

# PROPHECY AND PERCEPTION IN THE *OEDIPUS REX*\*

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## I

More than twenty years have passed since the publication of Hans Diller's essay on divine and human knowledge in Sophocles.<sup>1</sup> Since then, few writers have attempted to build on the foundation which Diller established. In this article we propose to examine the role of knowledge and perception in the *Oedipus Rex*. First, the language of the play will be analyzed with a view to determining what the characters know, and how they know it; second, the events of the play will be examined in the light of the characters' perception of them.<sup>2</sup>

In discussions of Oedipus' relative culpability, much importance has been attached to the hero's unavoidable ignorance.<sup>3</sup> But the circumstance which has the greatest effect on his destiny is not simply that he

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<sup>1</sup> *Göttliches und menschliches Wissen bei Sophokles*, Kieler Universitätsreden I (Kiel 1950) 18–22.

<sup>2</sup> Epistemological questions were at the root of many of the issues under debate in the second half of the fifth century. For an outline of the rationalist and empiricist positions (the former represented by Parmenides and Plato, the latter by Anaxagoras and Democritus), see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* III (Cambridge 1969) 3–13; for a brilliant treatment of Socratic-Platonic rationalism in particular, see M. J. O'Brien's *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill 1967); the philosophical implications of the OT are explored in T. Gould, "The Innocence of Oedipus: The Philosophers on Oedipus the King," *Arion* 4 (1965) 363–86, 582–611, 5 (1966) 478–525.

<sup>3</sup> For the view which equates Oedipus' *hamartia* with factual ignorance, see M. Ostwald, "Aristotle on *hamartia* and Sophocles' OT," *Festschrift Kapp* (Hamburg 1950) 93–108, J. M. Bremer, *Hamartia* (Amsterdam 1969) 158, T. Gould (above, note 2) 368 and 479, D. W. Lucas, *The Greek Tragic Poets* (New York 1959) 150, R. D. Dawe, "Some Reflections on Ate and Hamartia," *HSCP* 72 (1967) 118, R. M. Torrance, "Sophocles: Some Bearings," *HSCP* 69 (1964) 326.

is ignorant of the facts but that, like the people whom Socrates met on the streets, he often acts as if he knew what he does not.<sup>4</sup> For example, his plan to steer clear of Corinth was logical enough provided that Polybus and Merope were really his parents. But this is exactly what Oedipus did not know and when he failed to take this uncertainty into account, his very "wisdom" became his undoing. The parricide occurred not simply because Oedipus did not know where he stood but because he insisted on acting as if he did know. This point has been made elsewhere. Let us begin by briefly considering the Tiresias scene, which pits Oedipus' knowledge against that of the divinely inspired seer. In dramatizing the conflict between intuition and logic, Sophocles here reveals the *foundations* of Oedipus' flaw (i.e., his tendency to trust in bogus knowledge).

After putting his question to Tiresias, Oedipus sees that the prophet is reluctant to speak, but does not perceive the fact which explains this reluctance (i.e., that Oedipus himself is the murderer). He therefore concludes that Tiresias is keeping silent in order to protect himself (345-49):

Since I am so angered I will pass over none of those things which I perceive (*ksyniēmi*). For know that you seem to me (*isthi dokôn emoi*) to have joined in sowing this deed (i.e., the murder of Laius), and to have carried it out . . . etc.

Oedipus promises to reveal what he "perceives," but his next statement is prefaced with the words: "it seems to me . . .". The juxtaposition of these verbs is arresting. Oedipus cannot really "perceive" the guilt of Tiresias, which is non-existent. Rather, he is experiencing as perception (*ksyniēmi*) what is admittedly a deduction from appearances (*dokôn*).<sup>5</sup> Of course, there is nothing wrong with the hero's *reasoning*: if the situation were as Oedipus sees it, Tiresias' balkiness would indeed be cause for suspicion. Unfortunately, the hero's *perspective* is so

<sup>4</sup> So L. Aylen, *Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* (London 1964) 91-94; also D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle, Poetics* (Oxford 1961) 304. For a discussion of the Appearance/Reality theme, see K. Reinhardt, *Sophokles* (Frankfurt 1947<sup>3</sup>) 104-44.

<sup>5</sup> Later Oedipus implicitly admits that *ksynesis* is what his charges *lack* (see 620: *ei de ksyniēs mēden? . . . ktl.*). The Chorus refer (681) to the charges as an "unproved seeming of words" (*dokēsis agnōs logôn*: note that *agnoia* is said by Aristotle to be the opposite of *ksynesis*, *de An.* 410B3).

limited that any deductions he might draw from the situation, however logical in themselves, can only lead him further from the truth.<sup>6</sup>

The process repeats itself after Tiresias has been goaded into identifying Oedipus as the killer. Oedipus sees that the prophet has accused him, but he does not perceive the facts which make the accusation true. Accordingly, he surmises that it is all a plot to drive him from the throne (401-02):

I think (*dokeis emoi*) that you and the framer of this plot (i.e., Creon) will come to grief for carrying on this purge.

One of the striking features of this statement is that its underlying premise (that a plot exists) is treated as self-evident even though it is nothing but a surmise. One need not look far to locate the source of this confusion. In the very next scene, Oedipus will claim that Creon is "manifestly" (*emphanôs*) his destroyer and the evident (*enargês*) thief of his kingdom (534-35). The hero substitutes reasoning for perception. Having drawn an intelligent deduction from what he sees, he is quick to treat this deduction as a manifest fact. Once more, it is not the hero's *logic* that is at fault: if Oedipus were really innocent, nothing could explain Tiresias' behavior except the hero's supposition that he is out to "frame" the king. The difficulty of course lies in Oedipus' perspective. Believing that the situation contains what he sees in it (and nothing more), he not only fails to recognize the truth when it is placed before his eyes (i.e., his guilt), but ends up "seeing" what is not there (e.g., the "treason" of Creon).<sup>7</sup>

The active side of this syndrome is seen when Oedipus "proves" that Tiresias (389) "has eyes only for gain, but is blind in *technê*" (i.e., that he is a false prophet and must be acting on instructions from Creon). The whole "proof" is based on an appeal to visible evidence (or the lack of it): "Tell me," the hero asks, "where are you an unerring seer?" (390: *pou sy mantis ei saphês?*). The Sphinx's riddle required *manteia*, but Tiresias "gave no manifest proof of possessing" such a

<sup>6</sup> Note that Tiresias diagnoses the difficulty correctly: "You are all . . . without awareness" (*pantes . . . ou phroneit* 328-29), ". . . You blame my temper but you do not see (*ou kateides*) the one to which you are wedded" (337-38).

<sup>7</sup> Some have maintained that Oedipus' suspicions arise from anger, e.g., M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 202-04, also A. Lesky, *Die Tragische Dichtung der Hellenen* (Göttingen 1972<sup>3</sup>) 221.

gift (395: *out' . . . prouphanês echôn . . .*). If anyone demonstrated insight in the hour of crisis, it was Oedipus himself, not Tiresias (396–98). Here, the visible facts tend to obscure Tiresias' wisdom, enabling the hero to "prove" that he himself is more keen-sighted than his accuser. But what Oedipus' "proof" really demonstrates is that *gnomê* is worse than useless without a comprehensive vision of the facts. Intelligence may have enabled Oedipus to solve the riddle, but it did not reveal that the "prize" was marriage to his mother. Likewise, logic "proves" that Tiresias is a false prophet, but the truth of his statements is concealed from Oedipus *precisely because they reflect prophetic insight*.<sup>8</sup>

In response to Oedipus "proof," Tiresias delineates the hero's guilt in explicit detail and prophesies that this guilt will be brought to light before the end of the present day (413–28). Analysis of the vocabulary and syntax of Tiresias' statements reveals that the primary emphasis falls, not on the enormity of Oedipus' misdeeds, but on his failure to see them:<sup>9</sup>

Your eyes are open but you do not see (*sy kai dedorkas k'ou blepeis*) in what evil you stand . . . etc. (413–14)

It goes unnoticed (*lelêthas*) that you are the enemy of your own kin . . . etc. (415–16)

What place shall not be a haven for your cries when you perceive (*kataisthaneî*) the nature of the marriage . . . etc. (421–22)

You do not perceive (*ouk epaisthaneî*) a host of other evils . . . etc. (424)

The accuracy of these charges is confirmed by the hero's reaction, or rather by his failure to react. Tiresias' explicit revelations fail to bring about a recognition (and were not intended to do so: see 341 and 377, with Brunck's emendation), because the truth inevitably

<sup>8</sup> Oedipus' rejection of Tiresias cannot be termed *hybris*. Appearances conspire to make the prophet's charges seem adventitious. So J. C. Kamerbeek, "Prophecy and Tragedy," *Mnemosyne* 18 (1965) 29–40, C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles, A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge 1951) 131, Gould (above, note 2) 504, Bremer (above, note 3) 158. Note also the important analysis of this scene in T. v. Wilamowitz, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin 1917) 76–78.

<sup>9</sup> For the much discussed pattern of sight imagery, see W. C. Helmbold, "The Paradox of the 'Oedipus'," *AJP* 72 (1951) 295–97, H. Musurillo, "Sunken Imagery in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*," *AJP* 78 (1957) 42–43, J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London 1962) 212.

seems absurd to Oedipus in his present blindness. Hence, the hero is asked to weigh the apparent absurdity of the seer's riddles against the truth *as it is destined to be revealed later*. The outcome is defined in advance as a materialization of truths which now seem illogical, absurd:

That man whom you are seeking . . . is here among us. Nominally an alien in our midst, he will be revealed (*phanêsetai*) as a native Theban . . . etc. (449-53)

It will be revealed (*phanêsetai*) that he is related to his children as brother and father . . . etc. (457-58)

During this scene, the Chorus have been exposed to two different kinds of knowledge, the prophet's intuition and Oedipus' deductive *gnomê*. As we learn in the first *stasimon*, they perceive that the conflict between prophecy and "judgement" is irreconcilable, but they are as yet unable to decide which is superior. Meanwhile, however, the Chorus themselves exhibit both types of knowledge, thereby demonstrating (to the spectators) the strength of one and the weakness of the other.

A much neglected feature of this ode is the unconscious opposition between its two halves. In the first, the Chorus implicitly ratify Tiresias' *manteia* by predicting that Apollo will track down the unseen fugitive (Oedipus). In the second, they refuse to countenance Tiresias' identification of Oedipus as the culprit. The dividing line between these segments is marked by a noticeable shift in the Chorus' mental processes. When in the opening stanzas the Chorus evoke an image of Apollo, the infallible hunter, their vision is summoned forth by *intuition*, being a projection of their faith in the god. But in the second half, the Chorus' thinking becomes mired in an earth-bound empiricism. Taking their cue from Oedipus, they measure Tiresias' *manteia* by the index of their physical perceptions. Their instinct is to trust the seer (483-88), but they cannot, in this case, reconcile their faith with the testimony of their senses. In their own words, they lack a "touchstone" (*basanôî* 494) on which to rely in taking arms against the fame of Oedipus to avenge an "invisible" slaying (*adêlôn thanatôn*). They see no sign of any quarrel between the son of Polybus and the son of Labdakos (this may be what they mean by a "touchstone"). On the

other hand, facts within the Chorus' limited perspective seem to prove concretely that Oedipus is the city's *benefactor* (507-11): "... manifestly (*phanera*) did the winged beast come upon him and he was seen against the touchstone (*ôphthê basanôî*) to be skilled and dear to the city." Therefore, the Chorus will not join in condemning Oedipus (503-06) until they "see the word made good" (*prin idoim' orthon epos*).

The Chorus' reflections illustrate the vulnerability of human logic, which must draw deductions from ambiguous facts. Here, however, the Chorus are refuted by their own intuitions. In the final stanza they declare that Oedipus will not be convicted in their eyes until they have some "touchstone," or until they "see the word made good;" but they have already divined that Apollo will infallibly discover the criminal (469-75). The combined effect of these statements is to make it seem likely that a "touchstone" will indeed appear. The Chorus refuse to countenance Oedipus' guilt because the circumstances of Laius' death are, to their eyes, "invisible" (*adêlôn*); but they have already predicted that the oracle will unerringly ferret out the "invisible" (*adêlon*) culprit. The Chorus unconsciously predict the overthrow of their own ignorance, pinpointing the precise area (Oedipus' "quarrel" with the Labdakids) in which the first revelations will appear.

## II

In the second episode, the interaction of the characters leads spontaneously to the revelation that Oedipus (probably) killed Laius. But are we to suppose that the characters alone are responsible? It is Jocasta's idea to recount the story of Laius' death at the crossroads; and it is Oedipus himself who recognizes in her account a description of his own attack on the "stranger." What seems providential is the way these elements suddenly combine to produce, *para prosdokian*, a partial revelation of those facts which Tiresias swore would be revealed. The disproportion between the characters' intentions and the result of their efforts, combined with the fact that this outcome has just been predicted in Apollo's name, creates the impression that the human actors are "jinxed."<sup>10</sup> Tiresias divined that the hero's guilt

<sup>10</sup> On the role of the gods, see Whitman (above, note 8) 142: "The gods as personages are not in the plays." But cf. A. Cameron, *The Identity of Oedipus the King* (New York

would be soon "brought to light" (*phanêsetai* 453 and 457). The Chorus subsequently affirmed that Apollo's oracle, having once "shone forth" (*phaneisa*), would infallibly discover the unseen culprit (471-76). And in the lines which immediately precede the *anagnôrisis* (724-25), Jocasta unwittingly foretells the coming disaster, attributing it to a divine source: "whatever the god (Apollo) desires, he will easily bring to light (*phanei*) himself."<sup>11</sup> When, in the next moments, a portion of Oedipus' guilt emerges from obscurity, one is prepared to perceive this as a spontaneous miracle, the materialization of Apollo's design through the medium of human actions.

One notes that at the moment when Jocasta makes her fatal reference to the crossroads, she is engaged in "proving" empirically that the prophet can be safely ignored. She begins her proof by claiming (710) that she will "reveal" (*phanô*) through "signs" (*sêmeia*) that prophecies are untrustworthy. The "sign," of course, is Laius' death at the hands of robbers, which appears to refute the oracle. But instead of proving the unreliability of prophecy, the sign convinces Oedipus that Tiresias' intuitions were probably valid. Jocasta's argument is well constructed but fails because the supporting *sêmeion* is ambiguous. "I will reveal . . .," she had said; but the outcome, with its providential overtones, suggests that man cannot predict what will or will not be revealed (one recalls the other statement in which Jocasta uses the future of *phainô*, i.e., 725: . . . *theos* . . . *autos phanei*).

After learning that Laius was killed at a crossroads, Oedipus recounts the circumstances which caused him to leave Corinth and come to Thebes (794-97):

When I heard these things . . . I set out into exile to some place *where I should never see* (*entha mêpot' opsoimên*) the reproaches of those shameful

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1968) 71: "... the gods are in the action from start to finish." B. M. W. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven 1957), occupies a middle position: while the gods inaugurated the process leading to the catastrophe (i.e., by foretelling Oedipus' parricide and incest), Sophocles was careful to leave them out of the drama proper. There, "the search for the truth is pressed on to the final revelation by the will of Oedipus and by nothing else" (12). See also H. D. F. Kitto, *Sophocles—Dramatist and Philosopher* (London 1958) 60. We accept Cameron's position, with the following qualification: it is assumed that any assessment of the gods' role must start with the oracles and their effect on the action.

<sup>11</sup> So Cameron (above, note 10) 65-66, but also Lewis Campbell *Sophocles I* (Oxford 1879) 198 (*ad loc.*).

oracles brought to fulfillment for me. And as I travelled on I came to those regions in which you say the king perished . . .

Since the oracle had threatened parricide and incest, it was "logical" that the hero should resolve to keep his parents out of sight. But logic, in this case, proved worse than useless, and did so for reasons that go beyond the simple fact that he was avoiding the wrong people. In discussing the parricide, it is necessary to distinguish between the motives of the individual actors and the cause of their meeting. Both Laius and Oedipus had plausible reasons for travelling on the road between Thebes and Delphi. What no human motive can explain is how the journey of father and son coincided in such a way as to occasion their meeting at a crossroads. Outwardly, the meeting appears to have occurred spontaneously (i.e., to have had no cause beyond those which are immediately apparent), and if the two men had been strangers, there would be no reason to distrust the testimony of appearances. But when the dust has settled and the result is seen for what it is (i.e., a meeting between father and son, leading to the predicted parricide), one is compelled to view the outcome as providential. While the hero himself perceives no connection between the two events juxtaposed in his narrative (the oracle and the fatal meeting at the crossroads), the audience sees that the second event, *qua* parricide, was the consequence of the first, and thus that invisible lines of force extend between them.<sup>12</sup>

If Apollo set the stage for Oedipus' downfall, it was Oedipus himself who, by taking the road to Thebes and killing the "stranger," furnished the raw material out of which providence fashioned a parricide. It should be noted that the impulse which led Oedipus to direct his steps toward Thebes has the same root as his misguided denunciation of Tiresias. Oedipus wrongly vilified the prophet because he was the victim of an optical illusion: all the visible evidence seemed to prove that Tiresias was falsifying a prophecy. Likewise, at Delphi, the hero

<sup>12</sup> "Spontaneous" occurrences sometimes prove, on closer examination, to be providential (see Arist. *Poet.* 1452A). Frequently it is the presence of a prophecy which produces this effect: see Soph. *OC* 84-101, also Eur. *Ion*, in which a series of *tychai* (including chance meetings between blood relatives) mysteriously fulfill the purpose of Apollo revealed in the prologue. The clearest examples are found in the Herodotean *Croesus-Logos*, esp. 1.34-35 (the "Adrastus tragedy"), as interpreted in F. Hellmann's *Herodots Kroisos-Logos* (Berlin 1934) 58-68.



set out to prevent the predicted outcome by arranging not to see it (796-97).<sup>13</sup> It was the confidence stemming from this application of *opsis* which allowed the hero to slay an old man without fear of patricide.<sup>14</sup> There were logical grounds for Oedipus' confidence at the crossroads. Nevertheless, the logic was vitiated because the fact which seemed to support it (i.e., the perceptible non-identity of Polybus and Laius) was an ambiguous fact.

The prominence of the *anagnôrisis* in this episode should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the scene culminates in a momentous act, Oedipus' summons to the Theban shepherd. This act is a milestone in the plot, and its motivation should be examined with care. Of course, the hero wishes to test his suspicion that Tiresias' accusations were true. In particular, he hopes the herdsman will confirm the rumor that Laius was slain by robbers. But before the scene ends, another meaning has attached itself to the herdsman's putative testimony. Jocasta already "knows" what the burden of this testimony will be (848-60):

JO. But be assured that the report (that robbers slew Laius) was revealed in this shape, and he cannot go back and repudiate it. For it was the city and not I alone who heard these things. But even if he should deviate in some detail from his earlier account, he will never, my lord, reveal that the slaying of Laius took place precisely according to letter (*dikaiôs orthôn*), for Loxias said that he was destined to die at the hands of his son by me. But never did that poor wretch slay him; rather, he himself perished first. So I would not, for fear of any oracle, thereafter cast an eye in this direction or in that (*ouchi . . . g'an oute têid' egô blepsaim' an . . . oute têid' an*).

OED. Your judgement is sound. Nevertheless, send someone to fetch the bondsman without delay, and do not omit this.

Jocasta here deduces the unknown from the known, the invisible from

<sup>13</sup> Similar language is used later in connection with the matricide (823-26): "To think that, if exiled, I cannot see (*idoimi*) my own kin . . . or else I must be yoked in marriage," etc.

<sup>14</sup> For the essential innocence of Oedipus' actions (at least prior to the drama), see S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto 1951) 85, T. Gould (above, note 2) 372, J. Jones (above, note 9) 145, F. J. H. Letters, *The Life and Work of Sophocles* (New York 1953) 218-19, M. Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie* (Göttingen 1954) 213, A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1966) 146-47, C. H. Whitman (above, note 8) 124.

the visible. Since the story was "revealed" (*phanón*) that robbers slew Laius, the witness cannot now testify otherwise. On the other hand, even if the herdsman changes his story, no "revelation" of his (*outoi . . . phanei*)<sup>15</sup> can contradict the impression that Laius was killed by someone other than his son. It is ironic that Jocasta, who a moment before (709) declared that "the human race has no share in prophecy," pretends to know in advance what the herdsman will be unable to prove. However, it is hard to condemn her, since she is drawing the obvious inference from the facts as she sees them.

In any case, when the shepherd arrives, he does the very thing which Jocasta said he could not do, i.e., reveal that Laius was killed by his own son in accordance with the terms of the oracle. The outcome illustrates that one cannot calculate through reasoning what will or will not be revealed. Mortals who attempt to do so must base their predictions on what has already been made visible (e.g., the "revelations" of Laius' attendant). The trouble is that tangible clues may also be misleading. Jocasta's source was an eye-witness to the killing, but he did not reveal what he saw, choosing to lie instead. It should also be noted that the outcome, which here strikes Jocasta as a logical impossibility, depends on a series of imponderable *tychai*. The messenger who brings word of Polybus' death is found to be the same man who rescued the exposed infant many years earlier. The servant who has been summoned as a witness to the events at the crossroads proves to be the very man whom Jocasta charged with the task of exposing the child. Finally, the demise of Polybus, by leading to the entrance of the Corinthian, unites the only two men in the world who can piece together an accurate picture of the truth. Though irrational in the sight of men, these "chances" cannot be without meaning in the perspective of the gods, since their combined effect is to bring about the vindication of the oracles.<sup>16</sup> But we anticipate. Before discussing the final episodes, let us briefly consider the second *stasimon*, which is useful in solving precisely this problem of who or what is the moving force behind the recognition.

Central to both the first and second *stasima* is the conflict between faith and the evidence of the senses. In the first, doubt had fallen on

<sup>15</sup> The prevalence of *phainō* and related words has been noted by W. C. Helmbold (above, note 90) 298. See also Knox (above, note 10) 131-33.

<sup>16</sup> See Reinhardt (above, note 4) 133, Cameron (above, note 10) 74-75.

the testimony of Tiresias, the human prophet. But it has since been "proved" that a specific pronouncement of Apollo failed to come true, and another oracle seems in the process of being thwarted. The threat to belief has therefore become critical. Unlike the previous ode, which fell into discrete halves, one mirroring faith and the other skepticism, the present ode begins with a *plea* for righteousness and ends with a lament that "godly things are disappearing" (910).<sup>17</sup>

The chorus begin by praying that they may always be found honoring the divine laws.<sup>18</sup> These laws were "engendered in the ether" (867) . . . "the mortal nature of man did not give them birth" and (868-70) . . . "forgetfulness will never put them to sleep" (*latha mēpote katakoimasēi*). That is, unlike human laws, which fail to operate when violated in secret, the laws of the gods are universally efficacious, since the gods cannot be oblivious to anything. "The god is great in them and does not grow old" (872). The characterization of the divine law as all-seeing and ever-vigilant is important for what follows. In the second and third stanzas, the Chorus catalogue the excesses of the typical tyrant (883-93). The implication is that the gods must infallibly vindicate their law against such transgressions, or forfeit their claim to respect as divine legislators (895-903):

<sup>17</sup> The relationship between the two odes is discussed by W. Schmidt, *Griechische Literaturgeschichte* I. 2 (Munich 1954) 366.

<sup>18</sup> Space does not permit a discussion of all the problems involved in the interpretation of this ode, esp. the relevance of the two central strophes. Recent scholarship on the second stasimon includes the following: N. v. d. Ben, "Two Vexed Passages of Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus," *Mnemosyne* 4.21 (1960) 7-21, G. H. Gellie, "The Second Stasimon of the Oedipus Tyrannus," *AJP* 85 (1964) 113-23, J. C. Kamerbeek, "Comments on the Second Stasimon of the Oedipus Tyrannus," *WS* 79 (1966) 80-92, G. Müller, "Das Zweite Stasimon des König Oedipus," *Hermes* 95 (1967) 269-91, Bremer (above note 3) 159, R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "The Second Stasimon of the Oedipus Tyrannus," *JHS* 91 (1972) 119-35.

Most persuasive is the theory of G. H. Gellie, which may be summarized as follows. When, in the second and third strophes, the Chorus pray for the overthrow of those who "set hands upon the untouchable," their reflections are intended (by them) to be entirely unspecific. But the audience will have heard *hybris phyteuei tyrannon* as an unconscious reference to the *tyrannos* of this play, i.e., Oedipus. Consequently, the Chorus' description of the tyrant in antist. A and str. B would be perceived as an unwitting commentary on the hero's narrative in the preceding scene. The audience will remember that Oedipus himself "set hands upon the untouchable" (i.e., in killing his father). When, at the end of the ode, the Chorus pray for the vindication of the old Laius oracle, they are unconsciously praying for the exposure of the "tyrant" (Oedipus) whose "hybris" they lamented in the central strophes.

If such deeds attain their object, why should I join the sacred dances?

No longer will I go in reverence to the earth's untouchable navel, nor to the shrine of Abae, or that of Olympia, if these things do not fit together so that all men may point to them (*ei mē tade cheiroleikta . . . harmosei . . . brotois*).

In the last sentence, "these things" refer to the fulfillment of the old oracles of Laius. In praying for the vindication of these oracles, the Chorus are unwittingly praying for the punishment (by exposure) of the unconscious "tyrant," Oedipus. But the meaning of "these things" is not made explicit until the succeeding verses. What is clear is that the divine prerogatives must be *visibly* enforced (*cheiroleikta*) if they are to command fear and respect among men. It is in the light of this stipulation that one should view the Chorus' final appeal (903-10):

All-ruling Zues, *if so you are rightly named*, master of all, let these things not find you oblivious. Let them not escape that dominion of yours which is ever undying. For the prophecies of Laius are wasting away while men set them aside. Apollo is nowhere manifest in his prerogatives. Godly things are disappearing.

These verses can best be interpreted in the light of the first strophe, to which they correspond both thematically and verbally. The Chorus here implore Zeus to prove his godhead ("All-ruling Zeus, if you truly deserve this name . . ."), by demonstrating his *vigilance*. This is the very quality which had earlier been established as the mark of the divine law. The first stanza defined this law as one which cannot be put to sleep through "forgetfulness" (*latha*). Here, the Chorus pray that the challenge to the oracle may not find Zeus "oblivious" (*mē lathoisē*). It was stated that "the god is great" in his laws (*megas en toutois ho theos*), and that "he does not grow old" (*gēraskei*). But now the Chorus perceive that the oracles are indeed "wasting away" (*phthinton*), that Apollo is no longer "manifest" in his prerogatives (*emphanēs*), and that "the divine is disappearing" (*errei ta theia*). At stake, therefore, is the power of the gods to command respect as universal legislators. If religion is to be preserved, Zeus and Apollo must visibly demonstrate that the oracles have not failed.

## III

In the closing verses of the second stasimon, the Chorus implore Zeus to vindicate the oracles by openly revealing their truth. Immediately thereafter, Jocasta enters and begs Apollo to cure Oedipus' anxiety over the possible truth of Tiresias' charges (911-23). Since her prayer implies a wish that the prophet should *not* be vindicated, it is clear that the Chorus and Jocasta are attempting to move heaven in opposite directions. When the Corinthian messenger announces that Oedipus' "father" has died, it appears that Jocasta's prayer has been answered. Oedipus is summoned to witness yet another "proof" of oracular ineffectiveness. The case against the oracle cannot be refuted from the facts as Jocasta sees them; but as soon as Oedipus confronts the Corinthian, the "evidence" begins to transform itself hideously before her eyes. The *real* message is that Oedipus had been found on Cithaeron with pierced ankles. Suddenly it becomes clear that it is the *Chorus'* prayer, not Jocasta's, which the messenger has been sent to answer.<sup>19</sup> (If Oedipus is the child whom Jocasta caused to be abandoned, the oracles are all vindicated.) Once again, the truth of the oracles has been revealed as the consequence of a cogent attempt to prove them worthless. One further example of this pattern now remains to be discussed.

The Corinthian messenger has told of receiving the foundling from a Theban, a servant of the royal house. The latter proves to be the very shepherd who survived the slaughter at the crossroads. Oedipus is eager to summon this witness anew, but Jocasta, who has already recognized the identity of the abandoned child, implores Oedipus not to press the inquiry "if he has a care for his life" (1060-61). The tragedy now hinges on Oedipus' reaction to his wife's warning. His answer is as follows (1076-85):

Let break forth whatever will. I, at least, will be content to *see* my birth, even if it is insignificant. She, perhaps, because she has a woman's pretensions, is ashamed of my low birth. But I, counting myself a child of chance, the kindly giver, shall not be dishonored. For she is the mother from whom I am sprung; and the co-eval months have defined me as

<sup>19</sup> Although the appearance of divine agency has often been noted, the effect is usually attributed to the fact that the messenger's arrival seems to answer *Jocasta's* prayer. See Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (New York 1955) 137, also *Poiesis* (Berkeley 1966) 213-14.

insignificant and great. Being, through such lineage, the sort of man I am, I could not hereafter prove other, so as not to learn my origins.

The tragedy is precipitated because Oedipus can "prove," against Jocasta's warning, that he is immune to disaster. He will not be dishonored, he says, because he counts himself "a child of chance, the kindly giver" (*paida tês tychês tês eu didousês*). If this phrase is destined to have any meaning for the spectators, it must bear some relation to the events of the play.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the entire passage presupposes the foregoing dialogue between Oedipus and the Corinthian, especially the latter's account of how Oedipus was brought to Corinth. When Oedipus calls himself a "child of chance, the kindly giver," he means that whoever his biological parents may have been, his life really began at the moment when, by an imponderable "chance," he became the "son" of Polybus and Merope. Knowing that the king and queen of Corinth are not his real parents, the hero sees himself as the creature of the anonymous force (*tyché*) which placed him in their hands. She is the "mother" from whom he was sprung (*tês pephyka mêtros*). This affiliation gives Oedipus grounds for rejecting Jocasta's warning: being, through such lineage, the sort of man he is (*toiosde ekphys*), he could no longer "turn out other" (i.e., than what luck and time have made him), "so as not to learn my origins" (i.e., so as to have a motive for abandoning the inquiry into his birth).<sup>21</sup>

As stated earlier, the foundations of this passage are to be found in the preceding dialogue between Oedipus and the Corinthian messenger. Note, especially, the following passages:

<sup>20</sup> It may be the obscurity of this phrase which has led some writers to characterize the hero's speech as reckless, e.g., Adams (above, note 15) 102: "... reckless pride . . .," esp. Bowra (above, note 7) 198: "... wild exaltation . . . with an exaltation that is on the edge of delirium . . . he is so excited that it may be wrong to demand clear thought from him." For an interpretation of the whole speech, see C. Diano, "Edipo figlio della *tyché*," *Dioniso* 15 (1950) 56-89.

<sup>21</sup> *ouk an ekselthoim' eti / pot' allos hôste mê 'kmathein t'oumon genos*. These lines are usually taken to mean: "I shall not now prove untrue to my nature by giving up the search into my birth." But *ouk an ekselthoim' eti* could hardly refer to what the hero is doing *now* (i.e., summoning the shepherd), as the standard interpretation implies. Rather, it points to the *outcome* of the summons, which has already been issued for the second time (1069-70). The hero will not "come out" a different person as a result of the shepherd's testimony; hence, why should he fear to turn over this last stone? The lines were correctly interpreted by W. B. Jones, *The Oedipus Rex of Sophocles*, Revised Ed., (Oxford 1874).

- (1) OED. How did he come to call me his own child?  
 MES. Having received you as a gift (*dōron*) from my hands. (1021–22).
- (2) OED. And had you bought me or happened upon me (*tychôn*) when you gave me (*didôs*) to Polybus?  
 MES. I had found you in the leafy glens of Cithaeron. (1065–66)
- (3) OED. Terrible the stigma I took upon me in my infancy.  
 MES. Yes, and it was from this stroke of fortune (*ek tychês tautês*<sup>22</sup>) that you were branded with the name you bear.  
 OED. By my mother or my father? In god's name, tell me.  
 MES. I know not. He who gave you to me (*ho dous*) would know this better than I.  
 OED. You mean you received me from another? You did not happen on the child yourself (*oud' autos tychôn*)?  
 MES. No, another shepherd gave (*ekdidôsi*) it to me. (1035–40).

The accumulation of words with stem *tych-*, in combination with forms of *didômi*, provides a clue to the meaning of the curious phrase *paida tês tychês tês didousês*.<sup>23</sup> Oedipus is a "child of chance, the kindly giver," because an unforeseeable accident caused him to be bestowed as a "gift" on Polybus and Merope. This is the evidence for his judgement that he can afford to summon the shepherd. (How could learning the identity of his true parents affect the kingly legacy which chance had once bequeathed to him?)

But it is not only the messenger who has had occasion to speak of *tyche* in this scene. Hearing of Polybus' death, Jocasta says (946–48):

Oracles of the gods, where are you? Oedipus has long been shunning this man for fear that he might slay him, and now this man has died by chance (*pros tês tychês*), not through Oedipus.

In Jocasta's perspective, Polybus' death by natural causes (*pros tychês*) proves that oracles are unreliable. Chance appears to have thwarted providence. Thus, a moment later, she has the means to assuage her husband's fear of the "incest oracle" (977–79):

<sup>22</sup> Here, *tychê* is used in a different sense, but it serves to remind us of a fact which the characters are prone to neglect, namely, that not all "luck" is *good* luck. See Bowra (above, note 7) 198, Adams (above, note 15) 102, J. T. Sheppard, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles* (Cambridge 1920) 162.

<sup>23</sup> *eu didousês* may be a ritual formula, as Knox suggests (above, note 10) 262n., but it appears that Sophocles chose the phrase in order to reinforce the link between *tychê* and the "gift theme," which is destined to reappear in the ensuing scene.

What should a man fear, in relation to whom (*hōi*) the power of chance rules, and forethought is never unerring (*ta tēs tychēs / kratei, pronoia d'estin oudenos saphēs*)? To live at random is best, however one may.

Jocasta's premise is not false, but emphatically true. The play itself has demonstrated that even the most reasonable prognostications are subject to overthrow by unfathomable "accidents." Here, however, Jocasta extends the "uncertainty principle" to include events predicted by the oracle. Since the course of events is unpredictable (as Polybus' death "proves"), Oedipus need not be overly fearful of the prophecy that he would marry his mother (as if the gods, like men, were the slaves of *tyché*, rather than its masters). One can hardly blame Jocasta for drawing this conclusion, now that "chance" has carried off Oedipus' "father" in apparent violation of the oracle.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, she is mistaken in concluding that chance's dominion over human life implies the unreliability of prophecies. Her argument fails because of the ambiguity of the supporting "sign" (i.e., Polybus' death *pros tychēs*). An event which occurs accidentally in man's eyes may prove to have been providential when seen in a wider perspective. Polybus died "by chance," but his death was not a random event and it does not disprove the reliability of oracles. On the contrary, it is through such well-timed "accidents" that the truth of the oracles is now becoming visible (as Tiresias predicted).

It is against this background that we must view Oedipus' summons to the shepherd. His language here is reminiscent of Jocasta's earlier "proofs" (1058–59): "It cannot be that after receiving these signs (*sêmeia*) I shall not reveal (*phanō*) my birth" (cf. 710: *phanō . . . sêmeia syntoma*). The hero is confident because he already "knows" what will be revealed when the inquiry is pursued, or rather, he knows what will *not* be revealed. He will not, he says, "be dishonored" (1081);

<sup>24</sup> It has been suggested that the sufferings of both Oedipus and Jocasta are in part justified by their "blasphemous" or "unorthodox" attitude toward oracles. Jocasta's words have further been interpreted as a negation of divine providence and a declaration of belief in a totally random universe (see Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* 148, Bowra (above, note 7) 208, Knox (above, note 10) 179–81). But one may disbelieve in oracles without doubting that the gods control events. That Jocasta acknowledges providence is revealed by her own explicit statement (725), and is implied by her prayer to Apollo (919–23). In the present passage, she does assert the dominance of chance and the futility of forethought, but only "in relation to man."



he will not "turn out (to be) other" than the man he now is (1085); as for Jocasta, she will not be "revealed as base" (*ekphanêi kakêi* 1036). But when the shepherd arrives, his testimony produces the very result which Oedipus had pronounced impossible. (See 1397: "For now I am found to be base (*kakos*) and sprung from those who were base" (*kakôn*).) The hero has precipitated this catastrophe by acting on "knowledge" that was misconceived, but not illogical. More particularly, he has, like Jocasta, been misled by the ambiguity of *tychê*, whose role in bestowing him on Polybus and Merope seemed to bespeak a "kindly" nature. It will presently be revealed that whereas the hero owes his life to "fortune," her gifts have hardly been "kind."

The *anagnôrisis* itself revolves around two separate acts of *giving*: first, the shepherd admits that it was he who gave the child to the Corinthian (1156-57):

OED. Did you give (*edôkas*) this man the child of whom he speaks?

SER. I did (*edôk'*). Would that I had perished on that day!

After extracting the information that the child came from someone in Laius' household, Oedipus demands to know whether it was a slave or "one of the man's relatives" (see 1168: he is still preoccupied with the issue of whether his parents were noblemen or commoners) (1170-80):

SER. It was himself the child belonged to, or so we were told. But the woman inside, your wife, could best say how these matters stand.

OED. You mean it was she who gave the child to you (*ê gar didôsin hêde soi*)? SER. It was, my lord.

OED. Ah, wretch! Her own child? SER. Yes, for fear of evil prophecies.

OED. Foretelling what? SER. The story was that he would destroy his parents.

OED. How then did you yield him up to this man?

SER. In sore pity, my lord, thinking he would carry him off to another land, the place from which he came. But it was for the direst of fates that he saved the child.

For the tragedy to unfold, it was necessary that Oedipus' journey to Corinth leave no traces behind it. This condition was fulfilled through a providential multiplication of "gifts" and "givers:" Jocasta gave the baby to the Theban shepherd, who gave it to the Corinthian, who gave it to Polybus and Merope. Each of these gifts had a plausible motive, arising from the character of the "giver" and the circumstances

in which he found himself. What no human motive can explain is the constitution of the *sequence*. One can only marvel that three people, having *these* personalities, affected by *these* circumstances, were assembled in the right place at the right time. The god had prophesied that Laius' son would slay his father and marry his mother. No sooner had the infant been born than the pattern of conditions necessary for the fulfillment of the oracle materialized as if by design. Who or what is responsible? The agents of Oedipus' downfall appear to be the three mortals whose "gifts" resulted in his removal to Corinth. But it is clear that each of these actors intended something other than what their combined efforts produced. Clearly, the *telos* of their actions was decided by a power beyond themselves. This force is correctly identified as *tychê*. But when the picture emerging in the *anagnôrisis* is found to conform to the one portrayed in advance by the oracle (and more recently by Tiresias), it becomes clear that this force was not *blind* chance, but rather "providential chance" or, as the Greeks expressed it, *theia tychê*.

#### IV

It seems unlikely that the *Oedipus Rex* was meant to prove a point. But the drama does reflect on the problem of knowledge, if only in an incidental way.<sup>25</sup>

In the period of uncertainty before the arrival of the Corinthian messenger, Jocasta laments that Oedipus does not (916) *hopoi' anêr/ennous ta kaina tois palai tekmairetai* ("like a sensible man, infer the new from the old"). This remark is interesting because it reflects the fundamental intellectual pattern of the play. As the tragedy engulfs them, the characters keep trying to *reason* their way to a knowledge of the future. Their method consists in inferring the new from the old in accordance with Jocasta's axiom.<sup>26</sup> This pattern is suggested, first, in the analogy drawn in the prologue between the present plague and the earlier infestation of the Sphinx: since Oedipus found a cure in the

<sup>25</sup> This has been discussed elsewhere in varying ways. See (besides Diller), Bowra (above, note 7) 201-02, M. Champlin, "Oedipus and the Problem of Knowledge," *CJ* 64 (1968) 347-56, M. O'Brien, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex* (Englewood Cliffs 1968) 1-16.

<sup>26</sup> Her phrase recalls the saying of Anaxagoras (fr. 21a): *opsis adêlôn ta phainomena* ("appearances afford a view of things invisible;" cf. also the injunction attributed to Solon: *ta aphanê tois phanesi tekmairou*, Diels-Kranz<sup>6</sup> I,63.22). Hans Diller has traced

past, he can be expected to do the same now (35-45). In a similar vein, the hero divines that, as Laius appears to have been the victim of a Theban plot, he himself is now liable to attack from the same quarter (139-41). But it is chiefly in coping with prophecies and oracles that the characters show their fondness for "inferring the new from the old." In the Tiresias scene, Oedipus gauges the value of the prophet's present charges from his performance in an earlier test: since Tiresias did not "manifest" (*prouphanês*) a gift of *manteia* in the crisis of the Sphinx, his solution to the present plague is judged fraudulent (390-403). Thereupon, the Chorus find in these same past events a warrant for judging Oedipus innocent in the present crisis: since he was "seen" (*ophthê*) in the past to be wise and dear to the city, he will not incur a charge of wickedness now. Jocasta, for her part, uses the "failure" of an old oracle as a *sêmeion* wherewith to reveal the worthlessness of prophets, present and future (710: *phanô de soi sêmeia tôn de . . .*): since Laius failed to die at the hands of his son, Jocasta will never again give a passing glance to any oracle (857-58). In particular, she infers from this "sign" that the herdsman's testimony cannot validate Oedipus' recently kindled fear of Tiresias (851-58). (It is this fear to which Jocasta is alluding when she deplores Oedipus' failure to "infer the new from the old, like a sensible man.") Later, the death of Polybus assumes the function which had earlier been assigned to

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the various forms in which this doctrine was applied in antiquity ("Opsis Adêlôn ta Phainomena," *Hermes* 67 (1932) 14-42; see also B. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, tr. by T. Rosenmeyer (New York 1960) 216-18). Empedocles used the (known) configuration of a lamp to illustrate the (unknown) structure of the human eye. Herodotus deduced the length and direction of the Nile (whose upper part he had not seen) by analogy with its European "counterpart," the Danube (see 2.33: *hôs egô symbollomai tois emphanesi ta mê gignôskomena tekmaïromenos*: "as I conclude by inferring things unknown from things visible"). More commonly, historians deduced the nature of past events or institutions from their visible counterparts in the present (for the prevalence of *tekmairesthai*, *tekmêrion* and *sêmeion* in Thucydides, see Diller 22). The reverse of this process produced, in the hands of the orators, still another variation of this method. Here, the future was deduced by extrapolation from the past, e.g. Andocides 3.2: *chrê gar tekmeriois chrêsthai tois proteron genomenois peri tôn mellontôn esesthai* ("one must use the events of the past as evidence for what is destined to occur in the future"). One notes that this is a reasonably close paraphrase of Jocasta's definition of the *ennous anêr* as one who "infers the new from the old" (*ta kaina tois palai tekmairetai*). But the phrase is a *topos* (see Isocr. *Paneg.* 4.141; Eur. fr. 584 and 811 (Nauck). For allusions to "scientific method" in the OT including "making the invisible visible," see Knox (above, note 10) 133-38.

Laius' murder by "robbers." This event is seen as yet another visible "sign" (see 987: is this not the force of *opthalmos*?) that oracles are unreliable. In the same passage, Jocasta deduces the triviality of the "incest oracle" from analogous prophecies recorded in the past (981-82): "many men before now (*édé*) have slept with their mothers in dreams" (i.e., without fulfilling the omen in a literal way); *ergo*, Oedipus need not fear marriage with his mother (980). Finally, Oedipus himself infers from the favors which chance has bestowed upon him in the past that he has nothing to fear from the impending visit of the shepherd (1076-85).

In effect, the characters set themselves up as prophets in competition with the professional seers, whose *techné* they scorn. In place of "inspiration" and birdsigns, their predictions are based on *gnomé*. The unseen consequences of the present are inferred from the apparent lessons of the past. Calculation from experience, not clairvoyance, becomes the key to predicting the future. Needless to say, the play demonstrates the futility of this method, for every time the characters employ it, their actions bring about the vindication of the oracles they had sought to disprove. Human calculation fails because it cannot allow for the effects of *tyché*, i.e., for those "accidents" of timing and juxtaposition which determine the *telos* of an action. Conversely, oracles succeed because they derive from the very source which controls *tyché*.<sup>27</sup> One is left to conclude that, given the dominance of chance in human affairs, no refinement of logic or calculation will ever compensate for the lack of a truly oracular perspective. Indeed, if there is any lesson in the play it is that intelligence exercised in a perceptual vacuum can be worse than mere ignorance. In particular, the practice of deducing the unknown from the known, the invisible from the visible, is shown to be a treacherous snare. How can one deduce the unknown from the known when what one professes to "know" is itself imperfectly perceived? This is the difficulty which plagues the characters throughout the drama. It is easy to see why the tragedy has been called a "critique of rationalism,"<sup>28</sup> for it incidentally demonstrates that "science" cannot compensate for the gaps in man's flawed perspective.

<sup>27</sup> Simplicius commenting on Arist. *Ph.* 2.4 notes that *Tyché* and *Loxias* were invoked jointly at Delphi (we owe this reference to Knox (above, note 10) 261n.).

<sup>28</sup> See W. K. Wimsatt and C. Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York 1957) 44n.