

**The encounter at the crossroads
in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus****

Toward the midpoint of the *OT* Jocasta, in a bid to convince Oedipus of the unreliability of oracles, recalls the old prophecy that Laius was destined to die at the hands of his son. Jocasta points out that this prediction proved doubly mistaken, since Laius was killed by foreign robbers at a crossroads and his newborn child was exposed on the desolate mountainside (707-25). To Jocasta's surprise, Oedipus responds with agitation. He questions her closely about the circumstances of Laius' death and then embarks on an autobiographical narrative that touches on his early life in Corinth and his journey to Delphi, reaching its rhetorical climax with the description of his own fateful encounter at the very crossroads mentioned by Jocasta.

Oedipus' rhesis has proved worrisome to scholars, for not a few items seem at variance either with verisimilitude or with information furnished elsewhere in the play. Some critics dismiss the anomalies to be found in the text as insignificant.¹ Others, treating the play like a detective story, read them as clues to Oedipus' mendacity or gullibility.² In contrast to the first school of thought, I treat these items as meaningful; in contrast to the second, I argue that they image forth an Oedipus who is neither a liar nor a fool. Viewed collectively and in context, the details of Oedipus' account function as meaningful indicators of the narrator's perspective on events. In the narratological terminology of Genette and Bal, they indicate his focalization.³

In this essay I examine a puzzling feature of the dialogue preceding the rhesis: Oedipus' fixation on the site of Laius' murder. In the rhesis itself I consider

Oedipus' announcement of his parentage, his account of his response to the oracle, his description of Laius' attendants, and his assertion that he killed the old man's entire entourage. All five of these topics, as I try to demonstrate, reveal Oedipus' preoccupation with his imperilled status. This concern, which would have been readily apparent to an audience familiar with Greek cultural codes, turns out to have governed Oedipus' conduct at crucial junctures in the past. It continues to make itself felt in his narrative, influencing his choice of topics, his language, and his selection and ordering of details. In tracing the motif of imperilled status I make no claim either to resolve all of the text's well-known problems⁴ or to alter the familiar conclusion that 'identity' is a theme of fundamental importance to the play. I hope, however, to open the way for some fresh inferences⁵ about Oedipus' state of mind both at the time of the murder and in subsequent years, as well as for a more precise articulation of how 'identity' is constituted in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

An initial issue of dramatic probability arises in connection with the dialogue between Oedipus and Jocasta (726-70) that serves as a transition to the rhesis. Critics have seen it as a structural defect that Oedipus seizes on Jocasta's casual reference to a crossroads while ignoring other, more striking aspects of her exposition.⁶ This objection has force, however, only if we assume that Oedipus had forgotten the encounter until Jocasta's reference jogged his memory.⁷ Close examination of the text reveals a different picture. Oedipus describes his own response to Jocasta's tale of murder at the crossroads as ψυχῆς πλάνημα κάνακίνησις φρενῶν (727) — words that suggest, not the 'return of the repressed,' but a swift rearrangement of active ideas and associa-

* My text is H. Lloyd-Jones and N.C. Wilson, *Sophocles Fabulae* (Oxford 1990). I am grateful to Paula Arnold, Alan Sommerstein, and to audiences at Dartmouth College and the University of Oregon for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

¹ R. Jebb, *Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge 1902) xxvii (henceforth: Jebb) likens Sophocles to a sculptor who leaves inconspicuous areas rough and unfinished. R.D. Dawe, *Sophocles: Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge 1982) 7 (henceforth: Dawe) compares the structural analysis of the play to examining a painting at too close range. J. Gould in H. Bloom, ed., *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex* (New York 1988) 144 comments on 'the fact that it is a play of which the theatergoer's experience is very different from that of the reader of the play-text.'

² Mendacity: p. Vellacott, *Sophocles and Oedipus* (Ann Arbor 1971). Gullibility: F. Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus: evidence and self-conviction* (Ithaca 1991). For criticism of Vellacott's assumptions see R.C.A. Buxton, *JHS* c (1980) 23 n. 4; of Ahl's, see S. Murnaghan, *CP* lxxxviii (1993) 162-67. The analogy to a detective story is qualified by J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek tragedy* (London 1962) 201 and E.R. Dodds, *Greece and Rome* n.s. xiii.i (1966) 41. For a review of various theories of Oedipus' innocence with additional bibliography see R.G. Griffith, *Phoenix* xlvii (1993) 96-107.

³ Cf. C. Genette, *Narrative discourse* (Ithaca 1980) 189-94 and M. Bal, *Narratologie: essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes* (Paris 1977) 21-58. With the exception of L. Roussel, *REG* xlii (1929) 362, commentators have not been attentive to the rhesis as a unified first-person narrative. For example, T. Gould, *Sophocles: Oedipus the King* (London 1970) 101 comments: 'It is as though the narrative up to this point [800] had been thrown in just for fullness, that what is to come now is the only important point.'

⁴ For example, I have no solution to the problem of Laius' one and many murderers (cf. 122-5, 842-7 and S. Goodhart, *Diacritics* viii [1978] 55-71). It may be, however, that the problem itself has been overstated. Oedipus' use of number is idiosyncratic at other points in the play as well: cf. the alternation νόσου/ νόσοις at 960 and 962 and the emotive plurals for family members at 1406-7. On these variations of number see V. Bers, *Greek poetic syntax in the classical age* (New Haven 1985) 28-32 and 34-35.

⁵ The drawing of inferences is intrinsic to the theatrical situation. Spectators freely and unselfconsciously attribute histories, motives and emotions to the characters they observe on stage. Even critics determined to avoid importing anything έξω τοῦ δράματος acknowledge the necessity of building up a coherent account of the characters from relevant passages of the text. The question becomes, which passages are relevant, and what constitutes a legitimate inference? For the considerations involved see P.E. Easterling in *Characterization and individuality in Greek literature*, ed. C.B.R. Pelling (Oxford 1990) 83-99.

⁶ Cf. R. Lattimore, *The poetry of Greek tragedy* (Baltimore 1958) 86, J.C. Kamerbeek, *Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus* (Leiden 1967) 19, Dawe 15.

⁷ P. Pucci, *Oedipus and the fabrication of the father* (Baltimore 1992) 115 states this assumption in its strongest, Freudian form: 'It is difficult to be sure what has caused the repression that buried this accident in Oedipus' memory for so long a time.' J.T. Sheppard, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles* (Cambridge 1920) on 804-5 reflects the difficulty of reconciling the tone of the rhesis with the theory of a forgetful Oedipus: 'Oedipus is engrossed in his story, imagination making vivid every detail of a scene he had almost forgotten.'

tions.⁸ Jocasta's response to Oedipus (728) is straightforward in its assumption that he is troubled by a conscious thought or present worry: ποίας μερίμνης τοῦθ' ὑποστραφεῖς λέγεις;⁹

Although it occurs much later in the scene, line 800 may appropriately be considered here, for it pertains to the issue of Oedipus' recollection. When in his autobiographical rhesis Oedipus arrives at the encounter at the crossroads, he prefaces his account with the emphatic words: καὶ σοι, γύναι, τάληθές ἐξερῶ. The truthfulness of Oedipus' disclosure is not at issue here, for there is not the faintest indication in the text that he has hitherto been guilty of mendacity or equivocation.¹⁰ Instead the etymological sense of τάληθές, 'what is not forgotten', comes to the fore. What Oedipus is promising Jocasta is 'completeness, non-omission of any relevant detail, whether through forgetting or ignorance.'¹¹

Indeed, the narrative that follows is conspicuous for its fluency and vividness. Historical presents alternate with past tenses for a lively, graphic effect.¹² Aspects of the encounter at the crossroads are narrated in a fashion that replicates the narrator's contemporary perspective. As in a photograph, some details of the historical event—for example, the 'double prong' wielded by the old man—are sharply delineated. Others are less clearly in focus; for example, Oedipus mentions briefly and erroneously that he murdered the entire party. As we shall see, what impressed itself on Oedipus' memory was not the bloody outcome of the incident, but the fact that it came as the culmination of a series of insults to his status.

We may now return to the opening of Oedipus' rhesis and to Oedipus' account of his own beginnings (774-5):

⁸ Pucci (n. 7) 115. For the Freudian approach see further F. Rudnytsky, *Freud and Oedipus* (New York 1987) 253-71. Pace O. Becker, *Das Bild des Weges und verwandte Vorstellungen im frühgriechischen Denken* (Berlin 1937) 201, the image of mental wandering in ψυψής πλάνημα is not necessarily suggestive of disorientation. Cf. 67, where Oedipus refers to his quest for a solution to the plague as φροντίδος πλάνοι. For ἀνακίνησις φρενῶν as a 'mental oscillation' see A.A. Long, *Language and thought in Sophocles: a study of abstract nouns and poetic technique* (London 1968) 130-1.

⁹ J. Bollack, *L'Oedipe Roi de Sophocle* (Lille 1990) ii 458 (henceforth: Bollack) points out that each of the three expressions (φροντίδος πλάνημα, ἀνακίνησις φρενῶν, μέριμνα) casts light on the others, and comments: 'La question de Jocaste évoque une fixation, un objet précis qui préoccupe l'esprit...' For Sophocles' use of μέριμνα cf. *Ant.* 857, *OT* 1460.

¹⁰ Cf. Bollack *ad loc.*, who also summarizes the arguments in favour of the line's authenticity. Oedipus' use of τάληθές may be contrasted to that of another Sophoclean narrator, Lichas in *Trachiniae*, whose concern is clearly with veracity (*Tr.* 474-5): πᾶν σοι φράσω τάληθές οὐδὲ κρύψομαι ἔστιν γὰρ οὕτως ὥσπερ οὕτως ἐννέπει.

¹¹ T. Cole, *QUCC* xiii (1983) 10. Although Cole is describing Homeric usage, E. Heitsch, *Hermes* xc (1962) 24-33 shows that fifth-century writers also exploit the etymology of ἀλήθεια and its cognates.

¹² Roussel (n. 3) 362 speaks of 'la précision pittoresque du passage.' Kamerbeek (n.6) 19 describes the narrative as 'a real resurrection of the past before the mental eye of the hearer.' For analysis of the tenses see A.C. Moorhouse, *The syntax of Sophocles* (Leiden 1982) 185-6 and 189.

ἐμοὶ πατήρ μὲν Πόλυβος ἦν Κορίνθιος,
μήτηρ δὲ Μερόπη Δωρὶς ...

Resonant with pride of lineage, the words nevertheless have struck many critics as out of place. Surely we may take it as a given that Jocasta had long since been apprised of Oedipus' origins.¹³ And welcome though the mythological details may have been to Sophocles' original audience, they seem more appropriate to the prologue than to a rhesis occupying the centre of the play.¹⁴ Genealogical enumerations of this kind are so closely identified with the opening of tragedies that when Aristotle refers to this passage in the *Rhetoric* (1415a20) his memory plays him false and he assigns it to 'somewhere or other in the prologue.'

Precisely because the genealogical information Oedipus provides is not crucial to the play's internal or external addressees, we can gauge its significance to the speaker. Oedipus names his parents, dwelling impressively on Polybus' nationality and Merope's noble lineage. Yet he sets the parental relationship in a temporal perspective which casts a subtle doubt on its continuance. There is nothing unusual in using an imperfect tense to represent a present in an historical narrative.¹⁵ In this context, however, Oedipus' choice of the imperfect seems pointed. It serves to retroject his subsequent uncertainty about his origins into the distant past and to consign his connection with Polybus and Merope to history. Even as Oedipus continues to refer to the couple who raised him as 'Mother' and 'Father' (783, 787), he documents a crucial shift in their relationship.

How and when this shift took place emerges with Oedipus' account of the accusation of illegitimacy (cf. πλαστός ... πατρί, 780) launched by a drunken Corinthian. Oedipus' description of Polybus and Merope had asserted his own nobility while implicitly calling it into question. This pattern of high status put in jeopardy now becomes explicit (775-7):

ἡγόμεν δ' ἀνήρ
ἀστῶν μέγιστος τῶν ἐκεῖ, πρὶν μοι τύχη
τοιᾶδ' ἐπέστη ...¹⁶

Oedipus did not take the drunkard's accusation lightly. Oppressed (βαρυνθεῖς, 781) by uneasiness, gratified but not reassured by his parents' indignant response to his queries, and conscious of the rumours proliferating

¹³ Lattimore (n. 6) 87, Pucci (n. 7) 107. However, B. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven, 1957) 92 argues that Oedipus' introduction 'recall[s] the courtroom speech.' For reflections of Attic legal procedure in the play see R.G.M. Lewis, *GRBS* xxix (1988) 41-66.

¹⁴ For variations on Polybus' nationality and on the name of Oedipus' wife and mother in the mythological tradition, see Kamerbeek (n. 6) on 774.

¹⁵ For a similar narrative use of the imperfect cf. *Ant.* 450: οὐ γὰρ τί μοι Ζεὺς ἦν ὁ κρυύξας τόδε. Antigone, however, goes on to assert (456) her continued faith in the ἀγραπτα νόμια, rather than to chronicle a change in outlook as does Oedipus. Ahl (n. 2) 18 and 142 also speculates on the significance of the imperfect at l. 774, but I believe that the effect is more subtle than he recognizes, since it is context rather than the tense *per se* that casts doubt on Oedipus' faith in the parental relationship.

¹⁶ 775-6. For πρὶν + indicative marking 'decisive turning points' see Dawe *ad loc.*

around him (785-6), he travelled in secret to Delphi.¹⁷ At this stage in his narrative Oedipus reveals that he was not only horrified by the prophecy delivered by the oracle, but also dismayed by the unceremonious treatment he received (788-90):

ὁ Φοῖβος ὦν μὲν ἰκόμην
ἄτιμον ἐξέπεμψεν, ἄλλα δ' ἄθλιω
καὶ δεινὰ καὶ δύστηνα προυφάνη λέγων...

When not reflecting on his own case, Oedipus can speak calmly and dispassionately of the recalcitrance of oracles (cf. 280-1). But ἄτιμος, whose primary meaning is 'dishonoured,' is hardly a calm or a dispassionate word. In Attic legal terminology ἄτιμος refers to the loss of civic rights; the adjective has been used in this sense, in fact, earlier in the play (657, 670). At a later point (1081), Oedipus will use the cognate verb ἄτιμάζω to announce defiantly that he will not be dishonoured by the discovery of low birth (δυσγένεια, 1079), since he reckons himself a 'son of Τύχη.' In the context of his autobiographical narrative, Oedipus' use of ἄτιμος maintains the motif of imperilled status. It signals to the audience that Apollo's failure to answer the original question did not escape the petitioner's notice. Oedipus' narrative registers his painful consciousness of the omission, which he apprehended as a personal slight.¹⁸

Critics have taken Oedipus to task for allowing Apollo's response to drive his original question from his mind, so that he abandoned his search for his parents' identity and resolved to avoid Polybus and Merope at all costs.¹⁹ But Oedipus' words suggest a different and far more careful line of reasoning. As Oedipus tells it, upon leaving Delphi he resolved to avoid, not Polybus and Merope, but Corinth (794-7):

κἀγὼ 'πακούσας ταῦτα τὴν Κορινθίαν
ἄστροις τὸ λοιπὸν τεκμαρούμενος χθόνα
ἔφευγον, ἔνθα μήποτ' ὄμοιμην κακῶν
χρησμών ὄνειδη τῶν ἐμῶν τελούμενα.

Oedipus had good reason to assume that he could thwart the prophecy by fleeing his native land. The drunkard's accusation might be taken to imply either that Oedipus was the product of adultery between Merope and an unknown man, or that he was the child of two unknown parents—for example, a pair of palace slaves.²⁰ By keeping his distance from Corinth—an

intention emphasized by the pithy, proverbial phrase τὴν Κορινθίαν/ ἄστροις τὸ λοιπὸν τεκμαρούμενος χθόνα—Oedipus would seem to have arrived at an all-purpose solution to the dilemma created by Apollo's oracular response.²¹ Distance, his words imply, had the power to safeguard him not only from his putative relatives, Polybus and Merope, but from any other set of Corinthian parents unknown to him. Concerning this phantasmagoric pair one fact alone would have been clear to him: it was impossible for both of them to be royal. One, if not both, was inferior in rank.

Against this account of Oedipus' ratiocinations it may be objected that throughout the fourth episode, until enlightened by the Corinthian messenger, Oedipus gives every sign that he views Polybus and Merope as his parents (cf. especially 964-72, 985-6). But he postulates this connection in response to the news of Polybus' death; the audience has no warrant to suppose that it represents his fixed conviction. At the outset of the episode Jocasta had commented on her husband's susceptibility to negative suggestion (914-7). Later he gives himself over with equal impulsiveness to an optimistic reconstruction of events (964-72). The audience may recall Oedipus' interviews with Teiresias and Creon, in which he advanced as certainties hypotheses arrived at on the spot, and conclude that in his dialogue with Jocasta and the Corinthian messenger the king is again jumping to conclusions. If we delete the anticlimactic 827, as suggested long ago by Wunder, all of Oedipus' references to Polybus and Merope as his biological parents (with the exception of 774-5, discussed above) are confined to the fourth episode.²²

A number of other passages in the play become more intelligible on the hypothesis that upon leaving Delphi, and intermittently throughout his adult life, Oedipus has continued to ponder two possibilities: that he is a member of the royal family of Corinth, and that he is a lowborn Corinthian bastard. This hypothesis makes it possible to give full weight to a line whose tone has caused commentators some difficulties: Oedipus' swift and perturbed response (ποῖοισι; μείνον. τίς δέ μ' ἐκφῶει βροτῶν; 437) to Teiresias' apparently casual reference to his parents at the close of the first episode.²³ It also helps explain Oedipus' increasing conviction later in the play that he is of lowly, even slavish, origin—by no means the only conclusion to be drawn from the

²¹ For the reading τεκμαρούμενος see H. Lloyd-Jones and N.C. Wilson, *Sophoclea: studies in the text of Sophocles* (Oxford 1990) 98.

²² Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (n. 21) 99 cite J. Vahlen, *Opuscula academica* (Leipzig 1907-8), i 321 and Jebb *ad loc.* in support of 827. Vahlen states but does not justify his opinion. Jebb assumes that Oedipus at this point has only two choices; that is, he must believe either that Polybus is his father, or that Laius is. 827 reads like an expanded gloss; its pedantic, didactic tone marks it as suspect regardless of the order of the verbs, and despite the fact that ἐκ- compounds are a Sophoclean mannerism (noted by Dawe on 129 and 827; cf. also S. Goldhill, *Arethusa* xvii [1984] 177-200).

²³ Moorhouse (n. 12) 161 characterizes ποῖοισι here as 'scornful', but that tone does not square with the urgent imperative that follows. Moorhouse's interpretation is conditioned by his belief that 'Oedipus at this stage does not have doubts about his parentage.' Kamerbeek (n. 6) on 437 describes τίς ... βροτῶν as 'the alarming question which had haunted

¹⁷ With L. Campbell, *Sophocles* i (Oxford 1879) I interpret ὑφείρπε ... πολὺ as 'spread widely.' As Campbell explains on 786, 'This interpretation, introducing a new circumstance, is better than 'For it rankled deeply', which adds little to ἐκνίζε.'

¹⁸ The note of hurt in line 789 is intensified by the dative ἄθλιω, the possible reading of L before correction, which is preferred by Dawe and the Oxford editors to the ἄθλια of all the other manuscripts.

¹⁹ Cf. J-F. Vernant, 'Oedipus without the complex', in *Tragedy and myth in ancient Greece* (Brighton 1981) 81; B. Vickers, *Towards Greek tragedy* (London 1973) 511; Pucci (n. 7) 112; Ahl (n. 3) 145.

²⁰ For the two possibilities see J.F. Gardner, *G&R* xxxvi (1989) 55. For the passing off of a slave's child as royal cf. E. Alc. 636-39. I owe this explanation and these references to Alan Sommerstein.

information available, since the chorus, confronted with the same evidence, speculate that he may have been born of some god or nymph (1098-1109).

If Oedipus left Delphi still troubled by his original question, as well as horrified by the prophecy delivered by Apollo, his state of mind is not without relevance to the incident he now recounts: a chance meeting at the intersection of the roads leading to and from Thebes, Delphi and Daulia. Oedipus' preoccupation with his origins is registered both in his narrative and in the incident's violent outcome.

Oedipus' account of the old man's retinue (802-7) is confusing and contentious. He mentions a κήρυξ who may or may not be identical to the ἡγεμών or lead man, and a τροχηλάτης or driver. It is not clear whether these retainers add up to one, two or three. They do not in any case add up to four, the number specified by Jocasta (752) as accompanying Laius. Moreover, one member of the group apparently escaped Oedipus' notice altogether, for he claims that he 'killed them all' (813), whereas both Creon (118-9) and Jocasta (756) reported that one man escaped. Instead of attempting to resolve the confusion, we should accept it as reflecting Oedipus' experience of the events he describes. In part his imprecision seems to derive from an attempt to integrate the details newly provided by Jocasta with his own memory of the incident. Thus in the light of her account he retrospectively identifies as a κήρυξ the man he had been used to call the ἡγεμών.²⁴ Furthermore, his very failures of perception reveal where his attention was concentrated. Oedipus paid so little heed to the slaves walking behind the carriage that his narrative does not even acknowledge their existence. His gaze was riveted on the men in front—understandably, for the provocation they offered him was as serious as it was unexpected.

There was no practical necessity for the encounter to have developed into a confrontation. Although the intersection was narrow (*cf.* στενωπός 1399), it was not too narrow for a pedestrian and a carriage to pass: when Oedipus refused to give way, Laius struck him 'as [he] was walking past the carriage.'²⁵ The real issue was

Oedipus ever since the indiscretion committed by his drunken table companion', but proceeds to contradict himself in his note on 777-8: 'Oedipus...does not entertain any doubts concerning his descent from Polybus and Merope.' Dawe *ad loc.* describes the interchange as a 'disturbing moment' which Sophocles 'quickly passes over.' Sheppard (n. 7), however, notes on 436: 'To the audience ...this [question] is a revelation of [Oedipus'] whole mental life. It is at once plain that he has brooded long and anxiously over the question he now asks.'

²⁴ As Jebb notes on 803, οἶον is 'adverbial neuter...referring to Jocasta's whole description.' For the identification of the ἡγεμών with the κήρυξ see Dawe on 802-7. Jebb comments on 804-12 that the herald would 'be known for such by his staff', but heralds performed other tasks in addition to their official function, often involving driving or leading horses, for which the κηρύκειον would have been a hindrance. Priam's herald Idaeus, for example, drives the wagon bearing Hector's ransom (Hom. *Il.* xxiv 324-35). One side of an Athenian votive relief (Athenian Archaeological Museum 1983; see D. Buitron-Oliver, *The Greek miracle* [Washington 1992] fig. 26) shows Echelus and Iasile in a chariot while Hermes, without his κηρύκειον, walks at the horses' heads.

²⁵ δχους παραστεχοντα, 808. δχους is Doederlein's emendation, adopted by Dawe and the Oxford editors, but it is

one of precedence. In order to understand what was at stake it is necessary to consider the Greek etiquette of the road—an aspect of their own cultural system obvious to Sophocles' original audience, but only recoverable to a modern reader by way of other texts.

Three possible criteria for determining precedence suggest themselves: mode of locomotion, age and rank. Dawe improvises a motive for Laius based on the first of these: 'Laius, with all the superiority of the motorist over the pedestrian, tries to force Oedipus off the road...' The anachronism is amusing, but has no justification in the Greek context.²⁶

A second possible criterion is that of age. The audience has heard from Jocasta that Laius was beginning to go grey (742). Should the youthful Oedipus have stood aside for him? According to Herodotus, such deference was by no means the norm. Only in Sparta, he comments, are the young expected to give way to the old (ii 80):

συμφέροντα δὲ καὶ τότε ἄλλο Ἄιγύπτιοι Ἑλ-
λήνων μόνουσι Λακεδαιμονίοισι· οἱ νεώτεροι
αὐτῶν τοῖσι πρεσβυτέροισι συντυγχάνοντες
εἴκουσι τῆς ὁδοῦ καὶ ἐκτρέπονται καὶ ἐπιούσι ἐξ
ἔδρης ὑπάνιστέαται.

In fact the criterion was one of status. Other sources make it clear that in the Greek context an encounter on the road was charged with tension. By asserting the right of way either party could claim dominance of the public space, and the posture and gestures deployed by each conveyed unambiguous messages about relative social position.²⁷ Thus in the *Odyssey* Melanthius the goatherd, on his way to the palace, encounters Odysseus disguised as a beggar. Melanthius speaks abusively to Odysseus and attempts to force him out of the way (xvii 233-8):

ὡς φάτο, καὶ παριῶν λάξ ἐνθορεν ἀφραδίην
ἰσχύω· οὐδὲ μιν ἐκτὸς ἀταρπιτοῦ ἐστυφέλιξεν,
ἀλλ' ἔμμεν' ἀσφαλέως· ὁ δὲ μερμηρίζεν Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἤ μεταξὺς ῥοπάλω ἐκ θυμὸν ἔλοιτο,
ἢ πρὸς γῆν ἐλάσειε κάρη ἀμφοῦδις ἀείρας.
ἀλλ' ἐπετόλμησε φρεσὶ δ' ἔσχετο...

A passage from Euripides' *Ion* confirms that considerable emotion was invested in such encounters. When Ion is offered the chance to move to Athens he initially refuses, explaining that he prefers Delphi because the pace of life is leisurely and people well-disposed. He adds (635-7):

οὐδέ μ' ἐξέπληξ' ὁδοῦ
πονηρὸς οὐδεὶς· κείνο δ' οὐκ ἀνασχετόν,
εἴκειν ὁδοῦ χαλῶντα τοῖς κακίοισιν.

the participle that is decisive to the sense of 'walking past.' J. Peradotto, *TAPA* cxvii (1992) 8 is mistaken in referring to 'a spot too narrow for both to pass at precisely the same moment.'

²⁶ Dawe 17. Equally anachronistic is Bollack's assertion (ii 494) that Laius should have issued orders to stop the vehicle, as if the intersection featured some kind of pedestrian crossing.

²⁷ For gesture as a form of non-verbal communication within a cultural system see K. Thomas in *A cultural history of gesture*, ed. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (Ithaca 1991) 3-4, and D. Lateiner, *TAPA* cxvii (1992) 133-4.

These literary passages apparently reflect some of the tensions of real life. The anonymous author of *Constitution of the Athenians* ([Xen.] i 10) comments on the free-and-easy deportment of slaves and metics in democratic Athens:

τῶν δούλων δ' αὐ καὶ τῶν μετοίκων πλείστη ἐστὶν Ἀθηνησιν ἀκολασία καὶ οὔτε πατάξαι ἔξεστιν αὐτόθι οὔτε ὑπεκστήσεται σοι ὁ δούλος.

In a related complaint, Plato with humorous exaggeration decries the situation at Athens, where women and slaves comport themselves with the utmost freedom, and even the animals demand the right of way (*R.* 563d). Demosthenes (xxiii 53) confirms that confrontations on the highway could turn violent and end in homicide.

These passages reveal that in case of an encounter on the road, to yield the right of way was to be marked as an inferior. There could be nothing demeaning, to be sure, in giving way to royalty. In Euripides' version of the encounter at the crossroads the herald identifies Laius as a king, ordering the traveller: ὦ ξένη, τυράννοις ἐκποδῶν μεθίστασο (*Ph.* 40). But no such information is vouchsafed in Sophocles. Instead of a verbal exchange there is a silent demonstration of contempt and a mute contest of wills.²⁸ It should be noted that it was not possible for Oedipus to identify Laius as royal by visual means, since the king was not accompanied by the sizable retinue appropriate to an ἀνὴρ ἀρχηγέτης (750-1).²⁹

Oedipus, who did not know that the man in the carriage was a king, could not ignore the calculated insult to his own person. As we have seen, in a similar situation Odysseus, a man secure in his knowledge of his own worth, controlled himself and refrained from violent retaliation. But Oedipus was no Odysseus; he had more in common with Euripides' Ion, the young man unsure of his origins who deemed it 'unbearable' to be forced aside by an inferior. Oedipus responded in anger, striking the driver (806-7). Laius then watched his chance, and struck the young man full on the head with the horse goad as he was walking by.

At this point the incident escalated to an increased level of violence and an even more egregious assault on Oedipus' sense of self. To be expected to stand aside was to be treated as an inferior; but to be struck, and struck with an implement designed for animals, was to be marked as a slave.³⁰ Once again Herodotus provides

²⁸ There is no textual justification for assuming an abusive command issued by Laius and the herald, as does Roussel (n. 3) 368. C. Segal, *Tragedy and civilization* (Cambridge, MA 1981) 222 notes that 'not a word is exchanged', but links this aspect of the encounter to a general regress into savagery, with Laius treating Oedipus like a beast rather than, as in my interpretation, a slave. Segal's citation of E. *Supp.* 669-74 (456 n. 36) is not pertinent.

²⁹ Vellacott (n. 2) 116 and 119 objects that the presence of a herald must have revealed the traveller's royal status to Oedipus. But the whole point of Oedipus' question and Jocasta's answer (750-4) is that the distinguishing signs of a dignitary were missing. See also n. 24.

³⁰ Cf. J.J. Winkler in *Before sexuality*, ed. D.M. Halperin, J.J. Winkler, and F.I. Zeitlin (Princeton 1990) 179: 'Inviolability of the person is a marker separating slaves from citizens: slaves may be manhandled in any way; citizens are literally untouchable.'

corroborating evidence. He recounts how the nomadic Scythians, attempting to return home after an absence of twenty-eight years, encountered strong resistance from a new generation, the offspring of their wives and their former slaves. Finally one of the Scythians had the idea of going after their opponents with horsewhips instead of spears and bows; at the sight of these implements, he explained, they would 'understand that they are our slaves.' Sure enough, the young men panicked and fled (iv 3.3-4.1).

In Herodotus' anecdote men who had forgotten they were slaves are reminded by the symbolism inherent in the horsewhip. Oedipus, who until recently has been accustomed to think of himself as royal, is provoked to fury by the same symbolism. He responds with a violence that is out of proportion to his physical danger. The old man, he comments, 'paid no equal penalty' (οὐ μὴν ἴσην γ' ἔτεισεν, 810). Oedipus tumbled him out of his carriage and killed him along with his entourage.

The whole tenor of Oedipus' narrative suggests that he has never forgotten the encounter at the crossroads, but has classified it in memory along with other incidents casting doubt on his social position. When the messenger from Corinth reveals that Polybus and Merope were not his biological parents, Oedipus' questions reveal that the hypothesis of his low birth is reasserting itself with increasing force. To the messenger's remark that Polybus was no more Oedipus' father than he is himself (1018), Oedipus responds: καὶ πῶς ὁ φύσας ἐξ ἴσου τῷ μηδενί; The question is usually translated, 'How can my father be equal to one who is nothing to me?', but it also has the sense: 'How can my father be the same as a [social] nobody?'³¹ The double meaning is quite in accord with the intricate punning texture of the play.

The direction of Oedipus' thinking becomes unambiguous when he tells the by now frantic Jocasta that even if he turns out to stem from three generations of slaves, her own rank will not be compromised (1062-3). In his final speech before the revelation of his birth, Oedipus asserts his eagerness to learn his origins even if they are humble (τοῦμόν δ' ἐγώ/ καὶ σμικρὸν ἐστί, σπέρμ' ἰδεῖν βουλήσομαι. Jocasta may be ashamed of his δυσγένεια, he declares, but he considers himself—in a phrase which in later antiquity came to be associated with 'sudden, unpredictable changes of status'³²—a child of Τύχη' (1080). From dreading low birth he has come to affirm it. It is characteristic of Sophocles that this moment of triumphant assertion and self-mastery comes just before the catastrophe.³³ Oedipus' words are as brave and eloquent as they are ironic and deluded.

It is a critical commonplace that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a drama of identity, but what 'identity' means in a fifth-century context is not always sufficiently specified.³⁴ The closest equivalent to the English noun to be found in the play is the phrase 'who you are', δς εἶ (1036, 1068). To know who one is to know who one's parents are (ἀφ' ὧν εἶ, 415; cf. E. *Ba.* 506-7). It is also to know what they are, for in Sophocles' world as in Homer's identity and status overlap, and sense of self

³¹ Cf. Dawe on 1019 and Knox (n. 13) 155.

³² R.L. Kane, *AJP* ciii (1982) 139 n.6.

³³ Cf. *Aj.* 693-718, *Ant.* 1115-54, *Tr.* 633-62.

³⁴ Cf. Segal (n.28) 207 and, in mock-truculent protest, Dawe 3.

is inextricably connected with sense of position.³⁵ The reason why Oedipus paid such particular attention to the drunkard's slur was that it put both aspects of his identity in question.

This essay has attempted to draw out the connecting threads of Oedipus' rhesis. It is, I have argued, a legitimate inference from the text that Oedipus never forgot the original question which drove him to Delphi; that it was not heedlessness, but the assumption that all danger was limited to Corinth that led him unwittingly to fulfil the Delphic prophecy; that he read the confrontation at the crossroads as a challenge to his social identity; and that he killed Laius because the old man treated him like a slave. To conclude that Oedipus' anxiety is social rather than existential does not, in my view, diminish the play's significance or lessen its irony, for Oedipus' discovery of his rank takes its place among the many reversals that shape the action.³⁶ Oedipus had feared that he was the offspring of slaves, only to discover a truth far more terrible—that he sprang from generations of kings.

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³⁵ For a lucid discussion of this connection see S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1987) 5-II.

³⁶ For the motif of reversal see J.-F. Vernant in *Tragedy and myth in ancient Greece* (Brighton 1981) 87-119.

The Portland vase: a reply

In *JGS* xxxii (1990), a volume devoted to the Portland vase, the sections on the discovery of the vase (85-102) and on the interpretation of its frieze (130-6) are jointly contributed by Kenneth Painter and David Whitehouse (hereafter P. and W.), who refer at some length to my own published views on these problems,¹ but only to dismiss them as untenable. The purpose of this note is to show why they have not persuaded me to change my mind on either.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE FRIEZE (FIG. 1)

In their interpretation of Side 1 P. and W. follow Erika Simon² in supposing it to refer to the begetting of Octavian. The woman sitting on the ground in the centre of this side (C) is Octavian's mother, Atia, with the snake (*draco*) in whose shape, according to Asclepiades of Mende, Apollo visited her in order to father the future emperor.³ The young man who approaches her from the left (A) is Octavian himself and the bearded onlooker on the right (D) Neptune. But P. and W. differ

¹ Haynes, *The Portland vase* (London 1964, revised ed. 1975); *Gnomon* xxxviii (1966) 730 ff. (review of H. Möbius, 'Die Reliefs der Portlandvase und das antike Dreifigurbild', *ABAW* lxi [1965] 6-31); 'The Portland vase again', *JHS* lxxxviii (1968) 58-72.

² E. Simon, *Die Portlandvase* (Mainz 1957) 8-29.

³ Suet. *Aug.* xciv 4; Dio Cass. xlv 1, 2 f.

from Simon in their interpretation of Side 2. Where she again recognizes Atia with Apollo, they see a symbolic reference to the fall of Troy. The reclining woman in the centre (F) is Hecuba with the torch of which she is said to have dreamt before the birth of Paris.⁴ To the left of her sits Paris himself (E) represented as a grown man, to the right Venus (G).

A crucial problem for any interpretation of the frieze is the nature of the sinuous creature beside C. In common with most interpreters, I believe this to be a sea-monster of the type conventionally called *ketos*;⁵ and on the basis of this identification I have argued that the frieze as a whole represents Peleus on his way to woo Thetis. But to this line of argument, P. and W. claim, 'there are three possible replies: (1) that the creature on the vase is equally acceptable as a *draco*; (2) that a *ketos* can fit the Apolline theory just as well as the theory of Peleus and Thetis, and (3) that the Romans did not draw fine distinctions between snakes and snakelike creatures.'

To take (1) and (3) together: it is, of course, true, as that Roman writers use the words *anguis*, *serpens* and *draco* interchangeably as generic terms for snake, but it does not follow from this, as they imply, that Roman artists made no distinction between snakes and *kete*, a conclusion clearly refuted by the archaeological evidence. The snake is treated with considerable variety in Roman art, but a stereotype broadly based on nature can nevertheless be recognized (FIG. 2 a-c). In profile the head tends to be oval, its top running back in a continuous curve from the rounded nose to the neck. The eye is situated well forward, approximately above the middle of the jaw, and, being set in the side of the head, usually unforeshortened and circular. Male snakes often have crests and beards, female snakes sometimes small crests.

For the *ketos*, too, Roman art has a stereotype (FIG. 3), and one differing quite unmistakably from that of the snake. The *ketos* has a canine head with a raking, pointed nose, a long, flat, puckered muzzle and an abrupt, often beetling brow, above which the large ears point forward. Under the brow, and so above the inner angle of the jaw, the frontally-set eyes appear as triangular slits in the profile view. On many *kete* a slightly flaring gill-fin with a cusped end trails from the back of

⁴ On Hecuba's dream see *RE* xviii,4 (1949) s.v. 'Paris' 1489-92 (E. Wüst).

⁵ Apart from P. and W., the only scholars still sharing Simon's opinion that the creature is a snake, seem to be L. Polacco ('Il vaso Portland, venti anni dopo', *Alessandria e il mondo ellenistico-romano. Studi in onore di Achille Adriani* iii [Rome 1984] 734 ff.) and W. Schindler (*Mythos und Wirklichkeit in der Antike* [Berlin 1988] 202). Simon complains (*LIMC* ii [1984] s.v. 'Apollon/Apollo no.499') that I and others have paid too little attention to 'die mit der Frau auf der Hauptseite verbundene Schlange ... sie ist, wie Bastet (Nederlands *Kunst-historisch Jaarboek* xvii [1967] 1-29) in seiner Untersuchung zu Recht feststellt, kein Ketos.' Bastet did, it is true, at one time identify the creature as a snake, implausibly comparing it with the painted snakes of Roman *lararia* (*BABesch* xii [1966] 148-50, review of Möbius [n. 1]); but in the more considered *Jaarboek* article cited by Simon he accepts that it must be a *ketos* (cf. Haynes 1968 [n. 1] 72). Whether my own discussion of the problem (*ibid.* 61f) was inadequate, others must judge; but the reader will, I hope, forgive me for repeating here things I have said before. It is sometimes hard to persuade prejudiced eyes to recognize the self-evident.