

## ORACLE, EDICT, AND CURSE IN *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

APOLLO's oracle gives specific instructions concerning the treatment of the murderer of Laius. Oedipus issues an edict of excommunication and binds himself under a curse. I wish to examine the relationship between these three pronouncements as they occur initially and as they are used throughout the play. The basis of what I have to say is tentative in that it consists in a particular interpretation of Oedipus' address, 216 ff., and in the assumption that Sophocles employed a distinction between an edict, that is a secular command of the king as governing authority, and a curse which, once pronounced, is felt to operate independently. However, both the interpretation and the assumption are far from arbitrary, and if they are acceptable the resulting analysis reveals what might be called Sophocles' creative use of past episodes. The terms of the oracle give way to an edict of excommunication, and this in turn, becomes the content of a curse which initially had a different content. This process is not linear and irreversible, but varies in accordance with the requirements of each succeeding scene. In the main the development provides a transition of mood from the relatively matter-of-fact terms of the oracle to the unimagined horror of Oedipus' situation as finally revealed. The modification of material from earlier episodes which this involves is not explicable by reference to the memories and experiences of the characters. Rather elements such as oracle, edict, and curse should be regarded each as a variable nucleus of thought and feeling, not as a fixed and definite datum existing unchanged throughout the play. The form which each has on the first appearance need be no more essential than any form under which it appears later. Each has its function in its immediate context and beyond this is also operative in the wider scheme of the whole. And because the variations have primarily a dramatic purpose, they are unreliable evidence for a Sophoclean view of moral responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

The oracle at Delphi has declared that the reason why Thebes is suffering from a plague is that it is polluted because Laius' death remains unavenged, and that the land will be purged by a banishment or repaying bloodshed by bloodshed (100-1). The alternative penalty laid down by the oracle is considerably modified by Oedipus when he addresses the chorus as representative Theban citizens, although he refers to Apollo as his authority. The nature and extent of this modification is the first point I wish to discuss, but before this can be done the particular interpretation of Oedipus' address on which I rely must be explained. The whole speech, 216 ff., is full of problems. For present purposes the two main features are, first, a clear distinction between an edict of excommunication and a curse, and second, a tendency to blur the distinction between culprit and informant.

What is the purpose of the command to the people that all should drive the culprit from the community? For let it be noted that 236 ff. are a command, not a curse, cf. ἀπαυδῶ, and a command which *all* citizens are to obey. The

<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Mr. R. J. Dickinson of Durham University for criticism and comments which have improved this essay.

command is a public repudiation of the murderer expressed in the strongest terms and as such is perhaps meant for the ears of the gods as well as of the citizens. But it must also be meant for the ears of the murderer. For although the repudiation is to take effect at once, it must not cancel so soon the option of a milder penalty which Oedipus has just proposed as an inducement to confession, 227–9. The culprit who confesses will be exiled, but, it is expressly promised, he will suffer no further unpleasantness or harm. These lines match the offer of a reward for information about an alien<sup>1</sup> murderer, 230–2, and the two proposals together are an attempt to make the consequences attractive to the informant. By contrast the sentence passed in the event of no information being forthcoming is extremely horrific, and it is natural to feel in it a strong element of threat, an attempt to frighten the culprit into confession and make him choose the milder alternative. The situation has not radically changed and Oedipus does not take the silence which meets his first offer, cf. 233, as proof that no information can be expected any longer, for he himself and, more optimistically, the chorus, are at 294–6 still thinking of an informant coming forward through fear of Oedipus' curse. Excommunication is therefore, in part at least, a penalty which the culprit can expect if he does not confess but is otherwise detected.<sup>2</sup>

This aspect of the command, essential if the scene is consistently realized by Sophocles, contributes to the context without which the ensuing curse cannot be understood. A curse may regularly reinforce a civil penalty,<sup>3</sup> but here Oedipus is using it as an alternative to excommunication, in the event of the culprit remaining unidentified, when of course the punishment must be left to supernatural forces. This interpretation of 246–8 relies on the possibility that a future context can be supplied for the perfect *λέληθεν*, allowing it to refer both to the situation as it is at the time of speaking and as it will continue to be should no evidence come to light. The required context is given in the preceding command of excommunication, for the murderer must be able to avoid

<sup>1</sup> Since Oedipus has learned that the murderers are somewhere 'in this land', 107–10, we should understand the distinction between Theban and alien as one between citizen and resident alien, not as a reference to the robbers of 122–5, who, being bribed from Thebes, may be presumed foreign. Oedipus thinks himself to be a resident alien, and thus his words have overtones of Sophoclean irony.

<sup>2</sup> This interpretation clears away, I believe, a puzzle in these lines, namely how the people can be ordered to excommunicate someone whose identity is unknown. This has led to the suggestion that Oedipus is ordering the *culprit* to avoid the community rather than vice versa, cf. G. Tanner, *C.R.* xvi (1966), 259–61, criticized by A. S. Henry, *C.R.* xix (1969), 125–6, or to explanation by reference to alleged Athenian legal practice, cf. G. Greifenhagen, *Hermes* xciv (1966), 147–76. Greifenhagen sees numerous legal parallels in Oedipus' speech, all highly dubious, I think, including *μήνους*. But this

was simply a procedure for obtaining information and did not include judgement and penalty passed in advance on persons unknown, cf. J. Lipsius, *Das Attische Recht* (Leipzig, 1905), i. 208–11, and for a less formal view, references in R. Bonner and G. Smith, *Administration of Justice from Homer to Aristotle* (Chicago, 1938), vol. ii. The Prytaneum court does provide a sort of parallel, but is manifestly irrelevant: since Oedipus is just starting his inquiry, it would be premature to conclude that there is no known individual to be accused, which is the situation in which the Prytaneum practice was employed.

<sup>3</sup> Several are given and discussed by E. Ziebarth, *Hermes* xxx (1895), 57–70, e.g. p. 67 from Pordoselena, 319–317 B.C.: αἱ δὲ κέ τις ἢ εἴπη ἢ ἄρχων ἐσαγάγη ἢ ἐπιμήνιος εἰσενίκη ἄκυρα τε ἔστω καὶ ὀφελλέτω ἕκαστος στάτης τριακοσίοις ἴροις τῷ Ἀσκληπίῳ καὶ ἐπάρατος ἔστω καὶ ἀτιμος καὶ γένος εἰς τὸν πάντα χρόνον.

this if he confesses at once, and in the immediately following additional curse :

and further I pray, if with my knowledge he should share my hearth and home, that I may suffer the same fate with which I just now cursed them.

249-51

This guarantee of Oedipus' own commitment has a future reference and since the combination of verb and plural pronoun 'cursed them' naturally picks up 246-8, which has similar features, rather than the *command* of excommunication which is aimed at a *single* individual, it is to be expected that both curses refer to the one contingency, i.e. the non-discovery of the murderer's identity. If he is not discovered the people are assured that it will not be because the king is protecting him. Leaving a loop-hole for immediate confession, the curse of 246-8 is designed to come into operation in some future eventuality and, given the emphatic *λέληθεν*, this can hardly be anything but the failure to discover the murderer's identity.<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the speech and the standard<sup>2</sup> curse upon those who disobey and blessing upon those who obey with which it concludes, need not detain us here. The points which I have stressed suggest that, in structure and detail, Oedipus' address is a declaration of a practical policy in a particular situation, with different prescriptions for different eventualities and with the immediate purpose of getting information either by inducement or threat. In this scheme edict and curse are sharply differentiated, the edict threatening the culprit with excommunication should he be discovered, the curse appealing to the supernatural should he not be discovered, while neither cancels the inducement to confession.

For the second relevant feature of the address, a blurring of the identity of the culprit and informant, it will be sufficient to point briefly to the ambiguities of the text. First, at 224-9, Oedipus bids anyone who knows who killed Laius to tell all, but immediately offers encouragement in case this involves self-incrimination. Second, at 233-5, Oedipus envisages the case of someone refusing to speak in order to protect either a friend or himself. Third, the prominent placing of 'this man', *τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον*, in the immediately following 236 ff. naturally refers to the witness just mentioned, who may be silent not on his own behalf but on someone else's, and leads one to feel that excommunication may be the penalty for failure to give evidence. And finally, an irony prepared for by this indecisiveness of reference, Oedipus, the culprit who will reveal his own guilt, is made to curse himself should he knowingly let the

<sup>1</sup> The regular use of the perfect to express a future idea, cf. *O.T.* 1166 *ὅλωλας εἰ σε ταῦτ' ἐρήσομαι πάλιν*, is not parallel to *λέληθεν* here. A future tense would be standard in such sentences as this, cf. Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik*, ii. 187. However, this is not decisive. Neither future indicative (or equivalent) nor future-perfect would be suitable, for the murderer is already unknown at the time of speaking. If the context secures a future viewpoint, as I think it does, that is sufficient.

<sup>2</sup> For a curse supporting an oath, cf. Dittenberger, *S.I.G.*<sup>2</sup> 461, lines 53 ff.: *Ζεῦ καὶ Γᾶ καὶ Ἄλκι καὶ Παρθένε καὶ θεοὶ Ὀλύμπιοι,*

*ἐμμένοντι μέμ μοι εὖ εἴη ἐν τούτοις καὶ αὐτῶν καὶ γένει καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς, μὴ ἐμμένοντι δὲ κακῶς καὶ αὐτῶν καὶ γένει καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς, καὶ μήτε γὰρ μοι μήτε θάλασσα καρπὸν φέροι μήτε γυναῖκες* (quoted by R. Vallois, *B.C.H.* xxxviii [1914], 264). For a curse to cement an alliance, cf. Plutarch, *Arist.* 10, *ἔτι δὲ ἀρὰς θέσθαι τοὺς ἱερεῖς ἔγραφεν εἰ τις ἐπι- κηρυκεύσαιο Μήδοις ἢ τὴν συμμαχίαν ἀπολλέοι τῶν Ἑλλήνων*. For one occurring in a treaty between Athens and a state in the Delian League, cf. R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1969), 123.

murderer share his home, 249–51. These ambiguities—and an acquaintance with scholarly discussions of the first and third points shows conclusively how deep-seated the ambiguities are<sup>1</sup>—I would explain as a calculated imprecision of reference as between murderer and possible informant which is of profound significance later in the play and which is established in the present passage in such a way as to meet the requirements of the situation while accommodating those further references out of which Sophoclean irony arises.

So much for the particular interpretation of Oedipus' address. It should be noted that a different treatment is appointed for the murderer of Laius from that given in the oracle. In place of the alternative, 'exile or death', Oedipus envisages simple exile for self-denunciation and total excommunication otherwise. He has taken one of the choices and moulded it into an instrument of practical politics, though of course Sophocles, in accordance with his usual practice, does not dramatize Oedipus' thought-processes in making the selection. The substitution should be regarded as deliberate. While natural within its immediate context, the new version Oedipus offers is close to the fate which will be his at the end of the play. Thus he helps to bring about his own doom, much as Creon, by substituting entombment for stoning as a penalty for Antigone, unwittingly engineers the particular form in which ruin will strike himself, *Antigone* 772 ff. Yet we do not *feel* that Oedipus is departing in any marked way from Apollo's terms. It is done so subtly that the oracle's alternative simply becomes the king's edict. Sophocles has produced a substitute treatment for the murderer which has a quite different emotional tone. And it does not stop at the edict—for it is to be insisted on that the immediate context requires the king to *command* his people and to prescribe a penalty and that what we have from 224–45 is properly described as an edict, not as a curse. For this edict is reinforced, for a particular eventuality suited to the context, by a curse in vague, general terms, should the murderer remain undetected and the king conceal him. This is the only use of the curse here, and it does not cover the excommunication laid down in the edict. Yet later in the play Oedipus will remember that he *cursed* himself to excommunication, 817–20. I would suggest that what Sophocles is doing in the present passage is generating a more powerful nucleus of feeling in the studied transition from oracle to edict to curse. The requirements of the immediate context are meticulously observed but, such is the content of the edict and so closely associated with it is the curse, he can later at will amalgamate the content of excommunication with the form of a curse and use this for the requirements of later contexts without arousing the suspicion of an audience. These contexts will be considered as we come to them; what we have in this passage is the preparation of the material.

Oracle, edict, curse: Sophocles has furnished himself with a trio of rough equivalents with very different emotional atmosphere. The edict is both a sentence and a means of procuring information. This latter is the use made of it at 292 ff., a passage in which the ambiguity between witness and murderer is significant and where, for the first time, curse and edict appear to coalesce.

<sup>1</sup> On the first point cf. B. R. Rees, *C.R.* lxxii (1958), 201–4 and A. S. Henry, loc. cit.; on the third see J. T. Sheppard's note ad loc. ('Those critics are mistaken who . . .'). But the view so majestically dismissed by Sheppard is shared by B. W.

Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven, 1957), pp. 81–2, 'pronouncing a sentence of excommunication from all normal civic and domestic functions on any Theban who withholds information'.

*Chorus.* It was said that Laius was killed by travellers.

*Oedipus.* I too heard that, but the man who saw it is not to be seen.

*Chorus.* But if there is any sense of fear in him, he will not hold out after hearing such curses as you uttered.

*Oedipus.* A man who is not frightened to act is not frightened by words.

292-6

One oddity here is that while the Chorus refer to an eyewitness, as does Oedipus at first, τὸν ἰδόντα, 293, in the last line Oedipus appears to be thinking of the murderer himself. The emendation τὸν δρῶντα makes the passage consistent but at the expense of its suitability in the context. The Chorus have just mentioned an old, dim rumour about Laius' death. Surely it would be far too abrupt for Oedipus to rejoin that he has heard the rumour but the murderer is not to be seen. What is wanted is a remark about the source of the rumour, the eyewitness of whom Oedipus was told, 119 ff. Thus τὸν ἰδόντα looks right, and we are left with the illogicality. Oedipus is made to assume the identity of witness and assassin. Since the shift is psychologically plausible in view of Oedipus' performance elsewhere, cf. 124 ff., one purpose may be to expose the currents running deep in the king's mind, but the main purpose, recalling the similar assimilation of informant and assassin already established, is surely to lay bare in the peculiarly Sophoclean manner the frame of fact ever-present in the delusion of the stage-figures. What is the function of the curse here? As far as a witness is concerned, the curse of 269 ff. would serve. But Oedipus' introduction of the murderer himself and the fact that he and the Chorus are thinking of the efficacy of the curse as a means of producing information, makes it likely that it is the threat of excommunication which is employed here. Yet, as originally formulated, the threat was a command, not a curse. Here then is the first instance of Sophocles' getting returns from the ambiguities of reference (murderer and possessor of knowledge) and of mode of pronouncement (edict and curse) invested in the threat of excommunication in its first presentation. The threat is now a curse. Oedipus and the Chorus both at first talk of an informant; then Oedipus, his thoughts running on ahead, talks of the killer. But Sophocles talks of the hidden fact, that the two are identical. It will be Oedipus who reveals his own stain.

This instrumental use of the curse to procure information is not found later, for the play has passed on to new situations in which the other aspect, that of a penalty for the murder of Laius, is relevant. But before it is next mentioned Oedipus clashes with Teiresias and Creon, and in these two scenes, 300-677, a considerable portion of the whole play, the curse has no part at all, although the oracle and excommunication as an edict occur.

Oedipus greets the seer with a synopsis of the situation, including the oracle's instructions, 308-9. By contrast with his treatment of the matter when addressing his subjects, his return to the initial situation of the prologue and his request for help underline the respectful attitude he shows to the seer. But when Teiresias is provoked, it is the edict he turns against the king himself:

I bid you stand by the proclamation you made and from this day forth address neither these people nor me, for you are the unholy polluter of this land.

350-3

Naturally, it is excommunication as a penalty, not as a threat, that is in question

here. The edict is used, not the curse, partly at least because of the social standing of the two men. Teiresias' words are a challenge by one equal to another, not a solemn pronouncement of the hidden truth. And here we find an indication of the structural use Sophocles makes of his trio of penalties. Teiresias has a deep and terrible truth about Oedipus' condition to reveal; beyond his declaration that Oedipus is the murderer, there are the hints of parricide and incest, 457 ff. As far as the death of Laius is concerned, Sophocles could have had Teiresias taunt the king with the terms of the oracle and bid him prepare for exile or death. But such treatment is pale and trivial as a response to the horrors suggested at the end of the scene, while excommunication, although still only a shadow of the final condition, matches it in a way the terms of the oracle do not. Thus the edict, rather than the curse, suits the immediate situation of a conflict between equals and avoids anticipating the effect of later scenes—Oedipus is not yet faced with the knowledge that he might have cursed himself. And excommunication is used, rather than the oracle's terms, to mark the stage reached in the process towards the discovery of the unimagined truth. At this stage Sophocles wants the already established transition from oracle to edict, but he does not want and does not use the further transition from edict to curse.

For the confrontation with Creon the theme starts again from Apollo's oracle. The intervening ode directs attention away from Teiresias' final words back on to the oracle and the possibility that Oedipus might be the murderer:

Who is the man who, so the oracular rock of Delphi said, has bloodied his hands with an unspeakable crime? . . . A message flashed from snowy Parnassus that all should track out the unknown man.<sup>1</sup> 463-76

And at the climax of the scene Oedipus has come to believe that he will be exiled or killed. Since these are the alternatives offered by the oracle, in effect Oedipus unknowingly states the truth about himself in terms of the oracle—he is the man for whom these penalties are intended. But there is no question of Oedipus *believing* in his own guilt at this point; he is convinced that he is the innocent victim of a plot by Creon and Teiresias, who have somehow manipulated the oracle and are now trying to have him declared the culprit. Hence the scene is concerned only with the oracle; edict and curse are not required here. The very absence of excommunication, following the Teiresias scene, is a measure of Oedipus' ignorance of what is really at stake. And when excommunication returns, as it does in the following scene with Jocasta, it comes with all the more force as a curse.

A couple of points are worth noting in the Creon scene. There is a curious, indirect emphasis achieved by having Oedipus threaten Creon with a variant of the treatment which he believes Creon has planned for him:

*Creon.* What do you want? To banish me from the land?  
*Oedipus.* Not at all, I want your death, not your banishment. 622-3

<sup>1</sup> A slight but nevertheless real example of creative use of previous episodes. It was Oedipus who instituted the search in which all join, and thus features of the oracle and

the speech containing the edict have been combined. These lines go distinctly further in creating the impression that Oedipus is carrying out Apollo's command.

But the relationship is restated differently a few lines later :

*Creon.* Sister, your husband Oedipus proposes to wrong me terribly with one of two alternatives, either to banish me from my homeland or to seize and kill me.

*Oedipus.* I agree. 639-42

The contradiction between 'Not at all' and 'I agree', explicable though it is by reference to the anger in which both men speak, pushes the two penalties into prominence. There is also imprecision in Oedipus' statement that he will suffer exile or death as a result of letting Creon go free. Both statements are emphatic :

Be sure that, in seeking this, you seek my death or exile from this land. 658-9

And again :

Let him go then, even if I must unavoidably be killed or forcibly banished in dishonour from this land. 669-70

Oedipus believes that his death or exile will follow. In an uncanny way he is right without knowing it, for the oracle that prescribed these alternatives was aimed at him, though this aim was not, as he supposes, directed by Creon. Instead of saying 'Creon will now bring about my exile or death' he expresses his belief in a way that is charged with unintended meaning through his failure to spell out the obvious.

The ensuing transition from oracle to curse of excommunication is prompted by some details of Jocasta's account of Laius' death. Oedipus is struck with a fear lest Teiresias be right, and he expresses his feeling with a reference not to the oracle's penalties but to his own excommunication, and not to his edict but to his curse :

Alas, I think I have bound myself under a terrible curse unknowingly. 744-5

And, in detail :

If this stranger had any of Laius' blood in him, who is more wretched than I . . . whom no citizen or alien may take into his home, whom none may speak to but must thrust me from his house? And it was I and nobody else who laid this curse on myself. 813-20

The fate Oedipus here contemplates is worse, or certainly is given a more horrific colouring, than that laid down in the oracle. It is all the more impressive because he has brought it upon himself, an aspect which the oracle alone could not supply but the edict could. Further, though a curse could be lifted by the person who imposed it, its operation is a matter of magic or of supernatural direction, so that it appears remorseless and, compared with an edict, irrevocable. We have only to learn that the curse Oedipus has laid upon himself is a symbol of the hideous underlying truth and the process will be complete.

It should be noted that Sophocles is now concentrating on the predicament of Oedipus, not on that of the king of an oppressed city, and accordingly Oedipus thinks only of his own appalling situation, not on that of his plague-

bedevilled people. The curse has an important contribution to make here, for, were the terms of the oracle uppermost, the movement of the action might be diverted. Oedipus is in fact within an ace of securing the release of Thebes from the plague. Were he to reflect on these lines he might see some compensation, however wan, for his personal disaster. So he is not allowed the prospect of fulfilling the terms of the oracle. Nothing must weaken the gathering intensity of his downfall and the oracle is entirely superseded by the curse. Nor again in the play is this aspect of the matter touched upon. It is deliberately hidden.<sup>1</sup>

Although the prospect facing Oedipus is thus intensified, nevertheless it is little enough when compared with the final truth, for the excommunication of an accursed murderer is but a pale forecast of the abhorrence felt for the incestuous parricide. Again therefore the curse mediates between the relatively matter-of-fact treatment of a murderer and the unspeakable condition declared in the outcome. As at the end of the Creon scene, Oedipus, believing that he would be subject to exile or death, unconsciously hits the truth, but truth only in a low key compared with the curse of excommunication that comes in the Jocasta scene, so here he again hits the truth, but for all the heightened horror of his fear, this truth will be utterly transcended in the sequel. This is a structural function of the transition from oracle to curse, reflecting the transition from oracle to edict and associated (but different) curse seen in the prologue and first episode, and the transition from oracle to edict in the Teiresias scene. Three times a similar movement is made, and each time it concludes at a higher level of feeling than that previously reached—a thematic rhythm and formal dynamic of Sophoclean art which combines realistic unfolding of events in series with a graduated intensification of feeling.

If this account is in the main correct, and the curse functions essentially in providing a transition to a mood of deeper horror and in foreshadowing with ironical inadequacy the final revelation, there will not be much more use to be made of it in the remainder of the play. Even more will this be the case with oracle and edict. In fact all three do occur, but in ways which show them distinctly modified to meet the requirements of the context of a cataclysm in which they are quite swamped.

A messenger describes how Oedipus blinded himself and is demanding to be brought outside

intending to cast himself out of the land and remain no longer bringing on  
his house the curse he uttered. 1290-1

Presumably the curse is here one of excommunication, but no specific detail is mentioned. It is in fact said that the curse was self-imposed, *ὡς ἑπάσατο*. So it must be allowed that the curse figures in Oedipus' response to his calamity, but

<sup>1</sup> J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (O.U.P., 1962), pp. 203-4 brings into prominence the possibilities that Sophocles conceals. He observes, however, that 'it is true that Oedipus does not console himself, when disaster strikes him down, with the thought that his ruin is inextricably bound up with his city's deliverance from the killing plague', p. 207. Surely, if the deliverance were relevant, the Chorus or *someone* in

the play must mention it. But it is not mentioned at all after 665. As Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 3rd edn. (Methuen, 1961), p. 179, very pertinently asks: 'The stranger who once saved Thebes by his own intelligence must now, though Theban born, save it by leaving the city for ever. How did Sophocles come to miss such a dramatic ending?' For a similar view to that of Jones, cf. Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 189, on 1449 ff.



it is by no means a central factor as it was in the scene with Jocasta. A comparison with 819–20 is sufficient to show that no stress is given in the present passage to emphasize as significant the fact that he imposed the curse upon himself, for indeed no more is required than a motivation for Oedipus' re-entry. If the curse is to count as an important element in Oedipus' catastrophe we must look for some other reference after he enters. However, we look in vain, for it is not once mentioned. Oedipus does indeed explain his self-blinding partly in terms of his edict of excommunication. The sight of his parents in Hades would be intolerable, nor could he look with pleasure on his children

or on the town and towers and sacred images of the gods, of which I, the noblest born of any in Thebes, miserably deprived myself, when I myself ordered that everyone should reject the impious, the man whom the gods have shown unholy and of Laius' family. 1378–83

The detail is a version of the penalty of excommunication, but this now is back in its original form as an edict, αὐτὸς ἐννέπων, not as a curse. Certainly Oedipus is conscious that his own pronouncement has contributed something to his plight, and this notion could be conveyed by reference either to edict or to curse. But rather than feeling that either of them really makes his situation worse than it would have been without them, surely one feels that this is the unimagined and dreadful way they have been implemented. The use of the edict here resembles that made by Teiresias, 350 ff., when he challenged, almost taunted, the king to stand by his own order. So here Oedipus is harsh with himself and his bitterness is reinforced by his recognition of his birth, κάλλιστ' ἀνὴρ εἰς ἐν γε ταῖς Θήβαις τραφεῖς, 1380. Psychologically plausible and impressive this is, but it is far from a statement that he blinded himself because of his curse.<sup>1</sup>

The edict here is perhaps more important for what it helps to hide rather than what it reveals. Consider the conclusion of the speech in which Oedipus explains his fears to Jocasta:

If a man judged that it was a savage deity that inflicted this on me, would he not speak rightly? Never, never, O you holy, awful gods, may I see that day. May I vanish from mankind before I see such a stain of disaster come upon me. 828–33

There is more than a hint here of an Oedipus who might be seen as a pawn in a game played by malicious gods. The victim is passive, morally innocent, the

<sup>1</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 208–9, gives this passage wider reference than its place in Oedipus' speech warrants. Drawing on it and 1290–1, he says that Oedipus 'also refers his final expulsion, when it occurs, to this initial curse'. But Oedipus is not talking of his final expulsion. Jones maintains: 'so far from the curse being absorbed within the parricide and incest (when they are established), it continues to the end, undiminished.' It is my contention that the phrasing and placing of these passages shows them to be of far less significance than the same themes had earlier. C. M. Bowra,

*Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1944), has, like Jones, many fine things to say of the curse, but he too goes well beyond the evidence in claiming that 'Oedipus blinds himself because of his curse' (p. 184). In order to support his contention that Oedipus would have suffered less heavily if he had not cursed himself, Bowra places much stress on the life of a wandering outcast that awaits Oedipus, though he observes that 'the play closes without emphatically proclaiming it' (p. 174). But this virtually amounts to proof that Sophocles has other things in mind.

power that oppresses him is savage. Perhaps it is not so much because Sophocles' moral concepts valued intention less than performance, or because he was absolute in his uncritical acceptance of traditional religion, that the end of this play is left untouched by protestations that Oedipus' fate is undeserved. Such a possible treatment, which we associate more readily with Euripides, is rigorously excluded. Supernatural causation is accepted, but is matched by Oedipus' own initiative:

It was Apollo, friends, Apollo who brought to pass these terrible sufferings of mine. But it was no one's hand but my own that struck the blow. For why should I see when no sight would give pleasure? 1329-35

He no longer feels that his debasement has come from outside ('seeing such a stain of disaster come upon me'), but regards it as a disclosure of his own unholy nature:

After disclosing that such a stain was mine, how could I look on them without averting my eyes? 1384-5

Another theme is concluded here; informant and culprit are one and the same. The last thing Sophocles wants his audience to think about in this play is a problem of evil. Even in his calamity Oedipus' total helplessness in face of the gods is balanced by an aggressiveness and a capacity to determine his own condition that mark him as of the same mould as other Sophoclean heroes, Antigone, Aias, Electra, and Philoctetes. In this typical vision the edict of excommunication has a contribution to make by helping to keep Oedipus' own decisiveness before the mind and by filling any gap left by the avoidance of the issue of moral responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

The play would not be complete without some indication of how the final situation stands with regard to the oracle. Oedipus, as we saw, recognized Apollo behind his sufferings, 1329 ff. He begs Creon to treat him as the oracle commanded—but with a significant and unacknowledged difference:

*Oedipus.* Cast me out of this land at once, somewhere where no one may see me or speak to me.

*Creon.* You may be sure that I would have done so, if I had not wanted first to find out exactly from the god what should be done.

*Oedipus.* But his command was declared in full, to destroy me, the killer of my father, the impious.

*Creon.* It was so said. Nevertheless in our predicament it is better to find out exactly what should be done. 1436-43

<sup>1</sup> That Oedipus is polluted, whether or not he had criminal intentions, is of course fundamental. But the matter does not end there. Sophocles certainly could have altered the tone of the catastrophe by playing down Oedipus' initiative and emphasizing the cruelty of the gods. A bitter reaction to divine dispensation is found at *Trach.* 1266 ff. The notion of moral innocence introduced at *O.C.* 265 ff. may be absent from the earlier *O.T.* because Sophocles

deliberately excluded it, not because he did not think it relevant (or had not even thought of it yet). Certainly Euripides managed to combine pollution and vindictive deities in *H.F.*: cf. Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 38: 'Sophocles has chosen to present the terrible actions of Oedipus not as determined but only as predicted, and he has made no reference to the relation between the predicted destiny and the divine will.'

'It was so said', οὕτως ἐλέχθη ταῦθ'. Apollo's oracle, like Oedipus' edict, is remembered as something other than it was, and the new version is reinforced by Creon's agreement. The change is not just in the substitution of parricide, but that the consequences are shelved. The alternative 'exile or death' is merged into one, simple 'destroy', though Oedipus has in mind exposure as the means, and thus can contemplate either fate as one:

Let this city of my fathers not be condemned to have me live on dwelling in it, but let me dwell in the mountains, there on the mountain called my Cithaeron, which mother and father when they were alive fixed as my grave, so that I may in fact be killed by those who put me out to die. Yet I am sure of this: neither disease nor anything else can destroy me . . . 1449-56

Further, the modification of the oracle's content combined with Creon's decision to consult Apollo again and the concentration on the individual fate of Oedipus diverts our attention from the circumstances and purposes of the original utterance. There is now no plague in Thebes—none in the sense that our awareness of its existence is part of our experience of the final scene. So successfully has Sophocles controlled our experience that Oedipus' departure from Thebes can be mentioned without entailing the city's release from the plague. The purpose, as I have suggested, is to leave the individual tragedy untouched by consolation, and the method is the creative use of past events. Just as edict becomes curse, so Sophocles can change the detail of the oracle at will. And as we would not conclude from Creon's 'It was so said' that the Greeks did not listen to their oracles with much care, likewise Oedipus' acceptance that he has cursed himself should not be combined with his failure to protest his moral innocence as evidence of contemporary concepts of responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Features such as oracle, edict of excommunication, and curse doubtless reflect the views and values of Sophocles' own day, but their use within the play may always be determined by dramatic purposes. An undoubted degree of Sophoclean manipulation is to be accepted when exits and entries are motivated by almost opposite considerations, as Oedipus is said to be approaching

intending to . . . remain no longer bringing on his house the curse he uttered. 1290-1

and as Creon, ordering his removal, says:

Take him inside. Only kindred can see and hear kindred evils without impiety. 1429-31

Both attitudes are correct, but they do not clash, and no conclusion about contemporary modes of thought can be drawn from their coexistence. They belong almost entirely to the mechanics of the play, and here too, to an important degree, although it reaches far deeper, belongs the sequence of oracle, edict, and curse.

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<sup>1</sup> As is done, I think, by Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 209. 'It is plain from Oedipus' manner of shifting between "I was fated" and "I have doomed myself" that he regards both representations as adequate to his case. . . . They

are nothing more than modes of statement lying at hand, probably not even conceived as alternatives.' I would like to add that I find Jones's book more stimulating than any other on Greek Tragedy.