego, especially at the play’s ending, which classicists have attended to only in the comparatively recent past and which has been nearly totally disregarded in psychoanalytic literature. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

The greatness of world classics relies partly on the fact that, despite being subject to often deficient translations, they yet remain powerful enough to maintain an enduring impact throughout the ages. The same, of course, eminently obtains for Oedipus Rex. It is a drama of marvels, both as an historical document and as an intrinsically valuable text. It continues to be one of the most read and examined works in history; it stands as the first detective story in Western literature (Segal, 2001, p. 3); in the light of our contemporary concerns, one can say, with a slight modification of technological referent, that Sophocles’ play describes the
world’s most famous prototype of what is currently known as “road rage”; it is one of the world’s supreme artistic achievements and features Greek tragedy’s greatest figure and one of subsequent eponymous renown; and it exhibits an unexcelled orchestration of multiple ironies interpenetrating the language, character, theme, and plot.

From a more psychological point of view, one may go on to note that Oedipus Rex testifies undeniably to sexagenarian creativity [more exactly, by many estimates Sophocles wrote his masterpiece about the same age as Freud wrote The Ego and the Id (1923)]. Sophocles’ play, it cannot be restated enough, also played an inspirational part in the founding of psychoanalysis. And as Freud pointed out, the play’s additional particular power consists in dramatizing intrapsychic life by way of an audience-engaging process of delays and ever mounting excitement, a multiform unfolding that resembles the psychoanalytic process itself. Finally and not least of all, the Sophoclean classic, ever relevant to psychoanalysis in its continual development, resonantly dramatizes a gamut of psychodynamic factors, ranging from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal and post-Oedipal.

Shedding further light on complex psychodynamics informing Oedipus Rex, the present study is based on a close reading of the original Greek text, including its signifiers. The results of my detailed examination radically add to the lexical findings published by the most well-known, psychoanalytically informed classicist Charles Segal (1994, 1995, 1999, 2001). My scrutiny of lexical and other discursive complexities in the Greek text uncovers greater evidence for the motivations and conflicts driving the protagonists. The frequently subtle evidence for those conflicts is to be found the crucially significant polysemy, the suggestiveness of apparent tautologies, and the seeming triviality marking the sequence of parentally descriptive epithets. My undertaking deepens as well as harmonizes a psychoanalytic approach to Oedipus Rex with the orientation of classicists who are wont to emphasize the very role of the divinity that is wont to be downplayed by psychoanalysts. A hermeneutic integration of the classicists’ outlook on Oedipus’s hubris, intensified by his prideful intelligence (Edmunds, 2006, p. 49), involves an appreciation of the role of the ideal ego, especially at the play’s ending, which classicists have attended to only in the recent past and which has been nearly totally disregarded in psychoanalytic literature.

Methodologically, two clarifications should be made at the outset. First, a rider should be affixed to the general psychoanalytic caveat about treating fictional characters as real people. It is one thing to fill in periods of the lives of fictional protagonists and their family with supposed events not justified by the text, and accordingly to speculate with a series of could haves, must haves, and should haves. But it is quite another thing to be guided by Freud’s (1901) use of literature as textual evidence for the focal demonstration of unconscious conflict manifest in various forms of parapraxes.

Secondly, my approach differs from such critics as Ross (1982, 1995) and Priel (2002) who have made penetrating psychoanalytic examinations of Oedipus Rex seen against its mythical background. Bearing on this matter is the increasingly
acute critical awareness of Sophocles’ own creative independence (Bettini & Guidorizzi, 2004; Edmunds, 2006); the suggestive evasiveness and the complex modulations in his tragic vision of myth from play to play (Garvie, 2005); and lastly but not leastly, Steiner’s (1994) exemplary research into the cultural context of Freud’s and post-Freudian interpretations of the play. Accordingly, with one notable exception that I must immediately justify, I focus exclusively on what is said in the play itself.

That one exception concerns the precise contents of the Sphinx’s riddle that no one except Oedipus could solve. To the Sphinx’s question as to what walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, Oedipus correctly replied “man.” Sophocles did not spell out the text of the riddle, which was familiar to his contemporaries. But typical of his poetic technique, he did make several allusions to it and its link with Oedipus’s name (swollen foot). For example, in referring to the regicide, Oedipus questioned about the “obstacle” (p. 128) that immediately prevented its investigation; but the word which Oedipus used for “obstacle” is empodôn, which means “at the feet” in such a way as to be an obstacle and which, I submit, might be better rendered by the Latinate impedimentum. Sophocles also put into Creon’s mouth the resounding answer that Thebes could not probe into the mysterious regicide due to the pressing problems caused by the Sphinx that lay “before our feet” (pros posi, p. 130).

For heuristic purposes, I have divided my examination of Oedipus Rex into two main parts. The first part concentrates exclusively on the play’s pervasive narcissistic themes; in this context much use is made of a highly pertinent and incisive clarification of Freud’s conception of the ideal ego, which casts new light on Sophocles’ classic. In complementary fashion, revisiting the play and some of the same material from another perspective, the second part of my essay analyzes the intrigue strictly in terms of drive-defense theory and focuses on a series of scenes, some of whose Oedipal content has been hitherto totally overlooked.

THE NAME AND ITS GLORY

In an often cited text, Vernant (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1972), the eminent French Hellenist, roundly criticizes Freud as well as Anzieu (1966) for asserting that they found solid evidence of the Oedipus Complex in Sophocles’ masterpiece. No, replies Vernant, and he defiantly entitles his article “Oedipus’ without a complex”. For him, the play “incarnates a tragedy of fate, opposing divine omnipotence to the meager will of man” (p. 78). Vernant continues: “The specific domain of tragedy is situated at this frontier boundary where human acts interact with divine powers and where they reveal their true meaning, a meaning not understood by the very people who initiated and assumed responsibility for their acts and who insert themselves in an order of things which surpasses and escapes them. All tragedy necessarily plays out on these two levels” (p. 82). For a precise example of his approach, Vernant focuses on the episode of the famous
banquet which incited Oedipus to consult the oracle at Delphi. The French scholar concludes (p. 92) that this episode has both an aesthetic and religious necessity, but has nothing to do with “depth psychology” (this epithet for psychoanalysis is repeated on p. 94).

While disregarding various skeptical attitudes about psychoanalysis, let us nevertheless keep in mind the thematic centrality of the tension between the divine and the human posited by Vernant and other prominent Hellenists, such as Knox (1998, pp. 47 and 160). The latter for his part posits that Oedipus Rex, set against the background of the commonplace comparison between the deity’s and tyrant’s power in classical Greece, reasserts “the religious view of a divinely ordered universe, a view depending on the concept of divine omniscience, represented in the play by Apollo’s prophecy.” Indeed, for the Greeks, a failure to recognize the distinction between the divine dominion and human limitation could lead to terrible disaster. Thus, echoing the second well-known Delphic counsel of “nothing too much” (mêdan agan), the chorus in Oedipus Rex criticizes excess (ll. 873–878, 1195–1197), a violation of the Greek ideal of moderation and self-control (sôphrosúne). In his Interpretation of Dreams, however, Freud (1900) minimized this motif in the play; he presumed that the theme of divinity, arriving late in the Oedipal myth, is only a secondary revision that was automatically evaluated as such by Sophocles; in a later remark in his Introductory Lectures, Freud (1916–1917) specified that the oracle itself served as the unconscious site of the protagonist’s Oedipal desires.

The task initially before us is to harmonize the religious meaning of the oracle for the contemporary Athenian audience with a psychoanalytic understanding of Oedipus’s complex narcissism that underlies his self-glorification and belief in his own omniscience. A starting focal point is the dramatized theme of divinity and the role of the ideal ego, the most primitive level of the ego and the inheritor of original narcissism. This deepest narcissistic agency, we shall see, impacted on the various upper developmental levels of Oedipus’s self-esteem. In this context André Lussier’s La gloire et la faute (2006) serves as an indispensable guide. While clarifying Freud’s frequent confusion of the ideal ego and the ego ideal, Lussier proposes a major reorientation of the Oedipal Complex and its dynamic links with narcissistic pathology. Thus the determinant forces of narcissism are to be seen as present before, during, and after the Oedipal stage. The narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfection in the ideal ego are drive-invested, for if not, there would result merely inoffensive elaborations of fantasy. Evolution may affect the ego ideal but not the ideal ego, which is the most primitive layer of the ego. Lussier also depicts a fundamental multidimensional conflict in psychic life that arises from superego prohibitions and the drive-invested quest for a greater and greater perfection derived from the ideal ego. Accordingly, the superego is variously forced to function in reaction to the excessive, pathological investment of the ego ideal.

And now to the play itself. A powerful Sphinx dominated Thebes and killed all oncomers who could not solve her riddle. Oedipus’s solution of the riddle and
concomitant defeat of the Sphinx influenced his later claims of being superman. Although imbued with the salvific character of his understanding, Oedipus was blind to his ignorance about the most terrestrial. He manifested his knowledge of the general human development from childhood to adulthood, but he did not know his own personal genesis. Furthermore, Oedipus’s general rather than particular knowledge was not able to save him psychically, for it had nothing to do with a forbidden, repressed knowledge. Thus, within the briefest time after hearing the oracular doom about his filial future, Oedipus unwittingly went on to have the most momentous involvement with two people old enough to be his parents. His exceptional perspicacity, as the prophet Tiresias hinted (440–442), even became counterproductive and increased his pride, which, in turn, increased his resistance toward discovering internal truth and recognizing his limitations with respect to the gods. In short, the changes in Oedipus’s reverential subservience to the gods would correlate with his changing confidence about his self-knowledge and power.

Let us now attend to the unfolding of Oedipus’s narcissism more pointedly, following not the play’s zigzag development of the plot but rather its reorganization according to historical sequencing. Though born to Laius and Jocasta, the royal couple of Thebes, Oedipus was immediately unwanted on account of a threatening prophecy. Consequently, the feet of the princely neonate were pierced and fettered, and he was sent away to be exposed to die on a distant mountain. But there, thanks to two shepherds who became veritably his adoptive paternal saviors, the infant received the name Oedipus, one of whose meanings explicitly referred to his swollen feet.3 Oedipus’s subsequent foot fixation, I propose, should be glossed by the fact of the humiliation connoted by the common Greek verb andrapodizô: to reduce to slavery, or literally, to put a man’s feet, podes, in irons.

The rescued infant was afterwards handed over to other adoptive parents, this time to Polybus and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth. Years later, a fateful incident at a banquet ignited Oedipus’s suspicions about his origins and status. The first scene I explore is Oedipus’s belated retrospection on that incident and his doubts which had changed the course of his whole life (I underline two hidden allusions to feet in his recital):

I was brought up [in Corinth] as the greatest of the citizens, till this happened to me, a thing to be wondered at, but not a thing for me to work for. At dinner a man got drunk, and over the wine charged me with not being my father’s child. I was riled, and for that day scarcely controlled myself; and on the next I went to my mother and father and questioned them; and they made the man who had let slip the word pay dearly for the insult. So far as concerned them I was comforted, but still this continued to vex me, since it constantly recurred to me. Without the knowledge of my mother and my father I went to Pytho. (ll. 775–788)

Brought up as the first of citizens, the prince took affront at the statement of a guest in a state of total drunkenness. More precisely, according to Oedipus’s
polysemous description with its seemingly tautological, prefixed adjective, the guest was “overly full [huperplêstheis] of wine” [I would say that the huper, attended to in only one (Bowlby, 2007, p. 171) of all the translations I consulted] ranks as the most important prefix in the entire play). By implication, Oedipus’s description suggests the very drunken guest’s difficulty to stand steadily on two feet. Furthermore, in his recollection Oedipus attributed a persistent locomotion to the guest’s charge itself! Thus the foot-fixated Oedipus, true to his name, rankled that guest’s charge of illegitimate birth “constantly recurred [hupheirpe] to me.” Significantly, the core of the word hupheirpe is herpô, which can also mean to creep or to crawl!4 In short, Oedipus, riddled with anxiety, was beset by a charge that was constantly crawling towards him.

We can readily understand how narcissistic humiliation kept on shaking Oedipus to his roots. He had lent more credence to the passing remark of a total inebriate than he did the next day when his parents, who loved him so much (ll. 969–970, 998–999, 1023), insisted on his legitimate birth. Thereupon the distrustful Oedipus left them – and as it turned out – forever.

Narcissistically hypersensitive about his legitimate birth, Oedipus sought clarification by journeying to Delphi. But there, the oracle disregarded Oedipus’s question about his parental origins so that he once more experienced a narcissistic wound; he felt “dishonored” (atimon, l. 789). Instead, the oracle predicted rather that Oedipus would kill his father and sleep with his mother, a prophecy which Oedipus as a possible adoptee misinterpreted as confirming the drunkard’s charge and implicitly re-establishing his loving parents as liars.

At the famous junction of three roads not far from Delphi, after just being told he would kill his father and therefore a generationally older man, he promptly killed such a man, who, moreover, looked like Oedipus himself (ll. 742–743). Subsequently, as we know, Oedipus traveled on to Thebes that was endangered by the remorseless Sphinx. Oedipus was unaware, I contend, that he could give the famous solution to the Sphinx’s riddle not only because he was supposedly the most intelligent man of all, but also because of a narcissistic factor: his lifelong sensitivity about his body image, his wounded feet, contributed to his ability to answer. Nietzsche was indeed right to maintain in Die Geburt der Tragödie (1872/1946) that Oedipus did not solve the riddle, “because of his excessive wisdom” (seiner übermässigen Weisheit halber).

Blinded by his narcissistic triumphs in being as the savior of Thebes and wedding its queen, Oedipus overconfidently went on to confront a blight threatening Thebes, this time belatedly occasioned by the oracle in response to Oedipal crimes. Appealing to Oedipus to rescue the city once more, a priest indulged in contradictory praise: he said that the mighty Oedipus was aided by a god (ll. 38–39), then that he could have been aided by god or man (ll. 42–43), only to conclude by acknowledging both Oedipus and Apollo as the preservers of Thebes (ll. 47–48, 149–150). We even hear intimations of apotheosis in the priest’s supplication that he and his followers were at the altars of Oedipus (ll. 15–16). Indeed, the ministrant’s hedging suggests that he
had an insight into Oedipus’s grandiose self-perception underlying a politic modesty.

It is, next, when personally challenged for his shameful life (l. 367) by the godlike prophet Tiresias that Oedipus reversed his formerly proclaimed piety. Unsure in his self-aggrandizement and yet contemptuous, he now claimed for himself the singular role as prophet; only he and not Tiresias solved the Sphinx's riddle, and moreover, he exercised that prophetic skill without the help of the gods – a denial of his former stand (ll. 145–146) that he would succeed with the god's help or he would perish. For Oedipus, at this point, he could only be the object, not the subject of envy. As he self-exultantly reflected: “O riches and kingship and skill surpassing skill in a life much-envied” (ll. 380–381, emphasis added).

The appearance of Jocasta marks another turn in the religious tenor of the play and offers a further framework within which we can track Oedipus's vacillation between self-idealization and fears of self-diminution. As he learned about the details of the regicide, he passed from one submissive reflection to another: “O Zeus, how have you decided to act with regard to me? ... I have grievous misgivings that the prophet may have sight ... Would one not be right who judged that this came upon me by the action of a cruel deity” (ll. 738, 747, 828–829).

Abashed, the proud Oedipus then became forced to inquire about his origins from the Corinthian messenger, a migrant worker for hire (thêteai, l. 1029), which was actually the category of a free person a little above that of a slave. In quick succession, Oedipus’s old fears about his origins were revived upon the news that Polybus was not his father. Hearing also that he was saved by the Corinthian shepherd, Oedipus pursued, “What trouble was I suffering from when you took me in your arms?” (l. 1031). When the messenger specified that Oedipus’s ankles had been pierced, the king complained of being reminded of his former misery, for his pierced feet served to identify him and indeed constituted the source of his name. Not surprisingly, Oedipus’s heightened awareness of his earlier physical history and his supposedly low birth augmented his narcissistic injury and made him lament the shame he retained since infancy. His overdetermined choice of words in that lament has hidden autobiographical significance: “I took up a terrible shame from my swaddling clothes” (l. 1035). More precisely, the implications of the Greek word for “took up” (aneilomên) are as follows:

1. a custom prevailed of tying around the necks of exposed children little tokens which would later serve as a means of recognition (just as Creusa hopefully did in the Ion of Euripides, 1958). Thus Oedipus might also be saying that he was furnished with dishonorable tokens since his birth (Sophocles, 2004, p. 138fn);
2. in taking or picking up, there is an ironic allusion to the Greek custom of a father picking up and therefore acknowledging a neonate as legitimate and one’s own (Sophocles, 2002, p. 67fn).
Overcome by his social status as an illegitimate child and as a bearer of a mutilation, a stigma in classical Greece which set off slaves from nobility,

Oedipus mockingly raised the possibility to Jocasta that he was not a recent slave but one generationally identified: “Do not worry! Even if I prove to be the offspring of three generations of slaves, you will not be shown to be lowborn!” (ll. 1062–1063). Conversely, Oedipus rapidly held that Jocasta took pride in her noble origins (ll. 1069–1070). Completely distraught at that point, the disillusioned Jocasta quit the scene in order to commit suicide. Left alone, Oedipus further imagined that as a typically proud woman she was ashamed about his base birth (l. 1079). Then, in an immediate effort of overcompensating narcissistic repair, Oedipus grandiosely proceeded to pretend that he overcame the vicissitudes of human birth and growth. His mother is Chance, he claimed, who dominates and who personifies the lack of cosmic order in the universe (ll. 1080–1083), and thus “he is equal to the gods, the son of Chance, the only real goddess” (Knox, 1998, p. 156fn).

André Green (1992, p. 110n) put it this way: “Oedipus surmounts his of not being born as the son of the king – a circumstance that through projection he attributes to Jocasta – by claiming for himself divine parents, hence a projection of his ideal ego.” We could also say the force of Oedipus’s ideal ego was at its height and prevailed over any superego condemnation. Hence a reversal supervened whereby the superego reigned supreme when the disillusioned Oedipus carried out his self-blinding with its eternal punitive effects in Hades.

It is essential for our additional understanding of the play to realize that after claiming descent from Chance, for over the next two hundred lines that included the dramatic climax Oedipus did not refer to divinity in any form. He focused more and more on the strictly human level of finding out about his birth and of punishing himself. Apart from a brief comment by Michels (1986) who stands out as a notable exception, analysts have concentrated on the dramatic climax of the play but neglected its conclusion, and accordingly slighted its importance for the shifting equilibrium between the forces of Oedipus’s ideal ego and superego.

Let us now trace step-by-step that shift ensuant upon Oedipus’s self-blinding. In a supramundane sense, he recognized his subjugation to the gods, but on a human level we hear an exultant appreciation of his cursed acts for their very strength. Thus, after lamenting his helplessness, he sufficiently recovered to be able to laud the fiendish strength of his evilness: being unforgiveable, his fi lial crimes were “stronger” (kreeson’, l. 1374) than any atonement he could have achieved by hanging himself. Next, digressing on his feelings of humiliation, he held that he and his mother were de-differentiated as a human beings, without any fixed, distinguishing role in familial structure: “Marriage, marriage, you gave me birth, and after you brought up the selfsame seed, and displayed fathers who were brothers, children who were fruit of incest, brides who were both wives and mothers to their spouses” (ll. 1403–1407; cf. Pucci, 1992). At this juncture, we
note, the reductive commonness of Oedipus’s identity stands the farthest away from the singularity of his ego ideal’s imperatives.

Once more getting a hold of himself, Oedipus then counteractively asserted his grandiose distinctiveness, albeit outside the family context. In a compromise formation featuring a new balance between the forces of his superego and ideal ego, the undisputed king of adversity claimed, “[T]here is no human being who can bear my woes but I” (ll. 1414–1415). So ambivalently self-reaffirmed, Oedipus no longer feared as he was previously wont to, and he could even counsel the chorus not to be afraid, even though he named Creon as the “best” of men and comparatively described himself as “the most evil of all” (l. 1443).

Oedipus’s last exchanges with Creon abounded with an ambivalent mixture of expressed obedience and his command that his daughters be cared for. Creon replied with telling vexation: “Do not wish to have control in everything! Power to control did not accompany you through all your life” (ll. 1523–1524). That telling command by Creon sums up the final contrast in Oedipus’s life between his attitudes to the gods and to man. In some ways, we must conclude, the play’s ending vindicates the oracles, divine knowledge, and their consequences: although the gods may be unjust, they know (Burkert, 1991). And yet we must also realize that the claims of Oedipus’s ideal ego were only partially tamed – in his resilient grandiosity he still felt himself to be peerless in adversity.

A NEW BEGINNING: THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
T.S. Eliot, The Four Quartets: “Little Gidding”

To review quickly: in his well-known efforts to find the regicide who caused the plague affecting Thebes, Oedipus consulted with Creon and notably slipped in alternately referring to a single and several killers (ll. 124–241).

Oedipus’s next encounter was with the blind seer Tiresias, and their discussion quickly widened to include the oedipal issues of both parental murder and incest. Tiresias launched a clear accusation: “I say that you are the murderer of the man whose murderer you are searching for” (l. 363). Tiresias then explained the curse that Oedipus inherited from his parents and that he was in a scandalous marriage. Rather than see a repetition of Apollo’s predictions in Tiresias’s declaration, Oedipus reacted with effrontery and railed at his accuser’s foolishness. At that point, Tiresias countered that he himself was thought to be wise by the very “parents who gave … birth” (l. 436) to Oedipus. The seemingly tautological phrase “the parents who gave birth” reawakened Oedipus’s doubts about his origins and plunged him into confusion. Thus disarmed by a return
of his own repressed, the solver of riddles could only conclude that he found all of Tiresias’s words to be enigmatic.

The question of numerical progression climaxes in Oedipus’s subsequent encounter with Jocasta. That is to say, having focused on the issue of one killer in his previous discussion with Creon, and on two parents with Tiresias, Oedipus now cast his attention to the detail of three roads whose intersection marked the place of Laius’s murder (cf. Sophocles, 2006, p. 3). That so-called minor point, which Jocasta mentioned only in passing in her detailed account, precipitated Oedipus into a confession of psychic array: “What a wandering of the spirit and a stirring of the mind is upon me, lady, since I heard your words just now!” (ll. 726–727).

Remaining unsure in his hearing, Oedipus expressed a tentativeness unique in the whole play: “I thought I heard you say that Laius was slaughtered at the place where three roads meet” (ll. 729–730). Jocasta’s added specification about the location of the three roads is highly erotically suggestive: “The country is called Phocis, and the road divides; it goes to the same point from Delphi and from Daulis” (ll. 733–734).

Frightened by what he heard, Oedipus for his part embarked upon a defensive reconstruction of the regicide. First, he wishfully introduced into it a chronological distortion in order to distance himself from the dead Laius. Thus, presuming the age of the murdered Laius, the now middle-aged Oedipus wishfully inquired: “What stage of youth (akmên hêbês) did he reach?” (l. 741). In this overdetermined counter-move, Oedipus also expressed an identification with Laius: among all the synonyms that Oedipus could have chosen for the meaning “reach,” in his foot fixation he was driven to reuse the word heirpe, which, as we have seen in the banquet scene, also signifies “crawl.” Hence, as if in another unconscious reference to his childhood, Oedipus in a paternal identification had both himself and his father crawl up to maturity.

There is more. When Oedipus learned that contrary to his desperate presumption the slaughtered king had attained middle-age, (ll. 742–743), Oedipus followed up with another question based on desperate wishful thinking, this time evasively estimating the number of the king’s attendants: “Did he go with a small retinue, or had he many guards, in the manner of a king?” (ll. 750–751). Rejecting the extremes in Oedipus’s defensively imagined alternates, Jocasta expatiated that Laius’s accompanying entourage had been neither small nor large but somewhere in the middle: “There were altogether five, and one of them, a herald, and a single wagon carried Laius” (ll. 752–753). In fact, the retinue, though modest in number, stood out for its distinctiveness in that Jocasta’s term Apênê, was actually a four-wheeled carriage; conspicuously led by a herald bearing a staff, it indicated a royal procession (cf. Jebb, 1900, p. 104; Blondell, 2002, p. 54). With the consequent pressure of reality testing closing in on him, Oedipus’s distortions arrived at even greater heights when he talked again about the age of Laius. After being corrected that the assassinated king was not in his
youth but in middle-age, the middle-aged Oedipus again temporally distanced himself by twice designating that the royal “old man” (*presbus*, ll. 805, 807) attempted to drive him from the path.

Other forbidden derivatives informed the conflictual interaction between Oedipus and his mother. Wanting to divert the attention of Oedipus from the history of his pierced feet, Jocasta described the fate of her supposedly dead only son whose feet had been merely fastened (*enzeuxas*, l. 718). Do we see here a displacement and return of the repressed in Jocasta’s choice of this word, whose root, *zeugnumi*, can also mean to join in wedlock? Not long afterwards, Oedipus spelled the oracle’s prediction and then wondered out loud with a peculiarly phrased query involving paternal functions: “[Am I to] be joined [zugênai] in marriage with my mother and slay my father Polybus, him who brought me up, him who begot me?” (ll. 825–827). In his question that further disclosed his overdetermined anxiety, Oedipus unwittingly inverted the natural chronological sequence of fatherly functions, thereby highlighting for us the primary reality of his adoptive father Polybus as nourisher and the postponed fantasy about him as procreator. Noticing her husband’s continued dismay about what she related, Jocasta asked him, “And what special saying did you hear from me?” (l. 841). But the Greek word for “special” (*perisson*) can also be defined as “excessive,” which additionally illuminates Oedipus’s increased guilt brought about by his mother’s report.

When the messenger arrived from Corinth to announce that his supposed father Polybus had died, Oedipus believed himself partially beyond the pale of the Delphic prediction. But although he dismissed the possibility of parricide, he still feared incest with his presumed mother Merope. What especially imports here is how he defined the latter – not specifically on her marital status as queen but rather in terms of cohabitation: “the one with whom Polybus dwelled” (l. 990). That lexical detour, though unfortunately criticized as useless (Dawe, 2006, p. 159), actually becomes redolent with meaning when we bear in mind how it reflects Oedipus’s mounting anguish about his own ongoing forbidden cohabitation with Jocasta.

A close contrastive analysis of the subsequent exchange between Jocasta and Oedipus further demonstrates the defensive subtlety of their lexical choices. Indicative of her erotically laden censorship, Jocasta never used a procreative epithet to replace or elaborate “mother” or “father,” even though a phrase such as “a parent who gave birth” is not rare in ancient Greek; and she never referred to a mother and a father in the same phrase. Oedipus, by contrast, could refer to his mother and father together as such or through their procreational capacity, e.g. “I shall never go to where they are who have begotten me” (l. 1007). Oedipus could spell out paternal identity when talking only about his father: the oracle predicted, said Oedipus, that he would lie with his mother and kill the “father who had begotten” him (ll. 791–793). Yet Oedipus censored his language in speaking to Jocasta about mothers; he might speak parsimoniously of mothers *per se* but did not use any expanded terms for her maternal identity.
Significantly enough, only when Jocasta died did Oedipus refer to her maternal identity, yet even at that he resorted to a periphasis for the word mother: “Poor thing, was it she who gave birth?” (l. 1175). And in defensive detachment, Oedipus never named her as a corpse when he afterwards requested Creon to do his duty and bury “her who is in the house ... one who is your own” (ll. 1447–1448). Yet the return of the repressed extended not only to Oedipus’s simple lexical reference to his Oedipal crimes but also to their syntactic order. So before Jocasta died and as if in a mimetic response to a living reality, he always mentioned incest first, then parricide (ll. 791–793, 825–827, 994–996, 1184–1185); after her death, however, he reversed the order, giving first mention to parricide (ll. 1357–1359, 1398–1408).

When he finally raved in his self-recognition, Oedipus asked for a sword and burst into Jocasta’s bedroom, only to find her hanged. Frustrated in his probable matricidal desires, Oedipus then blinded himself. And here another series of apposite questions suddenly confronts us: What was the nature of the blinding act? Why did not Oedipus rather choose to pull out his eyes, a self-enucleation which would have equally caused blindness? Why was his blinding instrument an object pulled off from Jocasta’s body? To find out the answers, let us carefully follow the text once more. Sophocles has the messenger describe the violent scene packed with these profound Oedipal meanings: “He broke off the golden pins from her raiment, with which she was adorned, and lifting up his eyes struck them” (ll. 1267–1269). I offer firstly that the brooches, the instrument used for enucleation, is overdetermined, for its term in Greek can also mean both the external bones of the forearm and leg, the radius and fibula. More generally, Segal (2001, p. 127) adds that in taking away the long pins that held together the loose folds of her dress, it was as if Oedipus was also undressing his wife in their actual marriage chamber. In classical Greek literature, moreover, the eyes were often understood as the seat of eroticism whereby light would flow from them and influence the other (e.g. Antigone, l. 795). Thus, by displacement and symbolic substitution of the orbits for the female genitalia (Henderson, 1991, p. 130), Oedipus invaginated himself.

I also advance that we must not overlook the implications of the verb paiô; used twice by the messenger to denote striking, it means a well to copulate and thereby serves to emphasize the polyvalent nature of Oedipus’s act. By plunging the erotically symbolic object taken from his wife’s body into his orbits, Oedipus carried out an overdetermined self-blinding, an aggression masking a libidinal performance as well as a violent coitus upon himself in partial identification with Jocasta. Simultaneously, his self-castration by piercing duplicates the piercing of his feet (l. 1034), which in their swollenness may be seen as an erection (Freud, 1974, p. 163).

From a superego perspective, we should note that by belatedly and masochistically wanting to fulfill his own parents’ infanticidal wish, Oedipus resolved to be abandoned forever on Mount Cithaeron (ll. 1451–1453; cf. 1391–1392). Informing Oedipus’s resolution, I suggest, is a remarkable and hitherto ignored
fantasy of a vicious circle that point by point mapped out his life in the following way. Oedipus began his life's circuit with his birth at Thebes; then he was carried southeast in the direction of Mount Cithaeron and Corinth, and from there he later journeyed northwest to Delphi, considered by the Greeks to be the site of the world's navel; leaving there, he continued eastward and defeated his father at the vaginally symbolic narrow road and then, completing the fateful circle, went further eastward on to sexually enjoy his mother in Thebes.

Compounding that wish of vicious circularity, Oedipus felt himself so impious that he bruskly cut himself from former pleasures, including the sight of his children (ll. 1375–1377). The true measure of his superego severity can be gauged only when we take into account the Greek belief that the dead retained their bodily integrity or injury in life when they went to Hades (ll. 1371–1372; see also Sophocles, 1967, p. 249). Accordingly, given Oedipus's drastic conviction of his non-redeemable guilt, it was as if, not satisfied with his superego as the temporally limited or lifetime heir of his Oedipal complex, he extended his punitive heirdom into eternity. Oedipal life terminable, post-Oedipal suffering interminable.

CONCLUDING AFTERTHOUGHTS

From the psychoanalytic point of view, Oedipus Rex is remarkable for its singular presentation of the hero's lasting blindness and insight. Through suffering and rumination about strictly external evidence, Oedipus acquired superficial genealogical information that led him to recognize his overtly incestuous and patricidal acts, but ironically, the incarnate prototype of the Oedipal Complex remained ignorant of his own complex. He learned hardly anything about his own Oedipal humanness but just what the gods predicted, and his continued misunderstanding subverted his deferred understanding. He interpreted his plight as explainable by the gods' desires that he be an unwitting agent in forbidden activities. In a word, whereas Oedipus's Oedipal strivings remained fully unconscious to him, he was aware of his pre-Oedipal ambitions, though not of course in their archaic depth and their multifarious emergence. Yet his final courageous determination to endure his fate came from his own nature and not from the gods (Knox, 1964, p. 27), and in that way he once more achieved great-ness, though of another kind.

There is nothing of the "politically correct" Creon in Oedipus; though benighted, he persisted with a heroic courage that disregarded adaptation and attributed a prime value to the pursuit of truth at whatever personal cost. He championed an ideal diametrically opposed to Baby Sugg's counsel in Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987, p. 102): “Everything depends on knowing how much ... good is knowing when to stop.” One could state, nevertheless, that Oedipus's ideal ego was mobilized in a pursuit of truth which he carried out with a mixture of both heroic grandeur and his grandiosity. The knowledge that Oedipus finally acquired was not a peaceful knowledge but a tragic knowledge. His fate summons
up the stark truism in the medieval text, Der Ackermann aus Böhmen (von Tepl, 1951), namely, as soon as a man is born, he is old enough to die. Yet his fate also encapsulates E. M. Forster’s insight in Howard’s End (1910) that whereas physical death destroys us, the idea of death may save us. Truly for Oedipus, the idea of death, however crippling and blinding, saved him.

I should also asseverate that Sophocles’ exploitation of Oedipus’s name offers rich material for the psychoanalytic exploration of the ever-impressive comprehensiveness characterizing the imprint of creative genius in a universal masterpiece. Oedipus Rex is unparalleled among world masterpieces in that the signifiers and signifieds marking its original title and therefore the Greek name of its main character, Oidipous (tyrannos was added in the fourth century) not only pervade the plot but encapsulate the plot’s central meanings, thereby indicative of the unconscious and preconscious resonances potentially afforded by the original Greek text. While comprising the play’s principal signifier, the first three (!) letters of the hero’s name refer (1) to the verb oida, meaning to have seen and to know; (2) to the verb oideô, meaning to swell, either physically or mentally (e.g. the swollen foot and grandiosity of the hero). The word pous, besides designating foot, contains the word pou, which, depending on the presence of an accent, may mean perhaps and where. The pervasive sense of uncertainty – perhaps – characterizes the wealth of undecidables that haunt the play, whereas the significance of the word where recapitulates both the dramatically decisive themes of place and movement (Corinth, Thebes, Delphi; the various roads and fields; and specific spaces outside and inside the palace and its rooms). What is more, the movement itself is both physical and mental, e.g. the wandering and even erring of thought, as the Greek word planô can mean (ll. 67, 301, 727, 1029). And then again, the last six letters of the protagonist’s name constitute another word, dipous, two-footed, whose meaning represents the developmental high-point in the Sphinx’s riddle – the mobility of man from infancy to maturity to the lameness of old age.

Finally, one must advance, Sophocles’ play, in its original as well as in translations, puts special demands on us as psychoanalysts, whether readers or spectators. Through his dramatic genius Sophocles creates in us wishes for closure and then he often frustrates those wishes, narcissistic and otherwise. Such non-resolution optimally demands that we steer away from imposing unjustified conclusions on the play and that, in adapting an ascetic stance toward the masterpiece, we maintain that negative capability which Keats famously demanded of poets themselves. Although Oedipus Rex is assuredly “the paradigm tragedy of human blindness” (Kaufmann, 1968, p. 120), the risk always remains that in an excessive, self-deceptive identification, we might be tempted to find that the exceptional heroism of Oedipus is paradigmatic of our own life. Indeed, because of the overwhelming complexity and many-sided appeal of Oedipus Rex, we may now discover, now repress in our rereading of it, trying all the while to keep in mind the various reverberations — pre-Oedipal, Oedipal, and post-Oedipal — of the name Oedipus. Such an awareness, however faltering, adds to our enrichment
as analysts who look to *Oedipus Rex* for both inspiration and confirmation of our tenets.

**NOTES**

1. In my study I cite most often from the classic translation of *Oedipus Rex* by the outstanding Sophoclean scholar, Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Sophocles, 1994a, 1994b). However, I shall give my own translation at times when a greater literal precision is warranted. In order to reduce the intrusive impact in these circumstances, I shall use plain type for the line numbers when I use Lloyd-Jones’ translation whereas I shall italicize the line numbers when I cite my own. Thus, for example, 128 in the above text indicates Lloyd-Jones’ translation whereas 128 would indicate mine.

   It should be mentioned that Freud’s analyses of *Oedipus Rex* never refer to the original text but rather to a German translation, a curious circumstance in light of his having kept a diary in Greek in his youth – I suspect that this fact has been overlooked by investigators because Jones chronologically displaced it into the second volume of his biography (1955, p. 24).

2. It should be said that some classicists, such as Sophocles (2006), dispute the textual connections between the sphinx’s riddle, Oedipus’s injury, and the play’s references to feet.

3. Oedipus owed his name to the rescuing shepherds, and not to his real parents as he later presumed in ignorance (l. 1037). As Sophocles (1991, vol. 3) explains, the true parents would not have named the child they wanted to get rid of, especially since they could not have predicted or hardly wanted the survival of that child with the swollen feet.

4. Bowlby (2007, p. 171) duly calls attention to the literal sense of *hupheirpe* as creeping, yet she does not relate it the foot references in the play.

5. In this greatly suggestive reply Jocasta uses the predicative adjective *schistē* (divides), which with its slang meaning of split or crack can also refer to the vagina (Henderson, 1991, p. 147).

6. Oedipus uses presbus more appropriately for the Corinthian messenger (l. 1103) and the chorus (l. 1111).

7. Lloyd-Jones merely translates the seemingly unnecessary periphasis as “parents.” In the play where so much revolves about the distinction between biological and adoptive parents, the elaborated parental identifications are not at all superfluous. In translating lines 1012, 1017, 1082, 1175 and 1497, Lloyd-Jones again reduces crucially meaningful specificities into “parents,” “mother” and “father.”

8. The linguistic complexity of *Oedipus Rex* readily stands out when we resort to Ovid’s (1916) famous legend of Narcissus as a comparison. A study of Ovid’s Latin text, despite its powerful poetry, reveals no play on the signifiers in Narcissus’s name, even though his interaction with Echo would lead us to expect such in some measure.

**REFERENCES**


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