Oedipus Crux: Reasonable Doubt in *Oedipus the King*

Kurt Fosso

Whatever is true . . . is neither one nor even reducible to one.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

It was fate, really, that led me to question Oedipus’s guilt. Time after time, my main obstacle in teaching Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* was my students’ pre-packaged conviction that the play was only a drama of fate with perhaps a dash of hubris. They believed that what happened to Oedipus happened because it was cruelly fated, and that in the end the play could mean little more than what Oedipus himself reckons about his destined lot: “It was Apollo, friends, Apollo, / that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion.”

There was little reason, in these students’ minds, to read the text all that carefully, and certainly not much cause to fuss over details. After all, it was “obvious” that Oedipus unwittingly murdered his father, King Laius of Thebes, at a crossroads. And because he married the king’s
widow, Oedipus also wed his own mother, fulfilling the double fate of par-
ricide and incest foretold to him at Apollonian Delphi. At the drama’s climax,
convinced of his guilt Oedipus blinds himself; his queen, Jocasta, already per-
suaded of the awful truth, has hanged herself in despair. In short, the evidence
“convinces every character in the play—not to mention virtually every read-
er or viewer since it was first produced—that Oedipus did indeed kill his
father and marry his mother” (Blundell 1992, 300-1). Destiny won.

Resisting fate, a teacher could argue that Oedipus’s present actions in the
play are free rather than determined and therefore worth scrutinizing in
themselves. Yet some students will not unreasonably respond that undis-
covered crimes are no less crimes, and that Oedipus’s actions simply amount
to discovering what fate (as Apollo) already held in store. Yes, they’ll say, he
perhaps could have chosen not to investigate the old king’s murder, probable
source of Thebes’s plague, and have lived on in happy albeit plague-ridden
ignorance. But then, they’ll predictably conclude, his happiness would simply
be that of not knowing that he had fulfilled his horrible destiny. The instruc-
tor might then try, as I did, to challenge such predetermined reading by link-
ing the play to the Oedipus complex, or by historicizing the tragedy’s expres-
sions of religious doubt and sacred vs. secular struggles. For that mat-
ter, a teacher could shift the focus to the myth’s moral, literary, or cultural
functions, enlisting Aristotle’s Poetics or Claude Lévi-Strauss’s prismatic
Structural Anthropology to illuminate the play’s genre, structure, or purpose. But
it nonetheless proved impossible for me to unsettle my students’ steadfast
convictions about the tragedy’s too-simple meaning of wretched destiny and
resigned forbearance. Sphinx-like, fate blocked the way, posing no riddle
other than how a teacher like me could guide or goad students to read the
play more closely and invite the unexpected.

In a sense, then, it was fate that prompted me to try to erode the foun-
dations of such facile interpretations of Oedipus the King. And I did so by
raising doubts about Oedipus’s actual guilt. I don’t mean that I generated
doubt merely by calling attention to his ignorance of his own actions or to
the divinely stacked deck of cards dealt him at birth. Rather, I tried to get
students to raise doubts about whether Oedipus had murdered his father at all.
Perhaps I had in the back of my mind Voltaire’s pointed criticisms about the
play’s flaws of verisimilitude. I certainly was prodded along by J. Hillis Miller’s
observation that “Oedipus convicts himself by putting the somewhat
ambiguous evidence together in a way that convicts him” (1990, 78). Before
I’d discovered several other skeptical studies, including Frederic Ahl’s con-
sspiracy-inflected Sophocles’ Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction, I had only an
inkling about how much of the evidence for Oedipus’s guilt was in fact
ambiguous. But those first steps led me all the same to discover a way for
my students to undermine their firm convictions about Oedipus’s guilt and its fatal cause: by requiring them to vigorously defend their ancient client, mirroring the play’s own emphasis upon evidence, testimony, and judgment. Indeed, as *Oedipus the King*’s representative Chorus opines, to justly “find fault with the king” one must first “see the word / proved right beyond doubt” (*OT* ll. 506–8), not accepting, as another voice pleads, “obscure opinion / without some proof to back it” (609–10).

Not surprisingly, many of my students initially viewed this task as perverse or just plain impossible. They felt especially vexed by my prohibition against arguing that Oedipus was innocent simply because he either didn’t know what he was doing or else was a helpless pawn of the gods (the very reasons he himself offers in Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*). Setting aside all such extenuating arguments, students instead were to gather evidence from the text to raise reasonable doubt against the allegation of parricide or, if they preferred what seemed even more of a challenge, the charge of incest. And they were to present their findings in an essay geared to persuade the incredulous, and capped by a conclusion about the implications of Oedipus’s uncovered innocence or at least uncertain guilt. What could be more “against the grain” after all than to argue that Oedipus didn’t do it? Students became advocates with something really at stake, and for many of them *Oedipus the King*’s meaning suddenly became strangely undecided and, over twenty-four centuries after the play’s festival debut, up for grabs. Sophocles’s drama now positively beckoned for weighing the evidence for innocence, much of it hidden in plain view. Fate proved stoppable.

I. Grizzled Old King or No One in Particular?

One of the places my students and I began searching for evidence is the very spot where Oedipus himself first becomes “full of fears” that he may have killed the former king (*OT* 768). Thebes’s “rascal prophet” (705), Teiresias, has just accused him of being the king’s murderer, and Oedipus is explaining to Jocasta that he suspects her brother, Creon, of colluding with the blind seer. Seeking to allay her husband’s fears and suspicions, Jocasta argues that prophecies—and by extension prophets—aren’t to be trusted. For long ago, she and Laius had learned from Apollo’s oracle that “it was fate that he should die a victim / at the hands of his own son, a son to be born / of Laius and me” (713–15). To avoid the predicted outcome, the King had “pierced” their three-day-old infant’s ankles “and by the hands of others cast him forth / upon a pathless hillside” (718–20). As for the father’s fate, Laius was murdered in Phocis “by foreign highway robbers / at a place where three roads meet” (715–16). Apollo therefore “failed to fulfill his oracle to the son,” she con-
cludes, and “also proved false in that the thing he [Laius] feared . . . never came to pass” (720-24).

Yet Jocasta’s report does nothing to console Oedipus, who finds in its details about the king’s death several disturbing similarities to his own past encounter with an elderly man at a crossroads. “I have a deadly fear / that the old seer had eyes,” he cries (OT 746-47). As Oedipus anxiously relates, years ago he had received a similar prophecy and fled down the highway from Delphi, away from his presumed birthparents in Corinth. Aiming to find “somewhere where I should not see fulfilled / the infamies [of parricide and incest] told in that dreadful oracle” (797-98), he recalls:

near the branching of the crossroads,
going on foot, I was encountered by
a herald and a carriage with a man in it,
just as you tell me. He that led the way
and the old man himself wanted to thrust me
out of the road by force. I became angry
and struck the coachman who was pushing me.
When the old man saw this he watched his moment,
and as I passed he struck me from his carriage,
full on the head with his two pointed goad.
But he was paid in full and presently
my stick had struck him backwards from the car
and he rolled out of it. And then I killed them all. (OT 801-13)

In terms of the evidence, it certainly seems clear that Oedipus killed “all” in the party. Also clear, for most readers, is that by doing so he ignorantly killed his true father, King Laius of Thebes. And yet, as many of my students argue in Oedipus’s defense, a good deal could be clearer both about how many men died at the crossroads and who those men were. According to his firsthand but somewhat murky account, Oedipus was met by three travelers: a herald (kerux) and an elderly man riding in a carriage driven by a coachman. So far so good. But in answer to Oedipus’s question about how many attendants went “with” Laius on his “journey,” Jocasta says that “In all there were but five, and among them / a herald; and one carriage for the king” (730, 753-54). Oedipus recalls an old man and two companions, but by no means five or even six persons—assuming Jocasta’s “five” tallies those who went with the king. So did a few attendants wander down another road, or is the queen mistaken? In short, how can three persons also have been as many as six?
To solve this riddle of the massacre—including the conundrum that, according to both Jocasta and Creon, there was also a survivor of the attack—Sir Richard Jebb, in his well-known commentary on the play, reconciles the king’s and queen’s conflicting accounts. As Jebb deduces, after the herald had ordered Oedipus out of the way and Laius had similarly commanded, the carriage driver “did his lord’s bidding by actually jostling the wayfarer.” With his staff Oedipus then struck the driver; in another moment, while passing the carriage, he was himself struck on the head by Laius. He dashed Laius from the carriage; the herald, turning back, came to the rescue; and Oedipus slew Laius, herald, driver, and one of two servants who had been walking by or behind the carriage; the other servant (unperceived by Oedipus) escaped to Thebes with the news. (Jebb 1897, l. 804)

Jebb neatly balances the divergent narrative accounts but, as he would doubtless concede, in order to accomplish this feat he must fill in a few key details. Most notable among these additions are the cameos by the two missing servants, one of whom Jebb reasons was far enough behind the assailed carriage to enable him to escape “unperceived.” But even if we grant that Oedipus might have overlooked a stray attendant’s clandestine flight, why would he not mention the other servant as an additional victim? Jebb’s artful inference is that this fourth attendant would not initially have shoved or struck Oedipus, and so presumably was either missed in the final tally or discounted as collateral damage. Along similar lines, R. Drew Griffith reasons that Oedipus was “too busy manslaughtering to concern himself with making an accurate count” (1993, 105).

But there is room aplenty here for doubt about the play’s details of this crime scene, as Jebb’s creative reading attests. Granted, the manslaughter of multiple victims on a highway could distract anyone, yet the “Cleft road to Phocis” (Pausanias 1975, 9.2.4) nevertheless would seem to provide a fairly open murder scene, with a clear view of any trailing or fleeing men. Indeed Philip Vellacott finds Jebb’s hypothesis to be “quite groundless, and incredible considering the nature of the place, and the danger Oedipus was in, which would make him take care to ascertain whether he had dealt with all his enemies” (1971, 193). Given the text at hand, then, it seems more reasonable to conclude that Oedipus is silent about the presence of these two entourage members because neither servant was there to be killed or to escape. Moreover, although one attendant appears to have survived the royal massacre, that escapee’s eyewitness testimony utterly contradicts Jebb’s and others’ reconciling hypotheses (see below). For Jebb and company, joining together what the play leaves asunder underscores this wide evidentiary gap,
over which Oedipus’s and Jocasta’s narrated histories do not meet. Three are not six or even five, and “all” does not jibe with most or all save one.

In addition to questioning this numerical difference, readers may also ask why a king would apparently travel so incognito, especially on what Laius is said himself to have described as an “embassy” (*OT* 114)—possibly to Delphi, although Sophocles leaves the journey’s destination and purpose unspecified.\(^\text{11}\) The elderly man whom Oedipus killed seems to have had no royal markings at all on his nondescript person and “plain” carriage (755). Would not a king? Readers might also reasonably inquire why a monarch would carry not a regal staff but instead a “two-pointed goad” (*dipla kentra*) commonly used for driving cattle or oxen.\(^\text{12}\) Even if he were driving his own horse-drawn wagon via the crossroads to Delphi or elsewhere, a herdsman’s prod still seems an unsuitable implement. After all, in far-off Troy the *Iliad*’s Achilles and Odysseus both hold fine wooden staffs “studded with golden nails,” and Agamemnon bears a “royal staff ancestral” of Vulcan’s handiwork (Homer 1961, 1.246, 279). Against his highway foes Oedipus himself wields a staff (*skeptron*). One may well wonder, then, which of the two travelers, the old man or Oedipus, had more the measure of a king.\(^\text{13}\) In an unmarked carriage, the pugnacious elder rode along in plain clothes, brandishing a herdsman’s tool, yet with a “herald” leading the way.

But in fact we cannot be certain from Oedipus’s account that the man walking in front was really a herald. For one thing, Oedipus could have identified him solely by the man’s lead position, and for another, the man seems to have heralded nothing (e.g., no order to move aside, which Jebb nonetheless infers). Of course, the *Iliad*’s heralds have many practical as well as ceremonial functions, from quieting comrades to bringing lambs for sacrifice and arranging truces. But those heralds are notably “clear-voiced”—their main epithet—and have the special role of announcing proclamations and making summations. In short, their principal function is to speak, as heralds so noticeably do in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* and *Persians*. Contrastingly, the elderly man’s putative herald apparently heralded not a word to Oedipus, leading to what Justina Gregory rightly describes as “a mute contest of wills” on the highway (1995, 145). Further complicating his later identification of the lead man, Oedipus never mentions seeing even a herald’s trademark staff (topped with a caduceus-like emblem) or any staff at all.\(^\text{14}\)

Also worth noting is that Jocasta, after speaking with Oedipus about the king’s murder, laments to the Chorus that he typically “excites himself too much / at every sort of trouble” (*OT* 914–15). Rather than conjecture “like a man of sense,” Oedipus instead “is always at the speaker’s mercy, when he [the speaker] speaks terrors” (916–18). In this case, too, fearing he might be proved a regicide, Oedipus may have fretfully inferred that the company’s lead
traveler was a “herald” because Jocasta had herself specifically recalled one in Laius’s entourage. Along these same lines, even the recollected crossroads location might result from speaker interference. Oedipus could simply have localized his crime scene’s dimly remembered locale to Jocasta’s specific narrated site “at a place where three roads meet—so goes the story” (716). Accordingly, Oedipus nervously recalls killing the old man “near the branching of the crossroads,” his imprecise description perhaps betraying this rough joinery of narratives, insofar as traveling “near” is not quite the same as traveling “at.” Gregory similarly speculates that Oedipus’s “imprecision” here might “derive from an attempt to integrate the details newly provided by Jocasta with his own memory of the incident” (1995, 144). Identified with the specified herald in Jocasta’s story, Oedipus’s lead man retrospectively becomes a “herald.” In these divergent details, the play thus presents a puzzle of two differently numbered companies, one of them noticeably unregal in size and character, with only a rustic senior, his driver, and a lead man, and no indication of anyone’s royal status. We uncover a riddle of what should, in terms of the Oedipus myth, be plain as day, but which in Sophocles’s rendering decidedly is not.

Although Oedipus for his part ignores these potentially exculpatory discrepancies, he does take stock of another, even more obvious, difference between his recollection and the other accounts of Laius’s murder. For starters, his brother-in-law Creon’s recent report from Delphi’s oracle specifies not one assailant but a plurality of killers of the old king: “The God commanded clearly,” he states, “let some one / punish with force this dead man’s murderers” (OT 106-7; emphasis added). To this revelation Creon adds the old corroborating testimony of the royal massacre’s sole survivor. That attendant (oikeus, house slave) had fled “in terror,” but upon returning could tell the Thebans:

> nothing in clear terms
> of what he knew, nothing, but one thing only. . . .
> . . . that the robbers they encountered
> were many and the hands that did the murder
> were many; it was no man’s single power. (OT 118-20, 122-24)

Recollecting the same witness’s statement, Jocasta repeats the very same detail that the king “was killed by foreign highway robbers” (715), and the Chorus, too, recalls the “old faint story” that “wayfarers” killed King Laius (291–93). As William Chase Greene observes, in these various accounts Oedipus “recognizes . . . what may be termed the vulgate version of the story. And that version includes several persons” (1929, 78).
Sensibly enough, this forensic issue of the number of assassins becomes a central concern for Oedipus, who knows all too well that he was the sole killer of the highway trio. With some irony, given his famous answer to the Sphinx, Oedipus reasons that “One man / cannot be the same as many” (OT 844-45). If the lone witness attested to a plurality of assailants of the king, and were he now to report that “same number,” then, Oedipus concludes, “It was not I who killed him” (843). Even if we were to discount the eyewitness’s testimony by attacking his reliability (e.g., by speculating that he lied to hide his cowardice), the awkward matter of the oracle’s similar plurality of killers stubbornly remains. As Sandor Goodhart states, all the various sources in the play, save Oedipus’s recollection, agree on this “one crucial detail” about the “multiplicity of murderers” (1978, 59).

The reader or viewer may justifiably pause to consider how a solitary traveler could have killed Laius when the two other accounts of the assassination both stipulate multiple murderers. Not one killer but many—“many . . . hands” and many feet—must be discovered. Setting aside the dramaturgical escape clause that, pace Voltaire, casts these discrepancies as unmasterful devices of deferral, to be discounted or ignored, is it possible that Laius was killed by a band of robbers, as the eyewitness and the oracle state? Given the text of the play, this reading in fact seems the only way truly to square the differing accounts of the crime: everyone is right. By this rendering the highway killers were one and many because there was more than one elderly man, and more than one company of travelers murdered near the Phocal crossroads. The age-old philosophical question of “the one versus the many” here becomes a singular evidentiary issue, whose resolution is essential, within the narrative, to solving Thebes’s cold case of regicide. We need therefore to consider when these different elderly men and their companions were killed, which in turn requires analyzing other evidence, including the curious timing of news.

Early in the play, Creon informs Oedipus that Laius’s death had not been investigated because at the time an even more pressing and immediate civic concern demanded attention: the “riddling Sphinx induced us to neglect / mysterious crimes and rather seek solution / of troubles at our feet” (OT 130-33). For answering the Sphinx’s riddle—“What is four-footed and two-footed and three-footed though it has but one voice?”—and to replace Thebes’s dead king, Oedipus was awarded the crown. The sequence of past events was thus set: Oedipus heard the oracle at Delphi, fled down the highway, committed a triple homicide near the crossroads, solved the Sphinx’s riddle, and entered Thebes. On the Theban side, the Sphinx set up shop near the city, the citizens tried but failed to solve her riddle of feet, King Laius departed on an embassy (probably related to the
“troubles”), word of his death reached Thebes, Oedipus the Sphinx-killer arrived and was crowned the new king, and, finally, the massacre’s eyewitness returned. We can then unite the latter parts of both chronologies in an approximate timeline:

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Creon’s explanation about the lack of an investigation into the king’s “mysterious” death makes sense only if a period of time elapsed between the initial word or inference of Laius’s death and Oedipus’s victorious arrival, after which the eyewitness belatedly returned with his specific but tardy news. In turn, Oedipus’s arrival had to occur soon after he answered the riddle, since the Sphinx was haunting Thebes’s vicinity (some versions of the myth even perch her atop the city gate).

Apollodorus’s later rendition instructively describes the beleaguered Thebans “gather[ing] together often to search for . . . the answer” to the riddle. Only after many men had died in the attempt did Creon pledge to “give both the kingdom and Laius’ wife to the man who solved the riddle” (2007, 3.5). Thereafter, Oedipus correctly answered the riddle and was duly awarded Thebes’s crown and queen. Similarly, in Oedipus the King the Sphinx-conqueror could not have been hailed the savior of Thebes had that danger not lasted long enough to make Thebans so grateful for its end that they would crown the victor—and a foreigner at that. In other words, the Sphinx can only have been so exclusive a concern if its menace had persisted, surely for more than a day or two. It thus appears that Laius had either journeyed in response to unsolved Sphinxian “troubles” or else had departed prior to their advent, with initial word of his death delayed until the solving of the riddle had become the city’s paramount concern.

According to this presumptive timeline, Oedipus could only have arrived in Thebes as he did, bearing happy news to citizens mourning their king’s death—and, according to Creon, having “searched, indeed, but never learned anything” (OT 567)—if he had dispatched the old man well after Laius had been assassinated. Otherwise, limping gait or no, Oedipus would have reached Thebes ahead of the first reports or rumors about Laius, and Thebes would have had no job opening for a king. For that matter, Oedipus’s glad tidings would have eliminated any reason for Thebans to “neglect” their monarch’s death, the news of which wasn’t received from the lone witness, according to Jocasta, until “just before” Oedipus’s coronation (736). It was then that the survivor at last returned, reported the assassination, and, beholding a new man crowned king, “begged,” Jocasta recalls, “that I should send
him to the fields to be / my shepherd . . . so he might see the city / as far off as he might” (736, 760–63).

To presume that Oedipus killed Laius is therefore to encounter an improbable, if not an impossible, sequence of events: in which Oedipus murdered the king, traveled to the Sphinx and thence to a city that not only already knew of the death but had already “neglect[ed]” its investigation. One cannot suppress or ignore what has not been discovered, nor blame a monster already known to have been slain. Under the traditional mythic scenario, then, initial word of the dead king arrives too soon and the eyewitness’s news too late. To reject the hypothesis of twin homicides is to envision Oedipus wandering for several days or weeks or else to enlist a rumor-like force able to hasten word, vague yet quick as wind, to Thebes of its king’s death. But Oedipus makes no mention of any wanderings: no travels, for instance, back up the highway to Delphi or along the crossroad fork Jocasta traces to “Daulia” (OT 734).

More than a century ago, Sir George Young argued that, for the drama’s crossroads site to be significant (tragic), Oedipus must have been heading not to Thebes but to Daulia or greater Thessaly when he encountered Laius’s Delphi-bound embassy at the branching of the roads (1901, 50). Thereafter, Oedipus’s precise route is unknown, Young concedes, but the prospect of him heading “straight to Thebes, after slaying Laius, seems . . . improbable” (51), no doubt in part owing to the various temporal discrepancies. But as with Jebb’s refashioning of the massacre narrative, Young’s post-homicide scenario interpolates details the play notably omits. In the latter, in place of Daulia or some other destination, Oedipus flees from Delphi only toward an unspecified “somewhere” (entha), with no word of travels anywhere, “in the days that followed” (OT 794–95), other than away from Corinth and, it would seem, down the highway to the Sphinx and nearby Thebes. What’s more, this Daulia scenario serves only to exacerbate the nagging problem of the eyewitness’s own post-massacre whereabouts. The longer Oedipus may have dwelt or journeyed in Daulia or vicinity, the longer the witness also must have tarried some place and by some unknown means, withholding his news of the regicide. Hence, although the eyewitness may, under this scheme, conveniently go missing long enough for rumor to arrive of Laius’s death, his extended absence-without-leave raises its own problems. Tidy as a Daulia tour or detour may at first seem, then, it leaves its own forensic mess, in a play where messes are piling up. After all, even if we overlook these chronological conundrums, the homicide scene’s conspicuous numerical problems remain: one is not the same as many, nor can three victims equal five or six.

The contemporary philosopher Philolaus aptly proclaimed, “Everything that can be known has number.” John Kerrigan similarly points to the fact
that in the Athens of Sophocles “Euclidean demonstration, to the sureness of which [Sherlock] Holmes aspires, was the paradigm of reliable discovery” (1996, 74). When readers resolve away Oedipus the King’s “one and many bandits,” for Kerrigan such “quasi-demonstrative confidence should make the Dr. Watson in us protest.” Like Oedipus, these readers are too easily “lured towards the necessary in a field of probability,” away from the play’s proto-Aristotelian domain where “everything has a cause” and “events follow exceptionless regularity”—a domain in keeping with the emergent practices of medicine, astronomy, and mathematics (74–76). But why should Sophocles construct such irony and so deface the Oedipus myth, a myth he had treated in a fairly orthodox manner in Antigone? Why use Oedipus the King to defame the myth, and by extension raise doubts about prophecies, prophets, and the gods?

In answer, although Sophocles may have been a religious conservative of some stripe, as tradition bids, he could still have shared his fellow citizens’ skepticism about oracles and their ministers. For as Cedric Whitman argues, at the time of Oedipus the King’s circa 429 BCE performance “Athens was far too full of fraudulent, beggarly oracle-mongers for any educated man to be utterly naïve in the matter” (1951, 133). If the dramatist’s intention was nonetheless to pitch in a plague year for the old-time oracles and gods (and, one should add, for the clarity of divine judgment and punishment), he “could scarcely have chosen a worse way than by preaching the careless power of the gods and the nothingness of man—the very beliefs, in fact, which were themselves the concomitants of the Athenians’ lawlessness and moral decay” (1951, 133–34). It may be as a sign of such skepticism that in Oedipus the King we “never see gods or divine beings on stage, but only hear of them from oracles and soothsayers” (Ahrensdorf 2004, 782): from those very sources, in other words, that many Athenians, including Socrates, had come to suspect. At the Dionysia, where the play reportedly earned only second prize, Oedipus the King provided a sly forum for interrogating the era’s structures of certitude and conviction: as an unsettling of myth and even as a timely Socratic drama of perplexed unknowing.26

After all, one murderer is not the same as many, and although Oedipus fails, as Ahl points out, to distinguish in the same way “between five [or six] and three, or between one [survivor] and zero,” that does not mean readers or viewers should do so (1991, 140). Likewise, a herding goad does not a scepter make, nor is every lead man a herald. Taken together, Creon’s, Jocasta’s, and Oedipus’s statements, combined with the eyewitness’s testimony, suggest that Oedipus killed another elderly traveler than Laius, and that he murdered him well after Laius’s assassination. If the oracle and witness are therefore both to be believed, and if Oedipus is to be trusted about his own
details of the crossroads encounter, the only conclusion reasonably (and arithmetically) available is that there were two traveling parties. One group was a royal entourage and the other a rustic band; one was assailed by multiple highway robbers and the other by a solitary traveler. Outlandish as this double scenario may seem, for John Peradotto “the hypothesis that Oedipus might have killed somebody else at the crossroads, around the same time, is certainly no more preposterous a coincidence to assume” than others in the tragedy, “especially in view of the question raised by the play itself, and never resolved, about the number of assailants” (1994, 96).

Granted, Sophocles’s play would not be the first or last literary work to have improbable sequences, loopholes, red herrings, or loose ends. The sun can stand still for Joshua, so why can’t the witness head directly to Thebes but arrive after Oedipus has been crowned? Cannot Oedipus’s guilt, and the play’s fidelity to the myth, rise above such textual lapses, say along the lines sketched by Charles Segal, who resolves the one-versus-many puzzle by holding that the “basic law of noncontradiction” which Oedipus employs “gives way to a fantastic, irrational ‘logic’ of paradoxes in which opposites can in fact be equal and ‘one’ simultaneously be ‘many’” (1981, 216)? Yet such anti-logic seems a desperate measure. One cannot throw out a “basic law” when it proves interpretively inconvenient but resume its logic to establish Oedipus’s incestuous relations and parricide. For that matter, Oedipus did not solve the Sphinx’s riddle by envisioning some “fantastic” monstrosity, but rather by reconciling how a many-footed creature could, without contradiction, be one.

Pondering the dubious basis for Oedipus’s guilt of patricide in this most ironic of plays, with ironies that so often point toward rather than away from the hero’s guilt, Karl Harshbarger rightly asks, “If the play is built upon ironies, cannot there be irony in this, too?” (1965, 123). And yet, irony or no, despite all of this tragedy’s inconclusive and exculpatory evidence for parricide, the ironclad matter of Oedipus’s guilt of incest still remains.

II. The Game’s a Foot; or, Who is Whose in Thebes

Near the play’s finale of self-recognition and self-mutilation, Oedipus questions a herdsman, perhaps the very attendant said to have witnessed the royal massacre. “Are you that same servant who witnessed the murder of King Laius?” Oedipus the detective could ask. But oddly he does not ask this of the herdsman, despite having instructed Jocasta “to bring him” to be questioned about the murders and despite thinking him, upon the man’s arrival, likely to be “the herdsman, / whom we were seeking” (OT 860, 1111). The Chorus also believes this man to be “none other than the peasant” in question, but defers to Jocasta’s better knowledge (1052). Yet she never identifies
him, and the herdsman states only that he was one of Laius’s servants (it would be surprising were he not), “reared in his [Laius’s] own house” but spending most of his life “among the flocks” at “Cithaeron and the places near to it” (1123–27). So there the man stands, poised, if he is that eyewitness turned shepherd, to answer questions about the king’s murder, including the question concerning the accuracy of his testimony long ago about “many” assassins. But Oedipus asks him nothing about it. This curious failure to question a witness about such important matters—matters Oedipus surely deems vital to ending the plague—struck Voltaire, for one, as exceedingly improbable and a glaring defect (2001, 338). After all, Sophocles could have written the scene so that the elderly herdsman resolved the contradiction of the one and many murderers. Despite the play’s other factual discrepancies, the shepherd would simply confess that, in truth, Laius was killed by just one assassin, who strikingly resembled a younger Oedipus, no less. But he does not do so.

Instead other, more immediate and more personal questions overtake the investigation, sparked by the arrival of a stranger from Corinth. This unofficial messenger bears “news” of the recent death of that city’s monarch, Oedipus’s father, Polybus, as well as the happier “rumour” that the Corinthians “will choose Oedipus to be their king” (OT 934, 940–41). After first heartlessly rejoicing that the fateful oracle has been proved wrong—“[it’s] dead as he [Polybus] himself is, / and worthless” (972–73)—Oedipus laments that he nonetheless still has cause to fear his mother, Merope’s “bed,” for that second part of the prophecy remains unfoiled. Hearing these details of the old oracle and of Oedipus’s reasons for staying away from Corinth, the messenger seeks “to earn” his potential new monarch’s “thanks” by releasing him from these baseless fears (1006). So the favor-seeker now unwittingly drops a familial bombshell: “Polybus was no kin to you in blood” (1016). And this messenger appears to know whereof he speaks. Many years before, he explains, while “in charge of mountain flocks” he “found” the abandoned infant Oedipus upon “Cithaeron’s slopes / in the twisting thickets” (1026–27), “loosed” his “pierced and fettered” feet (1034), and carried him to the childless Polybus and Merope in Corinth as a “gift . . . from these hands of mine” (1022). The happy new parents apparently then named their adopted son for his conspicuous swollen feet: *Oedi-pus,* “Swell-foot.” As Odysseus’s scar revealed his secret identity, so the marks on Oedipus’s feet identify him as that foundling of the thicket.

But in fact much could be clearer about this crucial identification, as an overview of this scene attests. I find less cause to doubt the anonymous Corinthian than does Ahl, who sees in him a rumor-mongering “opportunistic” conniving Oedipus’s return to Corinth. But it certainly is the case
that the messenger has come to seek his reward (“to earn . . . thanks”) by winning the king’s favor with desirable rumors and newly allayed fears. And to do so this “unknown man simply announces that he gave Oedipus to Polybus,” and the credulous Oedipus believes him (Ahl, 1991, 177). Yet much doubt can be raised about Oedipus’s paternity without necessarily shooting the messenger. Regarding the discovery of that baby on Cithaeron, the Corinthian immediately (and perhaps suspiciously) clarifies one significant point of his custodial narrative: that although he described Oedipus as having been “found,” it was not he who found the foundling. “You took me from someone else?” (OT 1039), Oedipus anxiously asks, and the messenger replies that actually he had been handed the infant by another shepherd, “called Laius’ man” (1042). “With such clues” about this chain of custody, Oedipus surmises, “I could not fail to bring my birth to light” (1058-59). The investigation now becomes focused not on the previous king’s death but on the present king’s birth and infancy. And Jocasta will have none of it, presumably fearing by this point that the foundling will prove to be her and Laius’s own abandoned child. “God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!” she cries, exiting the stage (1068). Undeterred, Oedipus chalks up her fears to a queen’s concern that he, a self-described “child of Fortune” (1080), might be proved of low birth.

At this critical moment the herdsman arrives and, although his identity as the eyewitness to the massacre is never confirmed, the Corinthian messenger identifies him as none other than the shepherd who handed him the foundling. Under pain of torture, the herdsman reluctantly confirms this point, admitting that he gave the Corinthian shepherd (now messenger) “one of the children / of Laius” (OT 1167). Here the reader should be permitted a classic double take: “Children?! Laius had more than one child?” What, one wonders, became of the other children? Might any of them also have been abandoned owing to what the herdsman recalls as the “evil oracles” that a child “should kill his parents” (1176-77)? Earlier in the play, Oedipus noted that Laius’s “line” (genos) had left no progeny (261), but that fact does not preclude children having been born and “cast away.” Of course, whether Laius and Jocasta had one child or many children, and whether they had abandoned one, many, or all of them, Oedipus would still be their “blood” offspring and, therefore, regardless of whether or not he killed his father, he’d still have married his mother. Yet there are other problematical details in this custodial narrative—details that call into question precisely Oedipus’s “blood” parentage. We need not hypothesize how one ankle-pierced foundling might be mistaken for another, nor scrutinize the messenger’s motivation for quelling as well as for stirring up Oedipal fears by forcing the herdsman, disconcertingly, to “remember what he / does not know [agnotos]”
Instead, we can begin by pondering the matter of oracles, before proceeding to the question of just who it was who gave birth to that foundling of the “twisting thickets.”

As mentioned, the herdsman refers to a plurality of “evil oracles,” adding that the “fear” of them led the infant’s mother to abandon the child (OT 1175). Sophocles’s play thus presents three variations of child/parent prophecy: 1) the herdsman’s recollection of multiple oracles predicting a child would “kill his parents,” 2) Jocasta’s patricide prophecy that the king would “die a victim / at the hands of his own son . . . born / of Laius and me,” and 3) Oedipus’s Pythian forecast of patricide as well as of incest—a double prophecy seconded in the recent accusations by Teiresias. The Chorus therefore quite rightly refers to a plurality of “oracles concerning Laius” (906). At this point, we might then reasonably ask once more why this play so muddies the mythic waters. Why many prophecies rather than just one? For that matter, why make the last repeated prophecy be that of the “parents” oracle, which is at most only half fulfilled at the tragedy’s end, given that Oedipus will not have killed his mother, whether she turns out to be Merope, Jocasta, or nobody in particular? More important for the narrative, the plurality of “oracles” suggests that the house of Laius received more than one parricide prophecy: perhaps, this line of reasoning suggests, for more than one ill-fated, potentially parricidal child.

Even more significantly, it is not at all certain that the foster child in question, putatively named for his swollen feet, is Jocasta’s offspring. Oedipus pointedly asks the herdsman if the spared child of Laius was “A slave? Or born in wedlock?” (OT 1168), the implication being that Laius could have fathered children with servants, and perhaps that such demi-royal, bastard offspring would have been similarly disposed of in the thickets. An infant left on a hillside might have been born outside rather than inside wedlock, given birth by a house slave rather than by a freeborn wife. The point here is basically Oedipus’s own: that he could be the offspring not of a queen but of a servant (cf. e.g., Odyssey 14.200-3). Oedipus will cast off this slave-child scenario, but he nonetheless pinpoints it for the play’s audience. “The child was called his child,” the herdsman confesses, “but she within, / your wife would tell you best how all this was” (OT 1171-72; emphasis added). Although the shepherd attests that it was Jocasta who gave him the child to “make away with” (1775), he in fact never says that she was herself the child’s mother. When asked if that mother (tekousa, “she who gave birth”) could have been so “hard” (tlêmôn, “wretched,” “miserable”) as to do such a thing, he merely affirms Oedipus’s query and explains the hardness’s cause: “through fear / of evil oracles” (1175-76). But was “she,” whoever she was, hard-hearted from her own fear of oracles or from others’—Laius’s and Jocasta’s—dominating
fears? In this important scene, Sophocles seems to have exercised particular care to instill rather than to resolve doubts about this royal paternity test. By the herdsman’s account, Laius fathered more than one child; hence it is altogether uncertain whether the foundling was a slave or freeborn child, a bastard or a legitimate heir. And if Oedipus is the son of Laius and a slave, he is no child of Jocasta, whether or not she helped dispose of the bastard infant, and hence is no husband of his mother and father to his siblings.

Of course one may still point to Oedipus’s feet for physical evidence of his identity as the foundling given to Polybus. “[Y]our ankles should be witnesses,” the messenger proclaims, and Oedipus acknowledges the poignancy of this reference to what he calls an “old pain” (OT 1032-33). For Griffith this classic “recognition-token” thus “dovetails perfectly with Jocasta’s story of having exposed an infant with pierced ankles” (1993, 106). The putative foot-marks lend much-needed credence to the identification of Oedipus as that foundling child by explaining not only the cause of Oedipus’s scarred or sore ankles but also the origin of his peculiar name. Yet it is worth pausing before this last threshold, for although it is likely that Oedipus would be aware that his name can be derogatorily construed as “Swell-foot,” he could and in fact seems to prefer more flattering etymologies, including such Cratylan renderings as “Know-where” (oidi-pou) and, especially, “Know-all” (oidi-pás). Indeed, at one point Oedipus appears to pun upon his name’s apposite know-it-all etymology to Teiresias: “I came, / Oedipus [‘Know-all’], who knew nothing” (OT 397-98). Two other etymologies, “Two-foot” (oídipous) and “Know-foot” (oïdi-pous), might also be valued by a man renowned for having solved a riddle of feet. In this light, Oedipus’s reference to an “old pain” (archaion . . . kakon) related to his feet need not signify ankle scars, of which there is no evidence, nor podiatric ailments. Instead it could refer to the youthful “pain” of teasing (kakos, “evil” or “pain” but also “reproach”) suffered because of an uncommon, malleable name all too easily debased as “Swell-foot.”

In addition, the Corinthian messenger’s initial inquiry—“Might I learn . . . where is the house of Oedipus? Or / best of all, if you know, where is the king himself?” (OT 925-26; emphasis added)—curiously and conspicuously features, even more obviously in the Greek, “violent puns, suggesting a fantastic conjugation of the verb ‘to know where’ formed from the name of the hero” (Knox 1957, 184). That the messenger formidably puns, unwittingly or not, upon his would-be patron’s know-where-man name further establishes the potential for just such wordplay, here and elsewhere in the scene, including upon other pseudo-etymologies of oedi-pus. It is therefore less surprising that the messenger should later link Oedipus’s swell name to the swollen ankles of the foundling tale’s featured child. “Swell-foot” is but one semantic
twist in a game and history of puns, and whether by fate, chance, or rhetorical legerdemain, this nominal “old pain” forges a strong link in the narrated custodial chain as well as between the Corinthian favor-seeker and his newfound, foster-childlike “son” and potential, grateful king (OT 1031).

However, the messenger’s efforts backfire. Believing all his proffered terrors and Cratylan turns, Oedipus rushes headlong into convincing himself of his Theban paternity and related incest and parricide. As Greene rightly states, Oedipus’s guilt of patricide in fact is only “inferred from the discovery of his origin and from the discovery that he has fulfilled the half of the Delphic oracle that prophesied incest; ergo, his inference would run, presumably the other half that foretold parricide has been fulfilled” (1929, 81). Yet Oedipus convinces himself of his paternity without knowing, as we do, about the Corinthian’s proclivity for punning upon his multivalent name, and without considering the anonymous stranger’s motives, evidence, and reasoning. Oedipus also convinces and convicts himself without ever acknowledging the doubts raised by the herdsman’s account of multiple children, mothers, and oracles. Instead, Oedipus the investigator careens toward the realization of his worst fears, which is to say toward seeing as fulfilled Delphi’s narrative of parricide, incest, and, not least, fate.

Why does Oedipus the riddle-solver turned investigator not question this testimony, or at least delay reaching so damning a conclusion about his guilt? No doubt he rushes as he does in part because of his well-known impulsiveness, which first led him to consult the oracle and then to flee down the highway. But he also appears to dash headlong because the explanatory narrative he has helped to compose obliges him to do so: as the lead actor of sorts in a centripetal drama of fate. It is what Jonathan Culler aptly describes as “the convergence of meaning in the narrative discourse,” a convergence that arguably leads Oedipus, ever at the mercy of tellers and tellings, “to posit this deed” (1981, 174) and judge accordingly. As Hölderlin observed, it is Oedipus’s self-focused, masterful “interpreting of everything” that leads “his spirit [to be] defeated by the rough and simple language of his servants” (2001, 67). Put differently, everything is “made to begin with Oedipus, by means of explanations, with all the more certainty as one has reduced everything to Oedipus by means of application” (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 101). The drama’s “child of Fortune” avoids a world of chance and undetermined identity by claiming his meted, necessary, self-damning portion of fate and punishment. Along these very lines, Gilles Deleuze roundly condemns Sophoclean tragedy’s typifying “disease of judgment,” whereby “gods and men together raise themselves to the activity of judging—for better or worse” (1997, 128). But might the play’s dramatic “disease” be, more ironically, of Oedipus’s own making? The hero’s forensic
inquiry casts himself as fate’s victim and, despite his expressions of doubt, evinces his insistent belief in prophecy as well as in divine judgment. He thus doggedly applies the oracular narrative to forge a unitary myth of “Swellfoot,” despite the many doubts that linger.

Indeed, too many babies, too many oracles, too many names, and even too many mothers make any conviction about Oedipus’s guilt of incest as problematical as the conclusion about his guilt of parricide. So if Oedipus might not be Jocasta’s child, and if he may not have murdered his father, of what is he guilty besides having long ago killed a thuggish band on the highway? It seems a reasonable enough question given the evidence at hand or at least given the ambiguity of that evidence. And yet one key forensic puzzle-piece still remains: the prophet Teiresias’s accusations concerning Oedipus’s guilt of patricide and incest. Even if all the play’s other evidence is at best tenuous, how can Oedipus not be guilty if Apollo’s seer so clearly says he is? To borrow from *The Waste Land*, does the renowned prophet not perceive the scene and foretell the rest?

### III. “A Prophet’s Task”

Near the play’s opening, Oedipus has summoned Teiresias “[o]n Creon’s word” to help solve the king’s murder, and thereby “redeem the debt of our pollution / that lies on us because of this dead man” (*OT* 287, 312–13). But Apollo’s seer arrives in an uncooperative mood, bemoaning that he came at all, and Oedipus chastises him for his reluctance: “You’d rob us / of this your gift of prophecy?” (323–24). Their bickering escalates until it prompts the soothsayer’s blistering, jaw-dropping accusations: “I say you are the murderer of the king / whose murderer you seek” (363–64), and “with those you love best / you live in foulest shame unconsciously” (366–67). Oedipus is guilty of incest and patricide: “a fellow sower in his father’s bed / with that same father that he murdered,” as Teiresias decries (458–59). For good measure the seer even adds a new prophecy: that this “double striking curse, / from father and mother both,” shall drive Oedipus “forth / out of this land, with darkness on [his] eyes. . . . to a foreign country tapping his way before him with a stick” (418–19, 456–57). And to the prophet’s credit, at the tragedy’s conclusion Oedipus does end up blind and pleading for exile. A reader might well ask, then, how it is possible to discount the seer’s seemingly valid pronouncements, beyond simply insisting that enough exculpatory evidence exists elsewhere to render them moot.

Predictably enough, Sophocles’s play insinuates considerable doubt about the prophet’s allegations, beginning with Oedipus’s own aforementioned suspicions of soothsayer trickery. In response to Teiresias’s *j’accuse*, the incredulous king questions the seer’s skill, on the one hand charging him with con-
spiring in a coup d’état with Creon, and on the other hand chiding him for having failed, long ago, to solve the Sphinx’s riddle. “And who has taught you truth?” the king suspiciously asks. “Not your profession [techne] surely!” (OT 358-59). The seer, he surmises, employs not genuine Apollonian insight but crafted, mundane defamation. To this charge the prophet testily replies, “You have taught me, / for you have made me speak against my will” (356-57). Teiresias thereby ducks the implicit indictment (that someone merely “taught” him these things) by turning the tables on his opponent. Here, as in the murder investigation, Oedipus is the very one he seeks: “you . . . taught me.” The seer’s defensive words thus imply that because Oedipus has compelled him (ákonta proptrépho, “prodded along”) to speak, he has responded, blow for blow and dart for dart (cf. ákon, “dart”), with what would teach the ruler a lesson.

Teiresias moreover contends that he has as much legal “right” as his king to speak in his own “defence,” and to do so by speaking “against” his powerful adversary: “Of that much I am master” (OT 408-10; emphasis added). “Called” as a witness and now “taught” by Oedipus’s supreme power, the soothsayer retaliates with angry lessons of his own, possibly seeing that the quickest and surest way to conclude the interview is to declare Oedipus himself the regicide, deftly transforming the royal investigator into the investigated, the “master” into the “slave” (“I am no slave / of yours, but Loxias’,” Teiresias proclaims [410-11]). As often occurred in Athens’s courts, the accused man’s defense takes the form of a hostile attack, and despite this defendant’s special “mantic invective,” one nonetheless discerns “the forensic tone” (Knox 1957, 84-85). The best legal defense is here a strong (and certainly offensive) offense, employing vaticination as rhetorical power. It could be owed to their status as courtroom retorts that Teiresias’s words carry so little weight with the play’s characters. Apollo’s prophet is, Lowell Edmunds observes, curiously “ineffectual” in his revelations, all but forgotten later in the drama (1985, 15).

Oedipus levies his counter-accusations before a Chorus of elders and, at the play’s wartime debut, before an Athenian audience attuned not only to charges of political conspiracy but also to expressions of religious skepticism and doubt. Chance (tyche) rather than fate was regarded by many as the true ruler in human affairs, to the point of being itself deified. Within this agnostic cultural climate, and given especially Athenian suspicions about Delphi’s pro-Spartan ministers, distrust of the oracle ran high. The sophist Antiphon’s reputed judgment of prophets and prophecies serves as an apt motto for this age of rationalism, anthropocentrism, and religious doubt: prophecy, he claimed, was but the “conjecture [eikasmos, ‘guessing’] of an intelligent man” (2002, Tést. 9). Like many a member of the play’s
festival audience, Oedipus too not unreasonably wonders why he should put stock in a prophet’s revelations, especially given a dubious record of accurate prediction.

“Tell me,” the king retorts, “where have you seen clear . . . with your prophetic eyes?” (OT 390-91). To answer the Sphinx’s riddle was, Oedipus says, “a prophet’s task” (manteia, “prophesying power” or “skill”), and for that all-important work Teiresias had “no gift of prophecy / from birds nor otherwise from any God,” Apollo included (394-97). And whereas the blind seer came up empty-handed in that important civic act, Oedipus did not. Who, then, was the real know-nothing? For that matter, if the mantic did know beforehand of the misdeeds he reveals, then he must have concealed the facts, if indeed he is not now simply guessing at what will most disturb the tyrant who berates him. Certainly it wouldn’t require second sight to single out a foreign interloper whose arrival roughly coincided with the old king’s death and who alone can be said to have benefited from it. Moreover, to add to the prophet’s poor record of prognostication, he has now apparently failed even to foresee his own regret at heeding Oedipus’s royal summons. But bad track records, questionable ethics, and religious skepticism aside, the seer still knows what he knows. How does one explain away that?

How but by pointing to the most contrary evidence of all: the disparity between Creon’s Delphic report, declaiming multiple murderers of the king, and the prophet’s charge that Oedipus alone is “the murderer of the king / whose murderer you seek.”40 If Teiresias’s revelation is correct, then Creon’s oracular testimony must be wrong. Sophocles’s play thereby deftly sets one Apollonian fount against another, leaving readers and viewers the task of choosing which dueling pronouncement to believe, Apollo’s oracle (via Creon) or Apollo’s seer. Both sources cannot be true, which means that at least one of them has to be wrong. And given all of the exculpatory evidence on Oedipus’s behalf, it makes as much if not more sense for it to be Apollo’s prophet who is in error: he who sees, the Chorus avers, “most often,” but implicitly not always, “what the Lord Apollo sees” (OT 285-86). After all, the oracle’s account of the regicide accords with the details offered by the eyewitness, whereas Teiresias’s revelation does not. But if the prophet did not learn his accusations from a god, the question remains what other source could have informed him.

For his part, as mentioned, Oedipus suspects his brother-in-law of this intrigue. “Creon . . . secretly attacks me,” he charges, by “suborn[ing] this juggling, trick-devising quack” (OT 386, 388). According to this conspiratorial reckoning, the soothsayer41 would have learned from Creon of Delphi’s recent pronouncement and plotted with him to lay the blame on the hated upstart from Corinth. But there is a hitch: Creon’s report fingers a plurality
of murderers, not just one killer, and the prophet proclaims Oedipus to be guilty not only of regicide but also of incest. So from whom could the seer have learned of the incest if not from his patron god? Neither Jocasta nor the herdsman mentions incest as a part of their recollected family prophecies. Only Oedipus’s Delphic prophecy fully squares with Teiresias’s dual revelations. And there’s the rub. Goodhart in fact holds that “Unless we privilege Teiresias a priori as spokesman for the mythic pattern, we may have no confidence that the knowledge of the practicing mantic is other than professional” (1978, 60). In other words, the seer could have received intelligence from his confederates at Delphi, as one (distrusted) minister to another. It would be all too easy to accuse Oedipus of what the seer’s fellow Apollonians had already foretold.

Even without such insider knowledge, Oedipus’s recent self-presentations could supply a crafty soothsayer with ample rhetorical ammunition, acquired not in secret but in public. For just prior to the seer’s arrival at court, in commencing his inquiry Oedipus had depicted himself as a son to the dead king:

Since I am now the holder of his office,
and have his bed and wife that once was his,
and had his line not been unfortunate
we would have common children (fortune leaped
upon his head)—because of all these things,

I fight in his defence as for my father. . . . (OT 259–64; emphasis added)

Often read as an instance of Sophoclean irony, this passage underlines a simple but important point: that the son–father connection between Oedipus and Laius was an available trope when Teiresias arrived to literalize (and Oedipalize) its figurative hierarchy. One king, especially one who had thus inherited his throne, becomes a son to his predecessor and structural progenitor. Oedipus’s description of himself as the king’s son of course also bespeaks its familial–dynastic corollary: if Laius is the “father” (patros) then Laius’s wife becomes Oedipus’s mother. In turn, Oedipus would more than just figuratively stand as parens in loco parentis had Laius left behind any children. Parricide and incest here figure as rhetorical fruit ripe for the picking, certainly by any dexterous, “trick-devising quack” (OT 388). If Oedipus can style himself a son to the former king, it is not so formidable, let alone so prophetic, a “task” for a soothsayer to do so, in what amounts to an ancient version of playing the dozens. Even the less sophisticated Corinthian messenger found much to play upon simply in his potential new patron’s curious name.
As for the broader cultural availability of a charge of incest, beyond its being bandied about as an insult, Jocasta attests to the frequency of such incestuous fears and desires: “Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles, / many a man has lain with his own mother” (OT 981–82).42 Certainly a trick of the soothsayer trade is to play upon common and often intermingled fears and desires, familial and otherwise. Whether Jocasta’s dismissive explanation amounts to special pleading or, avant Freud, a statement of psychological fact, she characterizes Oedipus’s incest fears, and any man’s incestuous desires, as common rather than rare: experienced by “many,” not just by one.

Even when it comes to Teiresias’s prophecy of blindness there is cause for at least a little uncertainty and even incredulity. Specifically, the seer predicts that Oedipus, his crimes at last revealed, will go “out of this land, with darkness on [his] eyes. . . . to a foreign country[,] tapping his way before him with a stick” (418, 456–57). Yet although Oedipus ends up blind and begging to be exiled, and although there is every reason to presume that Creon will grant his request for banishment, Oedipus holds no such stick (skeptron) to tap along his way. Perhaps “tapping” (gaian, more literally “feeling”) is but an emblem for blindness, or possibly the real stick still remains to be handed him, maybe the very one he wielded long ago on the highway. For now, though, there is no indication that Oedipus has a staff; nor is there any suggestion, apart from Teiresias’s prediction, that he will even need one. It would be such a simple thing for Sophocles to depict Oedipus using a walking stick to reenter the scene or else to have one of the hero’s two daughters bring him a staff for support.43 But these things do not happen, and whether or not they will is left for the audience, then as now, to consider. Hence, in this one detail Teiresias may be proved wrong, and certainly has not been proved right. Even regarding Oedipus’s blindness, the soothsayer foresees only that he will become blind, not that it will, significantly, be wrought by the hero’s own handiwork. “Apollo . . . brought this bitter bitterness,” Oedipus will explain, “But the hand that struck me / was none but my own” (OT 1332–33).

Oedipus nevertheless ends up blind. Yet recall again Jocasta’s observation about her husband’s peculiar vulnerability: “always at the speaker’s mercy, / when he speaks terrors.” Here, too, Oedipus leaps to believe the worst. It is no great leap on our own part to surmise that Teiresias, wittingly or not, has bequeathed his adversary both a worst-case scenario (first foretold to him at Delphi) and the fated response. From this vantage, Oedipus does not so much fulfill a prophecy as act out a script for how fatefully to proceed—a script he himself has helped write. The play thereby holds open the possibility either that Teiresias foresaw the terrible events or that he has prophesied nothing, concocting revelations from a mixture of inside intelligence, guesses, tropes, coincidences, and common fears—all within a contemporary context of
mantic failure and looming doubt. The Teiresias of Oedipus the King declines from the far-seeing prophet of old to the more dubious and ironic, more modern figure depicted in Euripides’s Phoenissae and Bacchae.44

“O oracles of the / Gods,” Jocasta skeptically proclaimed, “where are you now?” (OT 945-46). Sophocles’s drama forges uncertainty at most every turn, suggesting that its author deftly and intentionally laid a weak rather than strong foundation for Oedipus’s guilt and fate, and thereby for the myth’s own certitude and unity. “Our sorrows defy number,” the Chorus laments (168).

IV. Conclusion

The Chorus’s timely complaint serves here as a fitting conclusion, for Sophocles’s work uncannily takes on a Sphinxian shape of many to which there seems no one solution. As Seth Benardete remarks, Oedipus the King’s complex of “knots” leads us to wonder if the drama’s deeper irony in fact consists less in our greater knowledge and Oedipus’s ignorance than “in our own ignorance of which we never become aware” (2000, 126)—or, one could add, of which we become partly aware, with the humbling sense that our knowing, like the Oedipus tradition’s many interpretations, must ever be partial and subject to stumbling. Oedipus the King presents a world in which resolving the many into one seems ineluctably to precipitate a change from the one back into many: from the Sphinx’s riddle of four, two, and three feet to Oedipus’s answer of “Man,” and back again to “many . . . hands” and feet, many oracles, and many names.

For an Athenian playwright to have intricately constructed such dramatic riddles and epistemological ironies would place him in the Periclean modernist camp of those who found good reason to question oracular and other traditional forms of authority and truth and the political powers closely associated with them. Such cultural tensions were soon dramatized to grotesque comic effect in Aristophanes’s Clouds, with its sophistical and heretical Socrates. Segal rightly holds that Oedipus shares with Parmenides and other contemporary philosophers the concern “with finding truth in a world of appearances,” a world newly marked by the sophists’ theories about language, which at bottom “pose the problem of the relation of words to reality and emphasize the power of words to deceive, to win unjust causes, and to confuse moral issues” (2001, 10). Indeed, in Oedipus the King it is language, in the form of narrative, that leads storied Oedipus to convict himself, suggesting to Miller that “the perennial success of the story of Oedipus may lie more in its powerful narrative presentation of the problem of narration than in any solution it presents to the question of man’s origin and nature” (1990, 74).
Narrative is revealed as the bearer of nature, which is to say as that which intercedes between knowledge (oida) and origin: pous as footing.

The play lifts the veil that, in the parlance of Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*, transforms history’s chance events into nature, removing from things their changeable “human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance” (1972, 142-43): that of essence and fate, of a nature without history, accident, or politics. Similarly, Peradotto argues that “sophistical” semiotic readings of Sophocles’s play usefully serve to make “ideology explic-it,” principally by “unmask[ing] the process, to which language is ever open, of making what is merely arbitrary seem natural, of turning the merely accidental into the necessary” (1994, 94). To read the play thus is to encounter the internal tyranny of orthodoxy, mythic and otherwise, and perhaps to return the forensic problem of evidence to the social imbrications that ushered it into being. More generally, it is to approach the problem that all perceived facts are, a priori, always viewed from a particular vantage and within the context of some theory or narrative. In other words, the meaning of any fact or concept is, to borrow a Quinean phrase, theory laden; which is to say situated, embedded in a (Procrustean) narrative frame. As Timothy Clark likewise holds, facts and concepts are “not derived from experience but (already) from some theoretical framework, through which alone the selective observation of any discrete thing or characteristic becomes possible” (1991, 3).

In *Oedipus the King*, fate-filled Delphic determinism both colors detail and requires a complicit filling-in to make mythically one what is disparate, indeterminate, and “many,” defying number. Much like Oedipus, readers who concur with his predetermined guilt “restore the myth, it would seem, only from the outside and only at the expense of the play Sophocles has given us” (Goodhart 1978, 61). In the early years of a misguided and isolating war, amid mercenary voices, jingoism, and pro-war alliances satirized a few years later in Aristophanes’s *Acharnians* (circa 426 BCE), Sophocles’s gadfly play dramatizes the tragic costs of forging (in both senses) a coherent master narrative: of what must be overlooked, filled in, gerrymandered, and duly reconciled. The most terrifying yet mundane knowledge in *Oedipus the King* may well be that knowledge is never unbiased or undetermined, nor ever unimpeded.

“Sophocles’s myth of Oedipus may still amount to a tragedy,” a student of mine writes, “for the story of a man who wrongly convicts himself of regicide is certainly tragic” (Dierschow 2007, 7). Read in this way, the play shifts from being a drama about divine fate to being one about questioning the validity of all sources of truth, from oracles and prophets to custodial, etiological, and other tales. If people cannot place their trust in such traditional sources, the play implies, then the “golden thread of reason” followed by
Socrates and company may be what’s left. Yet Oedipus himself is largely a negative example, losing his reasoned way by accepting inadequate evidence of his guilt of incest and, via that charge, of parricide. He assembles his self-convicting narrative from a patchwork of prophecies, rumors, testimony, and interpretation. Oedipus is shone in this light to be the first mis-reader of his own myth (and complex), and to be complicit in slavishly imposing Delphi’s master narrative upon himself, his family, and city.47

In reading this tragedy about seeing and not seeing, what some students come to see is that nothing should be taken for granted, neither fact nor theory, not least what is at one’s feet.48 Protagoras’s proclamation, “Man is the measure of all things,” takes on an Oedipal complexity beyond the dramatic ironies invoked by traditional readings of the play. Indeed “to suggest that Oedipus may not have killed Laius is to play havoc with a legend that for twenty-eight hundred years has remained curiously intact” (Goodhart 1978, 61). It is also to call into question, and to bring to task, the myth’s fundamental tenets, long ago incorporated in Western tradition as a near gospel of guilt, judgment, and fate.49 Such renewed reasoning about Oedipus’s innocence can lead in turn to a reconsideration of the narrative foundations for psychoanalysis50 as well as for “anti-Oedipal” theories, and of Oedipus the King’s place in Sophoclean drama, literary history, and, not least, the classroom. Where “one” was, let “many” be. Yet given these findings and their implications, do not myth, prophecy, deductive reasoning, and other measures of language, including literary interpretation, emerge as deterministic vehicles in themselves? Do they become another kind of fate, governing origins and causes, evidence and identity? What then of that fateful riddle? “But it’s in riddle answering you are strongest,” Teiresias still taunts.

NOTES

For my students in Core 106. Special thanks to my colleague Ben Westervelt for setting me on the path, and to participants at the 2008 and 2009 conferences of The Association for Core Texts and Courses.

1 Sophocles, Oedipus the King (Oedipus Tyrannus [OT]), ll. 1329–30. Unless stated otherwise, all quotations and line numbers are from the English translation of the play by David Grene in The Complete Greek Tragedies: Sophocles I, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. My readings also benefit from Hugh Lloyd-Jones’s Greek/English Loeb edition, R. D. Dawe’s Greek edition, and especially Sir Richard C. Jebb’s Greek text with commentary and notes.


3 E.g., in The Interpretation of Dreams Freud begins his analysis of Oedipus the King by first acknowledging that the play is generally viewed as a tragedy of fate, whose “tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them.” The drama’s
ensuing “lesson” is “submission to the divine will and [the] realization of [man’s] own impotence” (2010, 279). But Freud of course turns the mythical tables, contending that Oedipus’s “destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same [Oedipal] curse upon us before our birth as upon him” (280).


Most translators and critics concur about the so-called herald’s lead place, and like Dawe and Jebb I find it most reasonable to count three men in the company rather than two (i.e., construing the herald and coachman to be one and the same). A party of three also befits Oedipus’s “all.”

Lowell Edmunds agrees on this greater number, deducing that Laius had “five attendants” with him (1985, 11), for a total of six. Dawe likewise counts five—one herald and four escorts—plus the king (1982, 168; l. 753). Moreover, to judge by what Oedipus, the former prince of Corinth and current king of Thebes, deems would “suit a prince” on such a royal mission (OT 752), an embassy of just three men seems unsuitably small (even Jocasta recalls “but five”).

For ease I frequently refer to the Perseus Digital Library’s online edition of Jebb’s text and commentary: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collections.

A potential liability of Jebb’s reconstruction of the particulars behind Oedipus’s recollection, as of my own and many other critics’ interpretations of the play, is that characters and back-stories end up being treated as if they were real people with real histories. But with its emphasis upon past and future events as well as upon testimony, origins, and coincidences—not to mention tragic ends—Oedipus the King invites such personifying approaches and potential fallacies. Moreover, if Oedipus is not like a human being, with a past and a future, there would seem to be nothing more than generically tragic about the play’s outcome.

Griffith even speculates that “the gods concealed the presence of the surviving shepherd from Oedipus” (1993, 105). To judge from Hyginus’s Fabulae, Oedipus’s smarting foot could also have distracted him, as Laius’s chariot had just run over it (2007, 67.3).

Jeffrey Rusten 1996 offers a detailed analysis of the Phocas crossroads and its likely, pseudo-geographical location in Sophocles’s play. Grene renders Creon’s Greek noun theôros as “He went . . . upon an embassy,” a theôros being one who undertakes such a journey. Jebb, Dawe, and others, however, more expansively define the word in this instance as one who journeys to an oracle, Delphi being the implied destination. Liddell and Scott’s Lexicon does list this oracular meaning for theôros but rather circularly cites the same line in Oedipus The King along with a similar usage in Oedipus at Colonus. Yet in the latter play the term
is accompanied by specific and seemingly necessary mention of the destination (theôron delphikes, OC 413). Jebb et al.’s specification of consulting an oracle could thus be a product of reading the Oedipus myth into Sophocles’s play. Moreover, according to Liddell and Scott a theôros can simply be “one who travels to see men and things.” On the functions of the theôros, see Andrea Wilson Nightingale 2004.

Liddell and Scott’s Lexicon defines dipla kentra as a two-pointed “horse goad.” Jebb similarly reads “double goad” as “a stick armed at the end with two points, used in driving.”

One is reminded of the mortician’s simple evidence for identifying Arthur as a king in Monty Python and the Holy Grail: “He hasn’t got shit all over him.” As for there being any family resemblance between Oedipus and his elderly victim, many a senior would fit Jocasta’s description of Laius: “tall,” “grizzled,” “and in his form not unlike” Oedipus (OT 742-43). Her litotes (“not unlike”) surely leaves room for differences as well as similarities.

See Frank Santi Russell 1999, esp. 71-75. The herald’s staff, the kerukeion, “was the sign of [the kerukes’] office and a tangible reminder that they were under the care and auspices of Hermes” (71).

See, for example, Greene 1929, 85-86 and Griffith 1993, 102-4.

Following Oedipus’s lead (OT 573-74, 705-6), Ahl suspects Creon of political intrigue, but goes further, distrusting his attribution of the plague to Laius’s murder (1991, 60). Bruce Heiden likewise questions the reliability of Creon’s Delphic report on this score, owing to its potential for “interpretive embellishment” (2005, 246-47). Although Creon may quote verbatim the oracle’s command “to drive out a pollution from our land, / pollution grown ingrained within the land” (OT 98-99), his additional statements could be interpretive, despite his claim that Apollo “commanded clearly” about the regicide (106). Linking Delphi’s pronouncement to a past act of local “pollution,” Creon, by this reckoning, thus infers that Thebes’s plague will be cured by “banishing a man, or expiation / of blood for blood,” for the “murder guilt” of Laius’s “murderers” (100-1, 107), this latter detail perhaps informed by the eyewitness’s testimony. But while the play may generate doubt about Creon’s construed causal connection between that past regicide and the city’s present plague (the latter inexplicably delayed as retribution), the text provides little ground for doubting the words of his initial report. Moreover, he dares Oedipus to verify its details (603-5).

Critics note that Oedipus is himself curiously, even suspiciously, inconsistent in his numbering of the murderers, as when he asks Creon “How could a robber dare a deed like this” (OT 123), and then observes that “Whoever / he was that killed the king may readily / wish to dispatch me” (139-40). Yet Greene speculates that Oedipus merely does so “because he, too, has once killed his man and embers of old memories are faintly fanned” (1929, 77), and points out that the Chorus, too, lapses into the singular (78). Oedipus may simply be contemplating the intentions of a generic schemer, perhaps even a local culprit like Creon. And after all, when it came to solving the Sphinx’s riddle of feet, Oedipus’s special gift (and proclivity) was to reduce the many to one.

Voltaire reasons that Sophocles’s Oedipus never resolves the glaring one vs. many discrepancy because it is in fact a red herring: a too-obvious, flawed device to

19 Against a twin-homicides scenario, Griffith contends that neither account mentions “wreckage and gore littering the intersection from any quadruple homicide already committed there” (1993, 104). If there were two massacres, where did the corpses go, including the king’s? It is true that no one mentions having recovered Laius’s body. Although word traveled to Thebes of his death, it would seem his remains did not. Pausanias relates that Plataea’s king “found the bodies lying [there] and buried them” (Descr. 1975, 10.5.4). But we cannot know this within Sophocles’s play, nor does any single-massacre hypothesis resolve the mystery.

20 “Sophocles, who also frequented Periclean circles, was acquainted with Parmenidean monism” (Champlin 1969, 342).

21 Apollodorus, Lib. 2007, 3.5. Oedipus the King makes no mention of the riddle’s details. Charles Segal recites the riddle’s earliest, much more elaborate rendition: “There is on earth a being two-footed, four-footed, and three-footed that has one name [literally, one voice]; and, of all creatures that move upon earth and in the heavens and in the sea, it alone changes its form. But when it goes propped on most feet, then is the swiftness of its limbs the weakest” (2001, 36).

22 To judge from maps of the ancient area, it was approximately 20 kilometers from Delphi to the area of the crossroads—Griffith sets the distance at “18 kilometres downhill” (1993, 104 n39)—plus another 10 kilometers to Thebes. Sophocles’s audience would reasonably judge the second leg of Oedipus’s journey, sans détour, to take no more than a day or two, counting the delay at the Sphinx.

23 Peter Koper perceives “a carefully designed, indirect but intentional indication that the shepherd recognized Oedipus as the murderer and asked to leave town. . . . The lines bear no other interpretation” (2006, 92). But although the Greek text, like most of its English translations, indicates that the returned witness saw that Laius was “dead” (olalota) and Oedipus in power, I find no reason to conclude that he recognized Oedipus; only that he discovered a new king on the throne in place of his former lord, whose loss he balanced against the new ruler’s gain and his own diminished fortunes.

24 Oedipus’s recollection of his departure from Delphi seems muddled in the retelling, and isn’t helped by Grene’s translation, “But Phoebus sent me home again unhonoured / in what I came to learn” [OT 789; emphasis added], which might imply that Oedipus literally returned to Corinth and fled from there to the crossroads. But home is the last place Oedipus would go from Delphi’s oracle. Jebb’s rendering better captures this sense of the Greek: “Phoebus sent me forth [eksêpempsen] disappointed of the knowledge for which I had come.” And in fact, as Oedipus subsequently states, upon hearing Apollo’s prophecy he “fled, and in the days / that followed . . . would measure from the stars / the whereabouts of Corinth” (OT 794–96).

25 Taking a side road from Young’s line of reasoning, given that it is Jocasta who recalls the Daulia fork, might that town instead have been Laius’s destination? This royal itinerary would provide just as much of a tragic twist of fate as would Oedipus’s own travels thither. For that matter, is it really less tragic, or less in keeping with
Sophoclean tragedy, that Laius and Oedipus would have missed each other had either arrived at the crossroads a minute earlier or later?

26 Socrates informs Meno that it is not that, “knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them . . . with the perplexity I feel myself. So with virtue now. I don’t know what it is” (Meno 1961, 80d). The earlier Socratic dialogue Ion dramatizes a similar dismantling of traditional forms of poetic-prophetic knowledge and skill. Along this markedly agnoseological path, see Andrew Bennett, Ignorance: Literature and Agnoiology 2009, 9-24. Some six years after Oedipus the King’s premiere, Socrates would, with his “Thinking School” of Sophists, be uproariously lampooned in Aristophanes’s Clouds (423 BCE).


28 “τὸν Λαῖού τόινυν τις ἐν γεννηματῶν” (OT 1167). Jebb states that this phrase can mean either “he was one of the children of Laius” or “he was one of the children of the household of Laius.”

29 Pausanias relates that the mother of Oedipus’s children was not even Jocasta but a second wife, Euryganeia (1975, 9.5.11-12; cf. Odyssey 11.271).

30 E.g., Segal 1981, 207, 211-12, 223; Ahl 2008, 110-11. One could conjecture that Oedipus was encouraged as a youth to accept such creative, and more favorable, renderings of his name by parents uncomfortable with all that the cognomen “Swell-foot” slanderously implied: abandonment, exposure, and adoption.

31 Simon Goldhill points to the “two-foot” Oi-dipous rendering, which he claims “echoes the riddle” of feet (cited Ahl 1991, 157).

32 Cf. Ahl 2008, 111. Segal also reads the “old pain” as one of reproach (1988, 134). For his part, Mark Anspach reasons that even if the king does have foot scars or ailments, the evidence still “is hardly decisive” for it does not logically follow that if “Jocasta’s husband has bad feet and Jocasta’s son has bad feet . . . th[en] her husband is her son” (2004, xxi).

33 For Knox, however, the messenger’s provocative puns are but “the ironic laughter of the gods whom Oedipus ‘excludes’ in his search for the truth” (1957, 184).

34 By questioning his parents’ legitimacy as birth parents and by concealing from them his journey to the oracle, Oedipus, Heiden contends, “approached Delphi as a man who had already violated his family” (2005, 255). Perhaps Oedipus received a prophecy to match, and all from having taken umbrage at a drunkard’s slander of “bastard” back in Corinth (OT 781). By this reckoning, Sophocles portrays Oedipus not only as one whose impious actions have symbolically killed his Corinthian parents but also as someone predisposed to acts of symbolic parricide and its correlative feelings of guilt, regardless and heedless of fact.

35 Heiden argues that even if Oedipus in fact killed someone other than Laius, by his own admission he was still the murderer of another man and his company, and therefore “still stained by impurity, and still the legitimate object of Apollo’s outrage” (2005, 245). But even though one might, like Heiden, reasonably ascribe bloodguilt to Oedipus, no one in the play and its system of judgment does so; nor is such pollution even assigned in Oedipus at Colonus.
Teiresias’s “teaching” is implicit in his ‘you asked for it’ retort. See Dawe 1982, l. 357. Knox notes that kæleis “is the normal legal term for ‘calling’ a witness” (1957, 85).

Of this plague time Thucydides writes that many in Athens no longer feared or worshipped the old gods, judging the results to be equally dire and unpredictable whether they worshipped them or did not (History 1954, 2.7). And because, like the destructive war, the city’s plague did not distinguish “between the just and the unjust” (Knox 1957, 169), the gods increasingly came to seem irrelevant—or even nonexistent.

This outright hostility toward Delphi is reflected in Euripides’s attacks on the oracle as well as by the fact that eventually even those Athenians who still sought oracular truth would turn from Apollo’s Delphi to Zeus’s oracle at Dodona in Epirus (Cf. Pausanias, Descr. 1975, 1.17.5).

Antiphon, Testimonia 2002, 9 (fr. Gnomologium Vindobonense). According to Michael Gagarin, Antiphon’s suggestion that prophets employ an “ambiguous conjunction of guesswork and intelligence” is in keeping with this sophist’s aim to “refute[e] traditional interpretations of dreams” by demonstrating that “any dream could yield any meaning to a clever interpreter” (2002, 100-1). When a man asked if it was bad omen that a sow had devoured her piglets, Antiphon is said simply to have “observed that the sow was emaciated from hunger because of its keeper’s meanness,” adding “Rejoice at the omen, since the sow, despite being so hungry, did not eat your children” (Test. 2002, T 8).

Teiresias literally refers to “murderers,” although a singular culprit, Oedipus, is the target: “I declare that you are the ‘murderers’ and the people you are looking for” (Dawe 1982, l. 362).

Oedipus’s Greek dubs Teiresias a magus (OT 387). According to E. D. Francis, “the history of Achaemenian Persia amply demonstrates that the Magi might on occasion attempt to manipulate their religious power for political ends. This is surely Oedipus’ point” (1992, 345).

See Jebb’s commentary, l. 981. The oracle reference seems implicit in the Greek, rendering the line something like “as well as in oracles” or “as in this oracle.”

Even after his self-blinding Oedipus appears to stand on his own two feet, begging his daughters “come to my hands” (OT 1480), a phrase that, although in part figurative, appears also to be physically descriptive: Creon soon bids Oedipus to “let go” of both children (1523). Regarding the long-questioned authorship and authority of the play’s concluding lines (esp. 1468–1530), see David Kovacs 2009.

In the Phoenissae Teiresias’s prophecy of filicide “hardly seems to have any relevance [to the outcome]” (Papadopoulou 2001, 24), while in the Bacchae his authority “is evoked only to be proved inadequate in the context of the play” (31). Indeed the latter drama portrays Teiresias as curiously unable to grasp Dionysus’s wisdom save “in the most superficial way” (Segal 1982, 303) and adds the “distinctly comic” effect of having the aged prophet offer to dance (255).

Cf. René Girard: “Forgetting that truth, partial and limited, bears the imprint of its true origin . . . [n] the heated debates and battles of men as well as the imbri-
cation of converging desires, Tiresias will think he incarnates the truth and he will abandon himself to oracular vaticinations” (1970, 20).

46 These words echo Geoffrey O’Brien’s review of Janet Malcolm’s anatomy of a recent murder investigation and trial, *Iphigenia in Forest Hills*. By zeroing in on details discarded from the prosecution’s assembled narrative of events, Malcolm reveals “the unreconcilable gap between an acceptable master narrative—the version that everyone must agree on in order to keep moving forward—and the specific qualities of what actually happens” (2011, 4).

47 Contrarily, from a Girardian perspective of social contagion and scapegoating (cf. Gk. *pharmakos*), *Oedipus the King*’s “tragic lot consists in a gradual polarization of the violence of a few, then of the many, and finally of all against one” (Gebauer 1995, 261). Such scapegoating of course was not uncommon in the Athens of Sophocles and Socrates, as both ritual expiation (at the Thargelia festival) and political ostracism.

48 Even Oedipus’s vaunted riddle-solving skill could rest more in knowing about his own feet (*oida-podal* deduction) “as part of a name for man” (Chase 1979, 61) than in inductive reasoning as such. Feet—two feet, swelled feet, know(n) feet—make (the) “man.”

49 To question the foundation for Oedipus’s guilt, and for his fate, is to call into question what Oedipus affirms and perhaps also what the Oedipus complex forever avows—an avowal Deleuze and Guattari envision inscribed above the International Psychoanalytical Association’s door: “Let no one enter here who does not believe in Oedipus” (1977, 45).

50 “This discovery [of the Oedipus complex] is *confirmed* by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity,” Freud avers. “What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles’ drama which bears its name. . . . The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be *likened to the work of psycho-analysis*—that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta” (Freud 2010, 278, 280; emphasis added). As Juan-David Nasio recently affirms, without this complex’s buoying “conceptual apparatus,” most “psychoanalytic notions would be adrift” (2010, 49).
Works Cited


