OEDIPUS IN THE CINEMA

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The single greatest impulse for the prominence of Oedipus came with Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (or *Oedipus Rex*).[1] Oedipus has had an enduring presence on film as well. In 1908, André Calmette directed the first *Oedipe roi* in France. By 1912, three other European versions had appeared. Films about Oedipus either adapt Sophocles' play as period dramas set in antiquity or, more frequently, present updated versions. These modernizations include changes in names, characters, and plot and are often patterned on themes such as blindness and the inscrutability of fate, aspects integral to the original myth and to Sophocles' play. Their preponderance on the screen is largely due to Sigmund Freud's revival of Oedipus. Freud was "the discoverer of sexual inhibition as a mainspring of human behaviour; a gentleman, therefore, to whom Hollywood has every reason to be grateful" (Halliwell 1995.237; on Freud's presence, as it were, at the birth of cinema, cf. Quévrain and Charconnet-Méliès 1984.)

In the early twenty-first century, antiquity has had a veritable renaissance on the cinema screen, to say nothing of television with its mini-series and documentaries. My examination of the story of Oedipus and of related themes illustrates only one area of the pervasive presence of antiquity in the most influential storytelling medium of today. I divide the works to be discussed into four categories and their variations: myth, epic, tragedy, and comedy.

1 Halter 1998 gives an overview of Oedipus on the stage. In general cf. Robert 2003, Edmunds 1981 and 1985, and Edmunds and Dundes 1995.

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1. MYTHS

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Edipo re* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967) is a personal work imbued with its writer-director's autobiography.[2] Pasolini, who himself translated Sophocles' text, shows us an archetypal story and a modern comment on the human condition.[3] His Oedipus is both an archaic figure and an Everyman. The film's prologue is set in Italy in the 1920s, the time of Pasolini's own birth and infancy. Laius and Jocasta are patterned on Pasolini's parents, especially in their clothing and the décor of their home: "The baby in the prologue is I, his father is my father, an infantry officer, and the mother, a schoolmistress, is my mother" (quoted by Schwartz 1995.509). Pasolini also shows us his version of the origin of the Oedipus Complex when Laius, jealous of his son in whom he sees a rival for his wife's affections, pulls baby Oedipus by the ankles. Pasolini has said that his relationship with his father had been distant and problematic and that he was always closer to his mother. (An example is at Schwartz 1995.512.) The goal Pasolini pursued with his film shows his particular understanding of Greek myth and psychoanalysis:

> I had two objectives: first to make a kind of complete metaphoric—and therefore mythicized—autobiography; and second to confront both the problem of psychoanalysis and the problem of the myth. But instead of projecting the myth onto psychoanalysis, I re-projected psychoanalysis on the myth. This was the fundamental operation in *Oedipus*.[4]

With the exposure of Oedipus, Pasolini moves from modern Italy into a prehistoric society in which he sets Oedipus's life until Oedipus has blinded himself. Non-western music and a desert landscape tell us that we are now in a time of myth, not of history or reality. Everything now becomes highly stylized. Pasolini filmed the main part of his story—Oedipus at

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2 On this film, see Schwartz 1995.505–17. Mackinnon 1986.126–46 discusses it under the heading of "meta-tragedy." Cf. also Rossi and Taddei 1992, additionally Riemer 2002.

3 Pasolini on his translation: "I did a special translation, which is very straightforward and faithful to the original" (Stack 1970.126). Pasolini discusses his film at Stack 1970.119–29.

4 Quoted by Schwartz 1995.506. Cf. Stack 1970.126–27.

Thebes—in Morocco to achieve an imaginative recreation of the earliest stage of what was later to become classical civilization. Greek writer-director Michael Cacoyannis observes: "Pasolini did not make Greek tragedy. He made very striking films about the myths on which tragedy is based" (quoted by McDonald and Winkler 2001.81). A good illustration of the archaic and elemental in human nature and society is the scene of Oedipus at the Delphic Oracle. The setting is not the magnificent sanctuary of historic Delphi but a tiny desert oasis. The Pythia is a quasi-divine woman wearing a disconcerting and crudely made double mask over her face and above her head. For inspiration, she stuffs some strange substance into her mouth. When she has told Oedipus his fate, she laughs uproariously and with such great contempt that viewers instantly feel pity for Oedipus. At first, Oedipus does not understand what he is being told, and in his confusion he half-heartedly joins in her laughter. But the real meaning of her words sinks in soon enough.

In keeping with this archaic-mythic perspective, Pasolini's Oedipus is not the tragic hero of Sophocles' play but rather "an impetuous, unthinking, and violent hunter-warrior, product of a preliterate society riddled with superstition, subject to forces beyond his understanding and control" (Schwartz 1995.510). The long sequence at the crossroads in which Oedipus in a fit of rage kills his father and all his father's attendants except one best illustrates Pasolini's conception of Oedipus and the elemental nature of his environment and society. Remarkably, however, Pasolini adheres to Sophocles' conception of the tragic hero, for anger and a short temper characterize the protagonists of Sophoclean drama, as Bernard Knox argues in detail.[5]

In the film's epilogue, Oedipus, now blind, playing a pipe and still wearing his ancient clothes, wanders through a modern city (Bologna) in 1967, then returns to the meadow where we had first seen him as an infant with his mother. This ending is indebted to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, a play about Oedipus' reconciliation with the gods at the end of his life. The film's modern and autobiographical settings, which frame the main story, and the chronology from the 1920s to the 1960s indicate that Pasolini saw himself in Oedipus. Essayist, novelist, dramatist, poet, and filmmaker, Pasolini was perhaps best suited to tackle the story of Oedipus, making it modern and at the same time uncovering its archaic roots. *Edipo*

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5 Knox 1983, especially 21–27, and Knox 1988.26–28.

re effectively illustrates Pasolini's concept of "the cinema of poetry."[6] Like Pasolini himself, Oedipus, too, becomes a poet: "Once Oedipus has blinded himself, he re-enters society by sublimating all his faults. One of the forms of sublimation is poetry. He plays the pipe, which means, metaphorically, he is a poet" (quoted by Stack 1970.129). Despite its strange settings and other divergences from the canonical version of the Oedipus story, Pasolini's *Edipo re* is the most profound rendition of the myth and also of Sophocles' play that the cinema has ever achieved.

Before Pasolini, John Huston had provided an extended version of the discovery of the Oedipus Complex in *Freud* (1962).[7] The film follows Freud in the early stages of his training and career, focusing on his work on hysteria and his discovery of the importance of suppressed memory and infantile sexuality, culminating in his formulation of the seduction theory and the Oedipus Complex. In the film's final sequence, Freud for the first time presents his theory to a hostile and uncomprehending audience in a tumultuous lecture hall:

> It is in the Oedipus Complex, the child's fixation on the parent of the opposite sex, that infantile eroticism reaches its climax. Each human being is confronted with the task of overcoming this complex within himself. If he succeeds, he will be a whole individual; if he fails, he will become a neurotic and himself wander forever, blind and homeless.

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6 On this, cf. Pasolini's 1965 essay "The 'Cinema of Poetry,'" now at Pasolini 1988.167–86.

7 The specific moment in Sophocles' play that Freud most closely echoes is Jocasta's observation to Oedipus that men usually dream of sleeping with their mothers (*OT* 981–82). Gay 1998.100 and 112–13, Rycroft 1995 s.v. "Oedipus Complex," and Boothe 2002 provide largely non-technical explanations of the Oedipus Complex. Ancient interpretations of dreams, about which we have the *Oneirocritica*, a handbook by Artemidorus of Daldi, include aspects that now strike us as Freudian.

The subject of film and psychoanalysis is far too extensive to be treated here. Among many other works see, e.g., the overview by Allen 1999; further Metz 1982 and Kaplan 1990. As representative of a radical feminist approach to film and Oedipus, cf. Mulvey 1989.177–201 ("The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx"), a reflection on *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), an Oedipus film written and directed by her and Peter Wollen. Important also are her articles on spectatorship (cf. Freud's scopophilia): "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)" in Mulvey 1989.14–26 and 29–38.

The last words quoted parallel the fate of Oedipus at the end of his life. The film closes with a brief scene in which Freud visits the grave of his father, with whom he can now be reconciled. It is accompanied by the narrator's summation of what we have seen in the film. Appropriately, he begins with a classical Greek maxim:

> Know thyself. Two thousand years ago, these words were carved on the temple at Delphi: Know thyself. They're the beginning of wisdom. In them lies the single hope of victory over man's oldest enemy: his vanity. This knowledge is now within our grasp. Will we use it? Let us hope.

Classical scholars may quibble that the maxim on the temple of Apollo at Delphi is far older than two thousand years, just as in an early sequence of the film, Professor Charcot is made to refer to the wrong Greek word in his etymological explanation of the term "hysteria": "The word 'hysteria' is from the Greek word *hysteron*, meaning 'womb.'" (The correct word is *hystera*.)

The film's narrator is none other than director Huston, who earlier had even spoken as Freud in the first person singular. Huston's film necessarily condenses, simplifies, and fictionalizes its subject matter, but it is an honorable attempt to convey an appreciation of one of the twentieth-century's most influential and controversial figures. The film itself reflects what it shows us about the fate of its subject: partly from fear of controversy, the studio cut *Freud* by twenty minutes and retitled its sanitized version *Freud: The Secret Passion*. Rather than making the film acceptable to the prudish sector of its potential audiences, this version only distorted Huston's vision.[8] Huston conceived of his Freud as a kind of detective of the mind and of his film as "an intellectual suspense story" (Huston 1994.303). Despite the cuts imposed on it, the film still works well as just such a story, perhaps not least because Huston had been the writer-director of one of the most famous detective films of all time, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

The ghost of Freud, as it were, also influenced one of the most

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8 On the film's genesis, the problems encountered during filming, and the eventual cuts, see Huston 1994.294–305. *Freud* was partly based on an uncredited screenplay by Jean-Paul Sartre (cf. Sartre 1984 and 1985). Benoît Jacquot's *Princess Marie* (2004), a three-hour French television film, probably comes closest to doing justice to the figure of Freud on screen. It is a fictionalized retelling of Freud's relations with Marie Bonaparte.

accomplished film adaptations of Shakespeare, Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948). At London's Old Vic in 1937, Tyrone Guthrie had directed Olivier in a version of Hamlet heavily indebted to Freud via Ernest Jones, whom Guthrie and Olivier consulted. Jones was the author of a paper, later expanded into a short book, on Hamlet and Oedipus, in which he presents Hamlet as a quintessential figure ruled by the Oedipus Complex.[9] As a result, Hamlet's relations with his mother Gertrude and his stepfather Claudius were presented differently from any way they had been before. Freud's influence also extended to the film. Almost forty years after making his film, Olivier paid tribute to Jones and confessed to his belief in the Oedipus Complex.[10]

Huston's Freud was portrayed by Montgomery Clift, who had previously played a neurosurgeon-plus-psychiatrist in *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), an adaptation of Tennessee Williams's play directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and written by Gore Vidal and Williams. Although unavoidably sanitized—the 1992 version directed by Richard Eyre for British television is considerably more explicit—Mankiewicz's film succeeds in creating a steamy Southern atmosphere for its tale about Sebastian Venable, a gay sexual predator who himself becomes prey and is killed in a bizarre manner, about his overprotective and would-be incestuous mother Violet, and about Violet's jealousy of Catharine, Sebastian's frustrated young wife. On several occasions, Violet herself describes to the doctor her peculiar closeness to her son in revealing terms: "I know it sounds hopelessly vain to say, but we were a famous couple. People didn't speak of Sebastian and his mother or Mrs. Venable and her son; no, they said 'Sebastian and Violet,' 'Violet and Sebastian.'" And: "My son and I had a rare and wonderful love and trust between us, a sort of contract, a covenant between us . . . We needed no one but one another."

The gothic-horror scene of Sebastian's death, revealed by Catharine in a flashback, is patterned on another famous Greek myth, one best known through tragedy, if not one by Sophocles. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the vengeful god Dionysus brings about the death by dismemberment (*sparagmos*) of his enemy Pentheus, the king of Thebes, at the hands of Dionysus's frenzied followers, the Maenads or Bacchants. Sebastian Venable meets a similar fate with strongly Euripidean overtones: a *sparagmos* followed by omophagy,

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9 Jones 1976, the most extended version of what had originally been published in *The American Journal of Psychology* in 1910 as "The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery."

10 Cf. Olivier 1986.77–83. On the stage production, see Holden 1988.115–19.

the eating of the victim's raw flesh that was part of the Dionysian ritual. Such Dionysian scenes could take place when the Maenads had gone out into the mountains; in a comparable manner, the boys and young men who turn on Sebastian drive him to a small hill outside their village. In the film, it is hardly necessary for Catharine to tell the doctor or for Mankiewicz to show viewers that the setting of the scene is indeed classical. In Catherine's anguished words, it was "a ruin . . . broken stones . . . like the entrance to a ruined temple, some ancient ruined temple."

Oedipal overtones appear in science fiction film, too. A case in point is *The Matrix* (1999), written and directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski. This is an eclectic thriller loaded with almost innumerable references to popular culture, Eastern and Western religion, and various philosophical systems. Its main characters bear symbolic names like Neo (anagram of One), Morpheus, and Trinity. Neo, discovering that the world he lives in is really an illusion ruled by computers, is chosen to be the one who will save mankind. Not unlike Oedipus, Neo is taken to a woman called the Oracle in order to receive enlightenment. "She's a guide, Neo. She can help you to find the path," Morpheus explains. This Oracle is located in a lower-class section of a modern metropolis. The elderly and motherly woman lives in a humble but cozy apartment, and her kitchen figures prominently in this sequence. ("Not quite what you expected, right?" the Oracle asks Neo.) The Delphic motto "Know Thyself" appears in Latin (*Temet Nosce*) on a sign on the wall, and the Oracle translates it for Neo. As with Oedipus, the Oracle reveals part of the future to Neo ("You're going to have to make a choice") and warns him of what lies ahead ("I hate giving good people bad news"). On the soundtrack, an instrumental version of the popular standard "I'm Beginning to See the Light" provides an ironic comment during part of this sequence. At its beginning, when Neo and Morpheus entered the building, a blind old man, most likely a beggar, could briefly be seen sitting in the hallway, perhaps an allusion to Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*. But this blind man nodded his head when the other two passed by him as if he had recognized them—an apparently paradoxical reminder of the theme of blindness and knowledge that is prominent in Sophocles' Oedipus plays. The film's two sequels—*The Matrix Reloaded* (2001) and *Matrix Revolutions* (2003)—also feature the figure of the Oracle, if less prominently. Still, in the third film, the Latin motto from the first warrants a close-up, and the same song can briefly be heard again on the soundtrack. More important in the third film is an episode in which Neo is blinded but still has a kind of deeper second sight. This parallels Oedipus' fate: while he can see, he

is blind to the truth; when he is blind, he can see, figuratively speaking, because he has acquired insight and self-knowledge.

2. EPICS

The earliest literary form of ancient myth is epic poetry, and our first literary source for the Oedipus myth is Homer's *Odyssey* with a brief account of the myth's essentials (*Od*. 11.271–80). In the cinema, epic treatments of ancient material focus primarily on heroes who exhibit martial virtues, physical prowess, mental agility, or a combination of these qualities. By contrast, the figure of Oedipus does not readily lend itself to such films. Nevertheless, we may encounter Oedipus in rather unusual epic company on the screen. In Pietro Francisci's 1959 film *Ercole e la regina di Lidia (Hercules and the Queen of Lydia* or, more heroically, *Hercules Unchained*), Hercules, here incarnated by American muscleman Steve Reeves, takes part in the war of the Seven against Thebes.[11] He is traveling to Thebes in the company of his wife Iole and Odysseus' son Telemachus. They take shelter in a cave at Colonus in which they find old and blind Oedipus. Oedipus' curse of his sons in Hercules' presence sets the stage for the latter's involvement in the fratricidal conflict that ensues. Hercules' brief encounter with Oedipus, an old friend, is no more than an amusing curiosity, and after this early scene we hear or see no more of Oedipus in the film. There are, to my knowledge, only three other films that incorporate short parts of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. (The 1985 video version of Lee Breuer's stage play *The Gospel at Colonus* is not, strictly speaking, a film.) Pasolini touched upon the play in the epilogue of *Edipo re*. In Jean Cocteau's poetic *Le testament d'Orphée* (*The Testament of Orpheus*, 1959), there is a brief appearance of blind Oedipus led by Antigone. The film also contains a few other thematically important reminiscences of the Oedipus story.[12] Cocteau never turned his chief work about Oedipus, *La machine infernale* (*The Infernal Machine*, 1931), into a film. The third is Amy Greenfield's independent art film *Antigone: Rites of Passion* (1989), in whose opening sequence father and daughter are wandering outcasts.

The theme of Oedipal conflict between father and son occurs with

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11 On this film, cf. the contribution by J. J. Clauss in the present volume. His discussion of the treatment of ancient myth in a film such as Francisci's may be supplemented by Winkler 2005 and 2007. Cf. also the essays collected in Winkler 2006.

12 Cf., e.g., Evans 1977, esp. 129–61 on *The Testament of Orpheus.*

remarkable frequency in the cinema. Such conflict is a prominent feature of American society and literature. Towering father-figures, such as self-made men or empire builders, overshadow and intimidate their sons, who begin to resent or hate them. Father-son antagonism inevitably ensues. John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*, filmed by Elia Kazan in 1955, and Tennessee Williams's drama *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, filmed by Richard Brooks in 1958, are representative instances. They and many other such works are modern variants of tragedy. But a quintessentially American epic genre that also exhibits tragic overtones and is closely related to Greek myth and literature is the Western. Since the Western is not often associated with classical culture, I point out some of the connections here. I have previously addressed this topic in greater detail, so I list only a few pertinent examples.[13]

Echoes of Greek myth by way of intrafamilial and Oedipal conflicts appear in King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948). Anthony Mann's *Winchester 73* (1950) shows the hero's revenge on his brother who had killed their father; Mann's *The Man from Laramie* (1955) extends and deepens this kind of conflict.[14] Borden Chase, one of the most distinguished Western screenwriters, reverses his *Winchester 73* theme in his script for John Sturges' *Backlash* (1956) with the figure of a guilty father instead of a guilty son. More directly Oedipal and Freudian plots occur in Raoul Walsh's *Pursued* (1947), Mann's *The Furies* (1950), Joseph H. Lewis's *The Halliday Brand* (1956), and Phil Karlson's *Gunman's Walk* (1958). Robert Aldrich's *The Last Sunset* (1960), a film that involves the erotic attraction and near-incest between a father and his daughter, neither of whom knows about their blood relationship, was the most daring such film for its time. Edward Dmytryk's *Broken Lance* (1954) and John Sturges' *Last Train from Gun Hill* (1959) both focus on father-son conflicts. The fact that *Broken Lance* is a Western remake of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *House of Strangers* (1949), a modern drama, indicates the versatility and adaptability of the Western as a means to comment on universal aspects of the human condition.

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13 See Winkler 1985 and 1996; on *The Searchers* (1956), John Ford's greatest work, see Winkler 2001a, Winkler 2004, and, parallel to the latter, the contribution by Kirsten Day in this volume. On the Western as an Oedipal film genre, cf. Cawelti 199.136–61, especially 141–43. Walker 2001 examines Oedipal themes in specific Westerns.

14 Basinger 1979.125–26 briefly refers to Greek tragedy in her discussion of this film. Kitses 2004.157 calls it "a loose reworking of *Oedipus Rex*." His mention of "an Oedipal journey basic to the Western" (170) appears in his examination of Mann's films but is applicable to much of the genre.

As is to be expected, examples of sons feeling overshadowed by their fathers are a staple in Westerns. *Red River* and *The Man from Laramie* are well-known examples. In John Sturges' *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957) and Henry Hathaway's *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965), such sons were played by Dennis Hopper, a specialist in portraying neurotic youths. (Rumor has it that, in the latter film, Hopper had problems playing opposite the powerful personality of its older star, John Wayne.) More robust was Chuck Connors playing opposite Burl Ives—the patriarch in Brooks' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*—in William Wyler's epic saga *The Big Country* (1958). Both are tough and savage characters who, at one point, have the following Freudian dialogue when the son, returned home, is told that his father wants to see him. He asks: "You want me, pa?" The father replies: "Before you was born, I did." Although this exchange has a funny ring to it, the film reverts to a tragic mode when the father's rough code of honor forces him to kill his treacherous son.

Screenwriter Philip Yordan has said about the Westerns he wrote: "I have always wanted to re-create a tragic mythology, giving a large role to destiny, solitude, nobility" (quoted by Buscombe 1996.397)—a clear echo of Sophocles. Such echoes may occur in the Western intentionally or unintentionally. Two films directed by Arthur Penn are examples. *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958) is "a Western of uncommon psychological complexity—'Oedipus in the West,' as its director put it" (Kitses 2004.231). In *Little Big Man* (1970), on the other hand, a blind Indian chief who is expecting imminent death includes the following words in his prayer: "Thank you for my vision, and the blindness in which I saw further"—a sentiment that could describe Sophocles' Oedipus. By contrast, *Lone Star* (1996), written and directed by John Sayles, is an Oedipal Western in a twentieth-century setting (cf. Bakewell 2002). The first trilogy of George Lucas's *Star Wars* saga, among other things a kind of futuristic Western epic, reaches its climax not only with an archetypal Oedipal conflict but also—and in good Aristotelian fashion—with a combined recognition (*anagnôrisis*) and change of fortune (*peripeteia*). At the end of *Return of the Jedi* (1980), young hero Luke Skywalker and his nemesis Darth Vader are revealed to be son and father after they have come close to killing each other in a duel.

Modern American perspectives on Oedipus can be retroactively applied when a film is set in antiquity. This is the case with *Alexander the Great* (1956), a historical epic written and directed by Robert Rossen. In his view, Alexander, the young prince of Macedon, had a highly Oedipal relationship with his parents, especially his father, King Philip. Alexander's subsequent victories and his conquest of the Persian Empire derive largely

from the psychological dimensions within his family in his formative years. As Rossen said in an interview, his film was meant to reveal "the various guilts Alexander felt toward his father," emotions that even determined Alexander's pursuit of Darius, King of Persia: "The chase for Darius is tied up with his tremendous feeling that as long as a father-figure is alive in royalty, he has to kill him" (quotations from Casty 1969.34). Rossen's best-known film, the 1949 adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's novel *All the King's Men*, had also featured a young man overshadowed by a powerful father-figure.

In Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), a film much indebted to Rossen's, the titular hero is still part of a highly dysfunctional family: a hostile and overbearing father, blind in one eye, who is about to kill his son at one point, and an exotic and domineering mother who wears revealing dresses and whom Alexander once kisses full on the mouth, if without incestual overtones. In a remarkable sequence, King Philip tells the story of Oedipus to his pre-teen son in front of a large wall painting of Oedipus blinding himself. This and other painted scenes from Greek myth involving violent family or clan relations (Medea, Prometheus) are done in the style of ancient black-figure vase paintings. An adult Alexander will later have occasion to remember these pictures, which appear in flashback. As a reviewer noted, somewhat glibly: "Given parentage of that calibre, the boy . . . was going to conquer nation-states all the way from Athens to India, engraving his name in history, or he was going to wind up running a club called Oedipussy on the wrong end of Mykonos" (Lane 2004.126). But even classical scholars pointed to the Freudian aspects of the historical Alexander. As one of them summarizes it:

> Perhaps inevitably, a Freudian element has crept into the study of Alexander's personality during recent years. Critics now point out that his distaste for sex, the rumours of his homosexual liaisons . . . coupled with his partiality for middle-aged or elderly ladies and the systematic domination of his early years by that formidable matriarch Olympia [Alexander's mother], all suggest the presence in his nature of something approaching an Oedipus complex.[15]

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15 Green 1991.486–87. Green 1991.518 n. 40 lists some of this scholarship, from which he dissents (56). Cf. also Green 1991.40 on the relationship between Alexander and his mother.

An ancient ruler with an Oedipal fixation had appeared on the screen four years before *Alexander* in *Gladiator*; he was, in turn, patterned on the same historical figure in Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), the last film on Roman history from the age of silver-screen epics. In Mann's film, Emperor Commodus, historically the son of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, turns out to be the son of a gladiator instead. This unexpected twist is based on an ancient rumor about Commodus' parentage and his mother's marital infidelities (*SHA* M. Anton. 19.1–7). When he finds out that he is illegitimate, Commodus, dedicated to his dead mother's memory, kills his father. In Scott's film, in which there is no such gladiator, Commodus has a love-hate relationship with Marcus Aurelius and throttles the feeble old man in a murderous embrace when he finds out that Marcus has passed him over for the purple. In both films, Commodus does his utmost to destroy the noble legacy of Marcus Aurelius.

3. TRAGEDIES

Adaptations of Sophocles exhibit a wide variety of approaches on the part of filmmakers. Most of them are costume dramas in ancient surroundings or sets, sometimes even in a theatrical environment, or tell their story in contemporary garb. Among the former, Philip Saville's 1968 *Oedipus the King* takes place in the ruins of an actual Greek theater. The latter approach occurs with *Edipo Alcalde* (*Oedipus Mayor*), written by Gabriel García Márquez and directed by Jorge Triana, a 1996 updating set in modern Colombia. This film reflects the social and political instability of contemporary Latin America. It is in part indebted to the magical realism of Central and South American literature.

Highly intriguing because of its use of masks is Tyrone Guthrie's 1957 *Oedipus Rex*, a film of his stage production with a textual adaptation of Sophocles by William Butler Yeats. The result is a hybrid of theater and film. Its most subtle effect occurs in the scene when Oedipus and Jocasta begin to realize who he really is, for to viewers absorbed in the drama their masks seem to come alive. While the Corinthian messenger is explaining to Oedipus why the king and queen of Corinth are not Oedipus' parents, the truth is already dawning on Jocasta. Guthrie shows us, in medium close-up, a slow horizontal movement of her head. Immediately, he cuts to a frontal close-up of Oedipus, the camera looking up at him. Oedipus lowers his head toward the messenger in front of him to ask, quietly, where the Corinthian had found him. The viewers' impression at this moment is

that Oedipus has been struck a blow from above, as if by fate or the gods. He is changing from the mighty and somewhat arrogant king of Thebes to a figure of woe. The two close-ups express the Aristotelian concepts of *anagnôrisis* and *peripeteia*, here occurring simultaneously for the greatest possible impact, as Aristotle said, to evoke pity and fear (*eleos* and *phobos*) in the spectator (*Poetics* 1452a12–b13). It is the viewer's psychological involvement, not the actors or the director, that makes the masks come alive at these moments.[16]

Practically the entire oeuvre of Alfred Hitchcock is rich in Oedipal themes, from *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Spellbound* (1945, with a Freudian dream sequence designed by Salvador Dalí) to *Rope* (1948), *Rear Window* (1954, on scopophilia), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Frenzy* (1973).[17] Three of Hitchcock's films from his most creative period stand out.

The oracle that Oedipus receives is an illustration of fate's implacability and the apparently undeserved punishment and suffering that may be meted out to unsuspecting humans. This, in turn, reveals to us the precariousness of our existence. The most striking cinematic restatement of this aspect of Oedipus' story, although without any explicit reference to him, occurs in the first half of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). In its most notorious scene, Marion Crane, who is on the run after an impulsive theft of a large sum of money in order to be able to live with her lover, is brutally stabbed to death in the shower. This occurs shortly after she had come to understand that the crime she committed to break free from her stifling life was only the beginning of a worse kind of entrapment, the awareness of her guilt. In conversation with Norman Bates, an apparently nice if shy young man, she comes to realize the futility of her act, accepts her responsibility, and decides to atone by returning the money. "People never run away from anything," Norman observes to Marion, "We're all in our private traps . . . and none of us can ever get out." This will soon prove to be only too true. (Norman's statements concisely summarize much of psychoanalysis.) Hitchcock intends us to feel relief, as Marion herself does, at her decision to return because by now we have come to like her, even to identify with

16 On Guthrie's film and the ancient technique of masked acting in connection with cinema, see Winkler 2002 at 50–55.

17 *Rear Window* and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) are the most profound films on scopophilia as analogues to cinema. Conrad 2000 is a representative recent example of scholarship that discusses the numerous psychological and psychoanalytical aspects of Hitchcock's films.

her emotionally. The shower is, at first, a symbolic act of Marion cleansing herself of her crime. The sudden brutal attack is as incredible to us as it is to her—a tragic *peripeteia* without any apparent *anagnôrisis* or reason. So far, Hitchcock has closely adhered to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action in this modern tragedy: until her murder, we have been with Marion at every moment of the film, even following her into the shower. The shift of the plot's focus onto Norman Bates occurs in the scene of their conversation in his parlor; here, too, another major Oedipal aspect is introduced. Marion and the viewers learn about Norman's strongest emotional attachment: "A boy's best friend," he tells her, "is his mother." Later we find out just how close Norman and his mother really are. By the end, the Oedipal nature of the film has become powerfully evident.

The Birds (1963) is a complex tale of love and family relations in the guise of an apocalyptic ecological thriller. The murderous attacks by large flocks of previously harmless birds both symbolize and comment on the protagonists' emotional turmoils and inner conflicts, which the threat to their survival posed by the birds externalizes and untangles. A widowed mother is so strongly opposed to any woman in whom her son gets seriously interested that viewers readily suspect a suppressed incestuous motive. But the film turns out to have far greater depth than Hitchcock could have achieved with a facile Oedipal subtext. The true theme of *The Birds* is that of loneliness and abandonment. A conversation about the mother's way of treating her son's girlfriends, conducted by a former flame and the woman he is currently interested in, conveys the underlying issues to the viewer; the dialogue clearly rejects an audience's popular understanding of psychoanalysis:

ANNIE: "Her attitude nearly drove me crazy . . ."
MELANIE: "What had you done [to displease her]?"
ANNIE: "Nothing. I simply existed. So, what's the answer? Jealous woman, right? Clinging, possessive mother? Wrong! With all due respect to Oedipus, I don't think that was the case . . . Lydia liked me. That's the strange part. Now that I'm no longer a threat, we're very good friends."
MELANIE: "And why did she object to you?"
ANNIE: "'Cause she was afraid."
MELANIE: "Afraid you'd take Mitch?"

ANNIE: "Afraid I'd *give* Mitch . . . Afraid of any woman who would give Mitch the one thing Lydia can't give him—love."

MELANIE: "That adds up to a jealous, possessive woman."

ANNIE: "No, I don't think so. You see, she's not afraid of losing Mitch. She's only afraid of being abandoned."

Common danger later enables mother and son to conquer their unhealthy relationship and allows the mother for the first time to accept her son's new girlfriend as a future daughter-in-law.[18]

Nevertheless, *The Birds* contains a strong parallel to Sophocles' Oedipus. Just as there seems to be no reason why Oedipus receives the oracle he gets, so there is no reason for the birds' attacks. Their behavior is incomprehensible to us and remains unexplained. Robin Wood, Hitchcock's most perceptive critic, points to the shower scene in *Psycho* as a precedent that is analogous in terms of plot. His observations are convincing, but we are justified in broadening their cultural context and also in thinking of the question of cause and effect in connection with the oracle given to Oedipus:

> Consider the totally arbitrary and pointless nature of the shower murder in *Psycho* from the point of view of Marion and her development at that point. From her point of view—which is after all that from which we have been watching the film—the murder has no dramatic, symbolic, or thematic justification . . . Marion is saved [through her decision to return the money]. It is partly because the murder is—again, from her point of view—entirely arbitrary and unpredictable that its effect is so shattering. We are made to feel at that moment the precariousness, the utter unreasonableness, of life . . . the murder of Marion Crane is in no way and to no extent either provoked or deserved.

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18 The chapter on *The Birds* at Wood 2002.152–72 brings out the film's themes and qualities; see, especially, 160 on the conversation scene excerpted here. Burton 2001 gives a classicist's perspective on the film.

The last sentence quoted is wholly applicable to Oedipus and his oracle. The sudden reversal of Oedipus' fate is equal to what Wood calls the "disturbing sense of precariousness, of unpredictability" in Marion's death. We may compare the parallel nature of Greek tragedy and much of Greek thought (cf. Nussbaum 2001). Wood then turns to *The Birds* in even stronger Sophoclean terms, if without realizing that he is doing so:

> And this seems to me the function of the birds: they are a concrete embodiment of the arbitrary and unpredictable, of whatever makes human life and human relationships precarious, a reminder of fragility and instability that cannot be ignored or evaded and, beyond that, of the possibility that life is meaningless and absurd.[19]

As Wood and others have noted, the birds' attack on Melanie in the attic is a close parallel to the shower attack on Marion Crane not only thematically but also stylistically, especially in the rapid editing of both sequences. Again, Wood's analysis brings out the underlying Sophoclean parallel (Wood 2002.171): "The appeal [of the extreme violence that we watch] is not sadistic: there is too strong a sense of participation: we know it is *our* agony, *our* anguish that we are witnessing, for the birds are waiting for all of us." This points us back to the nature of Sophocles' Oedipus as an Everyman. In real life, we are just as unlikely to kill our fathers and marry our mothers as we are to be killed in the shower by a psychopath or almost killed by a flock of birds. But we respond emotionally to the fate of all these characters and see ourselves in them.

In Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), parallels to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* may not be immediately apparent, but they become evident in the assessment reached by Wood in a recent re-evaluation of the film.[20] While he does not refer to Sophocles at all but only considers *Marnie* from cinematic and psychoanalytic perspectives, his conclusion applies equally to the ancient play and the modern film (Wood 2002.405):

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19 The three quotations are from Wood 2002.153–54.

20 Wood 2002.388–405. This chapter, entitled "You Freud, Me Hitchcock: *Marnie* Revisited," complements the earlier one at 173–97.

> Freud claimed (correctly, in my opinion) that our entire basic character is formed during the first five years of our lives, the period to which we have least access via memory. It is a truly terrifying perception, which is perhaps why *Marnie* is Hitchcock's most deeply disturbing film. The child Marnie is of course somewhat more than five years old, but the trauma (with its oblivion) places her in much the same situation as the rest of us, the adult Marnie formed by events of which she has no clear or coherent memory. Marnie is on one level a "special case" (not all of us have beaten sailors' heads in with pokers), yet she can also be read as an extreme case of ourselves, living our lives ("A blind man battering blind men") with only the very vaguest notion of how we, as human beings, have been formed, vaguely aware that our behavior is ultimately determined (hard as we struggle toward full consciousness) by events, relationships, circumstances which we may never be able to drag out from the confusion of our early memories.

Both Oedipus and Marnie experienced a trauma in early childhood or very shortly after birth—the age difference is insignificant—that remains unremembered or dormant until a third party provides the necessary information about the event. To both, obtaining this knowledge is emotionally devastating but also liberating: they now know who they really are. As Wood rightly says, Marnie is a unique case and a kind of Everywoman at the same time. Previously he had made this point more explicitly (Wood 2002.182): "If Marnie is extreme, she represents an extreme of something relevant to us all: the grip of the past on the present. If few of us are Marnies, there is something of Marnie in all of us . . . anyone, given the circumstances, could be Marnie." Oedipus, too, is such an extreme case who can still represent all of mankind: anyone, given the circumstances, could be Oedipus. If this were not so, it is doubtful whether the power and appeal of Sophocles' play could have remained undiminished over almost two and a half millennia, with or without Freud. Wood's reference to blindness in the last but one passage given above, a quotation from William Butler Yeats' poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," is therefore more apposite than he realized.

It is no surprise, then, if scholars link Hitchcock himself to the

myth of Oedipus. In a chapter entitled "A Visit to the Sphinx," Peter Conrad discusses a publicity photograph of Hitchcock and the Egyptian Sphinx and comments:

> Hitchcock had a perfect right to position himself competitively beside the Sphinx. She represents the terrors of our condition, compounded in the puzzles she set men to solve . . . Freud, following Oedipus, set out to tame the Sphinx . . . As interpreted by Freud, the legend offered therapeutic hope: Oedipus is the analyst, vanquishing the monstrous irrationality of illness. Hitchcock, however, identified with the incubus, not with the clever hero who outwitted her. His own riddles, concealed in his films, are harder to solve, and the answers offer no reprieve for traumatized human beings.
>
> He does dare us to try our luck, like Oedipus . . . The films play hide-and-seek with us, scattering false clues . . . [Hitchcock] did the enciphering or encoding, making up the mysteries, and derived his own pleasure from baffling the brains of would-be interpreters.[21]

Conrad adduces a revealing moment in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* that points to the parallel situations of a fictional character and its creator and, simultaneously, of a psychoanalyst and a patient. The heroine,

> persuaded of the salesman's guilt [of murdering his wife], adopts the voice of the analyst or the critic, like Oedipus outfacing the Sphinx. "Tell me everything you saw," she says to [the hero], adding after a brief pause, "and what you think it means." She knows that there are layered secrets awaiting retrieval beneath the surface, as in the sealed tombs of that Egyptian valley . . . Hitchcock, whenever he felt in danger of being found out, said that critics dug too deep: disdaining profundity, the films—he claimed—were just entertainments. Thus, like the Sphinx, he guarded his secret for a while longer. (Conrad 2000.232)

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21 Conrad 2000.231–32 and 234.

Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), based on Patricia Highsmith's psychological thriller, deals with a variation on the parent-child relationship and its attendant neuroses. A pampered and affluent young man wants to arrange the murder of his father in order to have his mother all to himself. The version of the film shown in Britain, slightly longer than the American release, made it as obvious as was then possible that he is a homosexual.

A structural analogy to Sophocles' play, the one tragedy that Aristotle praises most highly in his *Poetics* as a perfect drama, can be found in what many consider to be the greatest film of all time, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). In both works, the life and fate of the central character is reconstructed in the course of the story, when either Oedipus or the reporter searching for the meaning of Charles Foster Kane's famous last word ("Rosebud") receive information from well-informed people. On the stage, we have speeches; in the film, their visual equivalent are flashbacks. As has been observed about Sophocles' play: "Because of this way of telling its story, the play is also about narrative" (Segal 2001.61). The same is true for Welles' film. Accordingly, American screenwriter and film teacher Michael Tierno calls *Citizen Kane* "perfect by Aristotle's standards" and concludes: "*Citizen Kane* is a 'perfect' American tragedy, just as *Oedipus Rex* is a 'perfect' Greek one."[22]

A dramatic form closely related to tragedy is melodrama. One of the most famous filmmakers in this genre was Douglas Sirk (originally, Hans Detlev Sierck). He directed high-class melodramas in the 1930s in Germany and in the 1950s in Hollywood. The latter films used to be dismissed as ultra-romantic women's films or "weepies," but there is more going on under their glossy surface than meets the eye. In *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), Sirk uses a stereotypical romance to make bitter comments on the complacency, hypocrisy, and emotional coldness of apparently good upper-middle-class society. In his own words: "America then was feeling safe and sure of herself, a society primly sheltering its comfortable achievements and institutions" (quoted by Halliday 1972.98).

In the fictional New England town of Stoningham, whose very name reveals the character of most of its inhabitants, an attractive, lonely widow with a teenage son and daughter falls in love with a younger man

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22 Tierno 2002.107–08. There is some hyperbole and flippancy in this handbook on screenwriting, but Tierno's approach to Aristotle and film is sound.

who is her social inferior. The pressures of bourgeois prejudice that her fellow townspeople bring to bear on her almost make her give up her one remaining chance at happiness. Early in the film, she prepares to go out with an older man who wants to marry her but whom she sees as no more than a friend and companion. For the occasion, she has put on a red dress. (Elegant color compositions play a major thematic part in this film.) The dress precipitates the following conversation among her and her children, here slightly abbreviated:

SON:	"Holy cats, mother!"
MOTHER:	"Do you like it?"
SON:	"I guess it's all right, but isn't it—cut kinda low?"
DAUGHTER:	"A typical Oedipus reaction."
MOTHER:	"A what?"
DAUGHTER:	"A son subconsciously resents his mother being attracted to other men. We call it an Oedipus Complex. Happens all the time."

This leaves the mother speechless. But the brief exchange foreshadows what is to come. When their mother has become serious about her new man, her children come to resent her out of selfish concern for their own status in society. What had at first appeared to be model children turn out to be no more than egotists. Here and in other films, most famously *Imitation of Life* (1958), Sirk used melodrama as a vehicle for social criticism and brought his own experiences into his perspectives of American society. In Germany, Sirk had become well acquainted with political and racial prejudices and hypocrisy, since his political views were on the left and his wife was Jewish. They emigrated from Germany because of the Nazis. It is telling that the first major scene of *All That Heaven Allows* in which darker tones surface should be an Oedipal one. In interviews conducted in 1970, Sirk, who had had years of theatrical experience in Germany as a young man and had staged *Oedipus Rex* during the 1928–29 season, again and again refers to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides when discussing his work.[23] So it is appropriate when feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey observes: "While

23 See Halliday 1972.84, 93–96, 119, and 132. Sirk had learned Latin and Greek in Germany.

the Western and the gangster film celebrate the ups and downs endured by men of action, the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, like the tragedies of Euripides, probing the pent-up emotion, bitterness and disillusion well known to women, act as a corrective."[24]

4. COMEDIES

In recent years, psychoanalysis in general and the Oedipus Complex in particular have come under increasing attack. Parody and satire, however, have accompanied the myth of Oedipus and psychoanalysis for much longer. In the cinema, Woody Allen has delivered a large body of work centered on the persona of a neurotic urban intellectual, invariably played by himself. His best-known film incorporating *Oedipus Rex* is *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), a love story with a twist reminiscent of the entanglements of classical myth and drama. A chorus and characters from Sophocles' play appear in pseudo-ancient garb but in an authentic setting, the ruins of the Greek theater at Taormina on Sicily, summarize the story of Oedipus and his family, and introduce his modern descendant (of sorts), played by Allen, and his erotic predicaments. The verbal humor in the opening choral ode derives from the high-flowing rhetoric of the kind we associate with serious drama, as when the chorus speaks of Oedipus' "lust for expiation" and calls him a "lost victim of bewildered desire," that is then undercut by bathetic punch lines ("Children are serious stuff") and anachronisms. This is a regular pattern in Allen's comedy. Not surprisingly, the ancient Greeks even become time travelers and directly take part in the film's plot, as when the chorus leader suddenly appears in New York City as advisor to the protagonist. After all, comment on the action is the chorus' main function, as everybody knows.

Deconstructing Harry (1997), Allen's satire of psychoanalysis and the literature "industry," contains a brief reference to Sophocles when author Harry tells Cookie, a prostitute: "A great writer named Sophocles said that it was probably best not to be born at all" (cf. Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1224–25). Her reply: "Harry, it's a little too late for that." More recently, in *Hollywood Ending* (2002), Allen plays a down-on-his-luck film director who develops a case of hysterical blindness when he begins shooting the big film that is meant to give him the chance to return to his earlier form and fame.

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24 "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," in Mulvey 1989.39–44; quotation at 39.

The Oedipal archetype of the mother who won't let her adult son grow up or become independent is a staple of Jewish humor and duly recurs in Allen's work. A case in point is the short film he contributed to the 1989 anthology *New York Stories*. Here an overbearing mother magically ascends to the sky, from which her gigantic face, hovering above the city, haunts her son and wreaks havoc on his life. The first gag in this film is its title, a pun on *Oedipus Rex*: "Oedipus Wrecks."

A year earlier, a variation on the same subject had been filmed by popular German comic Loriot (i.e., Viktor von Bülow) in his feature length *Ödipussi*. A meek and well-mannered middle-aged man, played by the writer-director, is hopelessly under the thumb of his domineering mother, who runs his life and interferes in his first-ever attempt at meeting a woman—a psychotherapist, no less. As is appropriate for the Oedipal theme, the mother utterly infantilizes her son. Her term of endearment for him is "Pussi."[25] The repressed son's only escape from the tight grip of his mother is a dream. Late one night, he happens to overturn the photo of his mother on his nightstand. He goes to sleep feeling guilty, only to meet his mother in a kitschy slow-motion dream sequence. Impulsively, he pulls her hat down over her ears and eyes. This rebellious action shocks him into waking up. Devoted son that he is, he immediately calls her on the telephone to reassure himself that she is all right. But the dream provides Pussi with a—for him—daring inspiration for his real-life revolt against his mother at the end of the film. It is unobtrusively symbolic. Pussi and his would-be girlfriend are back-seat passengers in a car driven by the mother through a peaceful country setting. The situation perfectly summarizes everything: life appears to be calm; the mother drives the car, drives her son and his entire life, and drives him crazy to boot. What to do? Again impulsively, Pussi reaches for his mother's hat and pulls it down. The car now veers off the road and loses its way in the fields. This is the end, but it is not a happy ending. Nor is it a solution to Pussi's Oedipal dilemma. Loriot's satire ends on a note of whimsy and regret.

Two films are noteworthy for their sophisticated comic incorporation of Greek drama into their modern settings. Vincente Minnelli's musical *The Band Wagon* (1953) uses Sophocles to demonstrate the culture clash

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25 The name Oedipus lends itself to easy punning, as in Frank Tuttle's musical comedy *Roman Scandals* (1933): Eddie, a young American played by the film's star, singer-comedian Eddie Cantor, imagines himself back in the Roman Empire. He now needs a classical name and becomes "Eddipus." The independent American short *An Enigma* (2001), directed by Dennis Neal Vaughn, features a character called Ed Rex.

between the Old World and the New, replete with a send-up of European pretentiousness. A famous but egomaniacal British actor, producer, and director—played by a famous British actor, producer, and director—is contrasted with down-to-earth American straightforwardness. The difference is personified in the two actors, Jack Buchanan and Fred Astaire. An American cliché has it that European culture is highbrow and boring; at least on the American stage, it can be no match for the excitement stirred up by the brassy and jazzy Broadway show whose genesis is the film's story. The first moment in which the film makes fun of high European culture occurs when we see the billboard announcing a theater's current program:

Jeffrey Cordova
Presents
Oedipus
Rex

Adapted From The
Original Greek
by
Jeffrey Cordova

Starring
Jeffrey
Cordova

Directed By
Jeffrey Cordova

The first three instances of Cordova's name appear in progressively larger type, virtually shouting out his egomania. Sophocles is nowhere mentioned.

Pote ti kyriaki (*Never On Sunday*, 1960) is one of the most famous films made in Greece, written and directed by expatriate American Jules Dassin, who also acts in it. Its heroine is Ilia, a ravishingly beautiful Piraeus prostitute with the proverbial heart of gold. Melina Mercouri, the future Mrs. Dassin, plays her as an incarnation of the carefree, life-affirming, and independent spirit of eternal Greece. Ilia loves Greek tragedy but with a twist. She does not acknowledge the tragic circumstances of the fate of Medea or Oedipus and simply gives their stories a happy ending by having everybody survive or be reconciled. Ilia comments on *Oedipus Rex*: "One thing is very nice: always Oedipus is talking about his mother. I never saw

such a good son who loves so much his mother." She then tells the plot in Greek and concludes (my quotation is from the English subtitles): "But let's forget all those cruel things. Poor Oedipus, he suffered, they hurt his eyes. But in the end, he finds his family, and they all go to the seashore." One of Ilia's friends comments: "They *always* go to the seashore."

Very different from Minnelli's and Dassin's elegant comedies is writer-director Mel Brooks' *History of the World, Part I* (1981). Its very title is a gag: there was never meant to be a Part II. Sophistication does not interest Brooks. His film is an irreverent romp through various periods of history. In its longest segment, "The Roman Empire," Brooks pokes fun at all and sundry clichés about antiquity and parodies the Hollywood tradition of Roman Empire epics. Naturally, a famous character like Oedipus must not be missing from these shenanigans. But Oedipus in Rome instead of Greece? No problem for Brooks, because all's fair in his brand of comedy. So his two protagonists, stand-up philosopher Comicus, played by Brooks himself, and hip black slave Josephus, encounter a blind beggar in the streets of Rome. We know that he is blind because we twice see him collide with obstacles in his path; we know that this is Oedipus because he wears a sign around his neck that exhorts passers-by to GIVE TO OEDIPVS. But this Oedipus is a cool dude: he is black and wears sunglasses—we might call him an ancient "hipster." The payoff to the brief scene, which lasts no more than twelve seconds, is a raunchy verbal joke. Oedipus sees (!) Josephus approaching from behind and greets him with a "Hey, Josephus!" Josephus greets him back: "Hey, motherfucker!" The joke hinges on the fact that today this last word is ubiquitous in certain circles and has lost all of its literal meaning—but not here.[26] And is this blind but seeing Oedipus no more than a con artist? In *Mighty Aphrodite*, Woody Allen includes a parallel moment when the blind prophet Tiresias says he saw that the protagonist's wife had a lover: "You had to be blind not to see it."

In Robert Zemeckis' comedy *Back to the Future* (1985), a time-traveling teenager meets his parents-to-be. They are still high-schoolers and are not even dating each other. Our hero now has to make sure that they begin a romance leading to marriage so that, in due course, he can be born and become who he is. Romantic complications ensue when his teenage mother,

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26 A variation on this joke, if in a radically different (and not funny) context, had appeared in Paul Humfress and Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976), a British film with Latin dialogue and English subtitles. The command *Age, Oedipus!* is rendered as "Come here, motherfucker!"

who cannot yet know—or even understand—his real identity, develops a crush on her future son. Amazed, he exclaims: "My mom has the hots for me!"

Jocasta a hot tomato? Sophocles would never have thought so, but in today's computer-driven age nothing is impossible. Jason Wishnow's *Oedipus* (2004) shows us just such a Jocasta—literally. Wishnow's film is a parody of ancient-epic films, a clever travesty, as its tagline announces: THE STORY OF OEDIPUS, IN 8 MINUTES, PERFORMED BY VEGETABLES. You read that correctly: Oedipus is rather a sad potato, Laius a mighty broccoli, Tiresias, the dour prophet of doom, a grim garlic, and Jocasta—but I already told you. She and Oedipus even have a heavy-breathing sex scene. Small wonder that its young writer-director has dedicated this "Mama's Boy Production" to his mother.

I close with a film that was never made and that most likely could never have been made in Hollywood. American writer-director Billy Wilder, a native of Austria, had once unsuccessfully attempted to interview Freud when Wilder was a young reporter in Vienna. Decades later, Wilder told a German journalist the outline of a comedy he had thought of making. A son and his mother fall passionately in love. They decide to disregard all social prejudices and live together as husband and wife. After many happy years, the mother reveals to her son a terrible truth: "I have to confess something. All these years I lied to you and cheated you, for I'm not really your mother." Hearing this, the young man collapses in tears and shoots himself dead.[27]

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27 I paraphrase the German text of Karasek 2002.146. Wilder recounts meeting Freud in Crowe 2001.140–41 and Chandler 2002.37–38; cf. Karasek 2002.47. Wilder made fun of psychoanalysts in, e.g., *The Emperor Waltz* (1948) and *The Front Page* (1973); cf. Crowe 2001.277 and Karasek 2002.300. In *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), a high-society lady repeatedly but mistakenly suspects her lapdog of misbehaving indoors and finally threatens: "First thing tomorrow morning you're going to the analyst."

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