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# **On the Razor-Edge of Fate**

## **Perceptions of destiny in Sophocles' Theban plays**

\*

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## **Declaration of own work**

I confirm that the following thesis is my own work. None of the information has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. None of the information has been submitted for publication.

Edinburgh, 30th August 2013,

Mariana Penha Ferreira Vieira

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## Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to analyse the differences and similarities in the perceptions of fate and aleatory events in the *Antigone*, the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and the *Oedipus at Colonus* of Sophocles.

Rather than dwelling on the anachronistic question of “determinism versus free-will”, the focus will be on the ways in which the characters themselves interpret the things that happen to them in their lifespan, in terms of luck, fate, or things that could have been different had they known better at a given moment of time. The conditions in which they perform the determining actions of their lives will be under scrutiny. Actions that seem to arise from contingency, from the previous moves of other actors, from accidental miscalculation, or even from voluntary offence will be contrasted with those for which there is no visible chain of cause and effect, and that are thus attributed to the desires of the gods or to inborn misfortune.

There is, from one play to another, a contrast between authoritative assertions of characters with acknowledged prophetic power (Tiresias in the first two works, Oedipus in the later play) that lead the audience to hope for different things: in the *Antigone*, it shall be argued, there is more room for the possibility of a timely solution for the conflict, than in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where everything has happened already before the start of the play. In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus’ new status means that he has understood more about the functioning of reality and the workings of destiny.

The ways in which the plot structure itself conveys a view on the workings of fate will also be analysed, from the series of coincidences in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* to the function of the episodes in the other two plays.

Even though the Theban plays are not philosophy treatises, the echoes of contemporary philosophical ideas are a constant in their text. Wherever relevant, a contrast with the Presocratic corpus has been made in an attempt to identify some of the thought patterns reused and adapted by Sophocles for his specific purposes and portrayals of the human position in the vaster cosmos.

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## Introduction

### 1. Why do things happen the way they do?

This work deals with fate, chance, and the different interpretations on the origin of events told by the characters in the three Theban plays, as well as human foresight and control over what is to come. The starting situations and the general setting of each story are very distinct: the *Oedipus Tyrannus* starts with a problem of unknown origin devastating the city, the plague, and an incitation from an oracle to expiate a crime of blood. At the centre of the plot is the tale of self-discovery by a man that could not step out of the single path laid down for him by Delphi. At the end, the patterns of destiny have been revealed to such an extent that it is safe to assume that Oedipus goes into exile, even without it being made explicit by the text: once the oracles have been demonstrated, the words of Tiresias will be enough to deduce the rest. The *Antigone* tells of ruler's bad decisions under the pressure of the end of a civil war. At three different moments, Creon has the chance to change his course of action (Antigone has too, for that matter), which he will do only too late, having to suffer the full consequences of his former actions. In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, we witness the heroization of a man who endured so much, and the obstacles he has to face before his last moments amongst the rest of the mortals. Oedipus' type of destiny is now separated from the rest of the mortals, he who before had been the uttermost example of human suffering and precariousness. The destinies of the other people in his family however, are still apparently being played out, especially that of Polynices, who believes he still has a chance to win against his brother in Thebes.

In the three plays, the characters attribute the origin of the events in their lives to different causes. The cause is often multiple: the wish of the gods expressed by the oracles, character and state of mind, contingency, family lines. Some of these factors weigh more than others, from one play to another. Sometimes the very structure of the plot proves the opinions of the protagonists wrong, and the dramatic tension consists exactly in the contrast between what is being said on stage and what the audience knows or can guess.

In the *OT*, the questions about fate are the most prominent. Some questions will arise from the study of this play, in the second chapter: given the ignorance

characteristic of humankind regarding themselves and the world, how are people to live their lives? How do people perceive what happens to them? What is the point of consulting the oracles if they cannot be understood, are perceived as fake, or are self-fulfilling? How is it explained that the just suffer, if there is no evidence in the near past of their bad behaviour? How can someone be both innocent and responsible for a wrong deed? What does that tell every one of us about our own perceptions of the world?

In the *Antigone* and in the *OC*, though these questions do not take the central stage — Sophocles was writing different plays, after all — they are still prompted by two neighbouring topics central to any of the three texts: one is conduct, the other is the possibility of knowledge. Since people have no means to know the future nor the full dimension of reality, and even less what the gods have in store, how are they to act in the best possible way? What separates the good ruler from the tyrant, the wicked from the just? Is it possible to learn and change one's conduct? Does that learning result in happiness? In the first chapter, it shall be argued that the *Antigone* is the only play where changing a course of events appears, at least for a moment, as a real possibility. Even then, however, the combination of several factors conditions the outcome: Creon is stubborn and will not learn in time because of that (though character is again something that is out of one's control). On the other hand, his destiny is played against Antigone's; both characters make their moves, and one's move cancels the other's. Antigone dies before Creon can rescue her.

Oedipus' fate in the *OC*, on its own, is necessarily alien to most human beings. In the third chapter, we will nonetheless turn our attention to the effects of the years in exile on Oedipus, and his endurance on the basis of his heroization. It is Oedipus who will bring up the conditions in which the events of his life took place, and who will offer to Theseus an explanation of the eternal alternation of contraries regulating the world of change where humans dwell. Oedipus' semi-prophetic stance, already on his way to liberation from the wheel of fortune, contrasts with the spectacle of the political world. It is in the analysis of the other characters of the play that the old set of questions will reappear: is one's character defined by birth? Does conduct change fate? Is there justice in the cosmos? If the good are to be rewarded, and the wicked punished, why does Antigone suffer?

Some concepts will be needed: fate (μοῖρα) and chance (τύχη), in the plays, go hand in hand. They both represent whatever happens to the agent outside of their control. In broad terms, fate, however, tends to have a personal aspect: it is allotted and becomes part of the agent. Chance, or luck, is all that is out of an agent's decision and comes to their encounter: the weather, the coincidence of running into someone else. Three other concepts determine how things happen the way they do: necessity (ἀνάγκη), character (φύσις), and states of mind (φέροντες). The character and the states of mind, passive or not to learning and change, reduce the options of outcome: person X is likely to act in such and such way, or is in such state of mind that will not consider a different option. It is because person X is so and so that their fate fits them, in most cases. Necessity, like fate and chance, restricts freedom: things happen because they must, and the agent is forced down one single and inevitable path (that may be unique or open to variations: no matter which way one takes, the outcome is the same). So some of these factors are internal, though not necessarily controllable (φύσις, even μοῖρα), the others are external (ἀνάγκη, τύχη). The terrible revelation in the *OT* makes all of these aspects converge in one, against the agent's perception. In the *Antigone*, the separation between internal and external is clearer: Creon's state of mind makes him act in such way, but the constant motion of the external world makes it so that his decisions are restricted by time. If he does not act fast, the consequences will start, in a succession that cannot be stopped (as falling domino pieces). In the *OC*, Polynices' character has already determined the necessity of his return to Thebes long before the play starts.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Why the Theban plays?

Ideally, this dissertation would have compared the picture of human destiny drawn by each play in the Sophoclean corpus, and its consistency from one text to the other. Time and space (and the feeling that there is not so much difference between analysing three plays or seven in a lost corpus of over one hundred) forced

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<sup>1</sup> There are other words for chance and fate that we shall encounter in the chapters. For a study on how the characters are vulnerable to luck, especially in the *Antigone*, cf. Nussbaum (1986). A recent survey on the workings of fate and luck in the *OT* is in Eidinow (2011). A study on the concept of fate in connection with the origin of good and evil in antiquity is in Greene (1944); cf. Dietrich (1965) for a detailed study of the words for fate, especially in Homer.

me to reduce the scope to a manageable number of plays. The most obvious choice was to cut it down to the works dealing with the family of Oedipus. First, because of the centrality of the topic in the *OT*. Secondly, because even though the plays are not a trilogy, they deal with the same two generations of characters in one myth. From a narrative point of view, even though the plays are not a direct continuum, very little is incompatible.<sup>2</sup> Would the perceptions of fate be compatible as well? Would Creon's position between two alternative courses of action in the *Antigone* contradict the pessimism of the *OT*, or are there points of contact that allow the multiplicity of explanations and the different perspectives at once?

### 3. Polar interpretations of Sophocles

The discussion of fate in Sophocles has been centred mostly around the *OT*, and polarised between two main interpretations, made famous by R. P. Winnington-Ingram as “pietists” (or “theologisers”, which may or may not be also “moralists”), and “hero-worshippers” (or “humanists”).<sup>3</sup> For the former group of scholars the general agreement is that the gods are just and punish the hero for some sort of crime (though the levels of sympathy towards Oedipus vary greatly between solidarity and compassion for someone who is a victim of fate to a desperate effort to find evidence for his guilt and bad character). For the “hero-worshippers”, Oedipus is the example of human excellence and courage against a hostile world, and the gods,

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<sup>2</sup> The two main incompatibilities that come to mind is Ismene mentioning Oedipus' death in the prologue of the *Antigone*, against his apotheosis in the *OC*, and the character of Creon from the earlier play to the latest.

<sup>3</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980:9), quoting Friis Johansen's terms on the latter's survey on Sophoclean bibliography.

For the interpretations of the *OT* before the last century, especially the division between Christianizing authors and Aristotelians, cf. Lurje (2004); cf. also Borza (2007) for the reception of Sophocles's tragedies besides the *OT* in Italy during the Renaissance.

For a separation of twentieth century scholarship between mostly Nietzschean and Freudian trends, cf. Segal (2001), against the Freudian reading, cf. Vernant (1972:75-98), and for the influence of the philosophers (esp. Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche) in the interpretation of tragedy in general, cf. Kaufmann (1992).

For an overview of the interpretation of Sophocles balancing between Jebb or Campbell's (1871) “psychologising” approach and Wilamowitz's (1917) focus on the dramatic technique, developed by Reinhardt (1979), cf. Markantonatos (2012b:5-6).

if they exist at all, are silent or cannot be understood.<sup>4</sup> For some of these critics, Oedipus' actions were completely controlled by the oracles, for others Oedipus is a "free agent" from the first moment on stage to the last, even if some events in his life were foreordained by the oracles. As Ruth Scodel points out, both interpretative trends, to find support in the text, have to ignore one half of what is said that supports the contrary view: "hero-worshippers tend to dismiss choral moralising as ethically trivial, mere conventionality. Pietists tend to ignore the plays' emotional weight and moral complexity, finding trite judgments where the spectator open to the drama is carried away by sympathy or deeply troubled".<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, the debate is out of date: these polarised trends, already challenged by Winnington-Ingram, are now changing, and different alternatives have been emerging, most of them accepting partially the claims of both pietists and hero-worshippers into a more balanced whole.<sup>6</sup> Several scholars now propose a combined interpretation: Oedipus is both responsible for his deeds and morally innocent, both a "free agent" and a victim of the design of the gods, and tragedy lies exactly in this duplicity and ambiguity. Things happen because of factors out of human control, in some cases, the direct wish of a god (Apollo in the *OT*), but fate is revealed by the human action corroborating what has been fated, regardless of the conditions in which that is done (i.e. aware of the dimension of the actions or not). It is with this approach that I have found myself in closer agreement.

#### 4. Aspects of early philosophy

Even though the correspondences between tragedy and philosophy are often discussed, surprisingly little has been written about Sophocles and the Presocratic thinkers, and, to the best of my knowledge, there is no systematic study of their

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<sup>4</sup> On Oedipus' guilt, cf. e.g. Bowra (1944), Vellacott (1964), Lefèvre (1987), Schmitt (1988), and more recently Griffith (1996). On Oedipus' innocence, cf. e.g. Sheppard (1920), Dodds (1966). For the classical example of the hero-worshipper side, cf. Whitman (1951), but see also Knox (1964) for the characteristics of the Sophoclean hero, and Reinhardt (1979).

For a strange and untenable view that Oedipus does not prove that Jocasta is his mother, nor that he killed Laius, cf. Ahl (1991).

<sup>5</sup> Scodel (2012:235).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Winnington-Ingram (1980), Scodel (1984), Manuwald (1992), Williams (1993), Lawrence (2008), Kovacs (2009b), Cairns (2013).

language and themes in contrast.<sup>7</sup> The present work is not such study either — quite the contrary, the references to the early thinkers might feel unrooted in chapters two and three. I have included them, however, because the closer this dissertation approached the submission date, the more convinced I grew that the comparison with the Presocratics was a field worth exploring and that looking at their texts together with Sophocles’ would bring a better understanding of the contemporary debates being rehearsed in the plays. Alas, that would take another dissertation to explore — may that be a path that I will be able to work in the future.

More than one single thesis, the plays seem to bring into confrontation several types of approach to one same question. This is not to say that Sophocles had not a “thesis” or a “message” to transmit with his plays, but simply that no character alone should be seen as the spokesperson of the poet. In that sense, a play would be closer to a Platonic dialogue than to a treatise.<sup>8</sup> In the *OT*, for example, there is the confrontation between four distinct forms of speech: the scientific methods of Oedipus, the rhetorical strategies of Jocasta, the proverbial tirades of Creon, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Long (1968:167) acknowledges the importance of the linguistic parallels with the Presocratics, but he too would need “a further book to develop these points in the detail they deserve”.

Kamerbeek (1948) focuses on Sophocles and Heraclitus. Knox (1957) surveys the scientific and medical vocabulary of the time, but only relates it to the philosophers sporadically, especially Anaxagoras. Kitto (1958) rehabilitates Sophocles as an active participant in the contemporary philosophical debates, especially in the relations between god and mortals. Winnington-Ingram (1965 and 1980) puts Sophocles in the broader intellectual context, and analyses his direct continuation of Aeschylus’ thought. Bollack (1995), unsurprisingly given his earlier work, finds occasional parallels with Empedocles. Vayos Liapis’ *Άγνωστος Θεός* (2003) addresses the distinction between divine and human knowledge for both the Presocratics and Sophocles. Allan (2005) is a useful though very brief survey of some major themes of tragedy, presocratic philosophy and the Sophists in the fifth century. The text reacts against the traditional view of, e.g. Snell (1953) that philosophy is an intellectual progression from the mythical world of tragedy. Seaford’s several studies comparing early thought and theatre (listed in the bibliography) focus especially on Aeschylus. Cairns (2013) brings several contributions that aim at bridging the gap between archaic thought and tragedy.

The relation between Sophocles and philosophical thinkers is another area where the scholarly debate has turned around a few dogmas for a long time, that only now are being reevaluated. One of them is his hostility to rationalism and to the Sophists; for the latter, cf. e.g. Nestlé (1910). For an interpretation more sympathetic to the Sophists’ influence from which Sophocles would have departed, cf. Rose (1976), taken up by Wilson (2012) to use the *Electra* as a case-study of Sophocles’ engagement with contemporary philosophy.

The antagonistic views held by Plato against tragedy, and, above all, the importance of the *OT* in Aristotle’s *Poetics* have been discussed abundantly, and the bibliography is too vast to list here.

<sup>8</sup> This point is made already by Allan (2005:81): p 81 “Like the interlocutors of a philosophical dialogue, the characters of tragedy present various points of view on these complex issues (...), yet each play, taken as a whole, does not lead the audience to a single definitive answer: rather than expound dogma, tragedy provokes further questions”.

Heiden (2012:131) sees in the *Trachiniae* a “provocation to philosophy, i.e. to self-conscious thinking about thinking”. He continues thus the analysis of Lawrence (1978), who reads the play as a contest between different ways represented by the characters to determine truth from appearance.

prophetic words of Tiresias. In the *Antigone*, the confrontation between Creon and Antigone is famously interpreted as the confrontation of the laws of nature and the laws of the city.<sup>9</sup> Each of these approaches reflects an interpretation of reality and bear consequences in the way characters act.<sup>10</sup> Many of the overall motifs (e.g. limitations of human knowledge, change and stability, unity and plurality), however, are shared with the early thinkers, and I have attempted to explore some of those relations.

## 5. Why this again?

It is common that new studies on the plays of Sophocles, especially on topics such as fate, start with an apology. To an extent, that apology makes sense: many of the arguments presented below will have appeared several times elsewhere, in many forms. On the other hand (and my excuse might be naive), the interpretation of Sophocles is far from consensual, and it is a debate that is worth opening again and again, rather than letting one trend or another crystallise. The Theban plays, after all, though perhaps with the exception of the *OC*, continue to be relevant to our real lives and reflection about the world — the fundamental problems raised by Sophocles did not change nor have been answered.<sup>11</sup> If that is the case, constant reassessments of the plays by new generations and new points of view, be it academic or artistic, are what keeps tragedy in the collective memory and makes sense of it into the present.

The departing approach of this work was an attempt to look back at the text without the bias of the moralist or humanist answers, and only then turn to the comparison of the different interpretations in the scholarly panorama. Of course, it is hardly possible for someone reading Greek at university to come to Sophocles without preconceptions of all sorts, so I have certainly failed my departing goal but I

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. also Lloyd (2012:572) on the four levels of understanding in the opening scene of the *Ajax*, namely “audience, god, intelligent mortal, madman”.

<sup>10</sup> Reinhardt’s (1979:98-104) interpretation of the *OT* framed by the opposition between appearance and reality is right, and places Sophocles in the epistemological debate of the fifth century.

<sup>11</sup> I therefore disagree with Markantonatos (2012:8) when he maintains that “it is true that some scholars, not least Bowra and Knox, have overstated the popular idea that in the dramatisation of the Oedipus story Sophocles has depicted the supreme crisis of human destiny”. From all the dogmas on the *OT*, the idea of Oedipus as paradigm (and extreme example of something that will normally only happen in smaller scale to any human being) is the one that makes more sense, and that explains part of the everlasting appeal of the play.

am still convinced that it was worth to try to keep it in mind as a principle. The dogmas around tragedy are sometimes so incompatible that trying to understand their origins, and to force myself to have a stand on issues that I thought had been somehow long solved for me by centuries of scholarship proved to be challenging and humbling: the incompatible dogmas arise because the text is difficult and uncertain, our distance from its original and ignorance of the context is huge, and transmission was and is often done biased by different moral codes and agendas. I am convinced, however, that PhD dissertations should be a *tour de force* on relevant matters, but also a gratifying and enjoyable exercise. The student of literature in me found in Sophocles' technique a constant source of pleasure; the human that I am found comfort and sympathy in Sophocles' characters, in all their darkness and greatness. The scholar that one day I may or may not become was happy to give her small contribution to one of the most engaging debates in Classics.

## Antigone

The *Antigone* depicts a very self-contained and specific situation: after a civil war the winning side must decide what to do to bring peace back to Thebes. The protagonists of the war were two brothers fighting for the throne. It is likely that other families have fought on different sides as well. In the play, we see the newly appointed ruler, himself related by blood to both sides of the struggle, having to decide what to do with the bodies of the adversaries. His edict forbidding the burial of the generals of the losing side is disobeyed by his niece, sister of both claimants for the throne, to whom there is the religious and family duty to pay the funeral rites to her kinsmen, regardless of their side. Alas, the attacking brother is seen by the new ruler as a traitor, and the possibility of new upheavals must be contained with a more and more authoritative hand.

So far so good. The *Antigone* is not primarily a play about the origin of events and the intellectual perception of the human place in the vast universe. Rather, it deals with learning how to rule, with learning that the gods of the dead must not be disrespected, that the order of the world of the living and the world of the dead must not be reversed, or even that the ties of blood carry responsibilities.

It is in the possibility for this learning to happen that the questions of fate are implicit. Creon is not dissuaded by seeing that it is his niece who is the culprit, nor by his son's plea, nor by the rumour that all the city is shocked by his decisions. The only possibility left is make a prophet appear. If Creon cannot understand what is happening around him, then the authority of Tiresias could have been enough to warn him of what was to come.

The first half of this chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of the scenes of persuasion where Creon is confronted with Antigone, Haemon, and Tiresias. These scenes follow a progression, starting from the weakest link to the authority of the gods. Tiresias' intervention is the fundamental turning point of the play. Creon's actions have already been performed: he has, in fact, already disrespected the gods, defiled the dead, condemned his niece to be buried alive, and neglected the consequences of that death to his son. He cannot know but, from this chain of events, will result the suicide of his wife as well. Tiresias, however, appears to say that

there is still time to change the final outcome, if only Creon changes his course of action. There is, therefore, a moment where fate is split into two possibilities.

Why does Creon carry on in his stubbornness? In the second half of this chapter, we shall suggest that there are in the *Antigone* three additional conditions delimiting one's destiny. One is birth: this is, after all, the disgraceful family of the Labdacidae. Even though the family curse plays a very small role in any of the Theban plays, it is still alluded as a pattern in the life of all its elements. Therefore, *Antigone* herself is condemned to suffer (she has, after all, already witnessed all the woes of her close family), regardless of what she does to confirm that suffering. Another reason is character. Both *Antigone* and *Creon* are stubborn and intransigent.<sup>12</sup> *Creon* has in his personality the seeds of tyranny, and guides himself by a strong set of preconceived ideas that limit his understanding. Finally, there is the possibility that the gods were indeed interested in *Creon's* downfall, to restore the balance disrupted by his mistaken deeds. The gods' presence is harder to understand in the *Antigone* than it will be in the *OT*, but there are two mysterious supernatural signs (a device that will be absent from the later play): the storms surrounding the burial of *Polynices*, the rejection of sacrifices in the origin of *Tiresias's* visit.

If *Creon* has offended the gods, it is natural that he pays for what he has done. Was there ever the chance to fix his wrongs? How was *Creon's* fate to be played against *Antigone's* fate? If *Antigone* is to die, both because that is her fate and because her death is fundamental for *Creon's* punishment, then how real was the option left for *Creon* to act differently? Some of these questions will have no answer, not because they are not raised in the text, but because the writer and his audience are humans, and therefore as puzzled about some of these topics as the characters in the play. Finally, and that is also advanced in the text, everything is to be understood against a frame where humankind is vulnerable to the passage of time, and that the passage of time brings change and constant alternation between contraries. But that is a matter that we will have to come back to by the end of our analysis of the three plays.

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<sup>12</sup> On stubbornness as a feature of the Sophoclean hero, cf. Knox (1964), who considers *Creon's* yielding unheroic. Knox is answered by Carter (2012:112-4), who maintains that if we are to consider any of the two unheroic, it would have to be *Antigone*, for "at no point is she unaware of their [her actions] causes and consequences."

## 1. Creon's decision and the scenes of dissuasion

A central element of suspense in the play is the possibility that Antigone might still be saved, and that Creon might still learn in time to fix his wrongs. Regardless of the ambiguity between Antigone's position and Creon's belief that he is defending the polis,<sup>13</sup> there is a clear demonstration that Creon has done something wrong that needs to be fixed, namely, disrespecting the rites of death by keeping a corpse unburied, and inverting the two spheres by condemning a living person to a living death.

Creon is confronted with three opponents who initiate three moments where the ruler can still change his mind. First, his confrontation with Antigone, then with Haemon, and finally with Tiresias. The opponents do not all have the same weight.

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<sup>13</sup> The traditionally labelled "Hegelian view" is that Creon and Antigone have equally valid points of view, that are just impossible to bring together. While I agree that the audience will necessarily have some degree of sympathy for Creon for his foolishness, I do not think it is possible to argue that Sophocles wanted his audience to think that Creon was right to condemn Antigone nor to forbid the burial of the opponent, in whichever form.

On the ambiguity of the sides, cf. e.g. Knox (1964:114) points out that Antigone's concerns are private: "But as Sophocles so repeatedly emphasises in everything Antigone says, her attitude is not that higher, enlightened loyalty to the *polis* which pursues the best policy rather than the immediately expedient; it is an attitude which ignores the interests of the *polis* completely. The fact that she is right about what is best for Thebes is merely accidental (...) She completely ignores the obligations which membership of the *polis* imposes, and even though Creon, their self-appointed spokesman, is wrong in the demand he makes, no one in the audience for whom the play was written would have denied their force or sympathised with Antigone's refusal to reckon with them".

Bowra (1944:67), upset with the ways in which scholarship read Hegel's intuition, and even though he agrees that the audience's feelings towards the characters will swing back and forth, thinks that Sophocles "built his play on a contrast not between obvious wrong and obvious right but between the real arrogance of Creon and the apparent arrogance of Antigone".

For a recent synthesis of the "orthodox view" (Antigone is right and Creon is wrong) and the Hegelian view, cf. Lardinois (2012:59ff), who offers his own conciliation, arguing that both characters "get what they ask for" and "recognize, too late, the negative consequences of their own behaviour".

Carter (2012:116-20) argues convincingly against the equal validity of both sides, but also criticises the "misleading" bipolarity in the structuralist approach identified with Segal (1981). The criticism of Segal's approach is continued by Heiden (2012:130), against the opposition "nature and culture". It is a fact that ironies and contradictions frame this and other plays. That irony is very often expressed by the troubled relationship between those pairs of opposites, that sometimes confound themselves into one unity, or work in a chiasmic relation. This "irony of the opposites" that are not always that opposite seems to me to be rooted in ancient Greek thought long before structuralism. The contrasts are present in the text, and not invented by the interpreter: the language of taming and wilderness in the *OT*, for example, is pervasive. Also, these coincidences and unexpected reversals of status are fundamental for the play as a work of art. There are not in the *Antigone* nor in any other of the extant plays only two opposites, but several, and their incompatibility, reversal, or fusion is part of the very structure of the plot. Countless agents and concepts in the plays, e.g. "hope", "wandering", the weather, Apollo, and so on, have both positive and negative consequences. Segal never denied this unification, quite the contrary.

The first confrontation is with the sister of the traitor (and of the leader of the winning side), a sister who has just disobeyed Creon's first edict. Creon's position is of higher hierarchical power, both by the distribution of social roles according to gender, and for being the leader of the victorious side after the civil strife; a strife caused by the two brothers of Antigone to begin with.<sup>14</sup> With Haemon, Creon's position is again of power, this time familial power: sons are not to question their fathers. Finally, the scene with Tiresias puts Creon face to face with someone who is not under his rule, but who is a slave of Apollo (cf. *OT* 410). Tiresias has access to a type of knowledge that Creon cannot reach, and is the closest representative of the gods amongst humans. His attempt to change the course of Creon's action should be taken seriously as a sign that there are still two alternative destinies being played. What will presently interest us in the *Antigone* is the succession of these scenes and the gradual heightening of tension as one scene narrows down the possible outcome until it culminates in the final catastrophe.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.1. Creon versus Antigone: digging up the trenches

The play starts with yet another scene of dissuasion, fundamental to establish the firm grounding of the two sides that are about to contend. In the prologue Ismene tries to convince Antigone not to disobey Creon's edict. At this point, Creon has already decided on the penalty for those burying the fallen generals (22-36), but is yet to announce it publicly. The city has just seen the end of a civil war and Creon is issuing what Bernard Knox has called "an emergency decree (...) resembling what we would call martial law".<sup>16</sup> The consequences of disobeying the edict are clear: those who do so will be publicly stoned (36, φόνον προκείσθαι δημόλευστον ἐν πόλει).

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<sup>14</sup> The family of Oedipus has already brought enough problems to Thebes. As much as the two sisters may have been a late detail in the myth, we are not to forget that they are the daughters of Oedipus, and they stress that same aspect in the prologue.

<sup>15</sup> In agreement with Jouanna (2007:383): "Sophocle va ensuite multiplier les scènes de confrontation où l'on verra le roi face d'abord aux jeunes de sa famille, à Antigone la révoltée, puis à sa soeur Ismène, puis à son fils Hémon. Dans toute cette partie, la tragédie est à la fois politique et familiale. Chaque confrontation se termine dans la violence, et la colère croissante du roi se traduit par des décisions de plus en plus irréparables".

<sup>16</sup> Knox (1964: 95).

Antigone's resolution to disobey is also clear, and she states her reasons: loyalty to her dead family, and respect for the nether gods that require funeral rites (69-77).

Ismene brings up to the mind of the audience the frail position of Antigone: as women, they should not disobey men, and that they have to follow the rule of the stronger (61-4). They are also, she reminds her, the offspring of a family that already knew much suffering through self-mutilation and murder of kin (49-58).

It is not unusual that a scene of dissuasion ends without any change of mind on the part of the protagonist. Thus Antigone remains decided to go against the edict, accepting death as the consequence. On the other hand, Creon's edict will soon be made official by its public announcement. The starting situation and its constraints are then set. We are faced with two incompatible decisions as we reach the first episode; Antigone leaves to bury the body, and the audience may, at most, hope for the edict to be revoked. Creon's entrance confirms Antigone's information, and gives the audience a clearer picture of the ruler's motivations and thought processes in proclaiming such decree.<sup>17</sup>

Creon's proclamation is ambivalent. While some of it was certainly pleasant to the Athenian ears, pleasant enough for the first half of the speech to be quoted in courts

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<sup>17</sup> If the actions are incompatible, however, the intentions for both need not be: both will claim that they are honouring the gods. They are incompatible because for Creon, those are the gods of the city, who he feels would be offended by the burial of an attacker; and, for Antigone, the nether gods, who are offended by the lack of burial. This is probably a genuine issue raised in any society: as I was writing this dissertation, I have watched the news about the deaths of both Muammar Gaddafi and Osama Bin Laden. While the body of the former was dragged and defiled around the streets, and then eventually buried at an unknown location; the latter was thrown in the sea, presumably to avoid that his tomb would become a shrine. The ways we handle the dead still matter a lot in war time ethics. Also for that reason, it is understandable that the *Antigone* has received so much attention during the twentieth century dictatorships.

in antiquity,<sup>18</sup> his words are also filled with potential traps, irony, and accidental self-references.<sup>19</sup> The most striking of these ironies comes in 175-7:

ἀμήχανον δὲ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐκμαθεῖν  
φυγὴν τε καὶ φρόνημα καὶ γνώμην, πρὶν ἂν  
ἄρχαίς τε καὶ νόμοισιν ἐντριβῆς φανῆ.<sup>20</sup>

It is impossible to know the whole of a man's character, disposition, and judgments until it has been tested by his ruling and by his laws.

This is a major aspect of the play: Creon setting himself up for evaluation by his edicts and his ways of ruling, and the ways in which his character plays against his best judgment in the exercise of power. Creon is inexperienced as a ruler, but Antigone's motives are not necessarily well accepted at first. To a certain extent, it is true that the tension in the play works because they both have a point worth making, yet they both make it in obstinate ways and never engage in a debate of reason.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, Creon is in a position of power, and as such Antigone's fate is

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<sup>18</sup> By Demosthenes, *On the Embassy*, 19.247, and in positive terms, at least according to Bowra (1944:68): "Their general acceptability is proved by the way in which Demosthenes quotes 175-90 against Aeschines and blames him for not having remembered them in his political life".

Cf. also Sourvinou-Inwood (1989:139): "There can be no doubt that Antigone's behaviour and actions would have been perceived by the Athenians as illegitimately subversive of the polis. She proposed to break the law in disobeying the decree, and also she was challenging the polis' control over the funerary discourse, and its fundamental ordering and articulation, which declared the disposal of the body of both the war-dead and of traitors a public matter; she challenged, invaded and disturbed the public sphere in the service of her private interests. The polis values dictated that the citizens' private interests had to be subordinated to the public interests of the polis (cf. Thucydides ii 60)."

Less partially, Burton (1980:90), after describing the situation of the Chorus facing a new king after a civil war, concludes that they are "confused and shocked by Antigone's deed, clinging for support to the twin pillars of the state's laws and a tradition of belief in divine sanctions, yet unwilling to make up their mind in the crisis of conflict between the two".

<sup>19</sup> E.g. 164-8 about how the Thebans remained loyal to the children of Oedipus. This would naturally refer to Eteocles, but, in the play, it might very well be that the Thebans are also loyal to Antigone and even to Polynices, inasmuch as there is not a single manifestation from the Chorus against the burial.

<sup>20</sup> I have often followed Jebb's text, whose commentary I find in its majority very elucidating, and indicated when I have opted for more modern editions. For a history of the transmission of the plays, as well as the necessary caveats to take into account with each editorial trend, I found Finglass (2012) indispensable. Cf. also Avezzi (2012). The translations of Sophocles are my own, for other authors I have used translations available in print, which are indicated.

<sup>21</sup> Ismene describes helping Antigone as "defying the state". So the opposition and incompatibility of Creon and Antigone is in the audience's head from the beginning (78-9).

dependent on his decisions.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning of the play, both figures are, necessarily, ambiguous enough for the audience to identify with, moving from one to the other at times, just as the Chorus does.<sup>23</sup> This underpins the build-up of dramatic tension from the start of the play and enables the poet to increase the emotional impact by playing on the audience's fears and expectations.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of their fluctuant opinion on who is right and who is wrong, the Chorus of old Theban men, too, seems to be impressed above all by seeing young people dying early.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the destiny of family of Oedipus is anything but alien to the Thebans, who will have seen the two sisters grow up, and their oscillation between secretly admiring Antigone's actions (as is suggested by both Antigone and Haemon) and openly siding with Creon is understandable. In the *OC*, Antigone will have to forge this familiarity by asking the Chorus to look at her as if they shared blood ties (*OC* 245-6, ὥς τις ἀφ' αἵματος / ὑμετέρου προφανεῖσα).

### 1.1.1. The first confrontation

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<sup>22</sup> The situation has a reciprocal element: Antigone's death will cause the end of Creon. Her death is decided by him, but executed by her, and it happens before he has changed his mind. Had Antigone not killed herself, Creon would have been in time to avoid all the subsequent disasters. C.f. Cropp (1997:154) on the causal chain: "In *Antigone*, none of the principals is faultless. The Elders abet Creon's error out of their excessive deference to authority. Haimon's loss of self-control destroys the last chance of making Creon see reason before it is too late, and his suicide leads to his mother's death and his father's final isolation. If Antigone is flawed by passion, her death-wish, and her heredity as a daughter of Oedipus, these flaws make it less wrong, or more acceptable, that she should die in the way she does - but they do not make it right". I see Tiresias as still another chance for Creon to fix his mistake. On the other hand, Haemon's loss of self-control is caused by Creon's absolute obstinacy.

<sup>23</sup> Antigone argues that the Chorus agrees with Creon out of fear (e.g. 509), but it seems reasonable to think that the Chorus agrees with Creon also because much of his speech conforms to the notions of common sense and traditional ideas about ruling cities and families. It is interesting that one of the characters that makes more use of *gnomai* is also the one who will disrespect the traditional institutions and try to go against established customs. Additionally, the Chorus has just seen the civil war and will, naturally, side with the recently appointed ruler, even if not fully convinced by his ways.

<sup>24</sup> The audience will have a reason to pity Creon too at the end, regardless of how weak and thoughtless he might have seemed as a king. The fact that he is too late to save Antigone is not pointed out as a reproach in the text; rather, there is the classical conclusion that learning comes too late. In that sense it is possible to pity Creon, who has yielded too late but has yielded, and whose disaster (the loss of all his family) is especially harsh.

<sup>25</sup> In the third stasimon, as they see Antigone, they cannot hold back their tears (803). They dedicate the fourth stasimon to an invocation of others with similar fates to Antigone's (living entombment). In the second stasimon, the Chorus will praise mortals for having learnt how to postpone death — Creon will bring it earlier for Antigone and Haemon. But cf. also Winnington-Ingram (1980:138) on the necessary isolation of Antigone from the rest of the Thebans.

Antigone is brought on stage to face Creon twice; first in 376ff., after she is caught, then after Haemon's scene, for her last speech. The first time she appears, she is led by the Guard who caught her performing the funeral rites. Since she has not escaped capture, it is expected that she would now have to persuade Creon of the justice of her actions. From the moment on that the attention is turned to her, it will be clear that Antigone will refuse any negotiation with Creon; the interrogation of Antigone is marked by intransigence, both in words and physically — Antigone is staring at the ground (441, σὲ τὴν νεύουσαν εἰς πέδον κάρα) — and she declares herself the impossibility of communication between the two (449ff). After talking to the Guard, Creon asks Antigone in three ways if she is the culprit.

442: φῆς ἢ καταρνεί μὴ δεδρακέναι τάδε;  
Do you confirm or deny that you did these things?

447: ἤδησθα κηρυχθέντα μὴ πράσσειν τάδε;  
Did you know there had been a proclamation against doing these things?

449: καὶ δῆτ' ἐτόλμας τούσδ' ὑπερβαίνειν νόμους;  
Yet you dared to transgress this law?

Between 442 and 447, Creon dismisses the Guard; Antigone admits the deed, so there is no further need for a witness. The procedure is clear: Antigone is accused by the Guard of performing the funeral rites for Polynices (for the second time, even, but that is not raised), Antigone admits doing so, and asserts her awareness of the edict. Therefore, in the eyes of both Antigone and Creon, she is admittedly guilty of breaking the law. It is interesting that the κήρυγμα from the beginning becomes νόμος in 449, with the force of “custom” that the word can acquire. Since ancient times, the plot of the *Antigone* has been summarised as the opposition between natural unwritten law and human laws, but this opposition is misleading.<sup>26</sup> Antigone will answer Creon with an argument of authority, by raising the matter from human laws to the disrespect of the laws of the gods. By doing so, she is removing the argument from

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. Bowra (1944:100). Although he makes a very interesting point relating the unwritten laws and the notions of universal kinship in early philosophy with their reflection between “ordinary people” in “ordinary life” as laws concerning “the relations between members of the family”, I disagree with him that “unlike the philosophers and statesmen, she sees that there can be conflict between these laws and the laws of men”. Creon's problem is not being the embodiment of the laws of the city, but having made a bad law, exactly because it did not take into account universal principles that should govern the city in parallel with and at the basis of the “laws of men”.

the human sphere and denying all possibility of discussion. It is no longer a problem of ill-advice and different opinions on how to rule a city and deal with the corpse of the traitors. A woman who has just disobeyed an edict, the sister of a traitor, and the daughter of a disgraced father, socially the one in the weakest position to argue, calls for the authority of the gods. However, the laws that allegedly belong to the gods and that Creon cannot run over (455, ὑπερδραμεῖν) are none other than the customs that have always served mortals as well. What else could they be, if not the unwritten laws of tradition, if the attributes of the gods are themselves the result of centuries of human tradition? In the *Iliad* 22, Achilles' excessive behaviour is condemned by people and by gods (in *Iliad* 22.13 Apollo has to remind him that he is not one of those allotted for him to kill). Taking revenge on the dead by leaving them for birds and animals to prey upon, apart from hygienic issues, strikes most sane human beings as horrendous (at least in literature, where people tend to be slightly nicer...). It is ironic that Creon is the one who is going against the boundaries of human custom, and who would declare he is righteous by doing so.<sup>27</sup>

In her reply to Creon's interrogation, Antigone will not only reaffirm that she knows the consequence of her actions is death (460, θανουμένη γὰρ ἐξήδη), but also that she considers death a gain (462, κέρδος αὐτ' ἐγὼ λέγω).<sup>28</sup> The vocabulary of Antigone is worth a brief comment. In 461, she says she must die even if Creon had not proclaimed it (κεῖ μὴ σὺ προὔκηρυξας). Her duty to her family is more important than her life, a life that has known nothing but suffering so far. As she claims (and we have reasons to believe her), no one else in Thebes agrees with the edict.<sup>29</sup> Antigone's death, however, is anticipated by her own choice, a choice that she has been stressing

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<sup>27</sup> At this point, as far as the manifestations of the gods go, the audience can be prepared to believe that Antigone's claim has some grounds, mostly after the description of the Guard about the storm that lasted long enough for the action to be performed, but not so long that Antigone would not be caught. That is so, I believe, because Antigone's capture is an essential link in Creon's learning (and we would not have a plot otherwise, of course).

<sup>28</sup> Several different things are called κέρδος, in the play: for Tiresias, for example, it is good advice (1032); for Creon it is the financial profit sought by Tiresias (1047, and by other men in 222); for the Chorus, Creon's suggestions are κέρδος as well, as much as they can still be, in 1322.

<sup>29</sup> Cropp (1997:146) suggests that Creon realises that he does not have the public support needed to perform a stoning. Creon, however, never seems to consider or believe Antigone's and Haemon's claim that they have support. On the other hand, it is possible that Creon decides upon a different punishment so that he is not directly responsible for shedding kindred blood. At the time of the proclamation, he did not know the culprit would be his niece.

throughout the play, and she will stress again in contrast with Ismene's decision towards the end of the episode. The her fate is conditioned by Creon's proclamation, that put her in the situation where she has to make a decision.<sup>30</sup> By saying that she chose her death, however, she is lifting the responsibility for her destiny from Creon: yes, he is responsible for the edict she transgressed, but even if he did not exist, she would still do what she had to do, therefore, he is insignificant. Accepting her death is *par excellence* closing any door for negotiation. For good measure, she will finish by suggesting that Creon is an idiot in 469 (σχεδόν τι μῶρῳ μωρίαν ὀφλισκάνω).

Antigone's tone is not intended to, nor will, placate Creon.<sup>31</sup> Instead, it will deepen the gap between the two, and make any resolution impossible. The Chorus remarks on her intransigence, relating it to her father's character (471-2), and Creon reacts to Antigone's provocations in his answer. Would Antigone be successful had she chosen to present a more submissive attitude? Counterfactual theatrical speculation is not a very useful exercise, but we can say beyond doubt that Antigone's tone has at least worsened her situation (unless we believe with her that death comes as benefit). A fundamental theme in the play is that stubborn attitudes *can* and *should* be changed. Later that will be said of Creon, but here, ironically, it is Creon who will pick the topic up to respond to Antigone. His speech starts with a chain of considerations about stubborn spirits that can be bent (473-479), comparing it in succession with iron that cracks, horses that are brought to obedience by a curb, and the expected behaviour from "a neighbour's slave" (an interesting example to use against someone belonging to a royal line, and about to marry his own son...)<sup>32</sup> Creon considers

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<sup>30</sup> She will say later (870-1) that the event that originated her fate was Polynices' marriage. That may be part of the truth, but it has also originated Creon's situation, and has been caused itself by the brothers' quarrel, that, in some versions, has been caused by Oedipus' curse after an offence, and so on. In the world of the play, Antigone's death is contingent upon Creon's edict, and not upon the fight between her siblings. Kitto (1939:145) asks "how often in Sophocles do we find the idea that the dead are killing the living?" and refers to these lines as example in the Antigone. While he is right, it is not *only* the dead killing the living.

<sup>31</sup> This is pointed out by several commentators: e.g., Knox (1964:65) "the defence of her action which follows destroys forever any possibility of compromise, excuse, or pardon"; and Griffith (1999:204) is right to remark further that here we have "a sarcastic and inflammatory conclusion (runder even than Elektra's to Klytimestra at *El.* 608-9), spoken as if Ant. had heard 220, and effectively ruling out any reasonable discussion or compromise (...)". The issue of Creon's lack of judgement will be brought up in clearer terms by Haemon, and then by Tiresias.

<sup>32</sup> Bowra (1944:73) adds that the word slave, heard by an Athenian, "would remind him that tyrants regarded their subjects as slaves, as Asiatic monarchs commonly do in Herodotus or as Plato speaks of a city ruled by tyrants as a slave-city".

Antigone's speech a second insolence (482, ὕβρις δευτέρα), aggravating the first one, and an attempt to make evil crime look good (495, τοῦτο καλλύνειν θέλη, referring to the crimes in which one has been caught).<sup>33</sup>

Creon, too, is driving toward an extreme and non-conciliatory position, and that extreme is marked by the second half of his speech. He now behaves as a distributor of μόρος, and will extend Antigone's penalty to her sister (488-9, αὐτή τε χηὶ ζῦναιμος οὐκ ἀλύξετον / μόρου κακίστου: καὶ γὰρ οὖν κείνην ἴσον / ἐπαιτιῶμαι τοῦδε βουλευδοῦσι τάφου). Inadvertently, he is also extending it to his son and to his own family, which contrasts ironically with the affirmation in 486 that being his sister's child or anyone nearer, which could only be a daughter (εἴτ' ἀδελφῆς εἴθ' ὀμαιμονεστέρα). His summoning of Ismene, who the audience knows to have refused to take part in Antigone's plot, has to be met with some sort of indignation, or at least seen as a gross injustice by anyone who has watched the prologue. But there is more to note on the text before the arrival of the second daughter of Oedipus. Creon will say that he saw Ismene maddened and not in control of her reason (492, λυσσῶσαν αὐτήν οὐδ' ἐπήβολον φρενῶν), accusing her of plotting against him in the dark (493-4). Presumably, Ismene would be in an altered state of mind upon the imminent condemnation of her sister, and not for breaking the law herself, and if she does plot in the dark, as Mark Griffith maintains, it is only when it comes to protecting her sister's secret (85), an offer that Antigone refuses.<sup>34</sup>

Antigone's reaction is even more provoking towards someone who has already made two mistakes (not burying a body, and punishing an innocent): "what else do you want more than taking and slaying me?" (497, θέλεις τι μείζον ἢ κατακτεῖναί μ' ἐλών;) The question, defiant as it may sound, does not lack fundament if, with Tiresias and probably many audience members, we agree that leaving the corpse to be defiled is an excessive punishment to the dead.<sup>35</sup> Creon has already disrespected gods and customs by refusing Polynices' burial; he may very well not be satisfied with

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<sup>33</sup> It is not completely clear whether this affirmation (and the preceding *gnome*) apply to Antigone, Ismene, or both. In Creon's clouded judgment, it probably applies to both.

<sup>34</sup> Griffith (1999:207).

<sup>35</sup> In 308, Creon has also threatened the Guard with more than death if he did not find the culprit. Not knowing where to stop after death is a motif of Creon's excess. Tiresias will ask Creon to let it go in 1011ff.

Antigone's stoning only. Upon Creon's claim that her death will be enough, Antigone asks why the delay (499-501), since there will never be anything upon which they will agree:

τί δῆτα μέλλεις; ὡς ἐμοὶ τῶν σῶν λόγων  
ἀρεστὸν οὐδὲν μηδ' ἀρεσθείη ποτέ·  
οὕτω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τὰμ' ἀφανδάνοντ' ἔφυ.

Why do you not do it, then? Since nothing from your words is pleasing to me, nor may it ever please me, in the same way, for you also, the things that I bring forth are displeasing.

Antigone sums up the essence of the scene and why her situation cannot be reversed in it. Dramatically, this delay is, of course, fundamental. It is thanks to it that the audience can have both the impression that there is still time to change Creon's mind, and the demonstration that that will require a miracle of sorts, their hopes brought down by the two characters' obstinacy. Naturally, Antigone's wish in 499 is to precipitate the consequences she chose to assume, knowing that no one else will speak for her out of fear (505, τούτοις τοῦτο πᾶσιν ἀνδάνειν / λέγοιτ' ἄν, εἰ μὴ γλώσσαν ἐγκλήοι φόβος). Yet, the scene is far from over. Antigone and Creon will finally engage in the only moment closer to a debate they will ever get to, after all doors to conciliation have been closed.

### 1.1.2. Private minds and Creon's prejudice

It is curious that the references to the self and words compounded with αὐτ- abound in the play, yet the argument develops constantly recurring to third persons. Both Creon and Antigone will argue on behalf of what the Thebans think (e.g. 505, 508), of what pleases the gods (Creon in 280ff.; Antigone in 450ff.), and even on what pleases the dead (Creon in 514, criticised by Antigone in 515). On the other hand, both of them detach themselves from the collective: Antigone by refusing Ismene's solidarity (she will not allow her sister to "share her death", 546, μή μοι θάνης σὺ κοινὰ), Creon by refusing to listen to anyone else.

What is it that makes Antigone and Creon so difficult to be reconciled? In terms of intentions, Antigone's first concern is the duties towards her family, while Creon's is the protection of the city. It will be demonstrated that burying Polynices will not

dishonour the city, but Creon judges wrongly. However, if the *Antigone* is to portray the story of a ruler who learns too late and suffers severely as a result of his actions, Antigone's death is a necessary link. With Creon's destruction (and the end of the line of Oedipus as well), the city is saved too, so this destruction has to be brought about.<sup>36</sup>

The main reason why Creon's behaviour is criticised, however, is his private understanding. In 376ff., when Antigone has been brought by the Guard, the Chorus had just been singing the second stasimon on the progress of men. The song ends with a condemnation as an outcast (ἄπολις) of him who "beds" with what is not lawful (ὄτω τὸ μὴ καλὸν ζύνεστι), thanks to recklessness (τόλμας χάριν). The reference applies ironically both to Antigone and to Creon: on first sight, Antigone is the one that isolates herself from the rest of the city, that goes against its gods, and that acts on impulse. Creon, however, is the one that brings a plague upon Thebes, because he disrespects the gods, and acts on impulse (ignoring the "moods of the city", the ἀστυνόμους ὀργὰς, and leading Thebes according to his own).<sup>37</sup> It is only by honouring both the laws of men and the laws of gods (368, νόμους παρείων χθονὸς θεῶν τ' ἔνορκον δίκαν, ὑπίπολις), which are interwoven in the fabric of society, that one acts correctly; i.e. human progress is only possible if built on the respect for the religious and civic values.<sup>38</sup> Antigone might be ignoring the city in motivation, but Creon is in fact ignoring the gods. All this could have been avoided had Creon been open to the understanding of the laws of the gods and the advice of men.

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<sup>36</sup> Following Winnington-Ingram (1980:120): "Aeschylus had written a trilogy on the Theban legion, of which we possess *Septem* only. It must have been in the mind of Sophocles and, for him and many of his audience, may have had the character of a standard version of the story. In the trilogy, the fates of *genos* and *polis* were dangerously intertwined and the salvation of the *polis* depended on the destruction of the *genos*. In *Antigone* Sophocles dramatises the final - and non-Aeschylean - phase of the destruction of the *genos*, in which a member of the *genos* sets herself up against the *polis* - and is destroyed".

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Heraclitus B2, where the private opinion is contrasted negatively with the λόγος common to all: τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ζῆνοῦ ζῶουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν. In the end, the main reason for Creon's downfall is because listens to his private λόγος only.

<sup>38</sup> Reading παρείων with Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990:124).

On the other hand, Antigone is criticised by her isolation too, even though she famously claims that it is her nature to join in love (523).<sup>39</sup> In her case, the stress in the words of self (the compounds of αὐτ-) means also that she is cutting herself off the rest of the city. When she is taken to be buried, the Chorus sings about her unique death by calling her αὐτόνομος in 821. It is because she is αὐτόνομος that she does not accept Ismene's solidarity, and that her conviction to bury her brother is more important than the new law of the city. Of course, Antigone is following what will prove to be the traditional and desirable course of action (respecting the nether gods), but that can only be made by the undesirable defiance of the collective.

Creon's following of his own mind results in his prejudice, in the narrowing down of options, and in his excess.<sup>40</sup> His fundamental reason not to change his mind regarding Antigone's penalty, at the opening of the confrontation, is solely that "he would not be the man" if he let her have her way (484-5). At the moment, he does not defend his law (why would he, if no one else's advice is deemed necessary?), nor does he argue about what pleases the gods, he is starting the path into tyranny, based on preconceived ideas about whom to receive advice from.<sup>41</sup> This topic will continue in the next scenes: Haemon is his son and too young, the Chorus is too old, Tiresias is a charlatan working for profit, and Thebes will not teach him how to rule (726-7; 733; 1033ff.). In a perfect circle, Creon will reaffirm his prejudice about virility and condemn Antigone, again, towards the end of the scene as if she had not been condemned before, and as if her penalty was the result of her words immediately preceding (424-5, κάτω νυν ἔλθοῦσ', εἰ φιλητέον, φίλει / κείνους· ἐμοῦ δὲ ζῶντος οὐκ ἄρξει γυνή).

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<sup>39</sup> This love being, consistently, restricted to her dedication to her family ties, that make the two brothers equally important in spite of the strife amongst them.

<sup>40</sup> For the interpretation of the play with the conditions for deliberation at the centre, and this sort of "practical wisdom" being fundamental for happiness, cf. Nussbaum (1986:52; with a survey on the verbs of deliberation in 436n6), especially where she notes the effects of Creon and Antigone's convictions: "each, therefore, approaches the problems of choice with unusual confidence and stability; each seems unusually safe from the damages of luck".

<sup>41</sup> Whitman (1951:87) underlines that "the belief that any individual potentially contains valid insight into justice, divine and political, was specifically Athenian. Such insight was a kind of *arete* peculiarly appropriate to a citizen. On the tacit assumption of this virtue in her citizens, Athens built her democracy (...)." Mythical Thebes is not fifth century Athens, but the play serves as a medium for contemporary political issues.

The entrance of Ismene, besides rekindling Creon's anger, brings an additional element to the discussion, namely reminding Creon that Antigone is betrothed to Haemon, in 568. If not for Antigone, then Creon could reconsider his position for the sake of his son. At this moment, Creon will not, of course, imagine that condemning his son's bride he will be to an extent responsible for the death of Haemon. He is not, therefore, in the position anymore to think on the consequences of his actions on behalf of third persons.

By the end of the scene, Antigone is considered dead already by Creon (567, answering 568, ἀλλ' ἦδε μέντοι μὴ λέγ'· οὐ γὰρ ἔστ' ἔτι). For all the audience knows, she is taken off the stage to die, and the chance of reversing the course of her fate seems to have been lost. The Chorus mourns the doomed house of the Labdacidæ. Only a miraculous intervention could now prevent Antigone's death, an intervention that may still happen in the person of Tiresias.

### 1.1.3. Antigone's last appearance

Antigone is brought on stage again, after the scene with Haemon and the third stasimon on the potentially destructive powers of love.<sup>42</sup> Most of the scene is between Antigone and the Chorus, a lamentation of her death in emotional terms that will make Creon's two short interventions to declare her entombment (884ff.) seem the most cruel. Even though stoning had been the declared punishment, that will not be Antigone's penalty.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps out of hesitation and inconsistency caused by his angered mood, perhaps to absolve the city from the crime, Creon will not change his mind regarding condemning the girl, but he will change the method of death (889, ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἀγνοῖ τοῦπι τήνδε τὴν κόρην). Saying so, Creon is also moving the responsibility of Antigone's death to herself (887-8, εἴτε χρῆθαι θανεῖν / εἴτ' ἐν τοιαύτῃ ζῶσα τυμβεύειν στέγη), giving her the option of remaining alive, but entombed, or dying — which means that, even if unconsciously, Creon opens the possibility for Antigone's suicide. Of course, neither death by stoning nor death by entombment is very nice (the latter being even worse, if we consider Tiresias words on the inversion

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<sup>42</sup> On the love of Haemon and Antigone, as well as for a review of scholarship on the matter, cf. Winnington-Ingram (1980: 92-98).

<sup>43</sup> On Creon's legitimacy ordering the traitor to be stoned, however, cf. Rosivach (1987:243).

of the two worlds, 1064ff.), but one consists in humiliation of the victim and public participation of the citizens, the other, as horrendous as it may be, leaves the hands of the executioner clean.<sup>44</sup> More important than all for our current purpose, by entombing Antigone alive, Creon is also allowing for the possibility that she can still be rescued if he changes his mind, mostly if we imagine that Antigone is to be kept in a large and high funeral chamber of the type of the so-called tomb of Agamemnon in Mycenae (which Jebb suggests that we should). This is not saying, of course, that Creon is actively giving room for that possibility (he only says that she might live or die inside it), but that the option will be in the audience's mind, making it even more dramatic when, after yielding, Creon leaves the stage to free Antigone and arrives too late.<sup>45</sup> If Antigone were to be stoned to death, even if Creon had changed his mind before the appointed time, she would have no time alone to hang herself.

Antigone's final speech, in spite of its rhetorical argument, is not aimed at persuading Creon to change her penalty.<sup>46</sup> Creon, who had already shown himself impatient at Antigone's lamentations (883-4), does not even acknowledge it, and the Chorus, the first audience of the argument, calls it gusts of the soul, comparing her

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<sup>44</sup> See also Winnington-Ingram (1980:121): "(...) it is clear enough that Creon's offence was not that he had obstructed the burial of a kinsman but rather that, just as he has sent a living soul to a tomb, he has kept a dead man from the realm to which he belongs". The fact that Polynices is Creon's relative does, however, worsen the offence.

<sup>45</sup> In agreement with Bowra (1944:103): "his motives are mixed and show his confused mind. In the first place he hopes that by this the city will escape the pollution of her death (776). He seems to think that after all he cannot kill one of his own kin, but will not forgo his right to punish her. He hopes that by the change of penalty he will avert the anger of the gods and yet save his own dignity". Bowra also admits the possibility that Creon might be trying to make Antigone repent, but I disagree with his reading of 779-80. The lines about Antigone learning too late that her concern for the gods of the dead was wasted should be read ironically against Creon's late learnings about how important that same respect is.

<sup>46</sup> Against the views of Antigone's last speech as a mere self-justification, Cropp (1997) argues for its rhetorical relevance. For the structure of the argument on the fairness of her punishment, see especially p.142: "If the gods approve her punishment, her suffering and learning are just; but if not, her punisher is committing a tyrannical outrage. Antigone says in effect, 'If the gods are allowing my punishment because they think Creon has justice on his side, then I am prepared to infer from my suffering, in agreement with the gods and Creon, that I have transgressed.' She then goes on to the alternative to which her whole speech has led: 'But if I have justice on my side and the transgression is Creon's, let him be punished as cruelly as he is punishing me'".

behaviour to stormy winds taking over her (929-30, ἔτι τῶν αὐτῶν ἀνέμων αὐταὶ / ψυχῆς ῥίπαι τήνδε γ' ἔχουσιν).<sup>47</sup>

Creon's last intervention will dismiss any hope that he will ever change his mind (934-5 θαρσεῖν οὐδὲν παραμυθοῦμαι / μὴ οὐ τάδε ταύτη κατακυροῦσθαι).<sup>48</sup> Haemon's entrance after the first confrontation between Antigone and Creon had been announced by Ismene raising the question of Creon's affecting his son's life by condemning his bride. There is, however, the unexpected arrival of Tiresias still to come, contributing to the alternating feeling of hope and defeat that opens and finishes each episode that precedes it.

#### 1.1.4. The gods' side

As the Chorus sings in 361, no one will escape death (Ἄιδα μόνον φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται). That, of course, applies to every single human, but it also echoes Creon's attempt to ignore the prerogatives of Hades, and being punished for that.<sup>49</sup>

When the Guard returns on stage, after having been there once before because he had been chosen by lot, he returns by personal initiative as an unexpected opportunity for reward (396-7 κλῆρος ἐνθάδ' οὐκ ἐπάλλετο, / ἀλλ' ἔστ' ἐμὸν θοῦρμαιον, οὐκ ἄλλου, τόδε), and Creon by chance (ποία ζύμμετρος προὔβην τύχη;); comes back to the stage he has left not long before.<sup>50</sup> The Guard will give the

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<sup>47</sup> There are several meteorological analogies in the choral songs; e. g., the parodos opens with the sun and goes on to describe the maddened hatred of Polynices as gusts of wind (135-7). In the second stasimon, the misery sent by the gods is described in terms of a storm (586-91). The burial of Polynices is also protected by a storm. This suggests that the gusts of Antigone's soul take over her from an external cause, which is not unusual in the Greek imagery for madness and altered states of mind. On the topic, cf. Cairns (2013b:xxvi-xxvii), In the second stasimon, the speech and thought of men is equated with the wind (352). This might mean both that mortals have learned to think in abstract concepts, but also that they think and say things precipitately.

<sup>48</sup> Following Jebb (1890), and Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990) attributing these lines to Creon.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. also Knox (1964:100) on Creon's attitude towards death: "For Creon, there is obviously nothing intrinsically awe-aspiring in the fact of death. He can look at a dead man and decide coolly whether he should be honoured for service or punished for treachery, without any religious fear. Death, for him, is simply the end of life. It can be used as a political deterrent, a threat to enforce obedience, as means of punishment, even as a privilege to be withheld from the obstinate under torture".

<sup>50</sup> Why would Creon return in the right moment? He calls it τύχη, and Griffith (1999), *ad loc.*, calls it "dramatic convention". It is probably a bit of both: Creon must be on stage at the right moment, and he is indeed, by one of those convenient works of chance, just like the Guard will catch Antigone thanks to luck. The *OT* will be filled with coincidences such as these, and we shall argue there that they are hardly to be read only as coincidences but, in the present situation as much as they contribute to illustrate the way the characters look at the events, not much needs to be read from it.

information on the timing and circumstance of Antigone's capture: the gods have sent a storm (415-31, the storm being described as *θεία νόσος*), and after this storm, that made the watchers unable to fulfil their duties, they found Antigone. The bad weather, coincidentally, lasted for long enough to let Antigone do her deed out of sight, but not for so long that she could escape capture.<sup>51</sup> If we are to interpret the storm as if it were the gods' intervention (and the Chorus has suggested as much already in 277-8, at the time of the report of the first burial), then the gods have a personal interest in both having Polynices buried and Antigone captured.<sup>52</sup>

Creon has indeed broken the religious obligations towards a dead family member. As such, it is natural to expect some sort of punishment from the gods (evil doers never go unpunished in any of the three plays, even if they have done evil unwittingly). Therefore, to reestablish order, Creon will have to suffer. Antigone's capture is a necessary condition for the plot to develop, and for all the other links in a chain of events to be set in motion; her death is necessary for Haemon to kill himself, and Haemon's death will lead to Eurydice's suicide. Creon's destruction is then accomplished by the end of his line and the death of everyone close to him. On the other hand, if the gods already had yet more suffering in store for the line of Oedipus, Antigone's and Ismene's expected suffering converges with the new situation that arose from Creon's decree.

If the gods are offended, as Tiresias claims, then it is plausible to think that the storms are indeed sent by them, making the circumstances propitious for the rest of Creon's downfall. Unlike what will happen in the Oedipus, the cause of the gods' anger is clear and easy to identify, except by Creon himself who does not accept that

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<sup>51</sup> The question of whether the gods are supporting Antigone or not has been profusely discussed in modern scholarship. E.g. Knox (1965:115); and, more recently, Cropp (1997:154): "At the same time, Antigone in her death is an instrument of the gods, or of nature. It is sometimes said that her defiance is ultimately futile because the gods, not Antigone, prove Creon wrong through the portents which Tiresias reports. But Antigone alone is the instrument of Creon's punishment. It is her defiance, her condemnation, and her entombment that cause the rift between Creon and Haimon which destroys their family." On the matter of the double burial being promoted and supervised by the gods, in order to take both Creon's and Antigone's wishes and actions to their last consequences, cf. Scodel (1984:55-7).

<sup>52</sup> There is also the matter of the two burials: why did Antigone get away with the first, incomplete one? The answer has to be that the first one announced the presence of someone defying the law, getting Creon to order the guards to increase their watch, and the second one was needed for her to be caught. Her capture being needed for Creon's learning.

he might be wrong (in contrast with the *OT*, where the whole city has a part to play in the accomplishment of the oracles).

However, the gods are fickle entities, and it tends to be hard to attribute to them anything certain, unless they show up as characters or manifest themselves in some unambiguous way.

## **1.2. Creon versus Haemon: an appeal to learning**

The Chorus lets Antigone go with, at least, a sense of resignation, lamenting the dooms of the Labdacidae in the following stasimon. It is not so much a reproach against Creon's actual injustice, but a general sense of the misery of human lives, where families are doomed and people die young. Haemon's argument with Creon takes place right after the closing antistrophe, where the Chorus had just been singing about a wandering hope and learning coming too late.

It is clear that whatever Haemon says will be very unlikely to persuade Creon to change his mind. The reasons for this were exposed by Creon himself regarding Antigone, in his speech about the difficulty in making a stubborn individual bend. For all we know, Antigone is condemned, and her confrontation with Creon closed all other possibilities. There is also little room to doubt that, regardless of how they see Antigone, the audience will probably sympathise with the two sisters by now, a sympathy which can only have been heightened by Creon's excess in trying to condemn both of them. It is the same audience that has seen the prologue, where Ismene refused to go against the edict. It is also not unlikely that Creon's assertion that he is "not willing to be ruled by a woman" would sound as unfitting, considering the frailty of Antigone's position. Stubborn or not, it is a young woman trying to pay the funeral rites to her brother, and it is not strange to imagine that her situation would move the elders — which does not mean, of course, that they would not think some sort of punishment is fitting, but maybe not death. The burial of Polynices, while putting into question Creon's first edict, does not mean that he would be less respected as a king. As mentioned before, the Chorus expresses their natural distress with seeing the young dying before their time; in the song known as the *Ode to Man*, they have also been praising the achievements of mankind, not least in prolonging life (by assuring food supply and conquering diseases). Creon, however, is about to cut

short the life of his niece.<sup>53</sup> Haemon's entrance takes place right after the second stasimon, where the Chorus had been lamenting the fate of Antigone. By this time, her death feels like a *fait accompli* — Creon has referred to her as “not living anymore” and the Chorus song is a mournful one.

However, if the playwright has chosen to make Haemon's entrance take place only at this point, that might be taken as a sign that there are still reasons to hope: Antigone is not dead, there is still an intervention, Creon is still in time. Haemon's appearance is, therefore, a plausible attempt to stop the course of action by changing Creon's mind. Throughout the short scene, his arguments will be met with a rampage on Creon's obstinacy to condemn Antigone (and even Ismene - the Chorus has to remind him that the other girl is not to die), and a crescendo in the irony of the contrast between the meaning of his words and his actions as the king of Thebes, leaving us with a growing picture of a despotic ruler.<sup>54</sup>

The two scenes of dissuasion (Haemon and Tiresias) are different from the prologue in the sense that they demand an action to be rectified, not a change in the action still to come (Ismene tries to dissuade Antigone *before* she buries Polynices, and as much definitive as her decision may be, the action is not done yet). In the *OT*, things have already been done long before the play starts, and there is nothing

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<sup>53</sup> The Chorus' sympathy also goes from Creon to Haemon. A father might be seen assuming a more authoritarian position towards rebel children without it being considered an awful mistake or a sign of his inability to provide adequate guidance. So far, the audience has been seeing him dealing with two young people, and might be ambivalent between pitying Antigone and understanding Creon's thought process. Even when Tiresias arrives, they might be influenced by contemporary views on the corruption of the prophets (or the theme would not be so present in Sophocles). However, it is Tiresias, not a random seer nor a nameless oracle. Tiresias is never wrong in tragedy, and that rule must have been valid to the audience of any of these plays. More than a condemnation of Creon's ways, the pity from the Chorus seems to be moved first by the death of two young people, and by the disproportionate punishment those deaths represent.

As for the political issues, the Chorus seems to think that father and son have something to learn from each other in 724-5: ἀναξ, σέ τ' εἰκόσ, εἴ τι κείριον λέγει, / μαθεῖν, σέ τ' αὖ τοῦδ'· εὖ γάρ εἴρηται διπλῆ.

<sup>54</sup> The coherence or contradiction between words and action will be fundamental in the *OC*, portraying vividly the differences of character between Theseus, Creon, Polynices, and Oedipus. Here, they are essentially elements of irony. Cf. Chapter 3, section 4.

Oedipus can do anymore to fix them. Here it will be too late for Creon to avoid what is to happen, but we are never invited to assume that it will happen anyway.<sup>55</sup>

Let us now turn to the text and see how Haemon's intervention develops. The prince's entrance is announced by the Chorus, who wonder about Haemon's state of mind as an expected and natural result of Creon's decisions regarding his son's bride (627-30: ἄρ' ἀχνόμενος / τάλιδος ἦκει μόρον Ἀντιγόνης, / ἀπάτης λεχέων ὑπεραλγῶν;). Creon answers the Chorus with a quasi-farcical reference to what the seers can tell, and how quickly he is to find out about his son for himself (631: τάχ' εἰσόμεσθα μάντεων ὑπέρτερον). At this point, of course, no one knows that Tiresias will be on stage shortly, informing Creon of what will happen to Haemon; a piece of information Creon had all the necessary data to figure out for himself, but that he will need the seer to spell out.<sup>56</sup>

The way in which he refers to Antigone's penalty as "final decision" or "irrevocable vote" is striking (τελείαν φῆφον).<sup>57</sup> The situation is complicated to this day: the king has indeed the power to decide on life and death, and, at least in the context of the play, that is never questioned. What is questioned is 1) taking the decision alone, against the advice of his city (or silencing his city and subjects with fear); 2) the disproportion of the punishment. By taking the power to himself and refusing advice (which has not happened explicitly in the text, but will, in this episode), Creon is, alone, taking charge of things that are also the field of gods,

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<sup>55</sup> It will be interesting to note that, in the *OC*, the curse Oedipus places on his male children comes *after* the fratricidal struggle has started and the downfall has been initiated. As we shall see in the last chapter, it is a deliberate option regarding the order of events from the myth.

On the other hand, most actions can be attributed to the failures of human behaviour (e.g. Oedipus' sons disrespect for their father, Creon's neglect for family ties), which can be anticipated and predicted, though not inevitable. What adds the inevitable aspect in the *Antigone* as elsewhere is that prophecy is accurate, and that implies some sort of determinism. The difference in the *OT* is that Oedipus is never acting with full awareness of what he is doing.

<sup>56</sup> As we shall see later, when Creon hears the sound of Haemon's cries coming from the tomb of Antigone, he will conclude that the final prophecy given to him by Tiresias was true. By the same token, time (and a very short one) was going to reveal to Creon the result of his actions, by showing him Haemon's death. The situation is different in the *OT*, where a single day will be enough to confirm Tiresias' words, but Oedipus will find out in one day what his whole life was. We see Creon losing the right moment to change his fate.

<sup>57</sup> Jebb (1891), *ad loc.*, translates it by "fixed doom". While the interpretation might be correct, the weight of the words in English seems to me to compromise the secular connotation too much. φῆφος is a pebble used for voting. It is alarming that the decision Creon made was made alone, and not by vote. Also, the contrast with τέλεια, that can be used of the power of the gods (LSJ, s.v. II) makes it even more definite and arrogant from Creon.

namely, life and death. Now, it can be argued that the idea of kings being semi-divine is not alien to tragedy — the prologue of the *OT* would be enough to confirm it. It is true as well that semi-divine kings have won their legendary status by some great action, which is missing in Creon's case. It is also true that the whole scene with Haemon shows a clear preference for a ruler who does not ignore the advice of the city. Not even Oedipus, in spite of his anger against Creon and Tiresias, is ever seen declaring himself able to rule the city alone, or rejecting advice. Quite the contrary, he refuses to listen to the oracle privately, and the process of recognition in the *OT* only starts because of his exchanges with Jocasta.

There is also the matter that we do not know whether the gods are just or not; the tendency is to think that even if they are just, we can neither predict when one will offend them, nor fully grasp the weight of their penalties (Oedipus being the most typical example of how to err unknowingly). Yet, people obey what they believe to be their wishes, and respect the gods. Creon's next speech will be centred in this blind loyalty that requires citizens and families to obey their ruler blindly, regardless of whether he is being just or unjust (666-7: ἀλλ' ὄν πόλις στήσειε τοῦδε χρεὶ κλύειν / καὶ σμικρὰ καὶ δίκαια καὶ τάναντία). If nothing else, Creon's attitude is one of excess, and excessive attitudes tend to have consequences in tragedy.

Haemon is an interested party in the story, and it is to be expected that he will defend his bride, and both the Chorus' and Creon's words reflect the expectation of a reaction to the previous scene. However, it is to be expected as well that he respects his father's decisions, and his approach is diplomatic. The prince arrives with pleasing words of obedience to his father, guaranteeing that no wedding would be more important than his filial duties (635-8). This *captatio benevolentiae*, preparing the ground emotionally for an appeal to reason, is welcomed by Creon, who initiates a monologue about the parallels between ruling a family and ruling a city. These parallels are not uncommon. In Thucydides 2.44, after suggesting that young enough parents of children who died should try to bring more children to the world, because "it is impossible for a man to put forward fair and honest views about our affairs if he has not, like everyone else, children whose lives may be at stake" suggests that people with children are more cautious in the rule of the state, since they have to provide for

the future of their family as well, tied with the benefit or ruin of the city.<sup>58</sup> Creon's speech to Haemon matches his first speech about the city, earlier in the play. Creon is convinced, rightly, of the duties of children towards parents, as he is convinced that he is raising his own well, in the same way as he was earlier leading the ship of state effectively. The triumphant tone is striking, mostly thanks to his apparently fair claims, however, the earlier speech shows an iron fist over the dead, the second, an iron fist over a condemned woman. On the other hand, Creon, who is so keen on demanding Haemon's filial duties towards him, forgets his own paternal duties towards Haemon, and how, by condemning Antigone, he will be going against his son's interests. Of course, Creon would have said that he is doing his best to keep his son away from the harm of a bad wife (e.g. 571: *κακὰς ἐγὼ γυναῖκας υἱέσι στυγῶ*), but he is reacting to the question first raised by Ismene to a problem posed by his decisions, and not deciding to condemn Antigone already with Haemon's situation in mind.<sup>59</sup>

At first, this seems not to have anything to do with Antigone's situation anymore. Persuaded by his son's apparent acceptance of his decision, Creon is boastful about his fixed ideas on what a good ruler ought to do. Halfway into his speech, that comes before Haemon has had the chance to present his case, Creon claims that he will "kill" her (*κτενῶ* in 658), so that he is not seen as lying in the eyes of the city (657, *ψευδῆ γ' ἑμαυτὸν οὐ καταστήσω πόλει*). This self-justification is suspicious: why would he do otherwise anyway, at this point, mostly if he is convinced of the rightness of his actions?<sup>60</sup> Does this open the possibility that he could do otherwise if he wanted? The reason is stated in 658-9: Antigone will pray to Zeus protector of the kindred (*πρὸς ταῦτ' ἐφθυμνείτω Δία ζύναμιον*, the text is reminiscent of what Creon

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<sup>58</sup> The translation is Warner's (1954) of *οὐ γὰρ οἶόν τε ἴσον τι ἢ δίκαιον βουλευέσθαι οἱ ἂν μὴ καὶ παῖδας ἐκ τοῦ ὁμοίου παραβαλλόμενοι κινδυνεύωσιν*.

<sup>59</sup> If we are to keep the text, Antigone had already commented as much in 572: *ὦ φίλταθ' Αἴμον, ὥς σ' ἀτιμάζει πατήρ*.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Jebb (1891), *ad loc.*, for an analysis of the steps of Creon's argument on obedience.

declared in 486, quoted in the previous section).<sup>61</sup> We have already seen, however, Antigone on stage, and we have already heard what she had to say, both to Ismene in the prologue and to Creon. The kinship Antigone recognises and cares for is the kinship with her brothers.<sup>62</sup> It is Ismene who has brought up the matter of the betrothal for the first time, at the end of the second episode (568). It is also implicit from the opening of the present scene that, by condemning Antigone to death, Creon is affecting his son directly, to an extent he cannot even imagine yet — Creon seems to have forgotten the impositions of this betrothal on his son. Once again, ironically, Creon is presenting, by himself, one of the reasons why condemning Antigone might be a bad idea.

As Jebb points out, Haemon's intervention elegantly picks up two of Creon's former claims, that a son is to submit to a father's judgment and that he must follow reason (640 and 648), and opens by attributing the origin of men's faculty of reason to the gods (683, θεοὶ φύουσιν ἀνθρώποις φρένας).<sup>63</sup> That way, he is not challenging the paternal authority, but is still remarking that there is something superior even to the king (Antigone had started her first intervention by invoking the authority of the gods as well). Carefully, he suggests that it may be useful to listen to what other mortals have to say. In this case, he will claim, the rumour pervading the city (692-5) makes clear that people are shocked by the undeserved doom of Antigone, finding her actions glorious rather than criminal (694-5 πασῶν γυναικῶν ὡς ἀναξιώτατη / κάκιστ' ἀπ' ἔργων εὐκλεεστάτων φθίνει). He will argue that he is only worried about his father's well-being and reputation (701-4). The father's well-being, whether he realises it or not, will depend on three interrelated things: changing his disposition; accepting advice from others; learning (705-9). Even though he was not present on

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<sup>61</sup> Griffith (1999: 236) points out the irony contained also in ζύναμον, “echoing Haimon's name”. Haemon's blood ties with Creon are stressed by his name, which is ironic given that Creon seems to neglect kinship in favour of the city. The connection between name and role is in the *Ajax* too, as the hero laments that his name suggests sorrow in 430-1: αἰαί· τίς ἄν ποτ' ᾤεθ' ὦδ' ἐπώνυμον / τοῦμόν ζυνοῖσιν ὄνομα τοῖς ἔμοις κακοῖς;

<sup>62</sup> In 549, Antigone accuses Ismene of being more loyal to Creon than to her siblings: Κρέοντ' ἐρώτα· τοῦδε γὰρ σὺ κηδεμών. The word κηδεμών is intriguing: Jebb, *ad loc.*, points out that it “did not necessarily imply kinship”, but its use in the context of those that attend to the dead suggests that Antigone is making a parallel of her own situation and Ismene's, and that Ismene's familial duties have moved on to Creon.

<sup>63</sup> Jebb (1891:129).

stage, he will answer in kind to Creon's earlier analogies about stubbornness, comparing him to a tree that bends, as well as with an apt nautical comparison. Creon has, after all, been referring to his role guiding the ship of state earlier.<sup>64</sup>

### 1.2.1. The possibility of change

Haemon's fundamental appeal is in 718, "let go of your anger and allow a change" (ἀλλ' εἶκε καὶ θυμῷ μετάστασιν δίδου). Jebb's commentary is, once again, absolutely right on his interpretation that "a change in Creon's mood implies a change in the whole situation". Of course, Creon's interpretation will be much different. Absolutely right is also Winnington-Ingram's interpretation in underlining thus the importance of φρένες in the text:

As has often been remarked, the issue from the beginning to end of the play is a matter of φρένες, of states of mind, which may be good or bad, wise or foolish, salutary or destructive, which determine decisions for good or ill. That is the issue between Creon and Antigone, between Creon and Haemon; it is the gist of Tiresias' criticism of Creon and a theme which dominates the closing scene and the final choral comment.<sup>65</sup>

The situations depend on as little as the characters' state of mind, and their personalities often play against their best interests, blinding them to what appears evident to everyone else. Of course, personality is to an extent something "implanted" in humans by nature (one could say "by the gods", as Haemon does), and for which, ultimately, one cannot be held responsible. However, neither for us nor for Sophocles, is personality sufficient to justify a mistaken action. Furthermore, it is not learning to live with the personality we have that can be pointed out as a weakness, and, in Creon's case, not learning that the counsel of the city and the uses of tradition will necessarily be less likely to err than the hasty decisions of one man.

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<sup>64</sup> On the topic of learning, cf. also Gregory's (2012:525) approach, where she notes: "in all three Sophoclean plays featuring fathers and sons [*Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, *Trachiniae*], whether biological or surrogate, the young man sooner or later begins to think for himself, and departs from his traditional stance of deferential obedience. Furthermore, in each instance the trend of the action suggests that the defiant son is wiser than the authoritarian father and the one with right on his side. In representing generational conflict, Sophoclean tragedy tilts toward youth". Her chapter has also the virtue of framing the pedagogical scenes in the plays with the attitudes towards learning in the fifth century Athens, and with Sophocles' role as a "civic instructor".

<sup>65</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980: 121-2).

It is Creon's prejudice, once again, that will prevent him from understanding the maturity of his son's words.<sup>66</sup> In his head, he is, after all, surrounded by inferiors: women, elders, young people, charlatans. The reaction to Haemon, not only makes Creon make his tyrannical tendencies more explicit, it will also cement further his determination regarding Antigone's future. He is not about to listen to advice from anyone, even less from... his city (734, πόλις γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀμὲ χρὴ τάσσειν ἔρει;). In 726, after the Chorus suggested that both speeches were valid, Creon's argument will not be about content but, once again, about status: Haemon is too young (726-7, οἱ τηλικοῖδε καὶ διδασκόμεσθα δὴ / φρονεῖν ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς τηλικοῦδε τὴν φύσιν;). As one response follows another in the interchange between father and son, Creon's tyrannical delusions, as we may begin to think of them, become more and more marked: he will end up asking whether he is to rule Thebes with any judgement other than his own.<sup>67</sup> The problem is no longer just Antigone's sentence — the problem now is even more serious and pervasive, and is about tyranny. Haemon's words are semi-prophetic (if prophecy was needed to guess the consequences of bad rule) warning him that he will be the ruler of a place with no people left (739, καλῶς γ' ἐρήμης ἂν σὺ γῆς ἄρχοις μόνος). Indeed, Creon's decisions will make his own life bereft of family and descendants, alienating and pushing to suicide those that would guarantee his own prosperity. Haemon is the last element in Creon's family too, and with his death, Creon will be left without hope for continuation of his line.

Haemon's accusations are clear. Creon is acting unjustly (743, οὐ γὰρ δίκαιά σ' ἐξαμαρτάνονθ' ὀρώ.), and disrespecting the gods (745, οὐ γὰρ σέβεις τιμὰς γε τὰς θεῶν πατῶν). He is not arguing in the name of the city anymore, and Creon, infuriated, refuses to see what justice is he contravening if he *is* justice. Haemon's reply in 745 is picking up the vocabulary of Creon in 744: ἀμαρτάνω γὰρ τὰς ἐμὰς ἀρχὰς σέβων; *L'état c'est moi*, he could have said, and his commands are independent of whatever anyone else thinks and, unquestionable and unchangeable. At the end of the discussion, there is not much else to expect regarding Antigone's situation. Creon is showing himself more and more stubborn. The scene of persuasion has failed.

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<sup>66</sup> Ironically too, Creon asks Haemon in 648-51 never to lose his sense of judgement over a woman — which is what he just did — and to let her sing to Zeus protector of kinship (658-9), the exact same god he is disrespecting.

<sup>67</sup> Following Jebb (1891) on 736.

It is clear that for Haemon, as he leaves, the matter is settled. The prince abandons the stage pointing out the consequences of Creon's decision: his son's death.<sup>68</sup> Haemon's death will later be announced by Tiresias as a consequence for Creon's obstinacy, but here the prince's words are enough to make sure that will be the case — if Antigone dies, he will die too, because he has decided as much. The cue is given by Creon himself in 750: he will not marry her while she lives (ταύτην ποτ' οὐκ ἔσθ' ὡς ἔτι ζῶσαν γαμεῖς). The affirmation picks up ironically 575, where Hades would be the one putting an end to the marriage contract (Ἄιδης ὁ παύσων τούσδε τοὺς γάμους ἔφθ), as well as 654, where Antigone could go marry someone in Hades (τὴν παῖδ' ἐν Ἄιδου τήνδε νυμφεύειν τινί).<sup>69</sup> Whether Creon will change his mind or not, Haemon is to join Antigone in death, and the only way to change that is to have Creon acting fast (751, ἦ δ' οὖν θανεῖται καὶ θανοῦσ' ὀλεῖ τινα). Creon underestimates the threat and, convinced that he is dealing with nothing but a stubborn youth, he will, once again, surpass the previous marks of excess by announcing that Antigone is to die in front of the groom (760-1: ἄγαγε τὸ μῖσος ὡς κατ' ὄμματ' αὐτίκα / παρόντι θνήσκη πλησία τῷ νυμφίῳ). The threat is ironic with hindsight, when we know that Haemon will indeed see Antigone dying, or at least arrive just after it happens, but, to a first time audience, it might cause the expectation that Antigone will be brought to the scene next. Instead, it is Haemon leaving, and Creon forgetting momentarily that he had decided to spare Ismene (770, ἄμφω γὰρ αὐτῷ καὶ κατακτεῖναι νοεῖς).

Of course, two verses later, Creon's plan about how to kill Antigone has already changed, for one reason or another. The portrait of the ways in which Creon makes decisions cannot be accidental. He is, at once, the clearly stubborn ruler who exaggerates in his exertion of power out of fear to be seen as weak, but on the other hand he is the man who changes his mind in two lines (he will also eventually yield very fast after Tiresias' final words). Rather than stoning Antigone to death in public,

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<sup>68</sup> It is possible however to argue that Haemon's words in 751 are misunderstood by Creon as a death threat against himself: "her death will destroy another", ἦ δ' οὖν θανεῖται καὶ θανοῦσ' ὀλεῖ τινα; that other can be Creon.

<sup>69</sup> Antigone is choosing death over marriage (or in love with death, as the Chorus will imply), and symbolically, by doing so, marrying herself to death instead. She cannot know that Haemon will, also symbolically, choose a *post mortem* marriage by dying at the same time.

or executing her in some other way in front of Haemon, Creon now decides to lock her alive in a tomb. Creon accuses her of impiety, but his two last lines are, evidently, going to be applied to himself, who will only learn after her death that he *should* revere the dead (779-80: ἢ γνώσεται γοῶν ἀλλὰ τηνικαδῶθ' ὅτι / πόνος περισσός ἐστι τᾶν Ἄιδου σέβειν).

The fact that Haemon kills himself will come as a surprise for Creon, who did not understand his words before, but, after the intervention of Tiresias, not a surprise to the audience. The hopes for a different outcome are running low, as there is the strong suggestion that the worst conclusion might be about to become true.

### 1.2.2. The deaths of Eurydice and Haemon

Our aim so far has been to demonstrate that in the *Antigone* there are moments where the characters are presented with more than one option. That will still be our concern in the next section, where we shall deal with the scene with Tiresias. However, because it also concerns issues of decision, design, and the reasons for things to happen the way they do, it is now worth digressing slightly from the order of events to look at how things turn out as they do between Creon and Haemon towards the end of the play.

Eurydice, enters the play in 1183.<sup>70</sup> The Chorus wonders whether she is coming because she has heard of the trouble with Haemon (just as Jocasta is about to pray to Apollo in the *OT*, Eurydice was on her way to pray to Athena). She interrupts the exchange between the Messenger and the Chorus, an exchange where the death of Haemon has already been announced as the result of both his own hand and his father's action in 1172-8.<sup>71</sup> It is worth looking at the whole passage:

Χο: τί δ' αὖ τόδ' ἄχθος βασιλέων ἦκεις φέρων;<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Her death will not be analysed here, but it is important to note that she kills herself after hearing of all that has happened, and that her dying is mostly another necessary piece in Creon's downfall, and as a consequence of his ill counsel.

<sup>71</sup> We shall look at the beginning of the Messenger's speech, on time and the reversal of fortune elsewhere, since it contains a fundamental notion present in the three Theban plays.

<sup>72</sup> Only a few lines earlier, in 1163, the Messenger has referred to Creon's rule as a μοναρχία. It is curious to note that, in this fast reverse of fortune, the Theban elders have had their counselling status restored to them.

Αγ: τεθνᾶσιν · οἱ δὲ ζῶντες αἴτιοι θανεῖν.  
Χο: καὶ τίς φονεύει; τίς δ' ὁ κείμενος; λέγε.  
Αγ: Αἴμων ὄλωλεν · αὐτόχειρ δ' αἰμάσσεται.  
Χο: πότερα πατρός ἢ πρὸς οἰκείας χερός;  
Αγ: αὐτὸς πρὸς αὐτοῦ, πατρὶ μηνίσας φόνου.  
Χο: ὦ μάντι, τοῦπος ὡς ἄρ' ὀρθὸν ἤνυσας.

Ch: Which burden of grief did you come to bring now to your princes?  
Me: They have died. Those alive are guilty of the dying.  
Ch: And who killed? And who fell? Speak!  
Me: Haemon died. He was slain by his own hand // by a familiar hand (αὐτόχειρ)  
Ch: By his father's hand or by his own? // by a familiar hand? (πρὸς οἰκείας χερός)  
Me: Himself by his own (hand), mad after his father's murdering.  
Ch: O, Seer, how have you rightly brought your words to an end (≈ fulfilled your prophecy).

The passage condenses three issues of importance to the present chapter: first, the nature of Creon's transgression, which consists in inverting the places of the living and the dead.<sup>73</sup> In second place, the ambiguity of the authorship of the action, and finally, the language used of Tiresias' part in the matter: ἤνυσας suggests that not only was his prophecy right, but that he *made* it right, as if a prophecy was an agent of sorts chasing down its victim (as they can be in Oedipus' story). The first aspect is self-explanatory. As for the second, Jebb tries to solve the ambiguity of αὐτόχειρ, an attempt that is not only unnecessary, but risks making the text much poorer.<sup>74</sup> As said above, the *Antigone* is filled with αὐτ- words, and the double meaning "self" and "kin" is inseparable. By answering that Haemon's death was αὐτόχειρ, the Messenger can convey the idea of both suicide and the father's responsibility: Haemon's decision was the direct consequence of Creon's actions; it is the self, but also the continuity of the family harming the self (as the Labdacidae kept doing as well, and had just done before the opening of the play). The ambiguity is so deliberate, that the Chorus has to inquire further which αὐτόχειρ was this: the father's, or... πρὸς οἰκείας χερός, which most have chosen to translate "by his own hand", certainly to mark the alternative.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Creon himself is referred to as a "breathing corpse" in 1167 (ἔμφυχον νεκρόν), furthering this inversion of natural places. As we shall see later, Tiresias (1069-71) will claim that Creon's major crime is keeping living people in tombs and dead people unburied.

<sup>74</sup> Jebb (1891:209).

<sup>75</sup> The same αὐτόχειρ will be used in 1315 to describe Eurydice's method of death.

However, πρὸς οἰκείας χερὸς also contains the double meaning of kin and self. In Haemon's case, with his brother dead, there are not many other options for πρὸς οἰκείας χερὸς, and Eurydice has not even been introduced yet as a character. The Messenger's answer while it reinforces the suicide, links it directly to the circumstance created by Creon's entombment of Antigone. So far, so good, and there is a double cause of Haemon's death. It is not a strange occurrence in Greek Tragedy that one of the causes is divine: in the *OT*, we will see that this is the case for most of Oedipus' actions, that are both performed willingly by himself (regardless of what he can know about their true significance), and according to the plans of Apollo (1329ff.). In the *Antigone* as well, the heroine will frame her actions in a sequence of hereditary doom as well as claim her own power of decision over them. Here, we are, at first sight exclusively in the human plane: Haemon killed himself because, before he left the stage, he had decided that this was the necessary consequence of Antigone's death, and because Creon's decisions had circumscribed his son's options. His death, however, was predicted by Tiresias and is necessary for Creon to learn.

This brings us to the third notion condensed in these few lines. In their answer, the Chorus invokes to the secular world a divine authority of sorts, by concluding that Tiresias' words were right. The use of the verb ἀνύω is more significant than that: Tiresias is not merely announcing the future; by speaking his prophecies, he is bringing the future full circle, accomplishing it, making sure it happens. It is striking that the use of the verb is exactly in the same context as in *OC* 452-4:

τοῦτ' ἐγὼδα, τῆσδέ τε  
μαντεῖ' ἀκούων συννοῶν τε τάξ' ἐμοῦ  
παλαίφαθ' ἄμοι Φοῖβος ἤνυσέν ποτε.

I know these things, hearing her prophecies (the ones brought by Ismene), and as thinking also of those (prophecies) spoken for me long ago, that Phoebus now has accomplished.

Here Apollo is the one “bringing about”, or “accomplishing” (ἤνυσέν) the old prophecies given to Oedipus. Tiresias is the divine representative among men. The conclusion of the Chorus does not mean, of course, that Tiresias *willingly* brought something about, or plotted something; they mean that by acknowledging that Tiresias' prophecies were right, then there was something that he could see as

verifiable in the future, if Creon did not change, and if there was the need for Creon to learn after his offence, then we may call that need a plan of the gods that was fulfilled. As we have seen and will notice again in the remaining chapters, it is not unusual that the actions of men seem to other men to coincide with the plans of gods, often also against the former's intentions (as is Oedipus' case). Neither does the natural assumption that one's actions are one's own, and the result of personal decision contradict the belief that things happen because they have to happen or were sanctioned by the gods. The curious aspect here is that the chain of events could not have been presented in a clearer way, nor could the human cause and responsibility in it be more stressed. Yet, there are two outcomes that can be foreseen, both of them being at once the necessary and determined result of a choice of action, and something that feels superior to whatever a mortal decides to do. If put together, the comparison of this attribution of personal responsibility with the opening lines of the Messenger's speech about time and the unpredictability of fortune is not necessarily one of contradiction, but one of two factors converging to create a given situation.

Let us return to Eurydice's scene. While the suicide of Eurydice is yet another necessary piece for Creon's learning, what will interest us here will be the way in which the confrontation between father and son will match or contradict their earlier encounter. The last time we saw him, Creon was leaving to repair his damage. Now the audience knows already of the death of Haemon, but no word about whether Creon has rescued Antigone or not. Instead of speaking of that first, just like Creon, the Messenger will deal with the body of Polynices in the opening lines of his narrative, 1192ff. Much has been discussed about this order of actions.<sup>76</sup> While it is true that one must be flexible with the chronology of events in some plays, the order

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<sup>76</sup> E.g. Waldock (1951:130), answering people complaining that he buried Polynices first: "Antigone's death is, of course, foreordained. No matter what route Creon took to the cavern he was destined to arrive too late. If he had made all the hast in the world, he would still not have been in time - for that is the plan of the drama, that Antigone is to die". While I agree that the death of Antigone is necessary, the foreordaining aspect is, so to say, optional. Foreordained or not, the tension of the play lies in the fact that it looks as though things can be changed, and, for that, hearing that Creon went to Polynices first is an immediate factor for increasing suspense. Creon fixes his first error first, and then proceeds to the second, without realising its potential urgency. On the other hand, we have no way to know whether Antigone died during the scene with Tiresias, while Creon buried Polynices, or one second before Haemon's arrival. For the view that Sophocles kept the reverse order on purpose, and Creon prioritising his amendments with the gods, cf. e.g. Kitto (1956:174-5).

here seems to be of importance: Creon, instead of doing the obviously urgent thing, starts by what he would consider obviously urgent, i.e. instead of rescuing the living, he will try to placate the gods by honouring the dead. It is only when they are done, that they head to the “bridal” tomb of Antigone (νομφεῖον in 1205) that they hear the groom’s cry. Creon’s reaction is described in 1211-13:

[...] ὦ τάλας ἐγώ,  
ἄρ’ εἰμὶ μάντις; ἄρα δυστυχεστάτην  
κέλευθον ἔρπω τῶν παρελθουσῶν ὁδῶν;

O woe is me  
Am I a seer?  
Am I walking down the most unfortunate path of all paths I have travelled  
through?

He asks, recognising the voice of his son. There was no need to be a prophet for Creon to fear Haemon’s death, since his son had already announced it, but it is Tiresias’ information that eventually convinces him to change his course. The prophecy was clear about Haemon’s fate (not so much about Antigone’s), but, as he hears his son’s cry, Haemon is obviously still alive. As far as Creon knows, he has begun doing the necessary actions to avoid Tiresias’ prophecies. He could easily have judged the causes and effects of his decision by the information given to him by other characters (Haemon’s anger, the Chorus’ hesitation, Tiresias’ description of the rituals), but now, as he guesses that Haemon arrived earlier to the tomb, he calls himself a seer.<sup>77</sup> He also calls the his present situation *δυστυχής*, when, good or bad, it seems to have little to do with *τύχη* as something happening by chance, that could be otherwise, aleatory — on the other hand, it certainly represents something external to Creon’s will, something he has not predicted as the consequence of his decisions. The irony here is, of course, that it is also something that could have been avoided, had Creon understood it before. The cycle is endless: Creon, with his features, is put in a situation where he will act with his personality playing against himself, and will eventually learn that he is responsible for all his actions, but he is not

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<sup>77</sup> In the *OT*, the Chorus also uses the word to talk about themselves in the deluded third stasimon: εἴπερ ἐγὼ μάντις εἰμί, in 1086). It might very well be that, apart from Tiresias, all instances of characters comparing themselves to seers are unknowingly ironic or wrong.

responsible for being put in the opening situation to begin with. Chance and the “plans of the gods” are not incompatible with mortals digging their own graves.

Creon’s men find Haemon holding the corpse of Antigone, in a position that will be very similar to the description of Oedipus’ finding of the hanging Jocasta in the *OT*.<sup>78</sup> Not only does Antigone die in the same way as her mother, Haemon, just like Oedipus, will add to his mourning a gesture of despairing violence against himself. The Messenger is clear: Haemon is cursing (ἀπομιώζοντα) not only the death of Antigone, but also, in 1225, πατρὸς ἔργα, the deeds of his father that caused it.

ὦ τλήμων, οἶον ἔργον εἴργασαι· τίνα  
νοῦν ἔσχεες; ἐν τῷ συμφορᾶς διεφθάρης;  
ἔξελθε, τέκνον, ἰκέσιός σε λίσσομαι.

O miserable, what have you done?  
What were you thinking? By which misfortune did you lose your wits?  
Come forth, my son, as a suppliant I beg you.<sup>79</sup>

It has been noted before that the scenes of maddened self-harm and bloodshed are preceded by an invocation of Dionysus.<sup>80</sup> This is no exception, following the Chorus’ song in 1115-54. There, Dionysus had been called from the Parnassus to heal Thebes. Dionysus is a Theban divinity, but he also takes over Apollo’s functions in Delphi for a season. As usual, the choral song is answered in ways that are not necessarily the ones that appear desirable. The plague threatening Thebes will be healed, but for that to happen, the ruling houses must be destroyed.

This time, there is an inversion, and it is Creon’s turn to beg his son to reason, and to try to stop his course of action. As it is common in Dionysian inspired episodes, Creon attributes Haemon’s actions to a momentary lack of reason, a wrong thought caused by a misfortune (συμφορά). As for what Haemon has done, the problem is

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<sup>78</sup> For an interpretation of Antigone and Haemon’s *post mortem* wedding, framed in the subversion of weddings in tragedy in general, cf. Seaford (1987). On the connections between death and love in mythology, cf. Vernant (1982:134ff).

<sup>79</sup> It is the second time that Creon wonders about Haemon’s state of mind. In the opening of the third episode, as we have seen, he has already asked how his son would have taken his decision to condemn Antigone. Ironically, the episode is spent with Haemon trying to change Creon’s state of mind.

<sup>80</sup> E.g. Seaford (1993:138-42), or Winnington-Ingram (1980:111). Both also note how the references to Dionysus are made in tones of joy and hope, right after the catastrophe. For a more detailed analysis of the whole song, see Jouanna (2007:457-62).

what he is still to do, more than the previous links in the chain of action, in which he had little say.<sup>81</sup> The following lines are the description of Haemon's attempt to kill Creon, and his suicide. Jebb argues convincingly that Haemon had never planned to kill his father, and that he tries to do so out of "a frantic impulse" that is "instantly followed by violent remorse", a remorse which would make Haemon turn the sword against himself.<sup>82</sup> The "violent remorse" interpretation is not so clear. Just like in the *OT*, Haemon walks in to find his wife(-to-be) hanging dead. Just like in the *OT*, the horror of the vision sets the male character in a frenzy.<sup>83</sup> Haemon may never have thought of killing his father, and Oedipus certainly has never thought of blinding himself, but Haemon did announce before that he would not survive Antigone. Whether he meant it because he believed he could still save her, or because he planned to die if she died, it is not clear. That does not mean, however, that there is a hint of remorse triggering his suicide. His situation is less bad than that of Oedipus — Oedipus realises that he is the author of the worst crimes, and sees in the dead Jocasta the result of them. Haemon is a victim of his father's policies, and sees in the death of Antigone also the death of his bride. Even if both actions can be said to be the result of a temporary madness, none of them is entirely gratuitous: Oedipus has to do something to give his emotional suffering a somatic counterpart by self-mutilation, and Haemon has to die with Antigone. We will not hear from Haemon

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<sup>81</sup> Jebb (1891), *ad loc.*, interprets οἶον ἔργον εἴργασαι as "Haemon's forcible entrance into Antigone's tomb". I am not sure it has to be so specific — Creon might very well be asking Haemon about something he, Creon, has done. The way of speaking is not uncommon: someone who has just understood that they have been wrong, has not yet assimilated it, and asks others what they have done wrong. The one who has done anything so far is Creon, not Haemon.

<sup>82</sup> Many others disagree, e.g. Holzermayr Rosenfield (2006), *ad loc.*, based on the ambiguity of Haemon's words in his first argument with Creon. I assume they are thinking of lines such as 751 (ἦ δ' οὖν θανεῖται καὶ θανοῦσ' ὀλεῖ τινα), where Haemon does not specify which other death will the death of Antigone bring. The ambiguity seems to be resolved in 753, by Haemon's statement that it is not a threat (τίς δ' ἔστ' ἀπειλή πρὸς κενὰς γνώμας λέγειν;). By now, Haemon has lost hope to change Creon's mind, and it does not look like a threat would do.

<sup>83</sup> Oedipus too will ask for a sword.

again, but, judging from Oedipus (in the *OT*), the self-blinding is a decision that he assumes still when he is sober again.<sup>84</sup>

Haemon's death, according to the Messenger in 1242-3, constitutes a moral lesson; the moral lesson Creon has failed to learn throughout most of the play:

δείξας ἐν ἀνθρώποισι τὴν ἀβουλίαν  
ὅσῳ μέγιστον ἀνδρὶ πρόσκειται κακόν.

Demonstrating to mankind that the lack of counsel is, by far, the biggest evil in which a man can be caught.<sup>85</sup>

Even though it is somewhat surprising that the Messenger is in the position to make such an elaborate conclusion — he is connecting a cause to an effect that is not necessarily obvious and univocal — it is hardly conceivable that the Messenger might be referring to Haemon's actions as resulting from ἀβουλία.<sup>86</sup> The deaths of both Haemon and Antigone are caused by Creon's precipitation and intransigence (made stronger by the confrontation with Antigone's own intransigence), and he is the one who has been accused of refusing counsel in two important episodes of the play. Haemon has come to his father to warn him that men are not infallible, and to ask him to bend, to learn, to change, and to convince him that doing so was noble rather than shameful. Haemon's death is the ultimate consequence of Creon's disrespect for the gods, a death that could have been avoided by acting differently, and a death that Tiresias has tried to prevent when he comes to see Creon. As he enters the stage again, Creon will admit as much as well, a lesson that, as the Chorus remarks, has come too late (1270, οἴμ' ὡς ἔοικας ὀψὲ τὴν δίκην ἰδεῖν).

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<sup>84</sup> Suicide is also, by definition, the ultimate expression of one's own will, even if often surrounded by the distortions of states of mind caused by despair. The humiliation of Ajax was plotted by Athena, but his suicide is his way to react to it. It is curious that Creon, who wishes to die towards the end of the play (1306ff.), does not kill himself. At this stage, just like for Antigone in the beginning, death is the best possible fate left to Creon (1328-33, ἴτω ἴτω, / φανήτω μόρων ὁ κάλλιστ' ἔχων / ἐμοὶ τερμίαν ἄγων ἀμέραν / ἕπατος· ἴτω ἴτω, / ὅπως μηκέτ' ἄμαρ ἄλλ' εἰσίδω).

<sup>85</sup> For Creon, in 672, the worst of evils that emptied cities was ἀναρχία. Rather than following counsel, Creon would prefer for his subjects (and family) to follow him and concede to his decisions regardless of their righteousness, for stability's sake.

<sup>86</sup> The Messenger describes Creon's words to his son as wondering which sort of foolish disaster caused his son's action (ἐν τῷ συμφορᾶς διεφθάρης, 1228), an action that, at this point, consists only in his being there. Haemon is then pictured with eyes flashing with anger (τὸν δ' ἀγρίοις ὄσσοισι παπτήνας ὁ παῖς, 1231), but the Messenger makes the immediate connection with Creon's actions, and does not regard Haemon's reaction as madness.

### 1.3. Creon versus Tiresias: prophecy and the non-uniqueness of fate

It is particularly relevant, in the overall structure of the play, that Tiresias appears without being summoned.<sup>87</sup> As the seer points out, Creon has saved Thebes before thanks to his advice.<sup>88</sup> By not calling Tiresias this time, Creon shows that his mind is made up, and the burial of Polynices does not seem to him a matter of controversy. There is no plague yet nor external manifestation of his undoing, as far as he knows; unlike Oedipus, who was pressed to take action by the situation of the city. It is never suggested up to this point that Creon might be in doubt between two different choices, nor that he might consider the possibility that he is acting wrongly. Psychologically, this reinforces the crescendo of Creon's obstinacy and his tyrannical tendencies — he does not look for advice, as he would have done in the past, because he has stopped considering advice important, and has by now dismissed all possible counsellors he could have enlisted. However, despite the growing impression that Creon might be digging his own grave (or his family's grave, in this case), Tiresias' appearance has an additional dramatic effect: it brings hope both to the Chorus and to the audience that things might still change their course. It is clear from the previous scenes that Haemon's and Antigone's claims that the general population disagrees with Creon have some grounding, as it is clear that the Chorus, while loyal to Creon, is very hesitant towards his demands. Tiresias' entrance is then a moment to breathe something of a sigh of relief. Unexpectedly, the prophet who is never mistaken appears. Creon has followed his advice before, so he will certainly follow it again, and Tiresias will know what the right thing to do is.

Unlike what happens in the *OT*, Tiresias is willing to speak, and will do so in a particularly straightforward way, rather than in the traditional riddles of the

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<sup>87</sup> Tiresias addresses the Θήβης ἄνακτες, in the plural, presumably referring to the Chorus. What might be only a traditional form of addressing a council becomes particularly ironic when one of the matters in hand is Creon's autocratic tendency. Even Tiresias, whose function is to guide the blind who cannot see their own condition, needs to be guided by the boy (the comparison is made by Tiresias himself in 1012-4). This adds up to the strong suggestion that no man, individually, is able to steer his life to the least bad port.

<sup>88</sup> In 994. Jebb (1891) points out, *ad loc.*, that Creon has been the regent of Thebes for a while after Oedipus' disaster, even if he has just become the king. The mention to Creon saving Thebes thanks to Tiresias' advice is repeated in 1058, this time during the argument between the two. Not much is made of the previous role of Creon, though, unlike Oedipus' in the *OT*, where his previous help to the city was the frame of reference against which the Chorus could judge his actions.

prophets. He is here to “teach” Creon, and Creon is to “be persuaded” (992 ἐγὼ διδάζω, καὶ σὺ τῷ μάντει πιθοῦ). Whether or not Creon understands what Tiresias is about to tell him, he should nonetheless do as he is told.<sup>89</sup> The reason for the difference in Tiresias’ attitudes suggests that in the *OT* everything had been done already, and Oedipus would find out about his own actions sooner or later in the course of one day, without the possibility of rectifying any of them. In the *Antigone*, however, that is not the case.<sup>90</sup> That idea is expressed in one fundamental line from Tiresias, in verse 996:

φρόνει βεβῶς αὖ νῦν ἐπὶ ζυροῦ τύχης.

Bear in mind that now, again, you are walking on the razor-edge of fortune.

The image of chance as a blade’s edge, a familiar metaphor in modern days too, seems to clarify the meaning of the sentence and of Tiresias’ purpose.<sup>91</sup> It can only mean that the subject is in a precarious situation before falling to one of two sides, no more, no less. Unlike Creon’s impression, this is “again”, a moment of choice, where he can use Tiresias’ help, because Tiresias has what he lacks: insight to the future. The word τύχη, as we shall see in the chapter on the *OT*, can be used ambivalently to express what we would call “things that are determined” (Jebb’s translation of it is “fate”, and it is right), and “accident”, but usually tends to refer to anything that is out of the agent’s control. On the other hand, those things are not necessarily aleatory, nor unexpected; people just might not be able to see the causal chain leading to them, or not be able to predict the exact time something will happen (change of weather, for example). Creon has two possible “fates” to choose from. One, if he follows Tiresias’ advice, will avoid catastrophe. The other will *necessarily* bring Haemon’s death, Eurydice’s death, and Creon’s downfall, and will be set in motion if Creon does not yield quickly. Creon’s decision is conditioned by timing:

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. chapter 3, section 3.2. on stubbornness as a handicap preventing humans from learning.

<sup>90</sup> I am not trying to suggest that Sophocles had both plays in mind when he wrote the scenes with Tiresias, just that the inclusion of the seer with two different attitudes is significant.

<sup>91</sup> Griffith, *ad loc.*, notes that while the image of the razor-edge is “proverbial, for a moment of crisis (...) the addition here of τύχη is unusual”, but does not add a suggestion on how are we to interpret this addition.

once things are set in motion, other agents will act, and Creon cannot control that; for example, Antigone will commit suicide.

It is this necessary aspect of *τόχη*, where the different possible outcomes will be linked to a chain of events, and not be arbitrary, that allows the interchangeability of terms with words for destiny. In the *OT*, things will become more complicated by the impression that no matter which choices the hero made or could have made, he would always have reached the same outcome, and *τόχη* becomes only one of the possible paths to fulfil one single and determined ending (cf. chapter 2).

Tiresias' initial argument, laid down in 998-1033, falls into three parts. First, the seer describes the alarming lack of omens that triggered his appearance, then, he advances the cause for such a situation, and he ends with an appeal to Creon to take counsel and correct what he calls "a mistake". Tiresias was first alarmed by the murdering spree amongst his birds of augur, that was "not without a sign" (οὐκ ἄσημος) suggesting that something was very wrong in the order of things.<sup>92</sup> To confirm this reading, Tiresias tries a sacrifice to Hephaistos, but the god seemingly rejects the offer. None of the rites gave Tiresias the answer he was seeking, apart from a tremendous sign from the gods that some sort of balance had to be restored.

From a dramatic point of view, it might be understandable to see Creon reacting so badly to Tiresias. The seer, who promised to teach a better understanding, jumps from the lack of clear omens to the conclusion, in 1015, that the city is ill, and that the reason for that illness is Creon's decisions (καὶ ταῦτα τῆς σῆς ἐκ φρενὸς νοσεῖ πόλις, once again the private understanding of Heraclitean sounding). In an inversion that is not the most helpful in a speech that seeks persuasion, the explanation will come only after: the gods reject the sacrifices because of Creon's refusal to bury Polynices, bringing a plague of sorts upon the city (1016-22). This refusal represents an inversion in what is due to the world of the dead, and what should remain in the world of the living, a motif that Tiresias will only expound at a later stage of the argument. The description of the situation in Thebes is made in the

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<sup>92</sup> Jebb (1891), *ad loc.*, reads it as "a vague omen of bloodshed (φοναίς), but no clear sign. The seer now sought further light by another mode of divination". I read, instead, that the sign was impossible to misinterpret, and that Tiresias proceeds to other methods of divination to learn more about its cause. While it will be obvious that the issue is related to the balance between the world of the living and the world of the dead, caused by the refusal of burial, it is not obvious yet that Creon will be responsible for the death his own kin.

above mentioned verses with a sinister imagery that anticipates this motif: all the places of ritual in the city, public and private (γὰρ ἡμῖν ἐσχάραι τε παντελεῖς),<sup>93</sup> have received the offering of Polynices' body, defiled by hungry dogs and birds of prey, i.e. instead of proper funeral rites, Creon's decision represented an offering of human flesh to the deities (a particular vivid image in 1022, where the birds, and by extension the gods, have eaten the blood and the fat of a murdered man, ἀνδροφθόρου βεβρωτες αἵματος λίπος). It is still presented as a funeral rite of sorts, but as an inverted type of funeral rite, that will make the gods turn their faces until proper rituals are made.

It is interesting to note that the only cause referred to at this point is the lack of burial, with no mention to Antigone's trial.<sup>94</sup> This suggests that there is one initial wrong that is generating the rest, a wrong that, once corrected, for it can still be corrected, should be enough to resolve the resulting conflicts as well.

### 1.3.1. Mistakes that can be fixed

The saving clause is introduced by the third moment of Tiresias' speech: intention.<sup>95</sup> The matter will receive particular attention in the *OC*, and be the basis of Oedipus' defence, but here it is only hinted at, from Tiresias' words. Instead, he will touch the same chord as Haemon has done in the previous episode, and attempt to persuade Tiresias that he must change his ways (if not his mind), stop being stubborn, and accept counsel, for what he has done was not the result of an evil intention but the result of a "mistake". Mistakes are traditionally unintentional, and here Creon will have the chance to correct it, if only he recognises it as such. Lines 1023-1030 state this possibility:

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<sup>93</sup> Griffith (1999) *ad loc.*, after Burkert, notes that "βωμοί are built-up altars", in contrast with ἐσχάραι that are "level or below the ground, esp. for sacrifices to heroes or chthonian deities". The two words, then illustrate how the matter affects transversally not only all places of cult, but also both the deities from the worlds above and below.

<sup>94</sup> As noted by Knox (1964:115): "And the gods, though they make clear to Creon and to all men that she was right to bury Polynices, do not praise her. (...) When their spokesman Tiresias tells Creon he is wrong, he makes no mention of the fact that Antigone was right. He refers to her only once; her imprisonment in a tomb is an offence against the gods - she is merely one more count in the indictment against Creon. The gods punish Creon unmercifully, but they do not save Antigone".

<sup>95</sup> That the discussion was around in antiquity can be seen not only in the *OC* and the *OT*, but also from the discussion done by Aristotle on voluntary and involuntary actions in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

ταῦτ' οὖν, τέκνον, φρόνησον· ἀνθρώποισι γὰρ  
τοῖς πᾶσι κοινόν ἐστι τοῦζαμαρτάνειν·  
ἐπεὶ δ' ἀμάρτη, κείνος οὐκέτ' ἔστ' ἀνὴρ  
ἄβουλος οὐδ' ἄνολβος, ὅστις ἐς κακὸν  
πεσῶν ἀκῆται μηδ' ἀκίνητος πέλη.  
αὐθαδία τοι σκαιότητ' ὀφλισκάνει.

So understand these things, my son. It is common for all men to make mistakes; but, after having erred, that man is not lacking in advice nor luck, if he repairs the evils he has fallen into, and does not remain unshaken. Stubbornness incurs a charge of incompetence.

People make mistakes, and those mistakes are called ἀμαρτία in Greek, a word that has given room to endless discussions on the characters' "innate flaw", which has since been generally recognised as a misinterpretation of Aristotle.<sup>96</sup> What Aristotle says in *Poetics* 13 is:

The perfect plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the subject's fortunes must be not from bad fortune to good, but on the contrary from good to bad; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great fault (ἀμαρτία μεγάλη) on his part (...).<sup>97</sup>

Whether Creon fits or not the model of Aristotle's ideal tragic hero, is a different question, and Jonathan Barnes is right in considering that "Aristotle's analysis is not in all particulars convincing" when it comes selecting the type of man whose misfortune is likely to arouse the audience's pity.<sup>98</sup> Regardless, and still following Barnes, what moved the audience is the feeling of disproportional payback for one's error, an "*undeserved* misfortune". By this, Barnes does not mean that "the tragic fault is always and necessarily unavoidable", as the case of Oedipus would suggest, nor that the hero is innocent of his misdeeds because of some external cause. Creon's

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<sup>96</sup> Stinton (1975) argues that the modern reading of the word should not go as far as to exclude any moral sense: "the word has a range of applications, from 'ignorance of fact' at one end to 'moral defect', 'moral error', at the other, and that the modern orthodoxy, though not clearly wrong as the moralising interpretation it displaced, restricts Aristotle's meaning in a way he did not intend, and does less than justice to his analysis of classical drama".

<sup>97</sup> The translation is Bywater's in Barnes (1984).

<sup>98</sup> Barnes (1995:280). Barnes' interpretation, too, considers that "a *hamartia* is an event, an action, something that you do when you go wrong in some way. The misfortune of Aristotelian heroes depends on what they do. Sin, or moral errors, are doubtless faults of a sort; and a tragic *hamartia* has sometimes been interpreted as a fault of this moral order."

error is clearly to have refused burial to Polynices, and as he did it, he was aware of what he was doing — just not of its consequences. As far as his intentions go, Creon misjudged his actions, but his wish was to protect the city. The mistake was avoidable, and, above all, rectifiable. The misfortune that will come to him will be learning too late that his mistake is to lead to the death of his son and wife, and, presumably, to a less than honourable situation of having condemned a family member to death (Antigone’s innocence is not as stressed as the rightfulness of the burial — she still defies the city).<sup>99</sup> The question remains about what would move the audience’s pity in a performance of the *Antigone*. While the fates of the younger characters would certainly be one of the answers, it is also very likely that Creon’s vain attempt to correct his mistakes might be seen as a factor of sympathy, and the fact that he is too late constitute the “unfairness” of his misfortune.<sup>100</sup>

We shall now turn back to Tiresias’ speech. Being stubborn (or self-interested, if we prefer that translation) is indeed a flaw of character but, at least at this point, a flaw that can be corrected. The translation of σκαιότης (1028) for “incompetence” renders the meaning of the clumsiness associated with left-handed people, a clumsiness that is not desirable in a position of power, as is Creon’s now.<sup>101</sup> It is the stubbornness that gives place to incompetence, and not the fact that Creon has made

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<sup>99</sup> For a survey of the circumstances under which burial was an obligation, cf. the summary and the bibliography in Nussbaum (1986:437-8). She concludes that Creon is justified in his refusal of burial near the city, but not in making any sort of burial impossible at all. His situation, however, is affected by the fact that Polynices is a family member, which would mean that he too would be included in the obligation to funeral rites. *Contra*, cf. Lardinois (2012:60).

<sup>100</sup> It seems hard for the critics to regard Creon as a traditional heroic figure. E.g. Knox (1964: 67), “But he (Creon) lacks heroic temper. In Creon we are presented with the spectacle of a man who displays every symptom of heroic stubbornness, who is placed in the classical situation of the Sophoclean hero, expressed in the appropriate formulas, but who is swayed by advice, makes major concessions, and collapses ignominiously at the first real threat”. There are several possible reasons for that, the first one being that we might be trying to find in the tragedy a type of character, preconceived thanks to the *Poetics*. It might also be, that Creon’s first speech would have been very well received in fifth century Athens, and that Creon’s first impression has to have been, if not as long-lastingly good, at least temporarily good. But the most important thing here is the lack of depravity. Creon’s mistake is just a very big, very bad mistake, and not something that would necessarily have to happen. When he yields, he may very well regain the audience’s favour, wishing for him to make it in time. On the other hand, Creon has to deal with a city on the first day after the end of a civil war. It is likely that people supporting Polynices might still be around, and, considering the very example of the two siblings, that intestine strife might resurface at any point within the “family” of the city. It is possible (and even necessary) to sympathise with his position.

<sup>101</sup> Creon changing punishments and forgetting whether he is condemning one sister or the two is clumsy, to say the least.

a bad choice before. Tiresias concludes with an appeal for Creon not to “overkill” the dead, an idea that is familiar at least from the destiny of Hector’s body in the *Iliad*.

### 1.3.2. Crucial timing

What specifically can Creon do about it? The advice is given in one sentence: he is to concede to the dead (εἶκε τῷ θανόντι), i.e. to give Polynices his burial. Where Haemon had requested that Creon would be willing to accept advice, Tiresias reinforces that request and offers that advice, indicating the immediate action to be taken. Creon’s reaction, as is to be expected, is not the kindest. In a fashion similar to Oedipus’ in the *OT*, he accuses the seer of seeking profit out of his art. The two waste the time of thirty-two verses debating on whether the gain is good advice for the king or wealth for the seers. Eventually, it is an enraged Tiresias who, in 1064ff., “shoots” as an archer the consequences of not following his advice. Tiresias is shooting καρδίας τοξόματα (1085), and the association of these prophetic arrows with Apollo’s imagery is inevitable; once the arrow is shot, it will kill its target sooner or later. Before long, Creon will have incurred the consequences of not one mistake but a series of them, he will have been responsible for the death of his son and Antigone, and worse, he will have kept the living one in a grave and the dead one without burial, supreme inversion of the natural order of things. For that, he will be chased down by the Erinyes for revenge. He will also have offended the cities whose warriors were refused burial,<sup>102</sup> bringing war upon Thebes. Tiresias’ tone in the passage is similar to the one in which he announced to Oedipus the catastrophe to come in the *OT*, when, enraged, he reveals the future he was willing to remain silent about, and that Oedipus would discover before the end of the day. Here, as we have seen, the prophet’s approach has been different. He started by presenting the matters as if they were very serious, yet with a simple solution. When Tiresias explodes, the audience and the Chorus have a reason to tremble, for it might be already too late.

Tiresias leaves the stage. However, the illusion that something can still be done is not over yet. Creon is about to yield! In a sudden change of tone, the king recognises that the prophet has never failed, and asks the Chorus for advice. The elders suggest

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<sup>102</sup> Following Jebb (1891) *ad loc.*

that he is to bury Polynices and free Antigone, which he proceeds to do without delay; the lack of burial being the original offence on which all the rest seemed to depend. Yielding is not the same as learning, and one of the two would have sufficed at the beginning of the episode. Creon has also learnt that he should respect the established laws in 1113-4; but first, he yields out of the realisation that Haemon's threat (which he can now see for what it is) was to come true, and that the consequences announced by Tiresias would match the events as well. He is yielding to the evidence that, if he does not do so, horrible things will come. In his words in 1106, he is yielding to constraint: ἀνάγκη δ' οὐχὶ δυσμαχητέον. "One must not fight in vain with necessity".<sup>103</sup> What had been a double-ended τύχη, is now the inescapable force of ἀνάγκη. Walking on the knife-edge of chance, Creon has finally made his choice, but it turns out to be too late. His obstinacy earlier in the play pushed things until the choice was made for him, turning the optional outcomes into a unique path. The tremendous irony here is that he will only now try to fight against this outcome, and that attempt will, of course, be a lost battle. Humans live in a world subjected to the passing of time and to change — and that makes the course of their lives unstoppable and unstable. Even if Creon had decided to fix his mistake (and he does), he has against him the changes in the surrounding world.

Later in the play, Creon says that he has learnt and that he is guilty of his son's death. (1259-60) but he also attributes what happened to him to the gods crushing him (1271-76). The line between what has been brought upon Creon by his own αὐθαδία and what was in store for him to begin with is necessarily blurry. Were the gods only reacting to Creon's initial offence? Was Creon put in the situation where he would have to decide what to do with the bodies of Polynices and his fellow chieftains, and, given his specific traits of character, he would most likely fail at making the right decision? There is no answer for these questions. Whichever way one chooses to look at it, it is never suggested in any of the three plays that the origin of a situation lifts the responsibility of the agent; and it is always stated clearly in the three plays that those who act wrongly should be punished. Therefore, the matter of conduct still matters in the *Antigone* as elsewhere. The play contains not only very

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<sup>103</sup> This is exactly the same that Polynices tells Antigone as he departs in the *OC* 1441-3. In Polynices' case, however, he is making the affirmation when he is still in Colonus. In theory, he would still have the chance simply not to go back to Thebes.

specific advice on what a ruler should not do, but also a demonstration of what happens if he does what he should not. That demonstration is only worth attempting if backed by the belief that individuals are to be held responsible for their choices, and that their actions shape their future. When in doubt, the opinion of the many will be a better guide, given the limitations of human knowledge, than the rule of a tyrant. Unlike the helplessness of the *OT*, in the *Antigone* there is some sort of answer on how people should act to avoid the worst fate.

#### 1.4. The Exodus: μηδ' ὀλωλότα κέντει

We have looked at what happens in the exodus regarding the manner of Haemon's death, and its contrast with the scene where the argument between father and son is portrayed. It is now worth examining the rest of the exodus, to find the ways in which the characters interpret what has just happened.

The exodus is introduced by an optimistic song to Dionysus, praying for a solution to the problem.<sup>104</sup> As it will happen in the *OT* as well, the solution will be sent by the form of a Messenger who informs the audience about Haemon's death. Eurydice, thus far left unmentioned in the play, will appear, and leave again, in silence. As the Chorus and the Messenger wonder about the meaning of this silence, Creon finally walks in, in 1261, bringing the corpse of his son. His lamentation is as follows:

ὦ  
φρενῶν δυσφρόνων ἀμαρτήματα  
στερεὰ θανατόεντ',  
ὦ κτανόντας τε καὶ  
θανόντας βλέποντες ἐμφυλίους.  
ὦμοι ἐμῶν ἄνολβα βουλευμάτων.  
ὦ παῖ, νέος νέω ζῆν μόρω  
αἰαῖ αἰαῖ,  
ἔθανες, ἀπελύθης  
ἐμαῖς οὐδὲ σαῖς δυσβουλίαις.

O the mistakes of a misguided mind, persisted in with fatal consequences.  
O you look upon killer and killed both in one family.  
O, the misery of my decisions.

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<sup>104</sup> Following Jebb's (1891) rather than Griffith's (1999) division because the scene with Eurydice, short as it is, is framed in the return of Creon and the interpretation of what has happened by the Messenger, the Chorus, and Creon himself.

O, my child, you died in your youth by a death that no young man should die.<sup>105</sup>

Ai! Ai!

You left this life not by your own rash folly, but mine.

The Chorus had already introduced him with an opinion on the origin of the death of Haemon: not by someone else's ἄτη, but by his own mistake (οὐκ ἄλλοτρίαν / ἄτην, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ἁμαρτῶν, 1259-60). Creon's answer confirms their impression. Haemon's death was the result of errors of judgment, errors that are now στερεὰ θανατόεντα. The death of Haemon makes Creon's mistakes στερεά, i.e. irreparable. The Chorus speaks of an ἄτη, and Creon calls it ἐμῶν ἄνολβα βουλευμάτα (1265). We have avoided the translation of ἄτη before, but the sense is of ruin in general, and in some specific contexts of god-sent delusion, or something beyond one's control, often presented as a temporary blinding. What both are saying is that Creon's ἄτη, evident in his misdeeds, was the result of his own deliberation, and that deliberation was itself done poorly (i.e. without proper thought). In that sense, ἄτη can stand simply for a state of mind. He is the cause of Haemon's death, and he is such, through his decisions. He could, of course, argue that he decided so unwillingly, and, in that sense, under an ἄτη of sorts, and that he only now has the information to understand what he was doing. In any case, claiming that it was an ἄτη would not absolve him from responsibility; claiming that it was *not* someone else's ἄτη but his own, and that it translates into his decisions, stresses his personal acceptance.<sup>106</sup>

Creon has learnt, but he has only learnt through suffering (1271, ἔχω μαθῶν δέλαιος), and only too late (ὀψέ, 1270). The death of Haemon is the consequence of his folly. As we have seen above, the threat of Haemon's death becoming true, as it is stated by Tiresias eventually triggered Creon's yielding, making it something that

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<sup>105</sup> Haemon was young, and his lifespan was young too, adopting Jebb's explanation that "his years had been few", over the LSJ's rendition of μόρος here as "corpse".

<sup>106</sup> On examples of how the ἄτη is not incompatible with personal responsibility, cf. Allan (2013:109). For a brief history of the use of the concept, as well as its decline, cf. Sommerstein (2013). For an exercise with Sommerstein's suggestions with the *Antigone* as a test-case, and for states of mind in the play, cf. Cairns (2013b:xi ff.)

could happen if he did not change his mind.<sup>107</sup> Creon leaves to make sure Antigone survives, and arrives too late. For him, the moment of his yielding would probably seem enough for his learning: he capitulates, tries to fix his wrongs, and, for the urgency of Antigone's situation, that was enough. The fact that he is too late feels unfair, it feels like an extra punishment: as if the gods were not ready to forgive something that the Chorus (and the audience) would probably be ready to forget, once fixed. Haemon's death is the final demonstration for Creon that he has acted wrongly.

In 1271ff., however, Creon declares that a god has struck him in the head ἐν δ' ἐμῷ κάρῳ / θεὸς τὸτ' ἄρα τότε μέγα βᾶρος μ' ἔχων / ἔπαισεν), and pushed him into the savage paths (ἐν δ' ἔσεισεν ἀγρίαις ὁδοῖς). The implicit idea, now with a charioteer analogy rather than a nautical one, is that Creon was driving in the right course, and was taken into his errors by an external force, overturning his joy ἀντρέπων χαράν). The root of misfortune is described at one moment as deriving from the gods and at another as residing in misguided personal decisions and this oscillation is characteristic of all the Theban plays. Creon might know why he was put in the situation where he had to make a mistake, but he can identify what that mistake was, as well as the intentions behind it (and one of them was even that he did not want to offend the gods of the city by accepting the burial). It is only in that sense that his lament in 1276 (φεῦ φεῦ, ὦ πόνοι βροτῶν δύσπονοι) can be applied universally, rather to his specific situation, caused by himself.

In the fourth stasimon, when the Chorus was still hesitating between supporting Creon or pitying Antigone (not that Creon ever loses openly the Chorus' support), they were attributing Antigone's death to the terrible power of that that has been destined (951, ἀλλ' ἂ μοιριδία τις δύνασις δεινά). At this point, even though the Chorus has had enough elements to have an opinion on Creon's actions, they are

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<sup>107</sup> Possibly, by the time Tiresias announces Haemon's death, Antigone has already killed herself, or is about to, starting the fate leading to the disastrous outcome. It is impossible to pinpoint when the situation becomes impossible to fix, but, just as Antigone's death depended on Creon ordering her entombment, Haemon's death depends on Antigone taking her life.

cautiously neutral, and “fate”, whatever it is, is used as an origin of evil by default.<sup>108</sup> Together with the image of Antigone at the end of a line of doomed family members, also present in the play, we get the impression that Antigone’s fate would be this one, no matter what. However, the exodus will confirm that Antigone’s fate is contingent on Creon’s actions (and her reactions to them). At most, her family line and vague “fate” are an unfortunate coincidence, or a predisposition for something to happen (which does not mean that it *had* to happen).<sup>109</sup>

Back to the exodus: things could have remained as they are by 1276. Creon would have been punished for his double error against the underworld (and against mortal sensibility) by losing his son, and by being co-responsible of the death of two young people, destroying the one hope of survival of his own house.<sup>110</sup> There is, however, more in store for him, namely the suicide of Eurydice. The death of his wife, who had been absent from the play for almost its entirety, comes as a surprise, as a further punishment. In 1296, Creon will ask what else is to come, the additional and uncontrollable outcomes of his mistake (τίς ἄρα, τίς με πότμος ἔτι περιμένει;). At this point, it is not about teaching someone something through suffering anymore; it is about the complete annihilation of Creon, and he has already understood it as such in 1288: “you have slain anew the one already dead” (αἰαῖ, ὀλωλότ’ ἄνδρ’ ἐπεξεργάσω).<sup>111</sup> The words echo those of Tiresias in 1029-30: ἀλλ’ εἶκε τῷ θανόντι μηδ’ ὀλωλότα / κέντει· τίς ἀλκή τὸν θανόντ’ ἐπικτανεῖν;). To all intents and

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<sup>108</sup> I disagree with Jebb (1891), *ad loc.*, that “the Chorus do not mean to suggest Antigone’s guilt or innocence; still less, to foreshadow the punishment of Creon. On this side, the ode is neutral, purely a free lyric treatment of the examples”. Lycurgus’ example, an offense to a god he tried to ignore, ends with his burial while living. Creon will be the one considering himself dead amongst the living. The contrast between the two worlds and the importance of not having things in the wrong place is constant in the play. While the stasimon is not (nor could it be) a direct reflection of what will happen, it hints, ironically, at Creon’s destiny. Jebb also notes that only the man in the three examples is guilty.

<sup>109</sup> By the end of the play, 1334-6, as Creon begs to be taken away, the Chorus will remark that no matter how much they pray, there is no deliverance from misfortune, and no way to change the future, that does not belong to men in the first place. Unlike in the *OT*, the Chorus’ last intervention will not be about mortals’ unavoidable doom, but about φρονεῖν as a necessary condition for (a reachable, one would think) εὐδαιμονία. Therefore, 1334-6 seem to fulfil the same role that Creon does in the *OT*, as Oedipus requests to be exiled: postponing an issue that is not to be solved within this play.

<sup>110</sup> By double error I understand both not burying Polynices and condemning Antigone to be entombed alive. The report of Eurydice’s speech will also blame Creon for the death of Megareus, his other son. No details are given on that, though, and it is even a bit strange that he is mentioned at all. Is Creon erring consistently, or was this a tragic one-off?

<sup>111</sup> There is an “extra-punishment” in the *OT* as well, namely the self-blinding, but that one is self-inflicted, and probably the only action Oedipus’ can say he did with all the information in his hand.

purposes, Creon is as good as dead and death itself would come as welcome relief (1329-32).<sup>112</sup> The gods, after all, are no better than mortals when it comes to setting a limit of the humiliation they inflict but, once again, all of Creon's present suffering is caused by the chain reactions of other people to his actions.

## **2. External and innate causes**

So far, we have been focusing mostly on the passages of the *Antigone* where, both by the structure of the plot and by the words of the characters, there is the strong impression that things are not determined, or at least not totally determined with a unique outcome that will not change regardless of whatever human beings try to do. Even if knowledge tends to come too late, there is the possibility for it, and the encouragement for people to act within common sense, tradition, open to the counsel of the collective, as a way to counteract the weaker and most dangerous traits of their personalities. There are, however, other explanations in the text on the reasons for things to happen to mortals; reasons that seem closer to some sort of genetic predisposition, or to events that seem aleatory, rather than the result of someone's bad decision. These do not exclude individual responsibility but, sometimes, to human eyes they add up to a total of causes for one same effect.

### **2.1. Hereditary doom**

It has been stressed by many scholars before that ancestral curses play a much weaker role in Sophocles than in Aeschylus. There is still, however, some reference to them. In the three Theban plays, the *Antigone* is the one where the notion of ancestral doom is used more often, at least to give a background on the character even if it does not necessarily justify the current situation (it is never suggested, for example, that Oedipus' deeds condition Antigone's, just that they are part of a line of misfortune).

An example of this is in the exchange between the Chorus and Antigone, after the Chorus has tried to console her (or to mock her, as she interprets it) by telling her that

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<sup>112</sup> Once again, mirroring his situation with Antigone, who looked forward to death as an end to suffering.

she was the only mortal to share her way of death with a goddess (834ff.). Antigone laments her situation in a limbo that is neither the world of the dead nor the world of the living. The exchange that concerns us, starts with the Chorus' answer, in 852ff.:

Χο: προβᾶσ' ἐπ' ἔσχατον θράσους  
 ὑψηλὸν ἐς Δίκας βᾶθρον  
 προσέπεσες, ὦ τέκνον, πολὺ·  
 πατρῶον δ' ἐκτίνεις τιν' ἄθλον.

Αν: ἔφασκας ἀλγεινοτάτας ἐμοὶ μερίμνας,  
 πατρὸς τριπόλιστον οἶκτον τοῦ τε πρόπαντος  
 ἀμετέρου πότμου κλεινοῖς Λαβδακίδαισιν.  
 ἰὼ ματρῶναι λέκτρων  
 ἄται κοιμήματά τ' αὐτογέννητ' ἐμῷ πατρὶ δυσμόρου ματρός,  
 οἴων ἐγὼ ποθ' ἄ ταλαίφρων ἔφυν·  
 πρὸς οὓς ἀραῖος ἄγαμος ἄδ' ἐγὼ μέτοικος ἔρχομαι.

Ch: You have stepped forward to the farthest limits of boldness and you have fallen heavily against the high throne of Justice. You are paying in full the ordeal of your father.

An: You have touched the most painful of my thoughts: the thrice-revolved lament for the father and for the whole of our fate,<sup>113</sup> the famous Labdacidae. Ai, the delusions of the maternal bed, the sexual unions of the ill-fated mother with her own child, with my father.<sup>114</sup> From this sort of parents did I, the much-enduring, come forth. To them I am going as an outcast, cursed and unmarried.

Antigone was born in a line of suffering, with the natural order already upset. She is the fruit of a union that should not have happened, and therefore likely to be condemned herself, from her origin, to a life of misery. On the one hand, Antigone is “paying in full” for the ordeal of her father; ἄθλος meaning both the prize resulting

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<sup>113</sup> The translation of τριπόλιστον follows the point made by Griffith (1999:272) about the agricultural sense of ploughing. The image is fitting for Oedipus (the OT is filled with it, mostly referring to sowing the seeds in the mother's womb), as well as for the Thebans, born from the sown teeth of the monster. The number three might refer here to the three generations of the Labdacidae that have been suffering from this sequence of miserable events, started with the birth of Oedipus. There is, however, no mention of Laius in the play. The notion of a family suffering for three generations would be closer to the model of Aeschylus.

<sup>114</sup> I have opted for “delusions” over “disasters”, to convey the sense that Oedipus knew not what he was doing.

from a competition, and ordeals, in the sense of the ones Heracles had to endure.<sup>115</sup> The Chorus also says, however, that she was guilty of excessive boldness, and that she overstepped the limits of Justice — which would imply her own actions, and not her father's. In 821 they had said that Antigone was dying αὐτόνομος, according to her own laws, or, by extension, wishes. As for Antigone herself, she picks up on the Chorus' suggestion and refers again to the dooms of Oedipus and Jocasta (as well as her brother's wedding, in the following verses that we have referred to above). She arrived on stage having already decided to bury Polynices, and we saw her determination, as well as her awareness that she would be breaking the law. Perhaps, she was put in the situation where she was compelled to act in such way, and, for the situation, her family history is the first causal link. She was the one, however, who decided to act in the way she does. If she could not choose what would happen to her, she could have chosen how to deal with it. At least within the limits of her character, but we will get to that.

It is striking that, in all of the Theban plays, there is a consistent omission of details on the crimes of previous generations. In the two *Oedipus* plays we never know much about Laius, and in the *Antigone* and the *OC* we never know much about the fratricide strife of Eteocles and Polynices, apart from the description in the parodos, where we hear of the final battle and the shared death of the brothers.<sup>116</sup> We may hear, in the *Antigone*, references to the misfortunes of Oedipus, but they bear no consequence to the present situation — quite the contrary, it seems that Thebes has never ceased their loyalty to the Labdacidae, including the heirs of the fallen Oedipus (164-9). Each play is self-sufficient and possible to understand exclusively with the information written in it. However, there *are* references to the ancestors, and these references may have other explanatory functions, that are not a chain of cause and effect, nor the result of a curse proffered by someone else.

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<sup>115</sup> Jebb (1891), *ad loc.*, translates it as “sin”, but that charges the text with a too strict interpretation.

<sup>116</sup> On the matter, West (1999:42): “In *Oedipus at Colonus*, as in *Antigone*, the tribulations of the house are contemplated with baffled despair. Oedipus protests that his actions were unintentional errors; he does not see himself as the victim of any curse, but of the gods, who led him into trouble, perhaps (he surmises) because they had some long-standing grudge against the family. Again, the oracle given to Laius is treated as the start of the whole matter, and nothing prior to it is mentioned. Sophocles, then, is consistently downplaying ancient offences. There is no question of a family curse going back to Laius. From the high incidence of calamities people infer some divine enmity, but they have no explanation to offer for it; they are unaware of any incident that would have provoked it”.

From a general point of view, external to the text, there are three immediate reasons to refer to the family lines.<sup>117</sup> First of all, references to other family members and their history add the illusion of predictability — people act just like their parents. That much is observed by the Chorus in 471-2, by seeing in Antigone’s behaviour the same features of character as her father’s (τὸ γέννημ’ ὤμὸν ἐξ ὤμοῦ πατρός τῆς παιδός). While Antigone may not be particularly well known to the audience (in fact, she might not be known at all), Oedipus’ story is familiar, in one version or another. Even if Sophocles wrote this play before writing his treatments of Oedipus, so he is, too, playing with the common knowledge about the king of Thebes when he chooses to refer to it in the text. This type of predictability is not that different from cultural prejudices. It is a reasoning of the type “the apple does not fall far from the tree”, or “a chip off the old block”. These generalisations do not have to be negative, but they are always attempts at classifying and predicting types of people. In the case of Antigone, they work by framing her in the succession of generations of her family. Creon, for example, will make a different type of generalisation when he refuses to talk to women, younger people, elder people, and so on. Family traits are not that different from *gnomai* (and may end up in prejudice), and the three Theban plays, especially in Creon’s speeches, are filled with maxims. They are rules of thumb to try to predict and understand the world.

## 2.2. Character

A parallel issue is each character’s personality, be it exclusive to them or shared by the whole family. Haemon says that the gods are the origin of mortal’s thinking skills (683: θεοὶ φύουσιν ἀνθρώποις φρένας). Considering that one does not choose one’s personal features, it is plausible to think they implant everything else too, from beauty to stubbornness.

People act in different ways, according to who they are (which is not their choice but determines their life), and according to contingency.<sup>118</sup> In the war of Troy,

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<sup>117</sup> If we are to trust Aristotle’s opinion in *Poetics* 13 that tragedies, at least the best ones, were traditionally built around few, illustrative, houses anyway, we are still left with the question of “why is that so”. Because these houses from the mythical past provided the best characters and situations?

<sup>118</sup> The notion of inborn baseness is particularly relevant in the *OC*. Cf. chapter 3, section 4. Oedipus, on the other hand, was born to be who he is.

Achilles will choose to stay rather than going back to Phthia, when he is offered the option, because such is his destiny (*Iliad* 18). Given his character of an epic hero, it would be unfitting that he would have ever answered differently. Antigone will normally bury Polynices, as it would be her role to a brother, but for this burial she has to defy Creon because of his edict. Antigone is the right character to do so, in contrast with Ismene.<sup>119</sup> In Sophocles' play, Ajax will not bear to live with the humiliation resulting from Athena's trick. The idea is not far from the well-known fragment of Heraclitus (B119 ἦθος ἀνθρώπῳ δαίμων) that states that a person's character is their fate (or vice-versa). However, character is not on its own necessarily a cause of downfall. In fact, it is worth noticing that most actions considered harmful to oneself or to another are said to be done out of a madness of some sort, which brings us back to the problem of states of mind, and of errors of judgment: someone can be apparently the best, yet fail in the most basic reasoning. The character, or rather, the subject, is vulnerable to the contingency of the situation, as well as to external factors (the madness is usually standing on someone's head, or infused by the gods). Even without recourse to the supernatural, the idea is not so strange: can any of us say that the weather outside, the number of glasses of wine, or simply the effects of a bad night of sleep have never affected our actions, in ways that we would call untypical of "normal selves"?<sup>120</sup>

Secondly, integrating a character in a family helps the economy of the play, allowing the author to use relatively minor characters without having to introduce them. The title of the play, as well as who is to be considered its hero and main character has raised many arguments (which we are not going to get into), and this indecision points to the possibility that neither Creon nor Antigone are the typical tragic characters. Why would Sophocles use less known characters, though? Perhaps

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<sup>119</sup> Bowra (1944) comments on this topic often throughout his chapter on the *Antigone*. E.g. on p.72 "Creon's fault (is not) merely intellectual. It is more a fault of character"; on p.111, the order in which Creon executes the tasks of burying Polynices and releasing Antigone is also dependent on his character, and on p.78 he concludes that this is a play about what happens to characters of this type when they reach power. Cf. also Kitto (1939:147) on the characters of Antigone and Creon dictating the action.

Against the focus on the characters, some scholars preferred to focus on the plot structure and on single scenes, cf. e.g. Scodel (1984) for a survey.

<sup>120</sup> Knox (1964:9-23) has done the survey of the vocabulary describing Sophoclean characters in action, their emotions and ways of thinking.

to be able to manipulate them and make them fit the situation he had in mind, perhaps to bring them closer to the common mortal; speculation is endless. On the other hand, we are told of Antigone's family as soon as the play starts, in the first three verses:

ὦ κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον Ἰσμίνης κάρα,  
ἄρ' οἶσθ' ὅ τι Ζεὺς τῶν ἀπ' Οἰδίπου κακῶν  
ὅποῖον οὐχὶ νῶν ἔτι ζώσαιν τελεῖ;

O sister, my own sister, my dear Ismene, do you know, from all the evils coming from Oedipus, which one there is that Zeus will not bring about for us two?

She is immediately integrated in a line of which we know the general story, and of which she is just a link. By knowing her house, we do not need to be told much of her situation: she is the daughter of Oedipus, and the sister of Eteocles and Polynices, who disputed Thebes. The opening lines are an underlining from the beginning of the importance of the family (also by reduplicating expressions of kin, κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον, with the prefix αὐτ- making it even stronger), to which, presumably, the gods have reserved a succession of misfortunes.<sup>121</sup> Rather than “the curse upon the Labdacidae”, as Jebb puts it,<sup>122</sup> the succession of misfortunes coming since Oedipus' time is a matter of fact and a way of speaking: there is the fact that the Labdacidae seem to have been struck by bad luck.<sup>123</sup> There is also the fact that there does not seem to be a reason for that, hence, it must be the gods, or something external.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The reinforcement in the form of address to Ismene also underlines the connection between the two. A connection that will be broken by the end of the prologue, when they both decide to act in different ways. The strife between the sisters is not, of course, as violent as the one between the brothers, and Ismene will even try to share Antigone's responsibility. Nonetheless, the children of Oedipus, united by doom, do not seem to be able to remain united while living.

<sup>122</sup> Jebb (1891:9).

<sup>123</sup> Here I am in complete agreement with Cropp (1997:169), also in what he has to say about the ἄτη: “This heredity seems to me to be relevant to Antigone's motivation and to our sense of her tragic fate (cf. 1-6, 49-60, 463-4, 559-60, 594-603, 857-71, 891-6). But this is not to say that she is a victim of ἄτη arising from the curse on her family, as Lloyd-Jones (1971/1983), 113-16 suggests. ἄτη-induced behaviour must surely be irrational and self-destructive. Antigone behaves self-destructively but by no means irrationally. When the Chorus say in 853-6 that she has ‘tripped against the high platform of Justice’ and is ‘paying off an inherited ordeal (πατρῶον... ἄθλον)’, the Justice referred to is the justice envisaged by Creon and the Chorus (cf. pp. 12-13), and the remark about her inherited guilt does no more than suggest that in what is happening to her there is some justice derivable from this source.” See also Bowra (1944:88): “Antigone does not act in folly and blindness of soul but from a clear knowledge of the divine will”.

<sup>124</sup> Jebb (1891:9).

### 2.3. Universal vulnerability to change

But there are also reasons of another sort. Referring to the bad luck of the Labdacidae reinforces the universal notion that all families are doomed, and we are born to be universally miserable. Death is inevitable, and from that comes a whole sort of misery and agony to all generations of mortals. The royal lines of Thebes are a public and exposed example of misfortune and suffering taken to extremes, and, often, brought upon each member of the family by themselves, be it unwillingly or by lack of judgement. Reminding the audience of the past does not force us into a fatalist mode of thinking in terms of inevitability and that things happen “because” people were born in a given family, different from other families of men (and that might be why we never hear much about Laius). Rather, it serves as a reminder that we are all akin when it comes to fate, and that, regardless of how just the gods seem or not, they are the only long-lived and happy ones, as opposed to the generations of mortals that know little else than suffering in their short lives. This is the conclusion of the Chorus in the *OT*, a conclusion that they will point at explicitly in lines 583-5 of the second stasimon in the *Antigone*:<sup>125</sup>

εὐδαίμονες οἷσι κακῶν ἄγευστος αἰὼν.  
οἷς γὰρ ἂν σεισθῆ θεόθεν δόμος, ἄτας  
οὐδὲν ἐλλείπει γενεᾶς ἐπὶ πλῆθος ἔρπον·

Happy are those who, in their lives, have not tasted evil. For once a house has been rocked to its foundations by the work of the gods, there is no limit to the spread of ruin throughout the entire family.

The idea is a common one: there is a state of happiness interrupted by an intervention of the gods. That intervention, unless the gods are random, is caused by a misdeed... The problem here is that it is impossible to know which misdeed that

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<sup>125</sup> The main difference in the Chorus of the *Antigone* is that there is, at least from a rhetorical point of view, the possibility of living life without ever tasting evil at all. The stress is on that once it starts, it will not stop, and it will affect the whole generation.

was, just that there must have been one to cause the gods' anger.<sup>126</sup> What the Chorus does not do is to name the mortals who have lived without "tasting evil". For a family to escape the gods' anger seems to be a matter of luck, rather than a matter of good behaviour. If nothing else, there is also a different notion that, while quite different, complements this one: the notion that time changes all, also present in all the three plays. Someone happy today might be unhappy tomorrow (cf. chapter 3, where we analyse Oedipus' speech on the eternal change). In the *Antigone*, the idea is enunciated by the Messenger's opening speech, 1155-1160:

Κάδμου πάροικοι καὶ δόμων Ἀμφίονος,  
οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅποιον στάντ' ἄν ἀνθρώπου βίον  
οὔτ' αἰνέσαιμ' ἄν οὔτε μεμψαίμην ποτέ.  
τύχη γὰρ ὀρθοῖ καὶ τύχη καταρρέπει  
τὸν εὐτυχοῦντα τὸν τε δυστυχοῦντ' αἰεὶ·  
καὶ μάντις οὐδεὶς τῶν καθεστῶτων βροτοῖς.

You who dwell by the house of Cadmus and of Amphion, there is nothing in the life of men that I would ever praise nor censure as being settled. For fortune raises up and fortune makes fall both the fortunate and the unfortunate, forever: and no one can be the prophet for men of the things established.

The Messenger's speech has a universal scope: nothing can be said about the future, because it is unpredictable, and it tends to change drastically without an apparent reason. He will carry on to (strangely) apply it to Creon. Strangely, for in Creon's case we have the chain of cause and effect in front of us, and can be content with just blaming the king for whatever happens to him. Creon, however, was a victim of his own stubbornness, and, to his credit, did what he could to rectify it as soon as he understood what was about to happen. If the audience will feel sympathy for the king, it will now be because he will be annihilated, even after trying to fix a wrong.

Lines 1158-9 are almost paradoxical. Fortune (or whichever word we want to use for events external to one's intentions) brings both good and bad things, to both

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<sup>126</sup> Jebb (1891:112) happily reminds us that "in the case of the Labdacidae the calamities were traced to the curse called down on Laius by Pelops, when robbed by him of his son Chrysippus". There is no mention to such event in any of the Theban plays, which makes its relevance questionable. Sophocles could have brought it up if he had wanted to trace the moral guilt of the Labdacidae, but he does not even discuss the reasons for the strife between Eteocles and Polynices clearly enough for an audience to side with one or the other.

fortunate and unfortunate people; *i.e.*, fortune might be good for those that are unlucky, as it might be bad for those considered lucky up to a certain point (who now would be called unlucky). The only thing that is established is that fortune follows an eternal pattern of constant change, a pattern of which mortals are hapless victims.<sup>127</sup> On the other hand, the Messenger warns us against the illusion that some other kind of things can be considered settled; as Jebb, commenting on 1160, rightly notices “the point is that things may seem established and yet be unstable”.<sup>128</sup>

While in the idea of ancestral bad luck there is a continuous line of things going wrong, there is no strong justification for that to happen that does not imply questioning the justice of gods. If the divine entities are to be blamed for what happens, that is only for lack of a better answer. In that sense, “fortune” is nothing else but Zeus, or whatever other divinity is calling the shots. Whichever the case, the general movement is downwards and pessimistic, there is no escape from this pattern of alternation, and no way to predict what will come next.<sup>129</sup>

The parallel idea that fortunes are turned upside down for no reason that can be identified, and those that are happy one day can become unhappy the day after, or that cities allied today can become enemies tomorrow does not in any way need to imply that the universe is random, and things happen out of no specific moral reason. It only means that mortals will never be able to tell the reasons why things happen as they do. It is not possible to know whether the gods are just because human limitations do not allow them to see the full picture. Accepting divine justice (and it is never said that we should not) implies accepting the notion of cosmic

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<sup>127</sup> This notion is not very far from the alternation of love and strife in Empedocles’ cosmic cycle (e.g. B17). It is not that there is no happiness at all — just that periods of happiness end, and alternate with periods of destruction. It is evidently pessimistic, but at least with a consolation prize: at some point in time, we can all be fortunate. In Empedocles’ cycle, too, a temporary happiness was possible for the one with harmony within his elements and if they could think properly (e.g. B110). Cf. chapter 3 below.

<sup>128</sup> Jebb (1891) *ad loc.*

<sup>129</sup> Winnington-Imgram (1980:112) observes that: “to the Messenger himself the downfall of Creon seems to be a matter of *tuche* (four times in 1158ff.), just as another ordinary man of little insight - the Watchman - thought it was a matter of *tuche* whether the criminal was caught or not (328) and expressed himself in very simple terms. And they both mean blind chance”. They do indeed mean blind chance, and they might be pointing out a cliché, but the label “man of little insight” seems unfair. They are more insightful than Creon, and are dwelling on matters that seem surprising coming from men of their social status. The comic flavour of the Guard’s scene is that he says the most insightful things in the simplest ways. He is also the one whose deliberative process we get to hear about, in 225ff.

balance that might be disrupted and that will need to be restored. In essence less pessimistic, it is also a pattern of events that humans cannot control or fully understand, and to which they are submitted. The fate of mortals, one way or another, may feel arbitrary, but in every play there is an act performed that will confirm that they have done something wrong. The moral difference being only in the fact that in most cases they were acting with the best intentions.<sup>130</sup>

It is very interesting that the Chorus, in the second stasimon, still mourns Antigone as the last “light” in the house of Oedipus (600, quoted below). If nothing else, there is the illusion that things could have been different for her by marrying Haemon. If Haemon’s words are true, and she is considered to be right by the people of Thebes, and if we are to believe that they will find Creon’s yielding convincing (rather than blaming him for the order in which he tries to fix his wrongs), then her punishment seems even more unfair and justifiable only by the ancestral bad luck of the Labdacidæ.

## 2.4. Hope

Finally, family fatalism has yet another function, almost too obvious to be worth pointing out: it adds to the dramatic effect. We see poor Antigone, there were hopes she would get married and break the constant bad luck of her ancestors, but it all failed and she died so young. If we are to take the Chorus’ lamentation as the reflection of a belief held previously, and not just as a feeling caused only *after* Antigone’s condemnation and triggered by the pathos of the occasion, then not even the Thebans expect that Antigone would suffer just because that was the case for her family. In fact, Antigone is the one who starts by saying that she will suffer in the beginning of the play, but only because she knows that she is about to disrespect an edict, and that the consequence is death by stoning. She will be miserable by contingency. In 599ff:

(...) νῦν γὰρ ἐσχάτας ὕπερ  
ρίζας ὃ τέτατο φάος ἐν Οἰδίπου δόμοις,

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<sup>130</sup> Antigone does disrespect the law, Oedipus does kill his father and marry his mother, Creon does reverse the natural order of life and death. These actions can be contrasted in terms of intention with, e.g. Creon’s in the *OC*.

κατ' αὐτὸν νιν φοινία θεῶν τῶν νερτέρων  
ἀμῆ κόνις λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν ἐρινύς.<sup>131</sup>

For now the light spreading over the last root of the house of Oedipus, is cut down (extinguished) with blood-stained dust of the nether gods and with the folly in words, and with the frenzy of thoughts.

The Chorus attributes Antigone's situation to some sort of madness of words and thoughts, a sort of madness that can be related to kin bloodshed, if we want to capitalise ἐρινύς as some editors do (λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν ἐρινύς). This criticism can be applied to both Creon and Antigone as the cause of their disgrace. It is, however, a civic criticism, in Antigone's case — while Creon will be disrespecting the gods, Antigone is only disrespecting Creon (his edict is the result of an emergency situation rather than a long-established law of the city), and the lines apply, in the first instance, to her. The first part of the stasimon ends with the extinguished φάος in the house of Oedipus, and the second antistrophe, 616-21, accordingly, finishes with an enigmatic utterance about the wandering hope that will bring ruin sooner or later, when it is already too late:

ἅ γὰρ δὴ πολὺπλαγκτος ἐλπίς πολλοῖς μὲν ὄνασις ἀνδρῶν,  
πολλοῖς δ' ἀπάτα κουφονόων ἐρώτων ·  
εἰδοῖτι δ' οὐδὲν ἔρπει, πρὶν πυρὶ θερμῷ πόδα τις  
προσαύση. (...)

For the much-wandering hope brings profit to many men, but to many (others) the deceit of thoughtless desires: it comes suddenly to one who knows nothing until he has burnt his foot with hot fire.

Hope, therefore, is not something unequivocally good and, like fortune, seems to oscillate between extremes. Based on what cannot be seen, hope is also often

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<sup>131</sup> For the discussion of the problems with the text, especially on the alternative between κόνις or κόπις, cf., e.g., Jebb (1891) or Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990). In a century, the debate has not changed much. In either case, there are converging metaphors that support the different interpretations. A root is the subterranean means of survival of a living plant, and uprooting something means death or rejection. Antigone's family is both her roots, and the ones that are luring her to death. For a while she would have had hope of escaping her family misery by marrying Haemon, so that hope is now extinguished. On the other hand, the ritual she performed consisted in covering Polynices (one of the last male elements of the family) with dust. I prefer to keep κόνις, but whichever version is used, it does not affect the point being made here.

misleading, and often one only realises it when it is already too late.<sup>132</sup> What matters here, however, is that hope exists, and while it exists, it allows us, the Chorus, Haemon, and even Tiresias to believe that things can have a different outcome.<sup>133</sup> Antigone's fate is only made more miserable by the fact that everyone hoped something different for her, despite the "ancestral curse" of her family, and, alas, she is entombed alive right before her marriage. The pathos is only made greater by the information that it is not only her personal disgrace, but also the sum of the miseries of her family's lives, culminating with her own.

### 3. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have seen how one of the things holding the plot together is the hope that things can be remediable, and that Antigone's condemnation can be revoked. It is never a straightforward hope, however: by the end of the scenes with Antigone and Haemon, we know that Antigone sees death as a benefit, and that Haemon is set on accompanying her in death as he leaves the stage. On the other hand, this hope is justified by the spontaneous appearance of Tiresias. The fundamental warning that the prophet comes to bring is that Creon is walking on fortune's razor-edge: once some actions are taken, others follow, but there is a moment when catastrophe can still be avoided.

It is impossible to pinpoint the exact second when that moment is over, but Tiresias announces with his prophetic knowledge what will happen if Creon does not change his mind (and which could be deduced from Haemon's intentions in the

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<sup>132</sup> Or, if we follow Cropp (1997:145), hope is *always* a presage of ruin, since it means a loss of reason: "In the following Stasimon the Chorus reflect on the workings of *âtê*, particularly as they affect the Labdacid family. The instrument of its destruction, like a bloody sacrificial knife wielded by the nether gods, is a loss of rationality, an Erinys invading the senses (λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν Ἐρινός, 601-3). This exhibits Zeus's irresistible power, which works tirelessly to overcome human transgression. No human life is invulnerable to ruin (ἄτασ, 614), for all human minds are vulnerable to hope (ἐλπίς, 615) which often manifests itself in unconscious deception by empty-minded desires (ἀπάτα κουφονόων ἐρώτων, 617); the unwitting victim imagines the bad to be good, until his foot touches the burning surface (an image of *pathei mathos* comparable with the image in 853-5; cf. pp. 148 and 150 below) and *âtê* is fulfilled (615-25)."

<sup>133</sup> An earlier reference to ἐλπίς was made in the second stasimon, 365, where mankind possessing the ingenuity to devise altogether unexpected skills (σοφόν τι τὸ μηχανόεν τέχνας ὑπὲρ ἐλπίδ' ἔχων), at one time comes to grief at another makes beneficial progress. The Messenger, too, will "hope" in 1246 that Eurydice's silence does not mean anything more sinister, which is an unfounded hope, if one follows the traditional preconceived ideas. This point is made by Jouanna (2007:386-7), based on similar examples from the *Ajax* and from Democritus.

previous confrontation). Therefore, in the same scene where the audiences' hopes are at their strongest, they are brought down again by the certainty that Creon's capitulation will be too late. The existence of an alternative between two possible destinies, however, has to be taken seriously — Tiresias is the highest authority for truth that can be given in tragedy.

On the other hand, we know that the gods are displeased. The mysterious storms surrounding Antigone's funeral rites gain an even stronger divine flavour when Tiresias announces that his sacrifices are being rejected. Convinced though he was that he was doing the right thing, Creon has disrespected the dead and the nether gods by not burying Polynices, and is disrespecting both upper and under spheres even further by entombing his niece alive. Tiresias' advice might very well be in time for Creon to save Antigone, but Antigone's death is a necessary link in the chain if Creon is to pay in any way for his error of judgement. In human terms, Creon arrives too late because, instead of listening to Tiresias and leaving as soon as possible, he does not trust the prophet and wastes precious time. On religious grounds, however, Creon has effectively done something wrong, and wrong deeds need expiation. In his case, the extinction of the family will result from his misguided actions.

Creon's character and state of mind do not allow him to listen to Tiresias in time: he is stubborn and refuses to take advice from anyone. His unfitness to rule will be demonstrated by his actions, and that is the cause of his downfall. On the other hand, other causes are used to explain the situation of Antigone and Ismene. Born out of a doomed family, the sisters find themselves in the position where they have to follow either the rule of the city or the loyalty to the family. Regardless of what they do, their situation has been one of suffering all their lives. Antigone seemed as if she had now the chance of ending the long-lasting misery of the line by marrying Haemon, but that option is cut short when Creon pronounces the edict. Additionally, Antigone's character clashes against Creon's, and both make conciliation impossible.

So there are multiple coexisting forms of explanation for why things happen as they do: because people make mistakes; because people's characters make them prone to make mistakes; because the gods are directly interested in re-establishing the balance broken by people's actions.

Creon sees his disaster both as the result of his misdeeds and the result of the fate allotted to him. This impression of double origin is understandable, and not uncommon to this day. People must believe they are free to act and the ones that decide upon their actions, as well as that their choices will have an impact in their lives. On the other hand, when things do not succeed, and there is a feeling that the consequences seem disproportionate to their actions or intentions, the cause is often attributed to how things were “meant to be” by some sort of fore-ordinance. Not only are the heroes in literature portrayed making decisions, as Williams or Knox have demonstrated, they are also seen interpreting the world as they can, with the available signs.<sup>134</sup> Just like Creon or the Chorus, we do not know how and why some things happen to us, and we will too, paradoxically, attribute their consequences to things as strange as divine plans. Just like Creon, we do not know whether we are offending the gods while protecting the city, and even though his extreme stubbornness is condemned, we can sympathise with his situation at different moments of the play.

This does not exclude the possibility that events are, or some of them are, foreordained (the civil strife at least is an element of the traditional myth, and depends on a web larger than the two brothers’ actions), but the stress in the *Antigone* is more on the causal chain and the elapsing of time. Except for one character, the Guard, who will have contrasting arrivals, first because it befell on him by lot to come to Creon, second because he decided he wanted to come, since he had seized Antigone.<sup>135</sup>

Characters in the *Antigone*, as much as in any other of the plays, think in terms of luck, fate, personal deliberation, family curse often, and it is not an unsurmountable paradox that they combine all those notions; it is what we all do ourselves when faced with the mysteries of life and with decision making. These ideas are present because they have to be present — neither us nor the characters have an answer for most of these issues, and it cannot be demanded from Sophocles that he would be using his plays as a vehicle for one single interpretation of the world. In fact, he will rather

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<sup>134</sup> Williams (1993); Knox (1964).

<sup>135</sup> On the first arrival of the Guard, and the way in which he is trying to make up his mind between “two unpleasant alternatives”, cf. Nussbaum (1986:53).

stage converging and opposite views from play to play, at least within the three surviving works dedicated to the houses of Thebes, as we shall see in the next two chapters. The Guard bringing Antigone to her destiny will be the one that, in the end, will hold the most sensible, if inconclusive approach as the necessary rule of thumb to be able to act in daily life: that (acting as he has to) he is not to suffer anything more than what is his fate (236, τὸ μὴ παθεῖν ἄν ἄλλο πλὴν τὸ μὀρσιμον). And even then, that is something that he, admittedly, can only hope.

## Oedipus Tyrannus

Unlike the *Antigone*, design is at the centre of the plot of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Oedipus, named after a fundamental event in his life, has his very birth restricted by an oracle, that implies, in its weakest form, that if he is to be born, then he is to kill his father. However, it is only as an adult that he will receive a similar version of the same oracle, which he will try to circumvent at all costs, running towards the fulfilment of his own destiny.

In the following chapter, we shall start by looking at the events in and out of the play, as well as to what are thought to have been Sophocles' innovations regarding different versions of the myth, and reasons for those choices. Explaining the structure and ironies of the *OT* feels, at times, like explaining a joke: the play works because it needs not to be dissected to be felt as terrifyingly convincing.<sup>136</sup> We shall try, however, to explore the ways in which the plot is structured, in the belief that the articulation between events yields information that is fundamental to the interpretation of the play, namely about the relation between the supernatural and the human spheres. In this section, we shall address Sophocles' omission of the story of Laius or any ancestral curse, choosing to focus on Oedipus' story exclusively. We shall conclude this first angle of approach by analysing the scene with Tiresias, and the advantages of the audience's point of view against the point of view of the protagonist. With the combined knowledge of the myth and the information from the prophet, the play shifts very early from the investigation of the crime into the quest for Oedipus' identity.

In the second section, we shall turn to the pattern of coincidences in the play. First, to the timing of events, and to the function of time in the deciphering of one's life. Secondly, to the coincidence of what characters have to say: how they arrive to speak about one thing and turn out to be the right person to talk about something else, how their silences at key moments are fundamental for the fulfilment of

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<sup>136</sup> In that sense, those who found inconsistencies of the plot, and claimed that Sophocles was worried about the effect of each scene have a point: there are some inconsistencies. But they are minor, and the overall structure feels as if it works as a clockwork.

Oedipus' oracle, and how the ambiguity of speech makes the things they say match a reality of which they are not aware. Together with this irony of speech come the mistakes in identification. We shall turn to Oedipus' error of judgement based on the impossibility of "one" being "many", and the coincidence of identities in the play, where one character often proves to have more than one role. This coincidence of identities shall then be contrasted with the contemporary thought of the Presocratic philosophers, in an attempt to contextualise Oedipus' type of mistake regarding the interpretation of the world of the senses. Finally, we shall turn to the events considered by the characters to be the fruit of chance or coincidence, as an uttermost example of their lack of tools to understand the full extent of reality. The misattribution of events to chance culminates with Oedipus' proclamation of himself as the son of τύχη, a passage that we shall analyse in its context, because it constitutes the climax of irony.

In third place, we shall analyse the agents involved in the fulfilment of Oedipus' oracle. Oedipus' destiny is at once a trap set by a supernatural power before his birth and the result of his own determination, as well as the result of the intervention of all other human agents around him. We shall start by looking at the personifications of μοῖρα, followed by the blurred identities denoted by the word δαίμων, from which we shall move on to the active role of Apollo in the accomplishing of the prophecies from Delphi. Following this, we shall turn to the examples of this web of necessity formed by the characters that are part of each other's fates in a chain that they cannot identify and of which they cannot see the limits. Fate is personified amongst the gods by Apollo, but it is also the result of the interaction of several agents. Thus fate is in a sense determined by individuals and essentially inseparable from them.

The fourth section is dedicated to the qualification of Oedipus' actions, as well as the conditionality of the oracles (especially Laius' oracle). Here, we shall analyse the ways in which the characters look at their own actions, and the significance of the differentiation between what is done voluntarily, and what is done involuntarily. We shall also take into account the red herrings, misjudgments and counterfactuals, suppositions presented by Oedipus and Jocasta about the events in their own lives, and why they are necessary for them to continue making the decisions that will lead them to fulfil the oracles at any given stage.

Finally, we shall argue against the need to declare Oedipus responsible or innocent regarding his deeds, since he is both at once. The issue of divine justice shall be addressed briefly, in the conviction that what is the cause of horror and sympathy in the play is the condition common to all humans towards life and the powers that govern it, rather than discovering whether the gods act justly or not. As far as it is confirmed that Oedipus married his mother and killed his father, religion is not affected.

## 1. Events in and out of the play

There is a difference between events ἔξω τοῦ δράματος (as Aristotle refers to them in *Poetics* 1454b) that are integral to the plot but not part of the action on the stage and matters that are not raised, or are deliberately omitted, by the poet, such as the reason for the oracle given to Laius. The innovations and omissions may tell us something about the problems that interested Sophocles while composing the *OI*. As with the *Antigone*, it is hard to tell from today's perspective what the myth was before Sophocles, and what it became after Sophocles' influence in the subsequent treatments.<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, the structure of the play and the events that are brought up on stage at different timings are sufficient and fundamental for the demonstration of the human position in the cosmos, with Oedipus' life as an extreme example.

Below we shall look at both types of events: the ones that are left out and should not be supplied by an audience, and the ones that happen off stage and are supplied by reports in the text. Then we shall move on to what is plausible to assume would be the audience's awareness of the development of the plot, and how that privileged point of view, compared to Oedipus', shifts the centre of the tension from the discovery of the murderer of Laius into something much more terrible: Oedipus' realisation of his own deeds. This realisation is achieved by the coming together of all

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<sup>137</sup> The sources for the versions mentioned above can be found mostly and more recently in Gantz (1993), pp.492-502. Much of the material in Gantz has already been pointed out by Jebb (1887). A fundamental study is Robert (1915), and for what may have been part of Theban epics, Bethe (1891). Still on Thebes in epic poetry, this time focusing on Homer and Hesiod, see Cingano (1992) or (2002-3). Other evaluations of Sophocles' treatment of the myth can be found in March (1987:119-54), or Edmunds (2006:13-56).

the pieces scattered through several agents of the play, at different moments in the past, and the reorganisation of those pieces into a meaningful pattern.

### 1.1. Versions of the myth

While Oedipus' exposure is common to many versions, the way he reaches Corinth is not. From being found in a basket in the river, to being raised by Shepherds, there are several other versions that do not include the wonderful coincidence of Corinthian Shepherd and Messenger being one and the same person.<sup>138</sup>

The reasons for Oedipus' killing of Laius are also diverse, though the hero never seems to know the identity of his father in any of them. That detail alone could give the audience of the *OT* a slight advantage over the characters of the play, as they would already expect a revelation of sorts at some point the play, with varying degrees of relevance.<sup>139</sup> In the Euripidean version in the *Phoenician Women* (where Jocasta witnesses Oedipus' blinding), Oedipus does not even reach Delphi to hear his own oracle, for he is polluted from having killed a man on the way (in Jocasta's narrative in 32-54, there is never a mention of Oedipus receiving an oracle about his parents at all, just that he was on his way to ask for one). In the Aeschylean version, the bloodbath at the crossroads seems to occur to the south of Thebes, and not on the way to the shrine (Nauck, fr. 173). In a later version from the first century BC, Epicaste is even with Laius when the fight ensues (Nicolaus of Damascus, FGrH 90F8).

Sophocles' choice to move the fight to the crossroads between the two cardinal points of the play (Thebes and Delphi, the meeting being at the crossroads with the road from Daulia, not very far off from the Parnassus) reinforces the connection between the fate of the Thebans and the shrine of Apollo, and Apollo's surveillance

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<sup>138</sup> Cf. Gantz (1993).

<sup>139</sup> There are variants where Chrysippus is either Oedipus' brother or the target of Oedipus' love, as in the scholia of the *Phoenician Women*, cf. Gantz (1993:492). In either version, Oedipus kills Laius. Williams (1993:142) entertains the possibility, only to discard it later, that no matter which path is taken, Oedipus will eventually kill his father. This is true, to an extent, if we think only of Oedipus as the man destined to kill his father in the myth. The striking thing about the *OT*, however, is that none of the steps taken seems to be aleatory, and rather that they are all fundamental pieces in the completion of a perfectly well-laid scheme.

on how that fate is accomplished.<sup>140</sup> It also states, without any doubt, the worries guiding the actions of his characters: both Oedipus and Laius are concerned about the future, both have heard oracles they are or have been trying to avoid, both have in Delphi the source of those concerns.

As for the Sphinx, even though the existence of the riddle is clearly stated by Sophocles first (and may be what is alluded to by Pindar in fr. 177d),<sup>141</sup> there is an alternation between portraying Oedipus' role in her defeat by wits or by force. Evidently, Sophocles would be more interested in the version that includes an intellectual challenge, so that the brightest of men can also be demonstrated the most ignorant of them all. Oedipus will use it to boast about his intelligence in comparison with Tiresias' craft (397-8), and the deliverance from the monster will be quoted as the time when the king saved the city before. Otherwise, the theme of the Sphinx is relatively minor in our play, to the point the content of the riddle is never revealed.<sup>142</sup>

More importantly, the effects of the revelation of Oedipus' parents appears to be the central topic of Sophocles first, in the sense that most other treatments, except Sophocles' and Euripides' have Oedipus carrying on living in Thebes, and eventually marrying again.<sup>143</sup> Oedipus' four children as the children of Jocasta is first accounted for in Aeschylus (*Seven Against Thebes*, 752-7),<sup>144</sup> and contribute to make his unwitting crimes even more shocking, by adding to the incest and parricide yet another confusion of natural familial links, consummating and perpetuating the unbalance caused by Oedipus' deeds in his double role of father and sibling.

Oedipus' self-blinding, in one of Euripides' fragments of the *Oedipus* (Nauck, fr. 541), is not his doing, but the punishment given by the servants of Laius, and it is

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<sup>140</sup> Cf. Halliwell (1986:188) on the religious and symbolic contrast between the choices of Aeschylus and Sophocles, as well as a detailed analysis of the significance of the crossroad.

<sup>141</sup> As printed in Snell (1954).

<sup>142</sup> However, scholars such as Cameron (1968:21) and Segal (1981:238), have seen in the Sphinx an agent or a direct contrast of Apollo, and in her riddle a hint about Oedipus. I agree with reading the Sphinx as one more element of the pattern of coincidences. As for the riddle we would have to assume that its content was known to the audience.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Gantz (1993:500-1) on a possible interpretation of the identity of the female narrator in the fragment of Stesichoros found in Lille.

<sup>144</sup> Though there is a strong case for the inclusion of Ismene and Antigone by Aeschylus to be an interpolation.

Creon who starts the investigation that will convict Oedipus. In the *Odyssey*, he does not seem to have become blind at all.<sup>145</sup> Evidently, the passage is crucial in Sophocles for two reasons: first, it underlines the irony of the man who thinks he sees further being, after all, blind to everything around him. Symbolically, it represents Oedipus' new vision and new understanding about himself. Secondly, because it is the passage where Oedipus attributes the origin of his actions to himself and to Apollo (cf. section 3 below).

As said above, regardless of how much the audience knows about other versions, it is very likely that they will know that Oedipus is the man who killed his father unwittingly. Sophocles' play will bring the focus to the problem of fated events that may appear random results of chance. Not so much in the sense that people are the puppets of the gods, but in the sense that they do not have the means of understanding the reality around them, and are constantly fooled and disoriented, trying to make sense of the causal chains of events in their lives.

## **1.2. Causal chains lost in time: the isolation of Oedipus' fate**

At the core of Sophocles' treatment of the myth, is the portrait of a man who cannot see what is in front of his eyes, and who cannot understand the words being said to him, not even when they are so clearly spelt out as they are by Tiresias, not because he lacks intelligence, but because he cannot organise meaningfully the information collected from his experience.

A complete vision of reality is, for human beings, dependent on the passing of time, that will, hopefully, make sense of what has already been lived (genuine or not, the ending of the play summarises the anxieties of the Chorus towards the possibility

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<sup>145</sup> Oedipus' self-discovery is perhaps the product of Sophocles' mind and the main story he has to tell.

of judging one's fate based on what seems to be one's behaviour).<sup>146</sup> On the other hand, time has also the negative effect of burying the memory of events, blurring their significance in the present. The gods only and, through them, the seers, possess a kind of knowledge that is not constrained by time. In the *OT*, the connection between every single event in the past will be pieced together on stage, by the combination of the memories of different agents. What will not become clear, however, is the causal chain that dictated that things should happen in such a way.<sup>147</sup>

That absence is, clearly, intentional. As the play starts, most of the events that will determine its outcome have already happened: the play is not so much about watching Oedipus trying to evade his fate as prophesied by the oracle (he has already fled Corinth), but about watching Oedipus realise that his attempts have been vain, without any possibility to fix wrongs long ingrained in the past. The play will not bring us any visible reason for Oedipus to be singled out to suffer; the reports made by other characters will not give Oedipus any explanation about his ancestors either. Oedipus' life began already marked by the conditions of his birth.<sup>148</sup> The oracle given to Laius not only revealed Laius' fate, but also the fate of that son born of him and Jocasta, namely, that he would be the murderer of his father.

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<sup>146</sup> Larger or shorter portions of the text have been deleted or rearranged throughout the centuries, on the basis of inconsistency with Sophocles' style, contradiction of what was thought to be the tone of the play, the hypothesis that a revision of the three Theban plays has been done for a performance as a trilogy, or even confusion of a text that would be from Euripides (1524-30). More recently, Dawe (2001) defends the thesis that "the rot [i.e. the interpolations] sets in immediately after v. 1423" (he also throws doubt, for example, on every reference to the daughters of Oedipus in the play). Finglass (2009) addresses Dawe's (2001:3-11) linguistic arguments in detail (which are too many to be addressed here) and concludes that they are "illusory" (p.55). Finglass' article also includes the history of the editions of the lines from the seventeenth century on. It is worth noting his finding that the first time that the ending of the *OT* is deleted on the supposition that it was changed to fit the *OC* is in 1853 (p.57-8). Kovacs (2009a), taking into account the discussion between Dawe and Finglass, argues that 1424-67 are genuine, and that 1468-1523 are an interpolation. Sommerstein (2011), along the lines of Finglass (2009), considers the whole ending Sophoclean (except with occasional difficulties). He rejects Kovacs and argues for the ending of the play repeating and mirroring its beginning. Regardless of the polemic, the conclusions drawn by the Chorus match the tone of the second and fourth stasima.

<sup>147</sup> The absence of this causal chain, evidently, raises the question of the justice of the gods. We shall return to that matter in 4.4.

<sup>148</sup> Whether the oracle given to Laius meant that he was not to have a child, or that he would have a child that would kill him is another matter. As we shall see below, the report of the oracle opens the possibility for Laius to avoid it (by not having a child), but the context in which it is reported, and the general misinterpretations by the characters of what fate is make it plausible that the child would be born in any case.

In the section above, we have listed variants of the myth available to Sophocles. In the play itself, several characters report their memories from events that happen long before and whose results are now made evident (the two older oracles, the story of the child and the Shepherds, the drunken man in Corinth, the defeat of the Sphinx). Had Sophocles had any point to make about an ancestral curse, or a punishment for someone else's action that goes down for three generations, he would have done so and would have been understood by his audience (as Aeschylus does in the *Oresteia*).

What is relevant in the *OT* is that Oedipus' story is both determined by his birth, and independent of any past misdeed of his lineage, for as far as any of the Thebans can remember. An original offence lost in time is a moot point. Since it cannot be traced back, the present suffering feels random. This feeling of arbitrariness is an essential aspect of the play, even though it is never once concluded that the sufferings are unjust.

### **1.3. The advantage of the audience's point of view**

Whichever version of the myth of Oedipus the audience might have been acquainted with (and certainly different people would remember different versions), the details of what happened before the beginning of the play are not to be supplied. As mentioned above, everything needed to interpret the play will be provided by the testimony of the characters. In that sense, the audience is in the same situation as Oedipus, listening to the second-hand narratives to reconstruct the story. However, unlike Oedipus, the audience will be able to interpret the puzzle much earlier, as early as Tiresias leaves the stage, transposing the tension of the play from the discovery of the cause of the plague into the moment when and how Oedipus will finally realise that he is the man he chases. They will witness on stage almost the same things as the king, but they will have the means to interpret what Oedipus cannot.

Knox has suggested that, by the end of the scene with Tiresias (457ff.), Oedipus has necessarily abandoned the stage, or it would not be possible that he would be deaf to Tiresias' explicit words.<sup>149</sup> That does not have to be the case. Oedipus is

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<sup>149</sup> Cf. Knox (1980) an article dedicated to the subject, with a survey of scholarship on it. *Contra*, see, e.g., Liapis (2012:87-8), with a stress put on Oedipus being perfectly aware of Tiresias' words, but choosing to disregard them.

necessarily in a much less objective position than an audience that watches things from the outside. Misled by the signs he can see, he has no reason to trust Tiresias (other than the fact that the city trusts her seer, but the seer has been silent for many years and has not predicted the plague), and he has no reason to think his words are anything other than absurd. It has been argued, by e.g. Philip Vellacott, that Oedipus, knowing his own life and as a solver of riddles, ought to have reacted to the keywords in Tiresias' speech, rather than recognising only the apparently irrelevant detail in Jocasta's speech about the location of Laius' death.<sup>150</sup> However, Oedipus' mind is clearly elsewhere. He is trying to solve the present problem of the plague, and to find the murderer whose identity Apollo requested. He is angered by Tiresias' refusal to speak, and cannot understand why it is so. He is not thinking of his own past many years before.

The advantageous perspective of the audience comes from two aspects. One is external: they know that Tiresias is never wrong in tragedies.<sup>151</sup> The other is their objectivity. Unlike the Chorus, who also witnesses Tiresias' speech, the audience does not have the same connection as the Thebans do to their history. The Chorus will judge based on their past experience and prejudice; the audience will judge based on what they see being displayed in front of their eyes.<sup>152</sup>

### 1.3.1. Tiresias' revelation

Tiresias' words in 457-60 are these:

φανήσεται δὲ παισὶ τοῖς αὐτοῦ ζυνῶν  
 ἀδελφὸς αὐτὸς καὶ πατήρ, κάζ ἧς ἔφθ  
 γυναικὸς υἱὸς καὶ πόσις, καὶ τοῦ πατρὸς  
 ὁμόσπορός τε καὶ φονεύς. (...)

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<sup>150</sup> Vellacott (1964:141).

<sup>151</sup> The Chorus' reaction is incredulous too. While they trust Tiresias, they remark that they know of no reason to accuse Oedipus (486ff.), and, quite the contrary, they have only witnessed benefits coming from him (502ff.).

<sup>152</sup> The Chorus can have, in other tragedies, a similar perspective, as in the *OC*, where they are seeing Oedipus for the first time, after only vaguely knowing his story. Allan (2013:174) points out that, besides the lack of detail concerning Laius' oracle (i.e. an ancestral cause to explain the present), the "disturbing" aspect of Oedipus' fall results from "the conflict between the audience's knowledge of Apollo's role and the Chorus' simple trust in righteous divine punishment".

He will be revealed to be at once brother and father of the children with whom he lives, son and spouse of the woman who gave birth to him, ploughman of the same fields as the father whose killer is himself.

These words are pronounced early in the play, in the second half of the first episode.<sup>153</sup> Tiresias is introduced as a hope for guidance, as the one man in whom truth is implanted (299, ᾧ τάλιθες ἐμπέφυκεν ἀνθρώπων μόνῳ) knowing the same as Apollo (300ff.) and he will be forced by Oedipus to reveal what is to come. However, his words will be taken differently: Oedipus will think he is plotting against him, and the Chorus will have to withhold their judgment until there is evidence of what Tiresias is claiming (opening the possibility for the seer to fail, since he is, after all, also a mortal).<sup>154</sup> We are told three times in the play that, up to then, the Thebans neither have a reason to mistrust Oedipus, quite the contrary, nor do they know of any past misfortune within the family, which the second Messenger will refer to as a line of happiness.<sup>155</sup>

The lines quoted above conclude Tiresias' information, and only make more explicit what he has already said in 413-425. Before this conclusion, the seer had set forth the whole of the plot. He says that Oedipus is the man he himself was seeking (362, φονέα σε φημι τάνδρὸς οὗ ζῆτεῖς κυρεῖν); that he does not even know his origins (415, ἄρ' οἶσθ' ἀφ' ὧν εἶ); that Apollo is about to bring Oedipus his ruin (376-7 οὐ γὰρ σε μοῖρα πρὸς γ' ἐμοῦ πεσεῖν, ἐπεὶ / ἱκανὸς Ἀπόλλων, ᾧ τὰδ' ἐκπράζαι μέλει), and that his ruin will come through the revelation of his birth (438, ἦδ' ἡμέρα

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<sup>153</sup> For the early revelation, cf. Liapis (2012:86), to whom Sophocles is now free from the “futile task of concealing crucial plot details that most spectators must have been already aware of”.

<sup>154</sup> Reinhardt (1979:104-5) points out, however, the ambiguity of the figure of Tiresias, itself a mirror of the “prophetic phenomenon”: “There is something about the human vehicle, the vessel of truth, the seer Tiresias, which is hard to comprehend, and not only for Oedipus when he misinterprets him. Half of Tiresias is super-human, half only too human; half of him possesses secret knowledge and is infallible, half of him is indecisive and forgetful, coming and yet anxious to go, concealing and yet revealing; he is half a capricious, irritable old man, half — in the midst of his anger — possessed of second sight; he is a walking enigma, ‘nursing the truth that makes him strong’ (356) — part the whole mysteriousness and paradox in the prophetic admonition, ‘Neither speak nor hide’, seems to be personified in him.”

<sup>155</sup> The Priest of Zeus remembers Oedipus' past benefit to Thebes on 40ff.. On the other hand, up to just a moment before, the second Messenger did not know that Oedipus was the doomed continuation of the line of the Labdacidae, that he refers as fortunate in the past (1282-5). The lines might ambiguously refer to Jocasta's and Oedipus' recent past as well, but the very fact that Oedipus turns out to be part of the line is the reason for the current woe. In 483ff., the Chorus could not point out a grief between the houses of Laius and Polybus, whose consequences Oedipus could now be living.

φύσει σε καὶ διαφθερεῖ). He also declares that the man, seen as a foreigner at first, will be revealed to be a Theban by birth (452-3 ζένος λόγῳ μέτοικος, εἶτα δ' ἐγγενῆς / φανήσεται Θηβαῖος, and that he will be blind, poor, and exiled (454-6, τυφλὸς γὰρ ἐκ δεδορκότος / καὶ πτωχὸς ἀντὶ πλουσίου ζένην ἔπι / σκήπτρῳ προδεικνὺς γαῖαν ἐμπορεύσεται).<sup>156</sup> “This person is you, this is what is going to happen, and the origin of all this is your own origin, because such is fate and Apollo will make sure it happens”, Tiresias could have said.<sup>157</sup> He is present against his will, for nothing can be changed. He will have nothing to add either to the reasons why Oedipus suffers, apart from the origin: Apollo. In *Antigone*, Creon brings a plague upon Thebes by keeping the dead in the world of the living and sending the living to the world of the dead. Both decisions are his, and are, to a certain extent, what we could call “informed decisions”, even more so with the support of Tiresias’ explanations. By the end of the *Antigone*, Creon’s recklessness will be condemned. The cause of the plague in the *OT* is the murder of Laius, and that is irreversible. Oedipus is the author of his own actions, but their dimension is beyond Oedipus’ grasp — Oedipus has killed his father and bedded his mother because his birth was already part of Laius’ fate. People will look at him in horror, but this horror will come from the consternation resulting from the revelation of truth, more than from the deeds themselves.

It has been said above that the audience puts the pieces of the puzzle together earlier than Oedipus or the Chorus. At the moment when Tiresias makes his revelations, no one on stage has mentioned Oedipus’ doubts about his lineage, nor any of the oracles given to either father or son. In the lines quoted above, Tiresias says that he will be found to be at once brother and father, son and husband, son and killer, but the Chorus has not witnessed anything that would suggest that Tiresias’

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<sup>156</sup> The exile can only be assumed by the end of the play from the confirmation of Tiresias’ words regarding the past and the present blinding.

<sup>157</sup> There is a dimension in which Oedipus’ suspicion of Tiresias is understandable. The play questions the skills of men who claim divine inspiration often enough for it to be accepted as a genuine problem. Tiresias’ knowledge, or most of it, could have resulted from putting together separate bits of information from the past, and concluding that Oedipus would have to have been the culprit (Tiresias would have known of Jocasta’s pregnancy, and might have talked to the Shepherd before about the murder of Laius, etc; speculation is endless). However rational the explanation of Tiresias’ knowledge may be (and one of the charms of the *OT* is certainly also that so much of it can be felt in exclusively human terms), the coincidence with the prophecies is impossible to discard, and the religious consequence of this and all the other coincidences, as proof of the presence of a divine agent of fate is made evident.

accusations have any grounds.<sup>158</sup> When Tiresias finishes his speech, however, the audience can understand which way things are going: they can see that the matter becomes the realisation that Oedipus will inevitably reach before the end of the play. For the characters, this realisation will come at different points, and through other necessary stages.<sup>159</sup>

#### **1.4. The organisation of reality into a meaningful whole**

What are, then, the events in the play? Mostly, the investigation of a killing that has occurred years before and that was not investigated at the time, and the shifting of that investigation into the investigation of the identity of the main character. The deviation from the original investigation, imposed by the pressing problem of the Sphinx, is an essential part of a net of coincidences up to the point where a second investigation is imposed on the city by the plague.

The play opens with the suffering of the citizens, and the supplication for Oedipus' assistance. Saving the necessary time from taking that action on stage, but also reflecting his care for Thebes, Oedipus has already sent Creon to ask for an oracle from Delphi. Since Apollo is the god of healing, to whom the citizens are praying in conjunction with their prayers to Oedipus, this choice of action does not seem at all strange. At this point, no one in Thebes knows that Oedipus has already left Delphi once before, discontented with the apparent lack of answer from the god. The god instructs Oedipus to find the murderer of Laius, a quest that Oedipus assumes, in good faith.

The answer to his inquiry is given to him soon after the prologue by Tiresias. As we have seen, Tiresias refuses to speak at first because he knows the past, and his advice cannot change the future. Eventually, he will say who the murderer is, and predict Oedipus' blindness and exile. That closes, for the audience, the initial question on the identity of the murderer.

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<sup>158</sup> I do not mean by this that the Chorus always makes the right and fastest deductions from the action on stage. The third stasimon is an example of the Thebans letting themselves being guided by false hopes against the most probable conclusion.

<sup>159</sup> *Contra* Webster (1932: 149), comparing the plots of the seven plays: "in the Oedipus we do not believe that Oedipus is the culprit, and the discovery is as exciting for us as for Oedipus; in the Electra we know that Orestes is alive, and therefore we are interested not in the story but in the emotional reactions of Electra to the story".

Oedipus, however, thinks there is a plot against him, presumably orchestrated by Creon and Tiresias, as he thought before that Laius had been killed by someone wanting to take the power (which he is ironically right in thinking, since Laius' murderer is also his successor). Under this conviction, he accuses Creon, and the situation is only solved with the entrance of Jocasta. The scene is necessary to make Oedipus drop the one clue he starts following (Jocasta and the Chorus beg him to spare Creon, whose claim of innocence is now bound by an oath), but also to prepare for Jocasta's reassuring speeches to her husband.

Jocasta's speech initiates a new moment of the play. Rather than reassuring Oedipus, her words raise the possibility that at least some of Tiresias' accusations were true. Roughly in the middle of the play, Jocasta mentions the crossroads where Laius died, triggering Oedipus' suspicion that he may be the killer of the former king (but not yet his son, and even less Jocasta's). The action here is dictated by Oedipus' need to reject the idea that he is the man he chases. Putting his hope on the number of robbers, Oedipus summons the only survivor of the quarrel. Meanwhile, he tells Jocasta the story of his own life.

Before the witness arrives, an unexpected Messenger comes from Corinth, with potentially good news (or at least with news that is taken by Jocasta as good, since it suggests that Oedipus has not killed his father). He is the one confirming that Merope and Polybus are not Oedipus' parents, and that he took them Oedipus as a child himself. He tells them that he received the child from a Shepherd, and at this point Jocasta is able to piece the puzzle together.

From here, starts a last moment of the reconstruction of the past. Jocasta's last hope of changing the course of things is to make Oedipus drop the investigation, which he will not do, for he has not yet realised the whole dimension of what is to be discovered. The Shepherd is brought in, Oedipus is found the author of the crime, as well as Laius' and Jocasta's son.

In the exodus, the Messenger tells of Jocasta's hanging and of Oedipus' self-mutilation. Oedipus comes back on stage to instruct Creon on what to do with him and his daughters, but Creon reminds him that he is not in power to decide anymore and that the answer will have to come from Delphi. Given Tiresias' speech and the unity of the play, it is plausible to deduce that Oedipus will go into exile, but the

action itself is not necessary to the plot: everything else said by Delphi or by the seer has happened.

One by one, each character who appears on stage (with the exception, perhaps, of Creon) will bring at least one more piece to the solution, completing the final picture from which there can be no doubt left, the picture that fills the Chorus with sympathy and makes them take Oedipus as the paradigm for the condition of all human beings. Neither testimony, however, is arbitrarily arranged. Rather, they make sense of Oedipus' whole life, from all possible perspectives. Michel Foucault is right in his interpretation of each piece being a half-revelation with a pair:

On voit donc clairement la mécanique de ces moitiés qui viennent s'ajuster les unes aux autres: moitié divine, alèthurgie religieuse, prophétique, rituelle, avec une moitié oraculaire, divinatoire — la moitié Phoïbos, la moitié Tirésias; et puis ensuite une moitié humaine, l'alèthurgie individuelle du souvenir et de l'enquête, avec une moitié meurtre dont un fragment est détenu par Jocaste, un autre par Œdipe ; et puis une moitié naissance d'Œdipe dont un fragment vient de Corinthe apporté entre les mains du messager et dont l'autre moitié était à Thèbes, enfouie, cachée dans la cabane d'un esclave. On a donc six détenteurs de la vérité qui viennent se regrouper deux par deux pour faire un jeu de moitiés qui se complètent et s'ajustent, s'emboîtent l'une dans l'autre.<sup>160</sup>

Foucault takes the symmetry further: each pair matches the social sphere it is coming from. The slaves, the aristocrats, and the gods (or their representatives), and each pair of people is connected by a close relation, respectively, friendship, the legal link of matrimony, and the divine link between Apollo and his seer.<sup>161</sup> Therefore, we have the first type of information, from Tiresias and Apollo, that says that the cause of the plague is a murdering and who the murderer is; the two oracles told by Jocasta

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<sup>160</sup> Foucault (1980:31).

<sup>161</sup> Foucault (1980:34). Foucault also points out that the Shepherd is in the possession of all the truth at all times. As it happens, the Shepherd has two halves of a truth: what happened to the baby, and what happened to Laius. He knows that Oedipus lived, and he knows that the man who is now king is the same man that killed Laius. He also knows, we are told in his confession (1175-6) that the baby was the son of Laius, given away because of the prophecies. However, I do not think it is possible to say, without doubt, that he recognises the grown Oedipus as the baby he gave to the Corinthian. There is the coincidence of their names. Here, ultimately, we have to be content with whichever conjecture we find more convincing. We either need to assume that both Shepherds knew Oedipus' name, or even that they were the ones calling him that because of his pierced ankles (cf 1036, ὥστ' ὠνομάσθης ἐκ τύχης ταύτης ὃς εἶ), or we accept that it could be the case that the Shepherd did not join the dots himself (1180-1, εἰ γὰρ οὗτος εἶ / ὃν φησιν οὗτος, ἴσθι δόσποτος γεγώς). In either case, his silence is understandable given his social class and given the fact that he disobeyed his king's orders. His revelations, however, still come to complete the two necessary halves. On the choice of names, cf. Griffith (1996:39) for the view of Polybus as the one naming the child.

and by Oedipus, together with Jocasta's tale about how Laius died, and Oedipus' story about how he killed a man; and the two witnesses to the identity and survival of the baby — the testimony of the two servants who had been instrumental in ensuring the survival of the baby and whose significance can only be properly understood in the light of Jocasta's account of the oracle given to Laius, after Oedipus' own oracle, and after the fact that Laius was killed in the same place that Oedipus killed a man. The gods say what is going to happen, both Jocasta and Oedipus try to avoid it at different times, and the Shepherds save the child, likely without knowing that they are saving the announced murderer of Laius, and constituting the fundamental link for the prophecy to be fulfilled. The revelation of the truth in the play happens in the reverse order of the fulfilment of the prophecy in the events before the play, from Oedipus' peak as the king of Thebes back to his exposure as a child.<sup>162</sup> Additionally, the testimony of the two Shepherds will be the sensory proof needed for the words of Tiresias to be taken, the oracles confirmed, and the power of the gods firmly re-asserted, as required by the Chorus in the second stasimon.

We have asked about the *Antigone* whether the play allowed the audience (and its characters) to think that things could have been otherwise, and we have answered in the affirmative. The conclusion in the *OT* is different. Even though they reach the realisation of what happened to Oedipus at different times, the possibility is open neither for the audience nor for the characters. The play has, however, a few counterfactual hypotheses advanced by the characters, and some relevant silences and crucial misinterpretations, that we shall look at in the following sections. We will have to wait until the *OC* for the parents to be blamed in any way for the fate of the son. In the *OT*, the trap of fate is well laid so that no escape is possible, by a web of coincidences leading to one goal, stated even before Oedipus' life starts. While Oedipus, though suffering extremely, will be considered the paradigm for people,

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<sup>162</sup> Segal (1981:247-8) sees in the ending of the *OT* an Oedipus who finally reaches a complete level of understanding, thanks to his endurance, against Tiresias' and Jocasta's advice to let go of the investigation: "in a life where so much seems to have been chance or randomness (...) Oedipus not only discerns pattern but creates pattern. His capacity to bear is connected with his determination to discover the shape which his life has within the mysterious order, or disorder, of the gods, to discern the coherence between the inner nature and the outward event, between the beginning and the end, the suffered and the inflicted injury". While I agree with Segal overall, his interpretation is better supported with the contrast between the *OT* and the *OC* in mind.

Apollo will be the main actor from the gods, the one setting in motion the inexorable plans of fate.

## 2. The patterns of coincidence

The absence of a visible causal chain could suggest, as it does for Jocasta and Oedipus at different points in the play (cf. 2.3.2 below), that life is governed by random chance, impossible to predict. Tiresias, on the other hand, who knows what is about to happen, attributes the upcoming revelation to Apollo. Tiresias denounces what Oedipus has done and states, as seen in the section above, that Apollo will be enough for Oedipus to learn the truth by the end of that day. There are reasons to believe, however, Apollo is not only interested in forcing the moment of Oedipus' realisation of his own past, but rather that the god has been involved in the rest of Oedipus' life as well, one way or another. Besides Tiresias' words, there is in the play a tightly woven pattern of coincidences that suggests a divine orchestration of some sort, aimed at a specific end, that makes it so that people's actions, however free they may feel, are conditioned by the circumstances in such a way that they will end up voluntarily contributing to the same goal.<sup>163</sup>

Before we turn to the specific treatment of the divine in our third section, we shall start by looking at this pattern of coincidences and its implications. We hope to demonstrate in the following paragraphs that they can only mean one thing: the coincidences in the play, are not only part of its dramatic structure, but are at the service of a thesis. They are meant to illustrate the inescapability of the oracle, as well as the limited knowledge mortals have about themselves, and the ways in which they tend to evaluate the events in their lives. We shall attempt to divide all the instances of coincidence into three rough divisions (time, speech, identity), that are

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<sup>163</sup> The only two involuntary actions that we see or hear of in the play are the forced confessions of the Shepherd and the revelation of Tiresias. The revelation of Tiresias, though, serves above all to shift the audience's attention (since Oedipus will ignore it). The Shepherd's confession is the last missing piece that confirms the whole sequence. Jocasta does not need to hear the Shepherd's testimony to understand what happened, but Oedipus does, since he fails to understand Jocasta's anxieties as well.

necessarily interdependent.<sup>164</sup> By doing so, we shall note that the type of human foolishness regarding reality represented in the play is very like the early philosophical criticism of human knowledge, how this deficient knowledge is reflected in the language with which reality is described. In the case of the *OT*, the prime example of this error will be the concept of τύχη.

## 2.1. Time and timing

Confined by the constraints of time, without the divine power of knowing past, present, and future, human beings are condemned to understanding things exclusively by looking at the past, and comparing already lived events with the ones in the present.<sup>165</sup> On the other hand, time is a factor of forgetfulness, and buries events in the past, such as the circumstances of Laius' death. That much is commonplace and easy to grasp. In the *OT*, however, there is another aspect of time that is directly relevant to explain how things have happened: that is timing. The passing of time will eventually reveal things, but the timing at which each revelation happens or each new accident takes place contributes to the continuation of the partial understanding of events by the characters, and consequently it contributes to the guarantee of the fulfilment of the prophecies.<sup>166</sup>

Both Jocasta (724-5, ὦν γὰρ ἄν θεὸς / χρεῖαν ἐρευνᾶ, ῥαδίως αὐτὸς φανεῖ) and Oedipus (280-1 δίκαι' ἔλεξας· ἀλλ' ἀναγκάσαι θεοὺς/ ἄν μὴ θέλωσιν οὐδ' <ἄν> εἰς δύναιτ' ἀνήρ) recognise that whatever the gods want to reveal, they will do so at a time of their own choosing, with no possible forceful interference from mortals. The

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<sup>164</sup> Peradotto (1992: 7-9) finds seven main coincidences. They are all included in the present list, but there are more instances of coincidence that deserve to be mentioned. Things in the *OT* seem to have been written in a quasi-obsessive way where every word, in its ambiguities and multiple senses, seems to have been used on purpose. Let us be obsessive too finding the parallels available in the text.

<sup>165</sup> Segal (1981:228-32) analyses the role of time in self-understanding, and how the key to the enigma of Oedipus' identity had to pass by uniting old and new, infancy and adulthood. I have great sympathy for his point on the imbalance created by Oedipus' deeds resulting from a disturbance of natural succession of time and generations (p.231): "Fitting the new to the old is the ever-renewed process of man's understanding of himself, and the succession of the new and old forms the natural succession of human generations. But Oedipus' collocation of new and old, from the play's first line on, expresses discontinuity and anomaly rather than orderly succession. His injury and the staff he bears confuse the natural progression in the stages of human life, and his incest confuses the orderly succession and separation of the generations within the family."

<sup>166</sup> In Xenophanes' B18 already, there is the notion that the gods do not reveal everything to men, but that men need an active search throughout time to learn (οὔτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖς ὑπέδειξαν, ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον).

play starts with a plague, revealed by Delphi to be the consequence of a murder long forgotten. By this time, Oedipus has had long enough to fully complete his prophecy, and is at the height of his reign. The parallel with the *Iliad* is telling: Apollo demands the rectification of a disruptive action.<sup>167</sup>

Both Creon (73-75) and Tiresias are late (288-9, Tiresias has been sent for twice). Creon's delay, of days rather than hours, is never explained, but leaves Oedipus counting the time (73; 75); Tiresias' delay could be attributed to his resistance to going to the palace. One way or another, both delays, even if not essential, make their appearances conveniently closer in time to the arrival of the Corinthian, which means that the reversal of fortunes in the life of Oedipus can happen in one shocking day.

During his argument with Creon, at the moment when he is convinced that there is a conspiracy against him, Oedipus asks whether Tiresias had ever mentioned his name before, at the time of the killing (564, ἐμνήσατ' οὐδ' ἔμοῦ τι τῶ τότ' ἐν χρόνῳ; cf. 558 and 641). This suggests, again, that there was a right timing for the god to make things clear, and a right timing to send the plague and demand expiation. Creon can only say that Tiresias has never mentioned Oedipus at the time, but will end the conversation himself with a consideration about the time needed to learn about someone's character.<sup>168</sup>

Still in the past, there was the timing of the appearance of the drunken man in Corinth and, of course, the timing of the meeting of Oedipus and Laius at the crossroads, which will both be interpreted as "chance" (cf. 2.3.2 below).

The argument between the Oedipus and Jocasta is interrupted by the arrival of Jocasta, which the Chorus considers "timely" (631, καίριον). Jocasta's arrival, in a moment of distress for Oedipus, will make her stay and try to reassure her husband. Another event that is well timed, adding up to this pattern of coincidences, is the death of Polybus and the arrival of the Corinthian. At this time, Oedipus is waiting

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<sup>167</sup> Cf. Griffith (1996:39), following Ahl (1991:57) and Knox (1956:134-5), about the plague being Sophocles' invention.

<sup>168</sup> Creon's maxim in 613-4 is on how time alone can decide whether someone has been just (as opposed to the bad person who is caught in one day), that is answered by the Chorus in 1213 (ἐφηδρέ σ' ἄκονθ' ὁ πάνθ' ὀρών χρόνος), where time found that Oedipus had done wrong, against the appearances (yet echoing the single day necessary for his fall in 438).

for the Shepherd to be summoned to answer on the number of assailants. It is only because the Corinthian arrives *after* Jocasta and Oedipus had been exchanging stories about the oracles that the matter of Oedipus' progeny is revived. After the Corinthian's news, Oedipus calls for the Shepherd again, aware that the right time for the conclusive revelations as come (1050, ὡς ὁ καιρὸς ἠὲρῆσθαι τάδε).

Three notions arise: first, it only takes one day for a complete reversal of fortune (Oedipus going from loved king to the doer of the most awful deeds). Secondly, the occasion when something could have been different, but the passing of time makes rectification impossible; there is a continuous chain of events that constructs one's whole life and is not possible to trace back and fix. And finally, that whatever happened in the fulfilment of the prophecy of Oedipus happened because the timing was right, and that precision betrays an orchestration of sorts by superhuman agents whose knowledge is timeless.

## 2.2. Unexpected changes of subject

This second category relates, in general, to speech. If divine orchestration could be held responsible for the timing of the events, it can hardly be blamed for the things that people say (except when it comes to the prophets and oracles), however, the things that people say are conditioned by their perception of reality at one given time.

We shall start by the people in the play who arrive to talk about one thing and end up talking about something else. The most striking example is, of course, Oedipus' visit to Delphi, even before the action of the play has begun. He travels to ask the god about the identity of his parents, and leaves the sanctuary with an indication about his future that he cannot understand.<sup>169</sup> Then, he seemingly forgets the question that brought him to the oracle in first place, and gets disappointed with the answer (ἄτιμος, 789, dishonoured and humiliated) not realising that the question, in a way, has indeed been answered: his father is the man he will kill, and his mother is the woman he will bed. Oedipus, however, cannot see the connection between the answer sought and the answer got at this point.

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<sup>169</sup> Plausibly a necessary red-herring to make him flee Corinth and run into Laius. This is one of the cases where the gods can be held responsible for what is said.

In 924 the Messenger from Corinth arrives to announce the death of Polybus. Upon Oedipus' fears regarding his mother (976, καὶ πῶς τὸ μητρὸς οὐκ ὀκνεῖν λέχος με δεῖ; and again 984-6), the Messenger is able to tell him that Merope is only his adoptive mother, without knowing that Oedipus had questioned his parents' identities before, nor that it was this same fear that made him leave Corinth for Thebes.<sup>170</sup> In the same way, the Shepherd, who had been called to testify on the number of assailants of Laius' escort (754-769) — a testimony that would only solve the minimum request of Apollo's oracle, to find the murderer of the king — will be questioned about the baby received from Jocasta instead (1039-1055),<sup>171</sup> at a point when the matter of number, the one thing upon which depended Oedipus' self-conviction as the murderer of Laius, has become secondary.

Finally, there is Jocasta's attempt to calm Oedipus. Her speech on the unfulfilled oracle given to Laius, instead of serving as example of how the words of the seers are not necessarily true, will set Oedipus on the right path to discover his identity, by the casual mention of the crossroads (716, ἐν τριπλαῖς ἀμαξιοῖς).<sup>172</sup> The conversation then turns into a clarification of the circumstances of the death of Laius (729ff.).

In this way, people turn out to bring first-hand witness on issues that seemed lateral to the main investigation (Oedipus' parents). The issues that seemed secondary, turn out to be central in the understanding of Oedipus' past. Oedipus' realisation of this past turns out to be the climax of the play, rather than avenging Laius.

### 2.2.1. Revealing silences

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<sup>170</sup> Even though one would assume that the people from Corinth would know that Polybus had been given a child to adopt. It is strange that Oedipus' suspicion is only raised when he is already so old but, if we see in everything a perfect timing for the prophecy to be fulfilled, then the doubts about the identity of the parents also come in the perfect timing for Oedipus to go to Delphi and to run into Laius. Cf., once more, Peradotto (1992: 7-9).

<sup>171</sup> This is the extra dimension of the crime, not suggested by the words brought by Creon, that makes it parricide and incest, and that connects it beyond doubt with Oedipus' life. Had the oracle brought by Creon indicated that there was also a crime of parricide and incest, Oedipus would have had the key to his mystery too early. Cf. 2.1 above and 2.2.1 below.

<sup>172</sup> Scodel (1984:64) points out that Jocasta mentions the crossroads first, and only then, when Oedipus' thought is already fixed on the detail, does she mention the exposure of the baby, delaying Oedipus' connection with his own history.

Besides the things that are said, the details forgotten, concealed, or simply left unsaid also contribute to the building up of a pattern of coincidences. From the point of view of the characters, and unlike what Oedipus thinks (e.g. against Creon in 700), there are no lies said out of malicious intent. No one in the play is hiding a truth in order to gain benefit from it (other than staying alive, at least). On the other hand, they refuse to speak either in self-defence (the Shepherd) or because they do not see the advantage of speaking (Tiresias). The only agent whose silence might serve a misleading purpose is Apollo.

The Shepherd, who has both saved Oedipus and survived his violence, will naturally not tell the rulers that he disobeyed their orders out of pity (cf. κατοικτίσας, 1177) and hoping that the other would take the child away forever, just as he will not denounce Oedipus as the murderer of Laius when Thebes makes him his king. Instead, he asks to be sent away forever himself (758ff.), after telling an approximate version of the story. The Shepherd also tries not to speak when he begs the Corinthian not to ask about the child in 1144, (after claiming that he did not recognize the Corinthian, and we have no reason not to believe him). However, none of this can be attributed to the Shepherd's evil intentions against Oedipus. They are, rather, lies to preserve his own life, and it is only when his life is threatened that he accepts to speak up.

Tiresias, on the other hand, will not want speak because, even if he does, nothing can be changed (341, ἤξει γὰρ αὐτά, κἄν ἐγὼ σιγῆι στέγω), Jocasta will want to stop speaking so that one can live with the suspected truth but without its inevitable confirmation, if the investigations proceed (1056ff. up to her last exit, she will insist three times, and leaves announcing her suicide by saying that those are her last words to Oedipus, who she wishes will never learn his origins, εἴθε μήποτε γνοίης ὅς εἶ). Whatever is said on stage, from the moment of the plague on, will only contribute to make the facts clearer, and never to correct a course of events long established in the past.

Oedipus himself does not like to remember all of his life. During his marriage with Jocasta, he managed never to have mentioned either the strange oracle, or his reasons for leaving Corinth, not even the fact that his ankles had been maimed in infancy (and probably well healed, perhaps thanks to the gods! for Jocasta would have

noticed otherwise; however, 1035 suggests that Oedipus knew where his name came from). Also, Polybus and Merope refused to answer the truth when Oedipus confronted them with questions about his birth, and they did not know that their reassurances were not enough for Oedipus, who secretly left for Delphi (774ff.; λάθρα in 786, in contrast with the publicity of Laius' trip to Delphi in 848-9).

The combination of people who speak, what they choose to speak about, and what they choose to omit is plausible and could easily be a genuine coincidence: if only Oedipus had told Jocasta about his ankles earlier.. they would have found out the truth earlier. If only the Shepherd had said something.. But, as we see from Oedipus' reaction to Tiresias' speech, even when the characters do say something, their interlocutors are not necessarily in the right mind to understand it. The revelation in the *OT* is only possible because all the conditions for it to be understood without any margin for doubt and in its full horror have come together at a single moment of time.

Here Apollo's silence plays a fundamental role. Right from the start, there is Apollo's oracle to Laius. Unlike the one given to Oedipus, according to Jocasta's report, this first oracle is only partial (711ff., fully quoted below). If nothing else, it takes away from Jocasta a reason to suspect Oedipus' provenience when he first arrives to Thebes. Not knowing either that the baby lives, or that the new king killed Laius, or that she is meant to marry her son, she has nothing to avoid that she has not tried to avoid already, by giving the child to the Shepherd. As far as she is concerned, the oracle was only about the death of her husband. Jocasta's ignorance removes an obstacle that could compromise the good timing for Oedipus to fulfil his own prophecy.

Secondly, there is the fact, mentioned above and noted by Oedipus, that Tiresias has not spoken against him at the time of the investigations on the murdering, investigations which were dropped because something else more pressing was going on, the Sphinx (130-1). Putting aside the nature of the Sphinx's threat, and the coincidence that Oedipus would be the one in the right place at the right moment, with the right skill to defeat her, we too can wonder why Tiresias has not spoken by

then.<sup>173</sup> The most plausible answer is simply that Tiresias did not know. Now, we know that Tiresias lays claim to a reputation for having knowledge coming from Apollo. The seer, both here and in the *Antigone*, is also seen as an advisor of the city, and not someone against Thebes. Therefore, the only reason for Tiresias not to have known at the time that Oedipus was the son and murderer of Laius was that Apollo did not want to make it clear for him just yet. Tiresias, alone, is not omniscient nor sees the same as a god: what he does know and see is what the gods want him to see at a given time, through the signs sent his way. In the same way that the oracle brought by Creon reveals the cause of the plague and its solution but does not name the culprit (as is remarked by the Chorus in 278-9, τὸ δὲ ζήτημα τοῦ πέμψαντος ἦν / Φοίβου τόδ' εἰπεῖν, ὅστις εἴργασταί ποτε), and in the same way that, years before, the answer to Oedipus' question about his parents was neither clear nor satisfactory to him. The contrast with the *Antigone* can be once again elucidating: when Tiresias comes forth to dissuade Creon, he is able to name the reasons why the gods are refusing sacrifice, and the one responsible for the situation is Creon. There is not, at any moment, any question that he is the one that caused and that can rectify what has happened. In the *OT*, rectification being beyond the possibilities of the play, the matter is about identifying Oedipus as the cause.

### 2.2.2. Ambiguity of speech: the dramatic irony

Tragic irony is not, of course, a feature exclusive to the *OT*, and it results from the coincidence between something that has been said and the way things turn out to be. In this play, there are several instances of it, that contribute to the feeling that there is some sort of determinism behind what appears to be chance.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Though the audience will only worry about these questions because they are being raised by a character in the play — the characters will bring back whichever elements that happened outside of the scene that might be relevant to the current plot, either by bringing a key to the enigma (the Shepherd's information), or as a demonstration of a process of investigation (Oedipus will ask about anything he can remember that might bring light to the investigation, and will take much longer to realise that the facts that he has witnessed himself are the relevant ones).

<sup>174</sup> On the *OT* being built around the contrast between things that “are” and things that “seem”, beyond verbal irony, cf. Kirkwood (1958:248).

The examples abound, sometimes only by the use of a word in an unexpected context, but let us name a few significant ones.<sup>175</sup> The play opens ironically: the priest of Zeus prays to Oedipus to save the city once again, him who is the first of men and who has been helped by the gods in saving Thebes before (34-39). As he promised to help Thebes, he also, Oedipus declares, will answer the Chorus' prayers (216-18), because, whoever wanted to harm Laius may want to harm Oedipus as well (138-141). He will do everything he can to find the murderer of Laius (145, ὡς πᾶν ἔμοῦδ' δρᾶσοντος), whose sentence of exile he pronounces (236ff.) and he will be the ally of Apollo and of Laius (244-5, ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν τοιόσδε τῷ τε δαίμονι / τῷ τ' ἀνδρὶ τῷ θανόντι σύμμαχος πέλω). Even though he has never seen the victim (105, οὐ γὰρ εἰσεῖδόν γέ πω), he will also fight for justice for Laius *as if* he were himself Laius' son at the end of the line of the Labdacidae (264-8, esp. ὡσπερὶ τοῦμοῦ πατρός).<sup>176</sup> All those things turn out to be true in unexpected ways.<sup>177</sup> Oedipus will turn out to be the man he chases, to be the champion of the god but also his greatest victim, and eventually to fulfil his own punishment for the culprit. He will indeed be fighting side by side with Apollo, in order to find the murderer of Laius, and, in his fight, he will be suffering from the same entity that has killed Laius before — let us call it “Apollo” too, as responsible for the very first oracle. By doing this investigation, Oedipus will also be answering the Thebans' prayers and finding the solution for the plague. Later, he will accuse Tiresias of blindness (384 εἰ δ' ἐτύγχανες βλέπων; if Tiresias happened to see, he would accuse him of doing the crime alone) and boast about his wits (387-8, ὁ μηδὲν εἰδῶς Οἰδίπους, ἔπαυσά νιν, / γνώμη κυρήσας οὐδ' ἄπ', οἰωνῶν μαθῶν), only to end as the one who blinds himself after being mentally blind and not capable to deduce his own identity earlier.

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<sup>175</sup> On Sophocles' use of puns and repetitive vocabulary to convey the importance of a theme in a play, cf. e.g Long (1968:148ff.) and Knox (1957:182-3) on Oedipus' feet. Segal (1981:232-6) for the use of verbs with double senses (such as nurturing or loosing).

<sup>176</sup> Still on the irony of knowing who are the people at whom he is looking, Oedipus will say in 997-9 that people miss seeing their parents, as he has, after fleeing Corinth.

<sup>177</sup> Except maybe for Creon's assurance in 87-8: ἐσθλήν· λέγω γὰρ καὶ τὰ δύσφορ', εἰ τόχοι / κατ' ὀρθὸν ἐξίοντα, πάντ' ἄν εὐτυχεῖν. If Oedipus follows Apollo's instructions, he will indeed find the murderer, and he will stop the plague. Whether that qualifies as the positive εὐτυχεῖν is another story: for the city returning to a healthy state, yes; for Oedipus, not at all.

In 919, Jocasta will be praying to Apollo, who is “closest” (ἄγγιστος), and her prayer will be immediately answered with the arrival of the Corinthian who brings the final key for the resolution of the problem.<sup>178</sup> Towards the final disclosure, and adopting an incongruously optimistic tone, the Chorus will still sing a pathetic song of hope for Oedipus’ lineage to turn out to be semi-divine (1089ff.) a stasimon introduced by Oedipus proclaiming himself the son of none other than Fortune (1080, ἐγὼ δ’ ἐμαυτὸν παῖδα τῆς Τύχης νέμων), “by whose providence (he) shall not be dishonoured” (1081, τῆς εὖ διδούσης οὐκ ἀτιμασθήσομαι).<sup>179</sup>

The examples abound, and their accumulation stresses the complete mismatching between people’s beliefs and the full dimension of reality. The irony results from an error of perception, the same error of perception that will make identities puzzling.

### 2.3. Coincidence of identity: one and many

How can one be many? asks Oedipus in 842ff., the question on which he puts all his final hope that he is not the killer of Laius (not yet that Laius is his father, nor that his mother is Jocasta):

ληστὰς ἔφασκες αὐτὸν ἄνδρας ἐννέπειν  
 ὥς νιν κατακτείνειαν. εἰ μὲν οὖν ἔτι  
 λέξει τὸν αὐτὸν ἀριθμόν, οὐκ ἐγὼ ἔκτανον·  
 οὐ γὰρ γένοιτ’ ἂν εἷς γε τοῖς πολλοῖς ἴσος·  
 εἰ δ’ ἄνδρ’ ἕν’ οἰόζωνον αὐδήσει, σαφῶς  
 τοῦτ’ ἐστὶν ἤδη τοῦργον εἰς ἐμὲ ῥέπον.

You were saying that he told of robbers that would have killed him (Laius). If, then, he will still speak of this same number, I am not the one who killed. One cannot be equal to many. But if he speaks of one lone traveler, then clearly this deed inlines towards me.

The question is misleading: one cannot, obviously, become many in terms of perceived physical presence (unless by visual hallucinations), but many can turn out to have been only one all along, and that will be the case of Oedipus at different

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<sup>178</sup> Lloyd (2012:570) differentiates the irony in the *OT* into two types, “stable” and “unstable”. In the former sense, the audience knows more than the characters and is able to recognise what the characters do not (e.g. the oracles were true); in the latter, the audience is in the same position as the characters, i.e. only retrospectively will they be able to understand that the arrival of the Messenger was an ironical answer to Jocasta’s prayer.

<sup>179</sup> Cf. 2.3.2 below.

moments of his life.<sup>180</sup> In this case, that happens because the man accompanying Laius told an embellished version of the story, where the number of offenders was larger. Even this man is many at once, by being both part of Laius' escort and the Shepherd who can confirm having received a baby with pierced ankles from Jocasta (the coincidence is suggested by the Chorus in 1051-2, οἶμαι μὲν οὐδέν' ἄλλον ἢ τὸν ἐξ ἀγρῶν, / ὄν κἀμάτευες πρόσθεν εἰσίδειν).

This man is not the only one with multiple roles. The Corinthian who confirms the identity of the survivor as the Shepherd of Laius is both the man who took the young Oedipus to Polybus (1022, δῶρόν ποτ', ἴσθι, τῶν ἐμῶν χειρῶν λαβῶν) and the one who could recognise Oedipus now to announce the death of his adoptive father, and the one able to confirm the fact that the father was adoptive (1016, ὁθούνεκ' ἦν σοι Πόλυβος οὐδὲν ἐν γένει). The Corinthian and the Shepherd are also at once the saviours of the baby and the guarantee of Oedipus' downfall (1030, σοῦ τ', ὦ τέκνον, σωτήρ γε τῷ τότ' ἐν χρόνῳ; 1179-80, ὁ δὲ κάκ' εἰς μέγιστ' ἔσωσεν). Jocasta is mother and wife of Oedipus, something she understands much earlier than him, but also mother and killer (that it was Jocasta and not Laius giving the child to be exposed is stressed in 1173-5). Oedipus accumulates most roles: he is Theban and stranger (e.g. Tiresias in 452-3, quoted above), son and husband (most dramatically put in 1403ff.), saviour of the city and the cause of the plague, roles he shares with Apollo (as saviour, 40ff, cf. e.g. 149-50 on Apollo; as the cause of the plague identified as the murderer of Laius, 95ff.), champion of Apollo and his first victim (135ff. and 1329-30).

The problem is not, that one person can fulfil more than one function in the play (quite the contrary, the economy, just on its own, is elegant in a theatre play, though unlikely in reality), but the perception of it. As pointed out in the previous section, the picture that emerges from the progression in which the plot will reveal additional details on each character resembles a jigsaw, of which each person was given a different piece at a different time, ignorant of the fact that it belonged to a bigger and single puzzle to begin with. In the same way that random events fall into place in an

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<sup>180</sup> On the mathematical terminology of the play, cf. e.g. Knox (1957:147-58). On how all Oedipus' counting sums up to nothing, cf. Lawrence (2008).

organised order, the multiple roles and identities of different people reveal a constant subject that has been different things at different times.

This confusion of perception is not limited to the denomination of human beings. Cithaeron (and the mountains in general) is at once the place where Oedipus was sent to die and where he was rescued, but also the place where the Chorus wishes Oedipus has been born in the third stasimon, and the place where Oedipus wants to be sent to die in the 1451-4. An object such as the sceptre accumulates the functions of being a symbol of the king's power, of aiding the blind beggar finding his way, and of being the weapon with which Oedipus kills Laius.<sup>181</sup> The elements which are usually seen as essential and positive in agriculture, as noted by Charles Segal, are described by their negative and destructive aspects, and rain becomes a sinister shower of blood (101; 1278-9).<sup>182</sup>

Some of these double-roles are compatible, and some are conflicting contraries that cause suffering. Together with the multiplicity of identities and the reunion of contraries in one subject, there are also simple mistakes of interpretation. The one that is the most relevant to the purposes of this chapter is the mistaken perception of *τύχη*. We shall go back to it; first, it might be useful to turn to some examples from the Presocratic corpus, hoping that they might frame much of Oedipus' situation in the philosophical thinking of the time.

### **2.3.1. The Presocratics on understanding the phenomena**

Segal's interpretation of the *OT* is focused on the oppositions of a series of contraries, and Oedipus' transition between each stage or geographical point as an "anomalous third term": e.g. wilderness and city, man and beast, past and future, adulthood and infancy, great and small, king and scapegoat.<sup>183</sup> The tragedy of Oedipus is that he embodies contraries that cannot be organised harmoniously, and

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<sup>181</sup> A point made by Benardete (1966:106), taken by Segal (1981:210).

<sup>182</sup> Segal (1981:209).

<sup>183</sup> Segal (1981:207-48). On Oedipus as scapegoat, cf. also Vernant (1972:117).

because of which he cannot reach stability in the present. In other words, Oedipus is “disoriented”.<sup>184</sup>

Some of the double-roles listed above have nothing intrinsically incompatible, we can add, such as the identity of the Shepherds, while the conjunction of others in one subject are the cause of much suffering (e.g. mother and wife at once). Later in the same chapter (p.240-4), Segal will observe that “no play is more about language than the *Oedipus Tyrannus*”, and the double role of language as both “the vehicle of confusion” and an “instrument of truth”. Even so, “language (...) becomes the microcosmos for all of man’s means of understanding reality”.

Segal’s interpretation is, in its majority, very attractive.<sup>185</sup> The errors of judgment of Oedipus and his general disorientation, however, conform to a pattern. They are, essentially, a confusion between parts and wholes, and that confusion is expressed by language. Oedipus cannot tell, from the multiplicity of the appearances, that there is one and the same reality.

This confusion and inaccuracy of vocabulary is part of the criticism of some of the contemporary philosophers against the possibility of human knowledge. Without trying to over-simplify all the Presocratics into a continuous whole disregarding their differences, thinkers such as Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles state some common mistakes in how the common man organises the information given to him from his perceptions.<sup>186</sup> Mortals can only have a partial view of the workings of the cosmos and of themselves. They do not know who they are, what constitutes them, and call reality by the wrong names. They lack the capability to recognise all the seemingly independent aspects of one unity, and to name them as if they were

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<sup>184</sup> Segal (1981:223). There is an extent to which any tragedy can be seen as the opposition of contraries, as the *agon* enacted in the mysteries. The difference in the *OT* is that they are present in one and the same person.

<sup>185</sup> I am not so convinced by the conclusions he draws on Oedipus’ fear of being cast away from the city out of a trauma of having been exposed as a child (p.210). Oedipus might know about his pierced ankles, but he obviously does not know about what happened to him when he was three days old, or he would have never believed that Polybus and Merope were his real parents. While, he could have been suspicious that the marks were the evidence of a former rejection by his parents, Oedipus will tell the story of the drunk man in Corinth as the first moment when he questioned his parentage.

<sup>186</sup> For a survey of the specific question of one and many, cf. Stokes (1971). The problem is not identical to the unity of opposites, but the aspect that interests us here, common to both, is human perception of reality.

different identities, even what would be mutually exclusive contraries (Oedipus will at once be murderer and avenger).

For Heraclitus, people are deaf, even when they have heard the truth (B34, ἀζύνετοι ἀκούσαντες κωφοῖσιν ἐοίκασι· φάτις αὐτοῖσιν μαρτυρεῖ παρεόντας ἀπεῖναι). So is Oedipus deaf to the revelations of Tiresias, and to everything else around him. Towards the end of the play, in 1386-90, after putting out his eyes, he will declare that if he could he would have put out his ears as well, i.e. the other source of information from the senses:

ἤκιστά γ'· ἀλλ' εἰ τῆς ἀκουούσης ἔτ' ἦν  
πηγῆς δι' ὤτων φραγμός, οὐκ ἂν ἐσχόμην  
τὸ μὴ ἀποκλῆσαι τοῦμόν ἄθλιον δέμας,  
ἴν' ἦ τυφλός τε καὶ κλύων μηδέν· τὸ γὰρ  
τὴν φροντίδ' ἔζω τῶν κακῶν οἰκεῖν γλυκύ.

Not at all: if there was also a way to block the source of hearing in the ear, I would have not held myself from shutting off this miserable body of mine, so that I would not hear, and would be blind as well. It is sweet for the mind to inhabit away from the world of grief.

Oedipus wishes for his thoughts to be away from the sense perception, especially sight and sound, that misguided him, and was the cause of his grief. For Parmenides too, humans are “deaf and blind” (B6.7, κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοί), and hold wrong opinion resulting from the senses; they are bicephalous and wander, torn between things that they consider opposites (B6.5). We shall have more to say about wandering in chapter 3, but while it has a positive effect of learning after exile, here it represents delusion, and following misguided clues, rather than following the right methods available for knowledge. Oedipus too has been wandering back to Thebes, thanks to his misconceptions; in B6, the path for those who are not able to tell being from not-being also turns back on itself (παλίντροπος). The ignorant men in Empedocles B2 wander also, with the information from the senses clouding their understanding. Both Empedocles (B2) and Heraclitus (B1-2, especially B17) accuse men of taking into consideration only what they run into at a specific moment, failing to see each occurrence against the larger pattern of things. More dangerously, in both cases the wronged mortals are convinced that they have understanding of what they are seeing:

Heraclitus B17

οὐ γὰρ φρονέουσι τοιαῦτα πολλοὶ ὀκίοις ἐγκυρέουσιν, οὐδὲ μαθόντες γινώσκουσιν, ἔωυτοῖσι δὲ δοκέουσι.

Many people do *not* ‘understand the sort of things they encounter’! Nor do they recognize them <even> after they have had experience <of them> — though they themselves think <they recognize them>.<sup>187</sup>

Empedocles B2.3-6

παῦρον δ’ ἐν ζωῆσι βίου μέρος ἀθρήσαντες  
ὠκύμοροι καπνοῖο δίκην ἀρθέντες ἀπέπταν,  
αὐτὸ μόνον πεισθέντες, ὅτῳ προσέκυρσεν ἕκαστος,  
πάντοσ’ ἐλαυνόμενοι, τὸ δ’ ὅλον <πᾶς> εὔχεται εὑρεῖν·

And having seen [only] a small portion of life in their experience they soar and fly off like smoke, swift to their dooms, each one convinced of only that very thing which he has chanced to meet, as they are driven in all directions. But <each> boasts of having seen the whole.<sup>188</sup>

Oedipus fits the picture of the ignorant man who, convinced of his intellectual greatness (he boasts of defeating the Sphinx), wanders to Thebes, persuaded that his parents are in Corinth and that he is circumventing his oracle, and is not able to recognise Laius nor Jocasta.<sup>189</sup> He sees every event in his life in isolation, as chance occurrences, without being able to analyse them into a meaningful pattern. Even Jocasta, as she comes out to pray to Apollo, will complain that Oedipus is at the mercy of each new encounter, rather than judging “new things from old” (914-7, esp. οὐδ’ ὅποι’ ἀνήρ / ἔννουσ τὰ καινὰ τοῖς πάλαι τεκμαίρεται). Oedipus also confuses the identity of things to which he attributes different names at different times, but he ultimately confuses his own identity. Apollo’s most famous maxim too, “know yourself”, might be after all, ever-ringing in the back of the audience’s minds, or

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<sup>187</sup> The translation is Robinson’s (1978).

<sup>188</sup> Inwood’s (2001) translation. For the importance of memory in ancient thought, cf. Vernant (1965:109ff).

<sup>189</sup> I disagree with Scodel’s (1984:66) conclusion that Oedipus and Jocasta are “naive” because they “think that gods and mortals reason compatibly”. Jocasta and Oedipus try what they can to circumvent their oracles, and are as naive as any other human, recognising (which both of them do) that the gods reveal whatever they want to reveal, whenever they want to reveal. Oedipus’ frustration at Delphi comes from thinking that the god did not give him an answer (which is true, if the answer was expected to be direct), and he will react based on what he can recognise, but he never claims to have understood what the god said.

even Heraclitus self-investigation (B101). It seems plausible to think that Sophocles would be playing with the theme in his portrait of Oedipus, of his specific type of intelligence, and of all the things he fails to see.

#### 2.4. "The certainty of chance"

The word τύχη and its compounds are used thirty times in the play (against μοῖρα that appears six times, cf. 3.1 below).<sup>190</sup> Some of its uses are standard or formulaic (even though they may have a second level of meaning), others are clearly significant in the characters' perception of chance. The occurrences in the former group, when there is a possible double meaning, helps building up the dramatic irony.<sup>191</sup> In this section, we shall turn our attention especially to the instances where characters attribute the origin of events to random chance, rather than to a determined chain of events set by the oracles, which are essential parts of one unique outcome.<sup>192</sup> Besides dramatic irony, those instances reflect an error of judgment, and that is the error caused by the limitations of human knowledge discussed above. Most of the past events in the play are seen by the characters as resulting from a random circumstance

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<sup>190</sup> τύχη and τυγχάνω appear twenty-four times: 52, 80, 87, 102, 263, 348, 423, 442, 598, 677, 680, 757, 773, 776, 949, 1435, 1450, 1479, 1526. Note the sequence of close occurrences, from 977, where Jocasta suggests that people should live according to chance, builds up in the exchange with the Corinthian in 1025, 1036, 1039, and culminates 1080 with Oedipus declaring himself the son of Chance. Then συντυχόντας (122); δυστύχησεν (262); εὐτυχεῖν (89); εὐτυχεῖς (145); εὐτυχῶς (998); εὐτυχοίης (1478). Eidinow (2011:55-61), in her survey of the uses of τύχη, μοῖρα, and δαίμων, notes that the first appearances of τύχη seem to "refer to good events (...) as the play proceeds, the negative meaning of *tuche* starts to dominate".

Greene (1944:140) seems to think that all mistakes could have been avoided if it was not for τύχη.

<sup>191</sup> E.g. 424 (εὐπλοίας τυχών), where it refers to the prosperous weather during a journey, typically something out of control, may have a second level of meaning, if we consider that Oedipus' voyage led him to disaster in Thebes. 609 (μαθοῦσά γ' ἦτις ἡ τύχη), may be seen as something that happened out of chance (Creon and Oedipus arguing) or rightly timed. The same goes for 757, where Oedipus "happens" to be in the palace at the right time. On the other hand, 598 (τὸ γὰρ τυχεῖν αὐτοῖσι πᾶν ἐνταῦθ' ἔνι) and 677 (σοῦ μὲν τυχών ἀγνώτος) seem fairly inoffensive expressions. Even then, however, it is possible to argue that the success of those who look for Creon lies in his hands (not on chance), and that Creon "found" Oedipus out of his mind because it was required that Oedipus would follow the only possible clue available to him: accusing Creon of betrayal.

<sup>192</sup> Or are they replaceable parts that will have one and the same outcome, no matter which way one takes to get there? Peradotto (1992:9) suggests not, and that if we "remove any one of these coincidences, an easy thing to do given the infinitesimal plausibility of their all occurring, [...] the Tyrannus collapses like a house of cards"; Williams (1993:146) agrees that removing any of the coincidental events implies "the metaphysical collapse of the supernatural necessity". I am in agreement with both: everything is so much interwoven in an inescapable net, that each move seems to be the only possible move at all times, even if the performers will feel (and live) them as options. For the agent, they are options indeed, the question being whether they were always meant to make them.

of fortune,<sup>193</sup> and it is only with hindsight called μοῖρα, after each detail falls into place in the fulfilment of the oracle.

Following an order that is not the one in which we hear about each of the events in the play, there is first the meeting of the Shepherds after Laius received his oracle. While it is not clear whether Jocasta and Laius were condemned to have a child, giving away the baby was a reaction to an oracle beyond any doubt. Therefore, the initial marking even of the life of Oedipus is under the sign of μοῖρα (in apparently striking contrast with Oedipus declaring himself the son of Fortune in 1080). Oedipus inquires whether he was found by chance (1025, σὺ δ' ἐμπολήσας ἢ τυχὼν μ' αὐτῷ δίδως;), or given to the Corinthian by someone else, a question on which he insists in 1039, after hearing the reference to his pierced ankles (or rather the τύχη of his pierced ankles, 1034-6) and assuming that it was one of his parents giving him away (ἦ γὰρ παρ' ἄλλου μ' ἔλαβες οὐδ' αὐτὸς τυχὼν;). As the former Shepherd confirms, the baby had been given to him by another man, but it certainly looks like a chance event that the two Shepherds have ever met at all, and that they have since changed professions, each living most of their lives in cities far from each other.

The τύχη of Oedipus' pierced ankles is relevant here in two ways. First, it is a token of recognition (body marks often are), that will allow Oedipus to confirm the veracity of the Corinthian's words. More importantly, it is also, symbolically, the setting up of a constraint. Oedipus' ankles were pierced together so that he could not walk freely. Oedipus' steps were, after all, bound to come back to his place of origin

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<sup>193</sup> The exceptions are: Oedipus winning over the Sphinx thanks to skill (but the fact that the Sphinx happened to be there for Oedipus to defeat seems to be a chance event); Oedipus' decision to flee Corinth after the oracle (but he went to the oracle because of a chance happening to begin with); Jocasta's decision to give away the baby (here the unconditionality of the oracle would include the birth of Oedipus, versus the open possibility of the parents not having children. We shall return to this later).

to fulfil a fate he was bound to by birth.<sup>194</sup> In that sense, his feet were never released from the pins, and that condition is so defining that it is the origin of Oedipus' name.

Luckily, we could say, Polybus was childless, and therefore ready to adopt (1024, ἡ γὰρ πρὶν αὐτὸν ἐξέπεισ' ἀπαιδία), raising the young Oedipus in ignorance of his origins, until the day a drunken man in a banquet taunts the prince for not being Polybus' son. The event is described as a chance one, worthy of surprise but “not worth of the concern” Oedipus gave it (773ff. esp. πρὶν μοι τύχη / τοιάδ' ἐπέστη, θαυμάσαι μὲν ἀξία, / σπουδῆς γε μέντοι τῆς ἐμῆς οὐκ ἀξία). The result of this accident was that Oedipus left to go to Delphi, and left Delphi right in time to run into Laius (114, θεωρός, ὡς ἔφασκεν, ἐκδημῶν). The fact that they are both going to Delphi is a hint that both trips are fated: we are never told what Laius is doing, but we are told specifically that he is on his way to visit the sanctuary of Apollo, from where the prophecies dominating the play came from. As it happens, both father and son get into a fight, and, before they know it, Laius' prophecy and the first half of Oedipus' prophecy are fulfilled. The very fact that they fight is a mishap — if there was a possibility for any of them to avoid their oracle, it could very well have happened that they had run into each other without a dispute ensuing.<sup>195</sup> Yet, the fight took place, we are told, and the reasons for it are described by Oedipus (800-13). Debating whether or not Oedipus was a bad boy disrespecting an old man is irrelevant. The two of them *had* to get into a fight for the oracle to be fulfilled. It is the first and only time that father and son see each other after the exposure of the baby, and one time is sufficient for the step the two of them are destined to perform together.

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<sup>194</sup> There is a third way in which the marks are important: they are a mark of shame for Oedipus. As much as he would have no way to know about his parentage, he knew the marks on his feet, and the marks meant a possible rejection and disownment. In that sense, some careful use of aspects of the psychoanalytical reading of the character can make sense. Oedipus could be revealing his own concerns of having been born in slavery by attributing them to Jocasta in 1062-3. This subconscious fear could also be in the origin of his “overreaction” to the words of the drunk man in Corinth, and the reason why the lingering doubt was strong enough to make him go to Delphi. The rejection of the inner fears could explain the rash decision to run in a different direction than Corinth, or even some sort of attraction to the exact thing one fears (the “imp of the perverse”), and so on. It is, of course, an anachronistic reading, and I know as much of modern psychiatry as Sophocles did to make the case for it. However, Sophocles was drawing his characters from human beings, and their behaviour has constant patterns, no matter how the vocabulary to describe them changes. On the yoking metaphor, see Segal (1981:217).

<sup>195</sup> Alas, both father and son share the same “nature”, and personality is par excellence something one cannot evade. Cf. Segal (1981:222), drawing on Kitto (1958:60).

Oedipus' arrival at Thebes is described by the priest of Zeus as auspicious and a sign of good fortune (52-3, ὄρνιθι γὰρ καὶ τὴν τότε αἰσίῳ τύχην / παρέσχεσ ἡμῖν, καὶ τανῶν ἴσος γενοῦ).<sup>196</sup> The same arrival is described in different tones by Tiresias in 422-3:

(...) ὅταν καταίσθῃ τὸν ὑμέναιον, ὃν δόμοις  
ἄνορμον εἰσέπλευσας, εὐπλοίας τυχῶν;

(...) whenever you understand that the marriage you sailed into in the palace was not the harbour it seemed, as you were having such a fair voyage?

Oedipus continues his voyage away from Corinth and finds an empty throne and an available queen, which would seem like a good turn of fortune. For the Thebans, he is the hero who rid them of the Sphinx. For Oedipus, this is without doubt some very good occasion to settle away from the prophecies he believes he is avoiding. The journey so far had not been, of course, a fair one, but he cannot know that he has just killed his father and is about to do the second thing he is destined to do. The fair weather too, unlike we have seen in the *Antigone*, now gives the wrong and contrasting indication of what is actually happening.

This arrival puts Oedipus in a situation that he sees as connecting him to his predecessor on the throne. In the painfully ironic speech where Oedipus will enumerate the reasons why it is his duty to find the murderer of Laius, and his forged blood connection of sorts in 258ff. he will say this:

(...) νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ κυρῶ γ' ἐγὼ  
ἔχων μὲν ἀρχὰς ἃς ἐκεῖνος εἶχε πρῖν,  
ἔχων δὲ λέκτρα καὶ γυναῖχ' ὁμόσπορον,  
κοινῶν τε παίδων κοῖν' ἄν, εἰ κείνῳ γένος  
μὴ 'δυστόχησεν, ἣν ἂν ἐκπεφυκότα ·  
νῦν δ' ἐς τὸ κείνου κρᾶτ' ἐνήλαθ' ἡ τύχη ·

But, as it is, since I obtained the ruling power that he formerly held, and share the marriage and the wife that he embraced, the children from us both would have created common ties between us, had he not been unfortunately childless. But, as it is, misfortune leapt upon his head.

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<sup>196</sup> It is also for a promise of salvation that Oedipus will pray to Apollo, as he waits for Creon's arrival in 80-1: ὤναξ Ἀπολλων, εἰ γὰρ ἐν τύχῃ γέ τω / σωτήρι βαίη λαμπρὸς ὥσπερ ὄμματι.

Oedipus has successfully hit the mark (κυρῶ) when he took Laius' throne. The verb is used again to describe how he has defeated the Sphinx (398 γνώμη κυρήσας), but it also contains a sense of chance, of things to befall one. The description of Laius as “unfortunate” (δυστύχησεν) for being childless is another instance of irony, reinforced by the acts of a personified fortune (ἡ τύχη) leaping upon his head. This personified fortune is no one other than Oedipus; the child whom the “fortune” evoked as having deprived Laius of children did, after all, give him a child. Laius' death was not fortuitous but exactly what had been said by the oracle would happen to him. The fact that Oedipus is alive is something that Laius tried to avoid, in the same way that Oedipus is on the road to Thebes exactly to avoid killing his father. The “chance” fact that Oedipus will be the one taking Laius' life is an event of τύχη, out of the full control of either of its agents, but it is Laius' μοῖρα too; it is his allotted death (cf. 713-4, ὡς αὐτὸν ἦζοι μοῖρα πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν, / ὅστις γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ τε κάκεινου πάρα).<sup>197</sup>

By some sort of chance, also, the investigation over Laius' death had been dropped by then, so shortly after — nothing was found and, as Creon tells us, they had more pressing matters with the Sphinx (130-1). The presence of the Sphinx, however, conditions the reaction of the city to the death of their king; it forces them to divert from the investigation until it is forgotten (προσῆγετο in 131).<sup>198</sup> As it happens, these are the pressing matters Oedipus is the man best fitted to solve (e.g. 1196-203), a skill (or lot, ἡ τύχη again), that will also cost him the fulfilment of the second part of the oracle (cf. 442, αὕτη γε μέντοι σ' ἡ τύχη διώλεσεν).

As the play starts, conveniently after Oedipus has had time to father four children, and Polybus has had the time to become an old man, a plague starts (the infertility of the land in the prologue will contrast with Oedipus' and Jocasta's excessive fertility). The cause of the plague is obscure, but it is not unusual to assume that it comes from

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<sup>197</sup> These verses and the form of the oracle will interest us again below.

<sup>198</sup> Jebb (1887) *ad loc.* notes that this must have been said with “a certain irony” since “προσάγεσθαι with infinitive usually implies a *gentle* constraint”. Once again, there is the idea of restricting movement, forcing a path into one direction. Cf. Segal (1981:223).

human transgression.<sup>199</sup> Therefore, Oedipus asks the divine authorities. When Creon arrives from Delphi, Oedipus asks (102):

ποίου γὰρ ἀνδρὸς τήνδε μινύει τύχην;

Of which sort of man does he reveal this as the τύχη?

The wording is strange, and it is not clear whose τύχη Oedipus is thinking of: the murderer's or the former king's (Creon will answer with "Laius"). If τύχη is something beyond someone's direct control, it is the opposite of a decided action. Ironically, Oedipus is opening the possibility for the murderer of Laius to have done it as the result of the constraints of the situation (being pushed off the road, for example), rather than a deliberate plot against the king assumed elsewhere in the play. In fact, Oedipus alludes to people interested in plotting against him three times, all of them red herrings: the same person who murdered Laius might be interested in deposing him (139-41, only true if we take Apollo as the agent interested in deposing Oedipus here); and about Tiresias and then Creon (380-9). What Oedipus called τύχη in the preceding verses, Tiresias will call μοῖρα in 376, quoted above.

The τύχη revealed by the god will turn out to be one aspect of the μοῖρα of Oedipus, and it will be revealed because the god is interested in it. In both cases, μοῖρα or τύχη represent something out of the direct intentions of Oedipus, while resulting from the actions perceived by him as (and in fact) his own. Just like everywhere else, Apollo's oracles coincide with Oedipus' actions, and with the converging actions of everyone else around him.

He sends for Tiresias, the best source of advice. By the time the old seer leaves the stage as early as 462, everyone in the audience has realised that Oedipus has fulfilled his prophecy, but they have not heard yet of half of the interpretations of the events described as "chance" that we have listed above. They will witness, however, the sequence of three last well-timed coincidences (cf. 2.1. above).

First in the denouement comes Jocasta praying to Apollo. As we have seen, she says that he happens to be closest, a proximity that has not only the physical dimension of the statue on stage, but also the factual dimension of Apollo's

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<sup>199</sup> But on the origins of pollution cf. Parker (1983), especially the fourth and eleventh chapters. On the double roles of Apollo as the god of healing and the god of plague, cf. Burkert (1985: 145-6).

connection to Oedipus' life. Jocasta's prayer is interrupted (or answered?) by the arrival of the Corinthian. The coincidence of this arrival at the height of Oedipus' anxiety is, at first sight, very welcome. As Jocasta puts it in 949:

(...) τοῦτον Οἰδίπουν πάλαι τρέμων  
τὸν ἄνδρ' ἔφευγε μὴ κτάνοι, καὶ νῦν ὄδε  
πρὸς τῆς τύχης ὄλωλεν οὐδὲ τοῦδ' ὕπο.

Long since, fearing he would kill him, Oedipus kept away from this man, and now he has died a natural death and not at his hands.

It was τύχη, in this case, the natural course of life, when people die of old age, that took Polybus' life, and not his son (though the word is unexpected here, since μοῖρα, or μόρος are usually used to designate one's death).<sup>200</sup> Except, of course, that it was not Polybus that Oedipus was destined to kill.

All these instances demand a comment on the meaning of τύχη. It can be good or bad, but the main feature that its uses seem to have in common is that it is something that happens beyond human control or prediction. Human prediction is made based on recognisable patterns of events, or visible chains of cause and effect. In the case of things attributed to chance, the pattern and cause seems to be absent.<sup>201</sup>

In the *OT*, however, its occurrences seem to happen mostly when the character is mistaken as to the origin of an event, and it appears, as we have seen, in contexts where ironically things turn out to be different from the evaluation made by the person speaking. A character in this play will be more likely to use a compound of τύχη than any word of other roots closely connected to constraint or inescapable necessity, such as ἀνάγκη or μοῖρα. When Oedipus speaks of τύχη, he most often means aleatory chance, but we know that the actual sense of his chance is that it has not been aleatory at all. It is a well-established τύχη, that he would probably refer to as μοῖρα, had he known that he was killing the man in the crossroads just as he had

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<sup>200</sup> On the early significance of μοῖρα, and for the personified Μοῖρα in cult, cf. Dietrich (1965:11-3 and 59-90).

<sup>201</sup> But see the conclusions of Hau (2011:196) about Polybius' use of the word τύχη. In her study of all the occurrences in the *Histories*, Hau found that the one sense that could be attributed to all uses was that "(τύχη) is outside of human control". The other senses, either negative or positive, such as predestining force, random power, agent of revenge, or even coincidence and unexpectability were added to it (p.202). Cf. also Nusbaum's (1986:3) definition of τύχη as simply something that happens out of one's agency, and not necessarily aleatory.

been warned he would do. However, when Jocasta suggests that one should not worry about the oracles and take things as they come, she is referring to chance, but her suggestion is not that far from Tiresias' refusal to speak based on the knowledge that what is to happen will happen anyway, regardless of him speaking about it.<sup>202</sup>

Eventually, all τύχη is μοῖρα, and both of them are at once external to one's decision, and the very essence of one's life, from which one cannot escape because it is one's lot. A terrible conclusion for a play where the triumph of human resolution and intelligence is brought down by the exposition of their recurrent lack of discernment, and by the assumption that all the "free moves", even though they felt necessarily free and will always feel that way, have always been predicted and conditioned by an external agency.<sup>203</sup>

#### 2.4.1. The son of Τύχη

The final passage under our attention is 1080-3, where Oedipus proclaims himself the son of Τύχη. The context is sharply ironic, and revolves around Oedipus' complete misunderstanding of his own line. At this point, Jocasta is trying to dissuade Oedipus from summoning the Shepherd. Oedipus refuses to listen, convinced that, having all the signs needed, he will not fail to bring light to his birth (1057-8, ἐγὼ λαβῶν / σημεῖα τοιαῦτ' οὐ φανῶ τοῦμὸν γένος). The Corinthian has already told Oedipus, that he had been given to him as a baby, with pierced ankles, by a Shepherd from the house of Laius. The information is, of course, more than enough for Jocasta. Oedipus' reaction to her fears is to reassure her that it is only him that might be proven to be of a lower birth, and not her. He says that even if he is shown to be the son of a mother from a third generation of slaves (1062-3, τρίτης ἐγὼ / μητρὸς

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<sup>202</sup> The point is made by Segal (1981:248) and summed up in his conclusion of the play: "(Oedipus) asks, in other words, whether the sources of such suffering lie in an overstructured or an unstructured universe, absolute necessity or absolute chance. That question can have no ultimate answer." Jocasta and Tiresias positions are two extremes that touch each other, in the same way that μοῖρα and τύχη seem to, after all, overlap. Cf. also Burkert (1991:24-6) for the opposition between a world "without a plan" and a divine mind with knowledge of everything and its parallels with Anaxagoras.

<sup>203</sup> Cf. Adkins (1960:19): "the world under the influence of *moira*, in fact, is not so much like a piece of clockwork as it is like a game of celestial snakes and ladders. Most moves are free; but should one alight at the foot of one's own particular ladder, or at the head of one's own personal snake, the next move is determined". This might apply to the *Antigone*, at most, but in the *OT*, even the "free" moves, such as the blinding, have a co-authorship. On the god creating the conditions for the future he predicts, cf. Manuwald (1992:13).

φανῶ τριδουλος), it will affect him only. Jebb notes that the “reference to the female line of servile descent is contrived to heighten the contrast with the real situation”, but furthermore, it stresses the aspect of the anomalies with maternity present since the prologue.<sup>204</sup> The land is barren, Jocasta had an abhorrent offspring conditioned (enslaved, in that sense) to perpetuate a line that should not have come into being. Tiresias has already called himself the slave of Apollo in 410. The slavery here is not a social condition as Oedipus thinks (quite the contrary — in Tiresias’ case it allows him to be at an equal stand to the king), but it is rather another form of constraint, representing conditioned options versus actions that are not compelled by circumstance and random wandering. It forms a semantic group with the pierced ankles, the Sphinx, or the oracle.

On the other hand, the three generations of slavery are reminiscent of the idea of ancestral curses lasting for three generations. In this case, the very birth of each new generation is the consummation of a prophecy: Oedipus is born and kills Laius, Oedipus’ children are the result of his bedding of his mother.

This moment of the play is not about Oedipus’ paternity as much as it is about his maternity. Jocasta leaves, and he embarks on the speculation that he is the son of a fortune, a female divinity, that will trump the generation of aristocrats of which Jocasta should be happy to be part (1070, ταύτην δ’ ἔατε πλουσίῳ χαίρειν γένει; Oedipus’ own line, of course). He misunderstands Jocasta’s distress as shame for his lineage (1078-9, αὕτη δ’ ἴσως, φρονεῖ γὰρ ὡς γυνὴ μέγα, / τὴν δυσγένειαν τὴν ἐμὴν αἰσχύνεται.); and shame it is, not because this *δυσγένεια* is a low birth, but a mis-generation. Oedipus declares himself above social class constraints, with a divine origin. Thus in 1080-3:

ἐγὼ δ’ ἔμαυτὸν παῖδα τῆς Τύχης νέμω  
 τῆς εὖ διδούσης οὐκ ἀτιμασθήσομαι.  
 τῆς γὰρ πέφυκα μητρός: οἱ δὲ συγγενεῖς  
 μῆνές με μικρὸν καὶ μέγαν διώρισαν.

I consider myself the son of Τύχη, who is the provider of good, and I will not be dishonoured. She is the mother that engendered me; and the months, my siblings, have marked me small and great.

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<sup>204</sup> Jebb (1887:140-1).

He is the son of a well-providing chance that brought him to the throne of Thebes through presenting him with the occasions to prove his worth (the Sphinx). He has been the baby with pierced ankles (dishonoured, ἀτιμάζω in 1081 echoes the description of the oracle in Delphi), given away by his parents, but he has also prospered. The passage of time, the months, brings different aspects of Oedipus about; as we have seen above, however, it is a day that will now suffice to reduce him again to the lowest condition.

Oedipus is and is not at once the son of Τύχη. He is not, in the sense of random luck, since his life has been determined from before his birth. On the other hand, if Τύχη stands in such a close connection to fate for “things one cannot control”, Oedipus is her son.<sup>205</sup> However, his naming and perception of reality is distorted, and only validated by irony and contrast.

It is also relevant that Τύχη appears personified. Besides the use of coincidences and carefully picked ambiguous vocabulary, Sophocles finds other ways to make this inexorability of fate even clearer. We shall now turn to the use of personification to achieve the effect of inescapability.

### 3. Agents of fate

As much as the pattern of coincidence analysed above could be, in the world of the play, just that, sheer coincidence,<sup>206</sup> the suggestion of external agents participating in the fulfilment of a determined fate is very strong. This suggestion comes from the structure and timing of the plot (as seen above), but also from the information given by the characters about the gods and the personification and divinisation of abstract concepts, as well as their influence in the dealings of

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<sup>205</sup> Segal (1981:212 and 227) suggests that by calling himself the son of Τύχη, Oedipus is, once again, condensing extremes: he is the best of mortals, whose birth was influenced by the gods, and the wild beast roaming the lands at random. This is not invalidated by Cairns' point (2013:145) that “Tyche (is) described, erroneously and ironically, as Oedipus' mother”. Of course it is erroneous, since we know that Oedipus' mother is Jocasta, but symbolically speaking, Oedipus is the child of a determined destiny. Ironically speaking, that destiny is perceived as random chance.

<sup>206</sup> As suggested by Waldock (1966:168).

humans.<sup>207</sup> From all the divinities and personified concepts evoked in the play, we shall focus on the most relevant pair for the discussion on hand: Apollo and μοῖρα. Unlike what happens in the *Ajax*, for example, in the *OT* we never see a divinity on stage, only their signs, statues, and their Messengers, but their presence is nonetheless felt and in an oppressive way.

Additionally, there are moments where an action is said to have been done by its human agent with the influence of a divinity, to the point where it becomes unclear who is doing what, and which aspect of a human agent is involved in a given action: these blurred lines are illustrated by the use of the word δαίμων, which shall retain us briefly.

Another angle that shall concern us in this section, though not directly of the same category of personified agents of fate, is the places where other characters' intervention affects the course chosen by Oedipus — the inescapability of the oracles then takes the form of another human being's unpredictable actions.

These four aspects, taken together, give a picture of a world with very few free options (if any), regardless of how they necessarily feel to their human agents. Not only a god might be interested in bringing about an oracle (by giving it to begin with),<sup>208</sup> but also people are the agents of their own fate, which they were born to fulfil. Even when they will try to circumvent it, other human beings will condition their escape routes, weaving a tight web of cause and effect that guarantees the prophesied outcome.

### 3.1. The moving μοῖρα

Unlike τύχη, some of the occurrences of which we have seen in the previous section, the word μοῖρα is not used very often in the *OT*, but in the six times it does appear, the context in which that happens is relevant to our study. In these references, μοῖρα is personified in all but one case; it comes to someone, stands by them, eventually abandons them, usually with a notion of movement. This notion of

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<sup>207</sup> As unreliable as the characters' perception might be, the play does not have a narrator, therefore it is often the case that the characters are saying "true" words, that are meant to be understood by an audience able to decipher their several levels of meaning.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. Manuwald (1992:8) on how the god's prediction of the future is already forcing a reaction from the agent.

movement and unpredictability contrasts with its actual meaning as one's fixed lot, as something to be achieved through a path narrowed by all sorts of constraints.<sup>209</sup> But the μοῖρα also seems to be, somehow, an integral part of someone (everyone has their own). In the one case where μοῖρα is not personified, the agent responsible for bringing things about is named in the immediate context. We can start by examining the prayer opening the second stasimon, 864-6:

εἴ μοι ζυνεΐη φέροντι μοῖρα τὰν  
εὖσεπτον ἀγνεΐαν λόγων  
ἔργων τε πάντων [...]

May μοῖρα find me as I maintain the revered purity of words and all deeds [...].

Whether we interpret it as the Chorus hoping that its μοῖρα turns out to be the best, or whether we think that the Chorus believes that their current μοῖρα can change is not so important: we know, from the the play, that people are born with a fate, which is revealed to have been good or bad by the end of their life. That will be the conclusion of the Chorus as well.<sup>210</sup> However, the anticipation of what might be brought by destiny is made stronger by the personification of a moving μοῖρα that walks hand in hand with someone (Oedipus at a later stage), or that meets the person, finding them in action and judging whether they are deserving of good or evil.

The song deals with problems of justice and retribution. If a man who misbehaves can escape unpunished, there is no reason for behaving. The Chorus will state that recurring to μοῖρα again in 887-92:

εἰ δέ τις ὑπέροπτα χερσὶν  
ἢ λόγῳ πορεύεται,

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<sup>209</sup> Once again, the possibility of movement in a different direction is contrasted with Oedipus' yoked feet and the fact that his steps were fated. The months, children of τύχη, were also limiting and determining Oedipus' life, a role that is the traditional meaning of μοῖρα. As a limitation of life, it depends on time (and movement, i.e. passing of time) to be accomplished.

<sup>210</sup> Cf. Winnington-Ingram (1980:186): "they express a wish for a *moira*, the implication being that what they desire is something divinely apportioned. (...) Destiny (*moira*) is not to be thought of as a helpful power which may leave you in the lurch if you behave badly". While I agree with Winnington-Ingram's interpretation, there is still a powerful personification to be accounted for, and the Chorus mistake is exactly in speaking of the μοῖρα as something that may come and go. Winnington-Ingram continues by analysing the passage starting at 1300ff., and the reunion of μοῖρα and δαίμων in the same sentence. I do not understand, however, what is meant by saying that "there was a time, then, when the *moira* of Oedipus included purity", if the *moira* is not something that changes.

Δίκας ἀφόβητος,  
οὐδὲ δαιμόνων ἔδη σέβων,  
κακά νιν ἔλοιτο μοῖρα,  
δυσπότημου χάριν χλιδαῖς,  
εἰ μὴ τὸ κέρδος κερδανεῖ δικαίως  
καὶ τῶν ἀσέπτων ἔρξεται,  
ἢ τῶν ἀθίκτων θίξεται ματάζων.

And if there is anyone who makes his way, disdainful in deeds and words, with no fear for justice, nor reverence for the shrines of the gods, may a bad μοῖρα take him on account of his ill-fated luxury, unless he obtains his gain justly, and stays away from the ungodly and does not, in folly, touch the things untouchable.

While the description of this man used as an example fits Oedipus in some respects (e.g. ἢ τῶν ἀθίκτων θίξεται ματάζων), it fits him exactly in the respects that the Chorus does not know about yet (because he touched the untouchable by killing his father and bedding his mother); not so much by the greed for treasure and power (the gain, κέρδος), which he has obtained in ways that the Thebans would consider “just” (they gave him the throne for rescuing the city, after all). At this moment, if Oedipus is to suffer, that feels like an injustice, and something that could not be predicted from what the Thebans know of him. However, if the king is seen to suffer, and someone who is vile is not, that raises a question of justice, but also of predictability.<sup>211</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, a certain amount of predicability is one of the tools available for mortals to judge how to live their lives. How can the Chorus know whether they have been φέρωντι τὰν εὐσεπτον ἀγνείαν λόγων ἔργων τε πάντων? They proceed to identify what they consider unholy actions, for which someone should be punished (and that is put even more strongly by calling the vices “ill-fated”, i.e. to a certain type of actions belong a necessary and also certain type of downfall);<sup>212</sup> actions that, presumably, they have avoided. The problem in the play is what one finds their destiny to have been, and not what their destiny finds in them, as if μοῖρα were something that shows up unannounced and catches the doer *in flagrante delicto*. The element of anxiety will be to realise that one’s

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<sup>211</sup> Cf. Allan (2013:175-6) on the Chorus’ “simplistic view of divine justice” leaving no room for “the moral ambiguity of someone who transgresses unintentionally”.

<sup>212</sup> On the matter of the necessity of punishment for evil deeds, cf. chapter 3, section 4 below.

actions are not always what they seem, and that one cannot abandon one's μοῖρα nor be abandoned by it.

The Chorus is mistaken in thinking that a bad μοῖρα will be revealed as justice, to fix the wrongs of men according to their behaviour — it is not that evil deeds go unpunished, it is that those men will be criminals if being criminals has been their μοῖρα, and evil deeds “ought” to result in suffering. The Theban elders judge what happens on stage, namely the possibility that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius, according to what they can testify, and that is the same form of verification they have to judge their own behaviour and what their expected μοῖρα will turn out to have been.

In 713, Jocasta tells Oedipus that a prophecy came to Laius that μοῖρα would come to him to die at the hands of their child (χρησιμὸς γὰρ ἦλθε Λαῖῳ (...) ὡς αὐτὸν ἦξοι μοῖρα πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν). The verb is an object of contention, but the personification and its implications are not.<sup>213</sup> There is a fate (regarding specifically the allotted end of Laius' life) that will come towards him in the form of death by the hands of his child. The image is the same in 263, where Laius and Oedipus would have had a connection, had it not been for τύχη leaping upon the Laius' head (νῶν δ' ἔς τὸ κείνου κρᾶτ' ἐνήλαθ' ἡ τύχη).<sup>214</sup> This fortune of Laius, here expressed by the words of μοῖρα or τύχη, had a very human form: it was the encounter at the crossroads, where the son struck back after, the irony!, the father hit *him* on the head. Laius' fortune is, therefore, to be killed by his son, as much as Oedipus' fortune was

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<sup>213</sup> Taking ἦξοι instead of ἔξοι with Jebb. Besides the arguments advanced by Jebb against the conjecture ἔξοι, it seems to be the case that the μοῖρα is most of the time accompanied by verbs of movement.

<sup>214</sup> Oedipus' counterfactual reasoning is, as it happens with all counterfactuals in the play, wrong, either because the speakers do not know that their counterfactual hypotheses are the case in reality, or because the required change of conditions to have done something differently had no way to take place (e.g. Oedipus' knowing what he was doing when he killed Laius).

to kill his father.<sup>215</sup> Both of them need, of course, to be present physically for that destiny to be fulfilled, and even though both tried at different moments to eliminate that physical presence, and their wishes corresponded as both wanted to circumvent the same oracle, they were not able to recognise each other when they were face-to-face. This runs in close connection with lines 1080ff., that we have encountered above (the son of τύχη). He is, indeed, the son of Jocasta and Laius, marked from birth by an oracle, and whose fate was to be born to fulfil Laius' own fate of having a child to kill him. He is the son of an established τύχη, beyond his control, and he is his and his father's μοῖρα.<sup>216</sup>

This μοῖρα that walks with or towards someone is finally mentioned by Oedipus in 1458. Creon is refusing to send Oedipus in exile without consulting the oracle, while Oedipus claims that the wishes of the god have been made clear and coincide with his own (even though he then says that the god wants him to be destroyed, not necessarily exiled, and, for the scope of the play, what happens to Oedipus afterwards is irrelevant — the revelation already destroyed him to such an extent that he cannot

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<sup>215</sup> The circularity of the gestures is interesting too. Oedipus will be the chance leaping on Laius head, when Oedipus strikes because Laius hit him from above. Oedipus will take the brooch off Jocasta's dress (in a marital gesture unfitting for a son, thus reproducing one of his crimes of touching the untouchable by removing the pin that keeps Jocasta clothed and potentially seeing the mother's body that he should not see) and pierce his eyes, reproducing the gesture done by his parents as they pierced his ankles as a child. The vocabulary confirms the mirroring of these actions to be intentional: 1270 ἄρθρα for the sockets of the eyeballs, while in 1032 they stand for the ankles that will "be witnesses" of the Corinthian story (μαρτυρήσειεν, the ankles are, of course, a physical token that proves something, but the play of words with eye-witnessing is significative). Cf. also 1453ff., on Oedipus repeating his parents' decree and wanting to send himself to die on Cithaeron. On the other hand, the piercing of the ankles itself is an extra and apparently excessive measure to lower the chances of survival of the infant. The piercing of the eyes is an extra and apparently excessive punishment beyond the one Oedipus has already decreed. Cf. also Segal (1981:223) on the verbal similarities of the yoking of the ankles and the aggression of Laius against Oedipus.

<sup>216</sup> There is a sense in which Laius' oracle is a random misfortune too, since the reasons for it are never given.

even commit suicide and, as he puts it, face his parents in Hades).<sup>217</sup> Oedipus proceeds to reinforce his request to be sent away to the place where he was meant to die had his parents' decision prevailed. He knows now that it is pointless to try to evade fate, and that he will not die if it is not his time to do so, for he has already been spared once, in order to be given a horrible doom (1455-7). Thus in 1458 he says:

ἀλλ' ἢ μὲν ἡμῶν μοῖρ', ὅποιπερ εἶσ', ἴτω·

But, as for my destiny, let it go where it will.

He will follow his μοῖρα rather than fight it, unlike what he did after consulting Apollo the first time. Of course, it could be asked how could he know for sure that this would be Apollo's will, but the deduction seems to be right — Oedipus has deciphered his condition. This affirmation also brings him closer to Jocasta's and Tiresias' apparently contradictory but converging views on letting things happen as they will. Even though he is not a king anymore (as Creon has to remind him, 1522-3), he still has to complete the investigation and persecution he initiated, which he will do, by condemning himself to exile, but, after that, he will be a wanderer, not a persecutor nor a fugitive, putting the responsibility of his life in the hands of fortune. So far, he had walked by reaction, trying to run away from where he thought there was danger. Now he will let μοῖρα choose its own steps without trying to contradict them, which is to say that whichever situation he walks into is the situation he accepts that he was destined to walk into. He will walk at random, vulnerable to whatever he cannot predict (or “measure”, one of his favoured words, as many interpreters have pointed out) coming his way. Curiously, this time the word used is

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<sup>217</sup> Even Apollo has been a wanderer in exile, as attested in tragedy, though with a different purpose in the context, by Danaus' remark in the *Suppliant Women* 214, ἀγνόν τ' Ἀπόλλω, φυγάδ' ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ θεόν. In the *OC*, Oedipus will take Theseus alone to the place of his death, taking him off the beaten path. Wandering seems to be connected with expiation and consequent learning in the Greek presocratic tradition, e.g. Empedocles in B115. On the other hand, there is a negative wandering, associated both with exile and with the general disorientation of the ignorant. Cf. Parmenides' B6. Cf. Montiglio (2005:263): “From Homeric epic to the novels, wandering is synonymous with dislocation, ignorance, and dispossession but also provides exposure to otherwise inaccessible sources of wisdom. Wanderers are expelled from their cities and minds, or even the cosmos; but their very liminality grants them the power to watch themselves and others from a privileged vantage point. Although wandering borders on nonexistence, it also shapes the quest for knowledge and self-fulfilment.” For the “wandering and tumult of the mind” back to the scene of the crossroads mentioned by Oedipus in 726-7, cf. Bollack (1995:139-45).

μοῖρα (the word with a stronger personal sense, which implies an allocation), and not τύχη, as could very plausibly be expected, with its sense of randomness that need not imply a plan. Whether some occurrence is to be ascribed to τύχη or to μοῖρα depends on the light in which it is viewed. Once recognised as forming part of a pattern any τύχη may be seen to be μοῖρα.

Unlike the instances that we have seen so far, in 376 the use of μοῖρα is not personified, but the immediate context attributes Oedipus' destiny to the action of another entity that will bring about his μοῖρα. These two lines, however, are better read with 1302, where the personification returns in a different aspect. Let us turn first to 376-7:<sup>218</sup>

οὐ γάρ σε μοῖρα πρὸς γ' ἐμοῦ πεσεῖν, ἐπεὶ  
ἱκανὸς Ἀπόλλων, ᾧ τάδ' ἐκπράττει μέλει.

It is not your μοῖρα to fall at my hands; since Apollo is sufficient, whose concern is to bring these things to completion.

The speaker is Tiresias, whom Oedipus is accusing of plotting with Creon. We are here in the field of intention and actions done in order to achieve a purpose. Where Oedipus thought Tiresias had planned to depose him, the seer will make explicit that the sufficient agent interested in Oedipus' fall is Apollo (and we see an example of Oedipus contributing to it himself, on stage, with the self-cursing).<sup>219</sup> This means that it is not a matter of human dispute: regardless of whatever Oedipus decides to do with Tiresias (punishing him, letting him go, believing him), it is his specific μοῖρα that he is going to know who he is by the end of the day.<sup>220</sup> This does not contradict with the previous instances: Oedipus' μοῖρα is part of him and walks along with him (and Oedipus cannot escape by going in a different direction, as he has tried to do by

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<sup>218</sup> With most editors, accepting Brunck's emendation to 376. *Contra* Knox (1957:7-8), who takes the lines as referring to Tiresias.

<sup>219</sup> But see Cairns (2013:136-42) on the types of overdetermination in the play, especially the point on p.138 on how Apollo's wishes would still trump Oedipus', had they not been coincident (in the case of the self-blinding).

<sup>220</sup> Tiresias will also say that it was Oedipus' τύχη as the solver of riddles that has destroyed him (442, αὕτη γε μέντοι σ' ἢ τύχη διώλεσεν). This τύχη is also what makes Oedipus confident that he will find the murderer of Laius, and that investigation is, indeed, what will bring the revelation that will destroy Oedipus. None of it contradicts the double-causation of sorts where one part is Oedipus' personality, the other is Apollo's oracle, and the two parts are absolutely inseparable.

avoiding Corinth), and, here, will be revealed in full light by Apollo, as the god guarantees its fulfilment. Since it is something Apollo will bring about and Apollo is a god, it is necessarily something that cannot be fought, contradicted, or altered. Hence Tiresias' initial silence: whether he speaks or not, Oedipus' actions have been done, supervised by the agents that guarantee fate, and the investigation that will bring up the truth was instigated by the god when he sent the plague. The chain of events leading up to the revelation of Oedipus' birth has been initiated by the time Tiresias arrives. Oedipus' μοῖρα is fixed and corroborated by his actions, just like every other μοῖρα, but there is an extra named factor to make sure it is fulfilled: Apollo's interest.<sup>221</sup> Why is Apollo interested in first place is never clear. He has certainly something to do with pollution, but he is also the one who guarantees that the deeds that will cause Oedipus' pollution are done. As has been said many times before, however, the reasons for Laius' punishment are never mentioned in the *OT*, nor are the reasons for the doom of the Labdacidae ever mentioned in any other of the extant plays.<sup>222</sup> The most that can be said is that Apollo is interested in so far as he is the god in charge of fate and prophecy, and as such responsible for bringing about in the lives of mortals the destinies presided over by Zeus.

### 3.2. The leaping δαίμων

In 1299ff., the situation is slightly different:

(...) τίς σ', ὦ τλήμων,  
 προσέβη μανία; τίς ὁ πηδίσας  
 μείζονα δαίμων τῶν μηκίστων  
 πρὸς σῆ δυσδαίμονι μοίρα;

(...) What madness overtook you, poor wretch? What divine power was it that jumped upon your ill-starred destiny with a leap exceeding the longest?

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<sup>221</sup> Cf. Hau (2011:190-3) for other examples of double-determination in Greek tradition.

<sup>222</sup> Oedipus himself will say, in the later play, that the reversal of fortunes sometimes happen owing to the smallest of causes.

The lines belong to the Chorus, as Oedipus walks back on stage, after piercing his eyes. In these lines coexist three difficult concepts: μανία, δαίμων, and μοῖρα.<sup>223</sup> First, the question on which sort of madness has come upon Oedipus (again, a verb of movement): the violence of Oedipus' self-harming is too great for the Chorus to think it has been done in sober conditions, a thought that is recurrent in equivalent moments all over Greek literature. A μανία, however, is a state of alteration often sent by the gods.<sup>224</sup> The subject of the second sentence is, accordingly, the δαίμων that leaped upon (again, the same image that has been used to describe Laius' fate) Oedipus' "dysdaimoned" μοῖρα. The idea is more or less clear: "what caused this? Which divinity (since we can see no human reasons for that) took over your destiny and turned it into this catastrophe?" In this case, as usual, but this time personified as the patient and not the agent of something, μοῖρα is Oedipus' lot (or even Oedipus himself as the one to whom this specific μοῖρα has been allotted and on the top of which some additional agent, the δαίμων, leaps, pushing it further), and δυσδαίμων is unhappy, or rather "unfortunate", if we want to keep the words of the semantic field of destiny. Which δαίμων leaped on your already ill-starred μοῖρα and, presumably, made it even worse (there is a notion of excess in the verses, with πρὸς suggesting that to Oedipus' evils even more have been added)? However, δαίμων is a more complicated word. It means divine, it means fate,<sup>225</sup> it can stand for the person by extension, and, in Oedipus' answer to this line, it will stand for Apollo.<sup>226</sup> The question opened the possibility for any "divine being" to have participated in

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<sup>223</sup> For μοῖρα in relation with δαίμων as words of fate, as well as the δαίμων related to the figure of the hero, cf. Dietrich (1965:14-58). The latter equation is particularly relevant for the *OC* as well. For a detailed treatment of this and other occurrences of the word δαίμων in the *OT*, cf. Winnington-Ingram (1965:32-8); for the δαίμων in general in Sophocles, Kirkwood (1958:283-7).

<sup>224</sup> In the *Ajax*, Athena will be seen veiling the hero's perceptions in delusion, but there the shame for the protagonist is that he has slaughtered cattle rather than his rivals, not that he has tried to kill them in their tents during the night. On the δαίμων as the bringer of delirium guiding Oedipus inside the castle in 1251ff., cf. Bollack (1995:193-6).

<sup>225</sup> Such is the Chorus' use in 1193-5. Cf. *OC* 74. See also Cairns (2013:143): "this is a regular archaic and classical use of the word: the divine power which is envisaged as the dispenser of good and bad fortune becomes a metonymy for that good and bad fortune itself."

<sup>226</sup> Besides Heraclitus B54, cf. e.g. Burkert (1985:179ff.) or Detienne (1963:54), for the conclusion that a δαίμων is defined as "un certain état des choses humaines où s'atteste une puissance religieuse", orientée vers la personnification ; mais daimon reste encore très proche de son statut-limite de 'signifiant flottant". Scholarship on the topic only shows how hard it is to understand the uses of the word, even more so after the Pythagorean influence.

Oedipus' disasters. This divinity will in its turn be equated with Apollo. This is the sense as well in 816 and 828 and will be again in 1258 and 1498. Earlier in the play, in 244, Oedipus has already unambiguously referred to the god as a δαίμων. There is, however, one significant exception in the fourth stasimon, where the Chorus clearly uses the word to refer to Oedipus' fate (1195-6, τὸν σὸν τοι παράδειγμ' ἔχων, / τὸν σὸν δαίμονα, τὸν σὸν, ᾧ τλάμων Οἰδιπόδα). It is not only a δαίμων standing for fate, it is Oedipus' personal δαίμων, i.e., what happened to him, as a result of the determination of a divine agency. The blurred identity of the δαίμων might very well be intentional, since the origin and agency of the actions is the coming together of Oedipus, Apollo, and fate.

The question is repeated in 1327-8, with an explanation of the reasoning behind it, i.e. for having done such a horrible deed, Oedipus must have had a divine power pushing him:

ὦ δεινὰ δράσας, πῶς ἔτλης τοιαῦτα σὰς  
ὄψεις μαρᾶναι; τίς σ' ἐπῆρε δαιμόνων;

O, doer of horrible deeds, how did you dare to put out your sight? Which god incited you?

In 1329-31, however, Oedipus will underline that his blinding was not only incited by Apollo but, as he points out in the same breath, were the result of his own initiative as well (in contrast with the words of Tiresias, earlier in 377, where Apollo would be *sufficient*, ἰκανὸς Ἀπόλλων, to bring about Oedipus' fall):

Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,  
ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα.  
ἔπαισε δ' αὐτόχειρ νιν οὔτις, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τλάμων.

These things were Apollo, my friends, Apollo, who brought about my terrible, terrible sufferings. But no hand but my own struck them, miserable wretch that I am.

The description of a divine power jumping over someone is often onto someone's head (e.g. 263 quoted above), but here the power jumps onto someone's fate, reinforcing the idea that there is a coincidence between a person and their destiny and that they are not separable. The divine power, Apollo and Oedipus at once,

attack Oedipus (referred to as his divinely miserable fate), pushing it to the most excessive limits, the parricide, the incest, and finally the self-blinding, making Oedipus the subject of a cumulative and excessive series of horrors.

### **3.3. Apollo**

The name of the god is the partial answer to all the questions from the Chorus. The presence of Apollo, as well as his major role as a mastermind in Oedipus' destiny has been recently noted and analysed by several scholars, and we have

referred to it often throughout this chapter, so we shall be brief about it here.<sup>227</sup> Neither Laius, whose murder is in the origin of the play, nor Apollo appear on stage as character, but their actions are unseen causes of Oedipus' present situation. Apollo's presence, as well as his engagement in the quest is vividly pictured by the

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<sup>227</sup> A very convincing argument has been made by Cameron (1968:65-95), answering both the rationalist commentators from Voltaire on and those who, around the same time of Cameron's text, acknowledged the relevance of Apollo in the pronouncement of the oracles, but nothing more, from the beginning of the play on, such as Kitto (1956:75) or Knox (1957:5). To Kirkwood (1958:277), there is "no mention of a divine plan". and "the role of deity in the *OT* is remote and largely neutral". Cameron objects that removing the gods from the play or trying to read the action as split in two spheres (Kitto, 1956:73) does not work, and that no matter how we look at the play, we will find Apollo and the gods "*inside* (the play), constantly pressing, a constant 'supernatural soliciting' of the action" (p.80).

For the gods as mere symbols of human action that "do nothing that life could not do", cf. Whitman (1951:41), also answered by Cameron. Maybe because of the timings of publication, Cameron does not acknowledge Dodds' (1966) famous article which most interpreters who have dealt with the question of the role of the gods in the Oedipus had to address. Dodds' view stresses the autonomy of Oedipus as a "free agent", regardless of some events being "fate-bound". Answering Bowra's (1944:199) claim that the knowledge of his own identity is "forced" on Oedipus by the gods, Dodds objects that "no oracle said that he must discover the truth" (p.43). Knox (1989:60) too, suggests that Oedipus' "one freedom" is to decide to find out the truth or not. I fail to understand how "no oracle said that he must discover the truth" when that is exactly the way in which the play starts. I see no necessary incompatibility in the distinction either: everything Oedipus does that is fate-bound is done as a free agent as well, and what happens to him on stage is conditioned by Apollo too.

Bowra's view (1944:167) is that the gods "have ordained a life of horror (for Oedipus) and make sure he gets it", and are present "at every important turn" of the plot for the undeserved "humbling" of Oedipus (p.175). Greene (1944:156), in the same year, though he leans towards the humanist view, agrees that the discovery is forced on Oedipus by fate, though he adds the hero's dimension to it: "fate has indeed contrived the revelation through the character and act of Oedipus himself."

Cf. also Winnington-Ingram, (1980:178): "It is, surely, impossible to read the play without feeling that, in some more or less incomprehensible way, Apollo is at work; that the god who knows what is destined to happen is securing that it does happen and, having happened, is known to have happened". Segal (1981:221) has a similarly mixed point of view, where Oedipus' fate is the coming together of two "apparent opposites, chance and Apollo's design". Manuwald (1992:13-4) underlines the double-causation of Oedipus' destiny as his own actions and Apollo's intervention. Peradotto (1992:11) sees in the god a similar role as the playwright's, in the structuring of the action: "If we are to *make sense* of the *OT*, we may (in fact, we must) assume the reality of Sophocles' Apollo". For Jouanna (2007:166) : "Le dieu", sans aucune autre précision, suffit à désigner le dieu de Delphes, tant sa présence est écrasante durant toute la tragédie".

For more recent defences of Apollo's fundamental role, cf. Lawrence, (2008:6): "We have seen that Apollo does indeed work towards the fulfilment of Oedipus' destiny through the communication of oracles which require a human response for their fulfilment and immanently through such external events as the 'coincidence' of the Corinthian's timely arrival. It seems reasonable then to infer that the god is responsible for the multitude of ironies and coincidences that inform the events and that he works through the mind of Oedipus, at least during the events surrounding the self-blinding. We do not know if he actually decreed Oedipus' destiny or if, as a god of prophecy, he was intent on predicting it and for that reason became involved in assisting its fulfilment. Since Apollo's predictions are causally inseparable from their fulfilment, it is difficult to imagine that the god is not indeed intent on that fulfilment". Cf. also Allan (2013:188) for the importance that the audience is aware of Apollo's hand before Oedipus understands it. Kovacs (2009b:539-60) suggests that Apollo's workings in the *OT* are similar to those of a chess game master predicting the moves of his disciple. This hypothesis is discussed and partially refuted by Cairns (2013:137-8), who confers a direct involvement of Apollo both in the designing and in the development of Oedipus' life.

For a view of Apollo as directly interested in the destiny of Oedipus, however punishing the hero for his faults, cf. Griffith (1996:55): "we have seen that (Apollo) did not compel Oedipus to kill his father and sleep with his mother, but neither did he try to prevent him from doing so".

Chorus in the first stasimon, where he is portrayed with the hovering Keres, bearing down on the murderer from above, after a chase like hunters after their prey, or a vulture after the dead.<sup>228</sup> He is the god of prophecy and healing, therefore intimately connected to the plot, but he is not the passive giver of oracles. His oracles are the triggers of action, and the expiation of the murder (as well as the fulfilment of Laius' prophecy) are thought to be in his interest, and confirmed to be as much for Tiresias, his one authority among men. His name is brought up by the characters on multiple occasions, the most significant of which are listed below.

a) He is the one that incites the investigation, e.g.:

95-8, Creon's report

λέγοιμ' ἄν οἱ ἤκουσα τοῦ θεοῦ πάρα.  
ἄνωγεν ἡμᾶς Φοῖβος ἐμφανῶς ἄναξ  
μίασμα χώρας, ὡς τεθραμμένον χθονὶ  
ἐν τῇδ', ἐλαύνειν, μηδ' ἀνήκεστον τρέφειν.

I shall tell you what I have heard from the god. Phoebus, the lord, commands us clearly to drive away the pollution from the land, as something bred in this land, and not to nourish it beyond remedy.

149-50, the last prayer of the priest of Zeus

Φοῖβος δ' ὁ πέμψας τάσδε μαντείας ἅμα  
σωτήρ δ' ἴκοιτο καὶ νόσου παυστήριος.

May Apollo, who sent these prophecies, come at once, as a saviour and reliever of the plague.

b) He is the one responsible for Oedipus' suffering, e.g.:

376-7, Tiresias' speech, already quoted above

οὐ γάρ σε μοῖρα πρὸς γ' ἐμοῦ πεσεῖν, ἐπεὶ  
ἱκανὸς Ἀπόλλων, ᾧ τάδ' ἐκπράξαι μέλει.

It is not your 'moira' to fall because of me; since Apollo is sufficient, whose concern is to bring these things to completion.

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<sup>228</sup> For Oedipus too as a hunter, cf. Knox (1957:111-2).

1440-1, Oedipus on what is to happen to him, as Creon wants to consult Delphi again:

ἀλλ' ἢ γ' ἐκείνου πᾶσ' ἐδηλώθη φάτις,  
τὸν πατροφόντην, τὸν ἀσεβῆ μ' ἀπολλύουαι.

But his word was made fully explicit: that I, the parricide, the ungodly, am to be destroyed.

c) The one that the Chorus names to point out the murderer, as the one whose worshipping will lose followers if the oracles are not demonstrated to be true;

278-9  
[...] τὸ δὲ ζήτημα τοῦ πέμψαντος ἦν  
Φοίβου τόδ' εἰπεῖν ὅστις εἴργασταί ποτε.

What Apollo was looking for when he sent the oracle was this: to say who did the deed.

906-10  
φθίνοντα γὰρ < ἄν > Λαῖου  
θέσφατ' ἐξαιροῦσιν  
κοῦδαμοῦ τιμαῖς Ἀπόλλων ἐμφανής·  
ἔρρει δὲ τὰ θεῖα.

The oracles of Laius are decaying, already forgotten. Nowhere is Apollo made manifest with honours. The divine things are perishing.

d) He is the one that will reveal what he wants to reveal when he wants to reveal it (and we know from Tiresias in 438 that it will be before the end of the day), e.g.:

280-1, Oedipus' answer to the Chorus

δίκαι' ἔλεξας· ἀλλ' ἀναγκάσαι θεοὺς  
ἂν μὴ θέλωσιν οὐδ' < ἄν > εἶς δύναται ἀνὴρ.

You speak justly. But there is no man who can force the gods to do what they do not wish to do.

710-25 Jocasta's "proof", with the contrast between what she believes to be genuinely Apollo's and what she attributes to his seers, who are corrupt (it is a commonplace in tragedy that the prophet is not believed):

φανῶ δέ σοι σημεῖα τῶνδε σύντομα.  
χρησμός γάρ ἦλθε Λαίῳ ποτ', οὐκ ἐρῶ  
Φοίβου γ' ἅπ' αὐτοῦ, τῶν δ' ὑπηρετῶν ἄπο,  
ὡς αὐτὸν ἕξοι μοῖρα πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν,  
ὅστις γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ τε κάκείου πάρα.

[...]

κάνταδθ' Ἀπόλλων οὔτ' ἐκεῖνον ἦνυσεν  
φονέα γενέσθαι πατρὸς οὔτε Λάιον  
τὸ δεινὸν οὐφοβεῖτο πρὸς παιδὸς παθεῖν.  
τοιαῦτα φῆμαι μαντικαὶ διώρισαν,  
ὧν ἐντρέπου σὺ μηδέν· ὧν γὰρ ἂν θεὸς  
χρεῖαν ἐρευνᾷ, ῥαδίως αὐτὸς φανεῖ.

I will show you a concise proof of this. A prophecy once came to Laius, I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from his servants, that his *moira* was to die at the hands of a child, born from him and me. [...] In this case, Apollo brought to pass neither that one would become the killer of his father, nor the dreadful thing that terrified Laius, to be killed by his son. Such had been determined by the words of the prophets. Do not pay attention to them: the god will easily make clear whatever it is he must needs track down.

e) He is the one whose human representative is Tiresias:

284-6

ἄνακτ' ἄνακτι ταῦθ' ὀρώωντ' ἐπίσταμαι  
μάλιστα Φοίβῳ Τειρεσίαν, παρ' οὗ τις ἂν  
σκοπῶν τάδ', ὧναζ, ἐκμάθοι σαφέστατα.

I know that lord Tiresias is able to see in the same way as lord Apollo. From him, my lord, someone looking for these things might learn in the clearest way.

f) He is the one that did *not* bring to pass the oracles given to Laius, and therefore would not have been the true source of those oracles: 720ff., quoted above.

Most of these assumptions are true, the last one is not. The confirmation that they are true is the way in which things happen according to the oracles and to the words of Tiresias. Oedipus' answer to the identity of the δαίμων is confirmed by the comparison with 377. The proof required by the Chorus in the second stasimon to carry on dancing is given by the fulfilment of the prophecies. The fact that Apollo instigated the investigation is confirmed not only by the oracle brought by Creon, and by the comparison of the two older oracles given to Laius and to Oedipus, but also by the plague assailing Thebes; a plague whose divine origin is reinforced by the

time gap between crime and punishment (there is no given hygienic reason unlike, e.g., the unburied corpses in the *Antigone*, that can give to the plague a strictly human cause), a plague that is forgotten (and gone?) once the murderer of Laius is found, but that was the necessary condition for Thebes to need Oedipus to act. It is also true that Apollo is the one who will point out the culprit, for the reasons stated above, even though there is a coincidence of interests with Oedipus', who makes Laius' and Apollo's cause his own (e.g. 244-5); Oedipus will clear out the matter, for the god, and with the god as ally.<sup>229</sup> That the god cannot be forced to reveal anything, and that he will bring things to light whenever he wants is confirmed by the timing of the events — no one, not even Tiresias, was able to find the murderer of Laius before Oedipus has married Jocasta (or to connect it with the child, as the Shepherd could have done). However, when the god demands the investigation, the process is set in irrevocable motion. Tiresias, the prophet of Apollo, will refuse to speak, but will, eventually, say that Oedipus' fall is something that Apollo wishes. Jocasta's wrong supposition in 710ff. comes from the necessary elements of the trap of fate: she has to believe that the first oracle was not fulfilled, in order to take her part in the fulfilment of the second.

In 1329, quoted above, Oedipus accuses Apollo as the origin of his misfortunes not once, but twice. We have said that there was a coincidence of intentions, as Oedipus also says that it was his own hand that blinded him. Some scholars have maintained that Oedipus is only attributing this causation to the revelation of his life, the past errors, or the triggering of the investigation, but not to the mutilation.<sup>230</sup> Others have thought that there was no intervention of the gods at all in Oedipus actions.<sup>231</sup> It seems clear, however, that Apollo is both the uttermost symbol of fate,

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<sup>229</sup> It is important to underline that Oedipus' and Laius' interests have coincided as well though they could not recognise it.

<sup>230</sup> E.g. Knox (1957:187).

<sup>231</sup> At least the actions on stage. Knox would be one of the proponents of this trend as well. Cf. survey of the bibliography on Apollo above.

but also one half of the double-causality that condemns Oedipus.<sup>232</sup> Certainly, the half with the power to know what is determined, but that does not, nor can it, exclude Oedipus' own determination to do everything he does, and that determination is stated throughout the play by Oedipus' indomitable decision to carry on with the investigation, and by his description of the events prior to the play (namely the defeat of the Sphinx, to which he only alludes to say that it was his victory alone, through his wits, as a contrast to Tiresias' knowledge coming from the gods). There are the things that Oedipus does willingly, and the things that he does because they were set by Apollo, and that may go against what he would choose to do. Most of the time, those things coincide, however mistaken Oedipus might be in the true nature of his actions. The particularity of 1329 and the self-blinding is that he is aware of what is happening. The adversative that adds that his own hand did the deed does not mean that the blinding was not predicted by Apollo as well (as indicated by Tiresias in 454-6), but that Oedipus' voluntary, necessary, hand was added to the event, and a sign of his self-awareness.

### **3.4. "L'enfer, c'est les autres"**

This brings us to one last aspect to take into account here: the other people in the play and consequences of their actions in the fate of Oedipus.<sup>233</sup> Oedipus' life is interrupted by a random drunken man in Corinth raising the doubt about his parents. He leaves Delphi, and strikes the old man and his escort because they tried to push him out of the way. He is made king by the people of Thebes, after defeating the Sphinx, and marries the queen, who does not seem to have any issue with marrying someone young enough to be her son; and who she knows she had, and

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<sup>232</sup> The two halves have different weights, and Apollo's will is evidently what matters. For the asymmetry of this overdetermination, where "the god's will is not merely prior to but immanent in the human action", cf. Cairns (2013:137). For Apollo reducing Oedipus to nothing, cf. Lawrence (2008). There are other aspects of Apollo present in the play and reproduced by Oedipus in the secular world, namely his role as the god of healing and of plague, that are matched by Oedipus both saving Thebes and bringing ruin to it, and then saving it again by discovering his own ruin. I find it surprising that Survinou-Inwood (2003:488) considers that there is not enough evidence in Sophocles to study his treatment of the gods, and that only Athena is close to Ajax and Odysseus (there is no mention of the *OT*). Apollo is not a character, but is inseparable from Oedipus and his destiny.

<sup>233</sup> In Homer, *Odyssey* 11.271-80, it is Epicaste who does something unwittingly. Here, Jocasta's position is closer to Oedipus' than is usually noted. She, rather than Laius, tried to avoid an oracle, and lives to see the result. She, too, is destroyed by this recognition, and especially by its actuality through verbalisation. Laius, presumably, did not recognise his son in the murderer.

that she knows was said to kill her husband, who she knows is dead in non-clarified circumstances, even though she has no reasons to suspect the stranger because she believes that the son is dead and she is ignorant of the fact that the stranger just killed her husband. He is not immediately incriminated as the murderer of Laius because the only eye-witness asks to be sent away, rather than speaking against the new saviour of the lands. He is born out of the union of two parents who were told their son would kill the father, and who tried to expose him with pierced ankles. He was given as a baby to a Shepherd who decided to spare his life and give him to someone else — someone else who gave the baby to the king of Corinth, who decided to hide from Oedipus that he was not his biological son, even after a specific inquiry (781ff.). Regardless of what he does, Oedipus has been tossed around by other people's decisions since birth, and from the age where he could not do anything himself, even less with pierced ankles.<sup>234</sup> The fact that he becomes a king and regarded as the saviour of Thebes against the Sphinx is an apparent twist in his fate, from the exposed baby to the high thrones of fortune. Cities and people being raised and sunk in one day is a recurrent theme in classical literature, and it is present, e.g., in the address of the priest of Zeus to Oedipus, but here it is also the ultimate demonstration that one cannot avoid what one has been born to be.

There is, therefore, one dimension in which it might be tempting to explain fate exclusively in human terms, as a complex web of causal links; but their terms are limited, and humans act without the knowledge of what they are doing.<sup>235</sup> Fate is the limitation of their options towards one outcome, a limitation that people cannot perceive. The personifications of *μοῖρα*, *τόχη*, the oracles and the depiction of a hunting Apollo and hovering Keres, as common as they might seem to be in ancient literature, reinforce this omnipresence of destiny, and the lack of tools human beings have to see from above, or from inside this organism, the inter-connections between

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<sup>234</sup> He is also rejected by the elements, according to Creon in 1424-8 (ἀλλ' εἰ τὰ θνητῶν μὴ καταισχύνεσθ' ἔτι / γένεθλα, τὴν γοῶν πάντα βόσκουσαν φλόγα / αἰδεῖσθ' ἄνακτος Ἥλιου, τοιόνδ' ἄγος / ἀκάλυπτον οὕτω δεικνύναι, τὸ μήτε γῆ / μήτ' ὄμβρος ἱερὸς μήτε φῶς προσδέξεται). Cf. Empedocles' description (B115.5-13, quoted fully on page 205 below) of the exiled *δαίμων* that, hated alike by air, sea, earth, and fire finds itself tossed successively from one element to the next.

<sup>235</sup> Regardless of human limitations, I do not think that it is possible to read the play without taking into account that Apollo has a direct interest in Oedipus' life, and Cameron (1968:79) is probably right objecting the separation of the divine and human spheres.

their actions, and how they are themselves, or their δαίμονες, their own fate, conditioned by everyone else around.<sup>236</sup> The subject is not only the agent of his own fate, but is surrounded by other agents contributing to it (and sometimes contradicting his efforts, even in good faith). One way or another, fate has always a human representative, and their intervention is to be interpreted in the global pattern. In the world of the play, all characters have an influence on Oedipus' life. The exception is, perhaps, the intervention of Tiresias, who in Oedipus' eyes, does nothing to advance his investigation. Even though the seer reveals everything there is to reveal, Oedipus does not take any clue from it that is worth pursuing (or he would have discovered the truth in that scene). The seer, however, calls Apollo by his epithet of Loxias (410); the revelation is oblique for Oedipus, but the ways in which the prophecies were brought about for him were oblique too. Tiresias' role up to then is passive, since he can hardly be accused of keeping silence over a matter he probably had no knowledge about at the time, as seen above (cf. 2.2.1.).

Through the recurrent personification of words of fate and chance, the effect of inescapability from the oracles and constant watch is overwhelming, be it as bouncer blocking the way, as a hunter chasing down a prey, or as a charitable hand helping one through. Combined with the actions of the characters, the personification of abstract notions brings fate closer to people: fate has the form of and is executed by people.<sup>237</sup> Oedipus' destiny is made of his father having a child, his mother giving the child away, the two Shepherds meeting, and so on. His own oracle is fulfilled by his meetings with different characters.

The portrayal of fate with verbs of movement is also significant in conveying this inescapability. This "theme of inexorable motion", to borrow the expression from Anthony Long, is expressed also by Oedipus avoiding his fate by running from one place to another, going from Delphi to Thebes rather than back to Corinth, only to find out that he is being chased there too, and that he ran in the wrong direction: both these attempts to run are flights forward, usually characterized by lack of time

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<sup>236</sup> Padel (1992:33-4) suggests that they are to be taken seriously, as she does not believe "the fifth century distinguished between literal and metaphorical". I tend to disagree with analyses that attribute to the people of the fifth century different ways of looking at the world that imply a certain naiveté that is not necessary nor adds much to the interpretation of the literary texts.

<sup>237</sup> On personifications of abstract nouns, cf. Webster (1954:14) and Long (1968:113-47).

to reason (yet Oedipus tries to reason on the go).<sup>238</sup> The oracle and the seer are the voices that do not need to run forward to know what is there, and who are not bounded by time and the succession of events in the earthly order. The Shepherd gives the baby to the Corinthian hoping that he will be taken somewhere far and never bounce back. Oedipus ends by asking to be sent in exile, following his fate where it takes him. The parricide is committed at the crossroads, as two people cross each other's paths on their way to and from the giver of prophecies. Just like their fate which is fulfilled by an attack, events are described as a surprise assault by fortune. Finally, no matter what one decides to do, someone else's actions will make sure that the efforts were vain (cf. Antigone's suicide). In the *OT*, as we will argue in the next section, there is not, and there has never been, a way out.

#### 4. Conditioned events and personal responsibilities

Oedipus' "guilt" or innocence has been the topic of many pages of scholarship on the *OT*. The answer is, as so many other things in the play, double. Oedipus is at once the doer of deeds that are taboo and he is innocent,<sup>239</sup> criminal and persecutor, saviour of the city and the cause of the plague. He is his destiny, and there is no such thing as an alternative option because that alternative option would not be the son born to kill Laius, and a man is born with an allotted fate, and is born to fulfil it by his own deed and best judgement, as pointed out in the sections above.

There is, however, more to be said on the topic of apparent options, and on the qualification of the actions by the characters, as well as their tentative suggestions on how one should guide one's life. Just as it happens for the real people of which they are extreme and artificial representatives, the characters in the play need to make sense of the world. Even if one believes in a completely deterministic universe, one will still have to keep moving and make decisions every day for life to carry on. While living one's own life, one will try to make at each moment the best choice, informed by whatever means of information are available. Therefore, the characters themselves

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<sup>238</sup> Long (1968:136).

<sup>239</sup> The unwitting aspect of Oedipus' actions regards the dimension in which they are parricide and incest. He would still willingly have killed the offender and married the queen of Thebes.

present counterfactual readings of the plot, as well as the reasons why they have acted in such and such way, and how the situation was presented to them at the time. The audience is given the chance to see some of those thought processes on stage. The Chorus, for example, is puzzled after the exit of Tiresias. In the first stasimon, they will, *a priori*, trust the seer, for he represents Apollo (296-300), but they will also trust their king, for they have never seen either in his behaviour or in his family past any reason not to do so (487-96). A precarious solution for them is to bring Tiresias down to the level of the common man (500-2), and separate what might be his potentially unfair accusation from the word of the god (which Jocasta does too when she reports the presumably failed oracle). The strategy is not very convincing, and the Chorus reflects that by demanding that the oracles become true, as proof (897ff.). By doing so, they are already questioning more than the word of a prophet — they are demanding a divine demonstration, an anti-miracle of sorts. Against the evidence of the senses and what they could witness in the past, the god is to demonstrate how Oedipus can be the murderer of Laius (505, ἀλλ' οὔποτ' ἔγωγ' ἄν, πρὶν ἴδοιμ' ὀρθὸν ἔπος, μεμφομένων ἄν καταφαίην). The demonstration will be enacted, of course, by Oedipus himself, as he collects clues that lead to his own past.

In the qualification of Oedipus' actions (or anyone else's), there are two aspects that are taken into account by the characters: the things that are done involuntarily, and the things that could have been otherwise. On the other hand, in the formulation of the reports of the oracles and in the oblique manner of their fulfilment there is an ambiguity that leaves room for counterfactual speculation. What was Oedipus' fate based on, then? On Laius not having a child? Was Laius condemned to have a child? We shall look at the oracle reported by Jocasta and analyse its wording. Finally, if the voluntary aspect of an action is to be taken into account, and if Oedipus was fated to do wrong, the problem of justice arises, together with a vexed question: why Oedipus?

#### **4.1. Actions that are ἐκόντα and actions that are ἄκοντα**

In Oedipus' actions, there is famously a clear distinction, carried on to the *OC*, between what he thinks he is doing, and what he is in fact doing, and that is the base

of all the tragedy.<sup>240</sup> Those are sometimes coincidental by irony, but also complete opposites. It is important to note, however, that Oedipus' intentions do not change, not even when he starts to suspect that he is the man he seeks.<sup>241</sup> Oedipus is always doing his best, even if often he is a victim of his own temper and prejudice (a temper displayed on stage or referred to unequivocally in all three plays). Three other characters insist that he should drop the case, but he cannot take that route (Tiresias by refusing to speak, Jocasta because she fears the truth, and the Shepherd because he fears for his life), not only because it is part of Oedipus' intellectual characteristics to want to follow the leads of investigation,<sup>242</sup> nor because he swore as much to the gods and to the citizens, but also, the reason pointed out by both Tiresias and Jocasta, because Apollo is interested in the revelation.<sup>243</sup>

Oedipus' actions had unquestionably dimensions beyond his knowledge, except perhaps for the self-blinding.<sup>244</sup> We have seen Oedipus making decisions at the beginning of the play, most notably, cursing the murderer of Laius, and declaring himself the champion of the dead king and the god, in ignorance. We have seen him

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<sup>240</sup> For the view that the question of guilt and responsibility does not have its place at all in the play, cf. Reinhardt (1979:133-4). He takes the play to be about "illusion and truth as the opposing forces between which man is bound, in which he is entangled, and in whose shackles, as he strives towards the highest he can hope for, he is worn down and destroyed". While I can very much sympathise with this opposition as one of the main axes in the play, I disagree with its incompatibility with the notion of fate. For Reinhardt (p.98) "Fate as predetermination does not exist before the Stoa and the victory of astrology". He sees as evidence the fact that the Chorus never sings about fate, while they sing about illusion. It seems to be the case, however, that one of the illusions is exactly about taking what has been designed as open for contradiction. I also disagree that the opposition between truth and reality makes the questions about responsibility avoidable.

<sup>241</sup> A trait that won him the sympathy of the audiences. Cf. e.g. Dodds (1966:43): "The immediate cause of Oedipus' ruin is not 'Fate' or 'the gods' (...) what causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to the truth", and later, in p.48, "To me personally Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles — even the last riddle, to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion". Apart from Oedipus' noblesse, it is curious that no one acts out of malicious intentions in the *OT* — there is no need for that. The most "malicious" thing done would have been giving the child to be exposed, but even that is in reaction to a prophecy, not something motivated by Laius' and Jocasta's "bad" characters.

<sup>242</sup> Oedipus is proud of his intellectual prowess, cf. 390ff., and he makes a contrast between himself and Tiresias' skill, a contrast that was avoided by the priest of Zeus, who had suggested that Oedipus' greatness was due to the protection of the gods.

<sup>243</sup> Of the three people trying to dissuade him, Jocasta is the only one Oedipus is in the right condition to hear. He is angry with Tiresias, and he has to use force with the Shepherd too. Jocasta is the only one of those who has not volunteered to tell him what she knows, who is connected to him by family, and to whom he has already yielded once in the play (644-659).

<sup>244</sup> Unless one believes Vellacott (1964), who thinks that Oedipus knew everything all along.

accusing Tiresias and Creon of plotting against him, and choosing not to punish them accordingly because Jocasta and the Chorus beg him not to.<sup>245</sup> We did not see, however, any of his unwittingly actions being performed on stage. We have their description from different points of view. What we are also presented with in the play, as exemplified above, is Oedipus' personality and the way he reacts to events, as well as his forms of reasoning (Oedipus tends to explain why he does what he does, e.g. 787-99 on why he fled to Thebes). The distinction between the types of actions is made more explicitly by the second Messenger, who in 1223ff. comes to tell the Chorus of the additional griefs, the death of Jocasta and Oedipus' mutilation, on the top of the ones the Chorus already knows (1232-4), the incest and the parricide. This distinction is made in 1227-31:

οἶμαι γὰρ οὐτ' ἂν Ἰστρον οὔτε Φᾶσιν ἂν  
 νίψαι καθαρῶ τήνδε τὴν στέγην, ὅσα  
 κεύθει, τὰ δ' αὐτίκ' εἰς τὸ φῶς φανεῖ κακὰ  
 ἔκοντα κοῦκ ἄκοντα. τῶν δὲ πημονῶν  
 μάλιστα λυποῦσ' αἶ φανῶσ' ἀθθαίρετοι.

I believe that neither the Ister nor the Phasis could wash this house clean of all the evils it entombs, and that it will soon bring to light, evils done willingly, and not unwillingly. And the most hurtful of pains are those that appear to be one's own choice.

There are the things done ἔκοντα, and the ones done ἄκοντα. In the *OC*, Oedipus will plead ignorance and justify his actions as being involuntary (in their real dimensions). The distinction, however, does not remain this clear for very long, or at least does not exclude the possibility that something done voluntarily may be done under supernatural constraints so it becomes in effect involuntarily. The self-harm of Oedipus and Jocasta is too great; it has to be helped or guided by a superhuman hand. Having the help of a god, however, has never taken away human authorship of any positive action (cf. the priest of Zeus in the opening praising Oedipus for his past successes, with the help of a god in 36-8). There is no reason for divine involvement

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<sup>245</sup> Cf. Williams (1993:152) on freedom of action: "Human beings are metaphysically free in the negative sense that there is nothing in the structure of the universe that denies their power to intend, to decide, to act, indeed to take and receive responsibility in the fundamental and intelligible sense that we found, in an earlier chapter, already in Homer. But metaphysical freedom is nothing — at any rate, very little". On the matter of "free will" being anachronistic, see Dodds (1966); on the debate in antiquity from Plato on, cf. Frede (2011).

to absolve a hero from responsibility for a negative deed. All actions are voluntary, until their unsuspected consequences are revealed, just as all chance events tend turn out to be bad fate when they do not go well. In the case of the self-mutilation, it is voluntary (and fated, and caused by Apollo) and its horrendous consequences are acknowledged.

Jocasta, the Messenger tells, died by her own hand (αὐτὴ πρὸς αὐτῆς, 1237), but she rushed into the palace in a frenzy (ὄργῃ in 1241), and frenzies, as we have noted in the previous chapter, are often attributed to the intervention of a divinity.<sup>246</sup> The Messenger also describes that she was followed by a deranged Oedipus, looking for his wife and for a sword (to what end would Oedipus want the sword is unclear, possibly to kill himself as a first impulse, but the description fits the frenzy and the general lack of judgement caused by the suffering). He speaks with a caveat about his eventual failings of memory (1239, ὅσον γε κἀν ἐμοὶ μνήμης ἔνι) on something that has just happened, and assuming that his second-hand account will never be as precise as first-person witnessing, a suffering from which the Chorus has been spared (1237-8, τῶν δὲ παραθέντων τὰ μὲν / ἄλγιστ' ἄπεστιν· ἡ γὰρ ὄψις οὐ πάρα; the following events on stage are about Oedipus seeing what he should not see, and blinding himself not to see any further because it would revive the memories — by being spared to watch what happened inside, the Chorus is being spared of a great deal of additional suffering). Even though there are witnesses of Jocasta's frenzy, and of the moments immediately before her suicide, as well as of Oedipus' self-blinding, there is never the possibility of preventing either of the self-harming actions. First, the witnesses are servants looking at their masters. Secondly, their masters look possessed. Sophoclean characters sometimes fear μανία more than anything else (cf. *Ajax* 82, where Odysseus says, in answer to Athena's question on his fear of Ajax φρονοῦντα γὰρ νιν οὐκ ἂν ἐξέστην ὄκνω). Oedipus's self-blinding makes him appear so deranged that it is received as an unexpected and excessive step on top of his other griefs (1300-2, τίς ὁ πηδῆσας / μείζονα δαίμων τῶν μακίστων / πρὸς σῆ δυσδαίμονι μοίρα; even if it has been predicted by Tiresias upon his exit). Thirdly, if there was a δαίμων involved, an unidentified supernatural force, the chances of rescuing

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<sup>246</sup> Cf. Seaford (1993) for the significance of these descriptions of altered states of mind right before the destruction of the household in tragedy, as well as for the influence of Dionysus in them.

someone would be limited... On the other hand, it is interesting that neither Creon in the *Antigone* nor Oedipus in the *OT* try to take responsibility over their own deaths, as their female counterparts do. In the *OC*, Oedipus knows that he will die, and knows which signs to look for to recognise his approaching end, but at the end of the *OT*, all he does is to declare that he will accept whatever is in store for him — even though he keeps giving orders about what to do with him, of course, since he has not only proclaimed a sentence upon the murderer of Laius, but also the human need to keep moving and acting without clear instructions from the gods at each step (perhaps why fate is represented as an inexorable movement in the play).

In the first stasimon, the Chorus described the murderer as a wild beast running away from its hunter. Now the untamed Oedipus has been joined by his pursuer.<sup>247</sup> For the Messenger, it is certain that Oedipus is being guided by a δαίμων whose identity he does not specify (1258-9, λυσσῶντι δ' αὐτῷ δαίμωνων δείκνυσί τις / οὐδείς γὰρ ἀνδρῶν, οἱ παρήμεν ἐγγύθεν, “as he was raging, one of the gods showed him the way: no one amongst (us) men who were near”), and that seems to be also the conviction of the Chorus, who will question the protagonist upon his return to the stage. As he pierces his eyes, Oedipus cries, in 1271ff., the reasons for doing so, reasons that he will expand in 1379ff. He will also give an immediate justification as he tells the Chorus who was responsible for such an act of violence. We must now quote again 1329-32:

Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,  
 ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα.  
 ἔπαισε δ' αὐτόχειρ νιν οὔτις, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τλάμων.  
 τί γὰρ ἔδει μ' ὀράν,  
 ὅτ' ἄρ' ὀρώντι μηδὲν ἦν ἰδεῖν γλυκύ;

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<sup>247</sup> On the opposition between civilisation and wilderness, and the vocabulary related to cattle which builds up for the savagery of the description of the encounter in the crossroads, cf. Segal (1981:221-2). The consequences of this savagery, Segal concludes, are that “the apparent opposites, chance and Apollo’s design, have converged to bring the two men together in that narrow passage, and it is here that man’s subjection to chance draws him closest to the random life of the beasts. Two men of kingly rank act out a truly primal scene, father attacking son with the instrument used on beasts, son slaying father with the token of the hurt that the father caused to his limbs”. For Segal, these contrast between wild and tame might also denote the presence in the play of the motives of a reversed rite of initiation, from adulthood to infancy, from civilisation (Thebes), back to the wild (the flashbacks of Oedipus’ first days in Cithaeron).

These things were Apollo, my friends, Apollo, who brought about my terrible, terrible sufferings. But no hand but my own struck them, miserable wretch that I am.

Why would I need sight when that sight would make me see nothing sweet?

The action was done by Oedipus' hand (αὐτόχειρ), in what can be interpreted both as a contrast to the previous deeds, or as a continuation of them. As mentioned above, Knox, among others, sees in this an affirmation of independence from Apollo: the god would have brought about the other things (cf. also 828-9, ἄρ' οὐκ ἄπ' ὤμοῦ ταῦτα δαίμονός τις ἄν / κρίνων ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ τῶδ' ἄν ὀρθοίη λόγον; when Oedipus was starting to suspect that he had killed Laius), but the blinding would have been an expression of individual will.<sup>248</sup> Knox connects it with the end of the Messenger's introduction, where he qualifies the new griefs he is about to report as self-chosen (1230-1, quoted above). On the other hand, as pointed out elsewhere, Tiresias had already announced that Oedipus would soon be blind. There is no contradiction in maintaining that both answers are true. Just like every other action of Oedipus, it is the result of his judgement (or even his gut feeling), but it is also what he has been fated to do. There is, for Oedipus a constant need to keep acting according to whatever he thinks is the best choice (which is what Oedipus will do, even when he says he will follow his destiny in the verses quoted above).

Finally, Oedipus, who has decreed in the prologue what would happen to the culprit, tries to decide what is to happen to himself. The structure of the play implies that he will, most likely, be exiled. Oedipus is not only willing to accept the punishment he ordained, he is also wanting to avoid a curse upon his house, as we are told by the Messenger (1291, οὐδ' ἔτι / μενῶν δόμοις ἀραῖος, ὡς ἠράσατο in contrast with the line of ancestral ὄλβος in 1282), a curse that he pronounced himself (238).

#### 4.2. Counterfactuals

It has been argued in 2.3. that Oedipus' mistakes are caused by a wrong perception of reality, leading to a wrong interpretation of the data available to him (even if that interpretation might have been the sole possibility available to his point

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<sup>248</sup> Knox (1957:186-7).

of view, which makes it unfair calling it a “mistake” without qualification). We have seen above, and will go back to it here, how Oedipus describes all the key events in his life as the result of chance, rather than destined, to the point that he will call himself the son of possibility, of Τύχη. His interpretation is not on the whole wrong, as we have tried to demonstrate. He is indeed the one vulnerable to sudden reverses of chance all his life. Just like any other mortal, and perhaps in even more faithful ways to Apollo than most (Creon unfairly implies the contrary in 1445, καὶ γὰρ σὸ νῦν τᾶν τῶ θεῶ πίστιν φέροις), Oedipus tries to learn about his past from the oracle (not even his future!), and is given an answer of what is still for him to perform and that, unknown to him, has already been set in motion by his birth. Not once does he discredit the oracle, not even after Jocasta’s “demonstration” of the fallibility of Delphic prophets: he reacts to what he is told, and does the first thing that seems reasonable.

Scholars have spent pages arguing about what Oedipus ought to have done, and how all his accidents could have been avoided.<sup>249</sup> They have accused Oedipus of lack of care for killing older men and marrying older women, but those are not the points that the text raises as moments when things could somehow have been different. It is, however, very hard not to try out conjectures. The play invites the interpreter to test its limits as a well constructed puzzle, only to conclude that every piece of it is fundamental. Bernard Williams, who starts by suggesting that no matter which path, all roads lead to Rome when it comes to Oedipus ending up killing his father and marrying his mother, concludes that:

The play represents to us an outcome, together with such things as failed attempts to prevent it, with such power and in such a chain of significance as to kill speculation about alternatives. (...) Our earlier speculations about the baby Oedipus, by taking alternatives seriously, started on a path that could lead to the metaphysical collapse of supernatural necessity (...).<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> For moralizing readings of the *OT*, cf. e.g. Vellacott (1964) who thinks that the myth was morally poor (p.145), and that the poet had to make changes to introduce some sort of morality. However, Vellacott bases his argument on the conviction that most of the details in Sophocles’ play are part of the traditional story of Oedipus, and that Sophocles introduced only the intervention of the drunken man in Corinth. That change, Vellacott believes, was essential to make Oedipus guilty: if he went to Delphi with a doubt about his parentage, and if he has been given the oracle as he tells it to Jocasta, then he ought not to have killed old men nor marry old women, but rather have been alert.

<sup>250</sup> Williams (1993:146).

Modern scholars, however, are not the first testing counterfactual hypothesis against the plot of the *OT*: the characters do it already. Their counterfactuals, however, are based either on the absolute ignorance of fact, ignorance caused by the wrong perspective, or on pure flaws of reasoning. In both cases, the audience has sufficient information to decipher the implausibility of the speculation, and to understand the irony it creates. Jocasta's argument against the false prophecies is an example, in 717-22:

παιδὸς δὲ βλάστας οὐ διέσχον ἡμέραι  
τρεις, καὶ νιν ἄρθρα κείνος ἐνζεύξας ποδοῖν  
ἔρριψεν ἄλλων χερσὶν ἄβατον εἰς ὄρος.  
κάνταῦθ' Ἀπόλλων οὐτ' ἐκείνον ἦνυσεν  
φονέα γενέσθαι πατρὸς οὔτε Λαίϊον  
τὸ δεινὸν οὐφοβεῖτο πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν.

And not three days had passed since the birth of the child when he (Laius) fastened the joints of his feet and cast him away, by others' hands, to the untrodden mountain. So you see, Apollo did not bring it about that he (the child) would become the murderer of the father, nor that Laius would die by his son's hand, which was the evil he feared.

First, Jocasta notes, casually, that Laius pierced the baby's ankles, but that he did not give the child away himself, but sent "others". As we know, the one who handed the child to the Shepherd was Jocasta herself, which allows her later to understand what the witness about to be called might bring. It is also significant that he sends the child to where he cannot be tracked down, since it is an impassable (ἄβατον) place, in a play where the images of hunting and chasing are so constant. The impossibility to move anywhere affects both the future (the child cannot move anywhere from there), and the past (he cannot return to its paternal home). More important is the reasoning in 720-2: Laius is dead, and he had only one child. Jocasta heard from her trusted Shepherd that the king was killed by a gang of robbers. She is convinced that the child is dead and therefore could not have killed his father (repeated in 851ff.), which parallels her equally wrong conclusion in 949 that Polybus' death means that Oedipus' oracle is equally wrong. Jocasta's reasoning would make sense: she has no reason to suspect that the child lives. She, too, has once decided to avoid fate, and to do that she had to sacrifice a son, a sacrifice that seems now to have been an

unnecessary step. It is not surprising that Jocasta is the one claiming that, since it is impossible to know fate (977ff.), it is best to live without a plan (εἰκῆ), i.e. without trying to escape prophecies whose truth is impossible to verify in advance.

In several places, Oedipus identifies turning points where things could have been done otherwise, or chance could have made them happen differently. First, in the investigation on Laius' murder. He asks Creon in 128-9 why they did not pursue the investigation at the time (and says in 255, οὐδ' εἰ γὰρ ἦν τὸ πρᾶγμα μὴ θεήλατον [...]), that he would pursue it even if Apollo had not required it, which is, of course, impossible, for he would not have known that the murder of Laius was the origin of the situation). A concrete reason is given: the Sphinx. Oedipus seems oblivious to seeing the empty throne as the origin of his own chance to become the new monarch: he too did not question it at the time. A second counterfactual will follow, that touches the limits of absurdity with hindsight. It is in 258-63:

[...] νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ κυρῶ γ' ἐγὼ  
ἔχων μὲν ἀρχὰς ὣς ἐκεῖνος εἶχε πρῖν,  
ἔχων δὲ λέκτρα καὶ γυναῖχ' ὁμόσπορον,  
κοινῶν τε παίδων κοῖν' ἄν, εἰ κείνῳ γένος  
μὴ δυστύχησεν, ἦν ἄν ἐκπεφυκότα ·  
νῦν δ' ἐς τὸ κείνου κρᾶτ' ἐνήλαθ' ἡ τύχη ·

But, as it is, since I happen to hold the ruling power that he formerly held, and share the marriage and the wife that he embraced, the children from us both would have created common ties between us, had he not been unfortunately childless. But, as it is, misfortune leapt upon his head.

The genealogical confusion is striking: had Laius had children, they would be half-siblings of Oedipus' own children with Jocasta. The bond between the two kings would be explained from having offspring from the same wife. Laius did not have children because “misfortune” stood on his way and killed him before that could happen. As it happens, of course, Oedipus and Laius have ties, they both had children from Jocasta, and Oedipus is the misfortune that stood in his way. Also, if Laius had had children, they would be the normal successors to the throne (if old enough, at least), and not Oedipus. On the other hand, Oedipus is the rightful heir of Laius, and the throne he wins from the victory against the Sphinx would have been

his (had his parents not tried to kill him, and so on... the chain of conjectures is circular).

Later in the play (564), Oedipus will ask whether Tiresias had accused him at the time. If that had been the case, then why would the Thebans have named him their king? The question implies that Tiresias could not have accused him at the time (a sign that the prophet is a charlatan, to Oedipus' angered eyes). What he does not know, however, is that there was one man who *could* have accused him at the time, and who chose to be silent. Had he spoken and been believed, only one half of the prophecies would have been fulfilled, and perhaps without anyone identifying the murderer of Laius with his son.

The other chance event is the appearance of the drunken man in Corinth. Oedipus' admission that he overreacted to it (775-8) entails the admission that he would not have felt the need to go to Delphi, had he been more reasonable (but being impulsive and digging for answers is part of being Oedipus...). Once he has received the oracle, all he can do is to interpret it in the most plausible way possible, and in that his thinking is perhaps less flawed than that of the scholars who persist in criticising him.<sup>251</sup> Once he has decided to avoid Corinth, Oedipus reaches the crossroads, a symbol of life's turning points and necessary decisions. In the *OT*, however, the crossroads is the place where things come together (τυγχάνει), where one oracle meets its other half, and father and son fulfil the prophecy.

Finally, when he comes back on stage already blind, Oedipus starts enumerating the turning points at which he was a patient, rather than an agent. In 1349-53, he will curse the man who saved him (ὄλοιθ' ὅστις ἦν ὃς ἀγρίας πέδας / †νομάδ'† ἐπιποδίας ἔλυσ' ἀπό τε φόνου / ἔρρυτο κἀνέσωσέ μ', οὐδὲν εἰς χάριν πράσσων).<sup>252</sup> Had he died, neither he nor his dear ones would have suffered, he says explicitly in 1354-5 (τότε γὰρ ἂν θανῶν / οὐκ ἦ φίλοισιν οὐδ' ἐμοὶ τοσόνδ' ἄχος), and he will

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<sup>251</sup> Oedipus' says, in his description of his trip to Delphi, that he avoided Corinth. As Gregory (1995:143) notes, it is one thing to say that he avoided the city and quite another that he avoided his parents specifically. Even though Polybus and Merope were still his best bets, by avoiding Corinth he avoids all potential slaves from whom the king might have adopted the child. Oedipus will later think that Jocasta's despair is due to the possibility that he may be revealed as the child of a slave, which is Oedipus' first hypothesis for alternative parentage.

<sup>252</sup> Following the text as Jebb (1887:176) prints it. The passage is problematic, but that does not affect the sense in which it is used above.

continue to enumerate what he would not have done had he died in the following verses. Had they not saved him, he would have died, as was his parents' wish. The Chorus suggests (1367) that Oedipus would be better dead than alive and blind, a suggestion that Oedipus rejects, with the explanation that "if he had sight" (1371), he would not be able to face his parents in the Hades nor his children on earth. He then returns to the enumeration of the past by identifying both the agents responsible for his fate and the moments where it could have been otherwise. He will blame Cithaeron first (1391-3), personifying the mountain that failed to kill him. Then he will blame Polybus and Corinth for rearing him (1394-7). In 1398-1403, he will proceed to blame the crossroads that witnessed the crime and drank the kindred blood. Last, 1404ff. he will blame the marriage (rather than Jocasta or Laius, who have decided that he should die), a marriage that resulted in a series of horrors that made Oedipus stand out from the rest of humankind by the dimension of his suffering.<sup>253</sup>

Had he not been saved, he would not have lived to fulfil the prophecies. Had he not met Laius at the crossroads, he would not have killed him. Had he not married Jocasta, he would not have slept with his mother. Alas, Oedipus did all those things, he did some of them willingly, and the others happened to him at an age when he could not have decided; his birth alone is the fulfilment of a prophecy. As it is demonstrated, the prophecies are valid and are to be believed, or there will be no reason for the traditional religious worship that is being enacted by the very fact of performing a play (as the Chorus, aware of itself and speaking of its role from a momentary objective perspective, will sing in the second stasimon).<sup>254</sup>

### 4.3. The unconditionality of the oracles

But let us go back to the very beginning of the events referred to in the play: the oracle of Laius. We know not why the king looked for an oracle. Laius' backstory is

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<sup>253</sup> Cf. 1414-5, and how Oedipus considers himself so tainted in a superhuman way that he is not even contagious. This contrasts with references to himself as a source of pollution that must be exiled quoted above. In the *OC*, Oedipus will stand back from his first impulse of touching Theseus because he is still polluted.

<sup>254</sup> For an analysis of the passage in the context of the other instances of self-referentiality of the tragic Chorus, cf. Henrichs (1995:65-73).

made completely irrelevant in the *OT*.<sup>255</sup> However, much has been discussed about the formulation of the oracle. The information appears in a second hand report from Jocasta and, as in the case of the Shepherd, second hand reports are not always exact (Oedipus also seems to favour first-person testimonies, Creon tells him to go to Delphi himself if he cannot believe him, the Messenger will give a second-hand report of Jocasta's death, and so on). Jocasta herself is not consistent in how she thinks one should value the oracles. However, given that the matter is central to the play, it is possible to argue for an intentional conditional formulation. Jocasta's words in 711ff. are these:

χρησμός γὰρ ἦλθε Λαίῳ ποτ', οὐκ ἐρῶ  
 Φοίβου γ' ἅπ' αὐτοῦ, τῶν δ' ὑπηρετῶν ἅπο,  
 ὡς αὐτὸν ἦζοι μοῖρα πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν,  
 ὅστις γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ τε κάκείου πάρα.

For one day a prophecy came to Laius, I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers, that his μοῖρα would be (μοῖρα would come for him) to die at the hands of any child which might be born from him (Laius) and me.

There are many aspects intertwined here: first, there is Jocasta's need to differentiate between the god and his ministers: if the prophecy seems to have failed, then it cannot be from a god. Secondly, how did this prophecy come to Laius? Did he look for an oracle because he had a motive? Did Tiresias, or a drunken man, or any other chance event raise suspicions? We shall never know. The verb of movement again suggests that oracles, just like every other aspect of fate, are embodied in the action of a person, in this case, Apollo's ministers, who will come out of the temple to bring someone their fate. The idea that it was a minister reporting second-hand

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<sup>255</sup> *Pace* Lloyd-Jones (1971:120-3) and Kovacs (2009b:367), the fact that Laius' past deeds are irrelevant for the *OT* is not simply an argument from silence: Sophocles is in the right cultural context to attribute something to a family doom, and he does so, to an extent, in the *Antigone* to describe the girl's fate. There is no reference to a "miserable race of Laius" nor to Oedipus being just like his father (except for Jocasta's physical description of her former husband, but that similarity serves a purpose of identification of someone in a murder investigation). By not connecting Oedipus' fate up to the older elements of his family, Sophocles is inviting us to consider his situation individually and putting the stress on the seemingly arbitrary ways in which the gods punish mortals, and on the extraordinary fulfilment of a destiny decided before birth, rather than the children paying for the crimes of their parents.

Dodds (1966:43) sees in the absence of past crimes a way for the poet to stress the self-determination of Oedipus' actions: "in all this we are to see him as a free agent: hence the suppression of the hereditary curse. And his self-mutilation and self-banishment are equally free acts of choice." I agree that focusing on Oedipus and what he does alone makes his fall all the more terrible, but Dodds neglects the information that Oedipus had been condemned to his fate even before birth.

the manipulated words of a god, suggests the possibility that the oracles are not a cause of concern. Added to Jocasta's belief that the child died, then the prophet lied or was a bad prophet. If the words of the prophets were true, then, if Laius were to have a child, the child would kill him. That is indeed what happened. But was this prophecy something that would only happen if and only if Laius and Jocasta had a child, or is it something that was going to happen unconditionally — Laius and Jocasta were necessarily going to have a child, and that child would kill Laius? The question of the conditionality of the oracle has been the topic of much debate. Jebb points out that ὅστις γένοιτ' is "oblique for ὅστις ἂν γένηται", which is a conditional relative clause; *if* a child is born from the couple, and not any child that *will* be born from the couple. This formulation makes Jebb remark that the oracle must have been given before the birth. The future optative ἦξοι may be conditional, or may stand for a future in direct speech.<sup>256</sup> Thus apparently, the oracle could have opened the possibility for Laius not to have children at all. The context of the play, however, favours the ambiguity: Laius and Jocasta could believe that they had the choice not to have a child, as they could believe that they had effectively avoided fate by exposing the baby, in the same way that Oedipus could believe he was avoiding the oracle.

The comparison with 851-4ff., where Jocasta will re-tell the story in different words, is not necessarily elucidating:

εἰ δ' οὖν τι κάκτρεποίτο τοῦ πρόσθεν λόγου,  
οὔτοι ποτ', ὦναζ, σόν γε Λαῖου φόνον  
φανεῖ δικαίως ὀρθόν, ὄν γε Λοξίας  
διεῖπε χρῆναι παιδὸς ἐξ ἐμοῦ θανεῖν.

If now he might turn aside from the former words, he can never show, my lord,  
that the murder of Laius is exactly as it should have been, since Loxias declared  
that he had to be killed by a child of mine.

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<sup>256</sup> Jebb (1887:100). Cf. Kovacs (2009b:366), who argues for the conditionality; Lloyd-Jones (1971:119-20) and Lawrence (2008:3) agree that the oracle leaves room for Laius not to have a child. *Contra*, cf. Wilamowitz (1899:55), taken by Dodds (1966:41), who claims that the oracle given to Oedipus is unconditional, putting the weight of the interpretation in the necessity expressed by χρῆναι in Jocasta's second report, in 854. Cf. also Griffith (1996:53); Segal (2001:28); Lurje (2004:392); Eidinow (2011:186-7). The formulation is usually contrasted with the unambiguously conditional form of the oracle in the *Seven Against Thebes* 742-57. Regardless of how one takes the oracle, Cairns (2013:168) remarks how it is not presented as a link in the chain of a potential punishment of Laius for a former crime, thus not being a link in the chain of hereditary punishment of Oedipus either.

Jocasta is trying to dissuade Oedipus from calling the Shepherd as witness. Her interpretation of the oracle, however, now clarifies that the child would have to be hers, and that the oracle was Loxias', forgetting to differentiate the god from his seers. The report now is made in words that look unconditional at the surface but that imply that the child has to be born: before the birth of any child, the oracle becomes conditional. Most importantly, whatever her interpretation of the conditionality of the oracle might have been, she knows that she had a child, and therefore that that would have to mean that that child was Laius' killer, but she thinks the child is dead. Therefore, her conclusion is, again, that it did not come to pass, and that the oracle was false. While she does not explicitly question Apollo's authority (she even prays to him), the Chorus will. The conditionality of the oracle only matters up to the point where it is open or not for Laius and Jocasta to have a child — once the child is born, the oracle must come true for Apollo's authority to stand. In the play, we know that the child was born, therefore we know that the oracle will come true.

E. R. Dodds *et al.* have a valid point claiming that the first oracle was unconditional too, but that is an implication to be drawn from the play, rather than from the immediate formulation of Jocasta's words. How could it not be unconditional, regarding the rest of the story? However, if we were to see it as the initial cause and explanation of Oedipus' fall, someone else's transgression, it would have been presented as such. The fact that it can be read as conditional from Jocasta's report is just an ambiguity of language, which is another fundamental aspect of the play: people cannot tell what is their μοῖρα. At most, it could become another unverifiable counterfactual, which would not matter for Oedipus' present in any case, since it is a deed long done; there is no concern in the play in discussing whether or not Laius and Jocasta could have done otherwise.<sup>257</sup>

How, then, are people to live their lives, if they cannot see ahead, nor interpret the words of prophecy? Jocasta's suggestion in 977-8, while she is still convinced that the baby died, and her spirits have been lifted by the news brought from Corinth, is that one should, so to say, follow the flow:

τί δ' ἄν φοβοῖτ' ἄνθρωπος ᾧ τὰ τῆς τύχης

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<sup>257</sup> Dodds (1966:41).

κρατεῖ, πρόνοια δ' ἔστιν οὐδενὸς σαφής;

Why should a man fear, for whom things are governed by chance, and for whom there is no clear foresight of anything?

She could have asked the same question years before, when Laius had the first oracle. Conditional or not, the enslaving decrees of Delphi resulted in the birth of a child, a baby that the parents tried to annihilate in ways that would be possible without bringing the charge of infanticide upon their heads.<sup>258</sup> Just like Oedipus, they too failed to circumvent the prophecy, more importantly, without any other viable alternative of action.<sup>259</sup> Jocasta's solution is the reasonable option against madness or atrophy. Live on and hope for the best, wishing, with the Chorus, that their fate turns out to have been the least bad possible.

Thus, the possibility of a conditional prophecy does not open the room in the play for things to have been otherwise: for the only aspect where it would be debatable whether or not Laius could have avoided his fate (namely, not having a child) has already happened when the play starts. Oedipus is born. The fulfilment of the prophecy is set in motion. The red herrings and counterfactuals serve to magnify the dimension of the "horror of coincidence", and to demonstrate how every move has been part of a larger chain. This is not what happens in the *Antigone*, where we did not find this reaffirmation of fate's inexorability. Things can be otherwise and the moral, there, is that they ought to have been otherwise, if only Creon had not been such a fool. Tiresias' appearance makes us think that there is still a possibility of rescuing the girl; here, Tiresias' appearance only confirms that there is nothing that can rectify old deeds. We are never invited to think that the course of action will change at any time in the play. Even the moment immediately before the revelation, where both the Chorus and Oedipus have hope that the worst suspicions will not be

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<sup>258</sup> Cf. Williams (1993:139) for instances of supernatural necessity imposed by oracles that do not allow the room for the agent to ask "what if I don't?"

<sup>259</sup> Whatever Laius and Jocasta do, however, the prophecy means the end of the line. If they decide to avoid having a child at all costs, the line ends in their generation. If they have the child, the child will kill the father and bring further pollution upon the house (and the line will end in the generation after, as we know). The one open end would be a child born from another wife that not Jocasta. However, the play is all about people ending up doing exactly what they were trying to avoid, so it is not hard to believe that Laius and Jocasta, somehow, had a child unintentionally (those things happen!), without just deciding to disobey the oracle.

confirmed (1076-1109) does not work as a factor of suspense for the audience, but rather as a factor of pity, if anything.<sup>260</sup>

Comparing this play with another, in reference to Ajax's deception speech, Williams has pointed out that "the *Ajax* does for possibility what Oedipus does for necessity".<sup>261</sup> To that could be added the direct intervention of Athena, and her own words in 45: κἄν ἐξεπράζατ', εἰ κατημέλιθ' ἐγώ. Ajax would have succeeded killing the Greek warriors, had Athena not been paying attention. Alas, she was. In the *OT*, there is no question that Apollo is not paying attention to what Oedipus is doing. So much so, that it is the god who sends a reason, the plague, for the mortal to consult his oracle.

#### 4.4. "Crimes and misdemeanours"

Towards the end of the play, the Chorus will tell us both that Oedipus' τύχη used to be envied by the rest (1526), and, in the fourth stasimon, that Oedipus becomes a paradigm for mortals (τὸν σὸν τοι παράδειγμ' ἔχων, / τὸν σὸν δαίμονα, τὸν σὸν, ὦ τλᾶμον Οἰδιπόδα, βροτῶν / οὐδὲν μακαρίζω).<sup>262</sup> Regardless of the authenticity of the exodus or of portions of it (cf. 1.4. above), the affirmation that Oedipus used to stand out from the rest of mortals in skill and happiness is repeated often enough in the play. However, it is only when he falls that he becomes an example.<sup>263</sup> Still standing aside from the rest given the extreme dimensions of his suffering, Oedipus is nonetheless the example of how humans cannot count themselves happy before the end of their days, and can only retrospectively judge their lives. The most striking

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<sup>260</sup> Knox (1957:51) disagrees: "The chorus (...) is hoping for a miracle that will save Oedipus from destruction, and that is how we feel too". The counter-argument is in the text, mostly in the appearance of Tiresias. The truth must come to light, and will come to light, whether or not Tiresias spells it out (which he does). From the point of view of the theatrical effect, it would not be possible to have Tiresias revealing the truth on stage, in words that might be enigmatic at first, but that are crystal clear for ears that can examine them objectively.

<sup>261</sup> Williams (1993:148).

<sup>262</sup> Cf. Jebb (1887) *ad loc.*

<sup>263</sup> Sophocles is known for the density of his characters — this density serves a purpose. They are not types, nor perfect, because they are closer to all humans, and humans are imperfect. Oedipus is a paradigm in this sense too: his career as a solver of riddles and as a king is good, yet we see on stage how he loses temper, and we are given enough data to sigh at the actions Oedipus chooses to take rather than what seems obvious with hindsight (such as killing an old man, or marrying a queen old enough to be his mother). His rage against Tiresias is only justified from his own point of view, but he still accepts to change his mind to please the Chorus and Jocasta.

aspect in which Oedipus becomes a paradigm is by demonstrating that people can act with determination and following what they deem best, the most fair, the most adequate for the city, without knowing that it is in fact the contrary. Oedipus exemplifies human blindness to their own actions and to the reality they live in. That is also why in the end the sympathy towards Oedipus does not change. Tainted, yes, but the very fact that he brought that pollution upon himself unwillingly is enough to grant him pity and for the Thebans, hitherto loyal to him, to see themselves in his misfortune, recognising the common denominator for all humans.

One last question remains. Why Oedipus? Or, as in Dodds' exam paper, "does Sophocles in this play attempt to justify the ways of God to man?"<sup>264</sup> The traditional answers are divided between finding reasons why Oedipus is to blame, and absolving him from any moral guilt. The facts remain that Oedipus did those things, did them willingly, and did them unaware of what he was doing. As far as intention goes, we can be certain that Oedipus was trying to do the exact opposite of what he does. He did not simply "happen" to marry his mother and kill his father — he did so while trying to avoid it. He is innocent when it comes to intention, but guilty of action. Oedipus will say that he is fighting side by side with Justice (274, σύμμαχος Δίκης) to avenge the dead. Mortals believe that the gods worry about pollution and purification, which are a form of justice or re-establishment of the natural order.

Why, then, does a man whose fate seem to be the best of all, whose past actions seem the most beneficial for his city, fall in the way Oedipus does? That is left unexplained, and it is left unexplained because there is no visible chain of cause and effect, intentional crime and respective punishment. In the fourth stasimon, the Chorus recapitulates Oedipus' benefit to Thebes (which makes him contrast with the "facial composite" of a criminal in the second stasimon), and stresses that it was the passing of time that revealed what he has done unwittingly (1212, ἐφηδρέ σ' ἄκονθ' ὁ πάνθ' ὀρώων χρόνος);<sup>265</sup> it is by this passage of time that the abnormal marriage could be discerned and judged (the marriage that is no marriage, and that unifies the two

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<sup>264</sup> Dodds (1966).

<sup>265</sup> For an analysis of the passage with the stress on the involuntary aspect of Oedipus' deeds, that makes Oedipus an "assassin sans crime", cf. Bollack (1995:185-8).

things that should not be unified, husband and son, in 1213-4, δικάζει τ' ἄγαμον γάμον πάλαι / τεκνοῦντα καὶ τεκνούμενον).

To the eyes of the Thebans' common sense, Oedipus' ultimate fate is surprising. The one thing they can base their opinion on, and they will, is the experience from the past. This positive recapitulation had started even before Tiresias accused the king. The priest of Zeus remembered in 40-57 how Oedipus had saved the city before, and how his arrival in Thebes had been seen as a good omen (52-3). When Tiresias speaks, the Chorus answers that they will not accuse their king without proof (505). Even when evidence starts coming together, the Chorus hopes that it may not be the case that Oedipus is the man who killed Laius (834-5). In the *Antigone*, the Chorus knows why Creon has fallen, and points out the importance of learning. There is nothing else to point out in Oedipus' case, other than the precarious situation that makes him one of the mortals.

In the end, the gods' justice crushing Oedipus is not questioned, because it does not need to be questioned, neither by human standards nor by any other standards (whatever they are). Religion is questioned exclusively when there is no apparent cause for what is happening. If Oedipus is the cause of the plague, then he must have done something that disrupts the balance of nature. He did something that disrupts the balance of nature: he killed his father, married his mother, and fathered his siblings. That is more than enough, as far as the gods go.<sup>266</sup> Why did they pick Oedipus before birth to do these things? We will never know. If there is an original cause, that is the same as if there was not, because we are human and therefore unable to see further than an average of three generations (most people never met their great-grandparents). Whether or not the gods have their motives, they will never be clear to us, but neither is religion dependent on that clarity (a lot of religion depends, rather, on fear). The play is about human precariousness in a world vaster than what they can perceive, and how their lack of knowledge pushes them into the very thing they try to avoid; not about divine justice or the moral necessity to punish Oedipus for some bad action in the near past.

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<sup>266</sup> Cf. Allan (2013:178) on the human justice: "the emphasis in *OT* is on the *negative* and harsh side of justice, that is, not on good people being rewarded, but on wrongdoers being punished, even if they have committed their crimes in ignorance". Cf. Cairns (2013:159) on how this type of justice is "depressing" and "far from edifying".

Fear comes from learning that one day is enough to reveal that the pattern of events and behaviour underlying one's whole life is not the pattern perceived, but its opposite. It is not the case that Oedipus was living so well, and suddenly something happened that made him miserable — all his life was directed towards the same end, without his awareness, and there was not a single “twist of fate”. What makes him equal to all mortals is that no reason can be seen to justify that this happened to him and not so someone else. Winnington-Ingram's conclusion is right:<sup>267</sup>

The acts which drew down on Oedipus the wrath of the gods were not done in pride of any kind, but in simple ignorance. Is there, then, any moral in his fate? Is there any lesson to be drawn? Yes, if it is salutary for men to realise the fragility of human fortunes and the vast sea of ignorance in which they swim. No, if it is meant that Oedipus should have been something other than himself, without the keen energies and the thrusting intelligence which made him great (...).

## 5. Conclusion

Contrary to the attempts to find in Oedipus terrible faults of character that would justify his fall were the reaffirmations of Oedipus' greatness by modern scholars. One way or another, most people who write about the *OT* feel the need to underline his courage, intelligence, good intentions and, something that will be important for the *OC* as well, his resistance and capacity of endurance in a world of adverse circumstances. Oedipus is not always perfect, of course not! We see him being tossed from one clue to another, and reacting as a human might. As said above, he embodies a series of unharmonious contraries that will eventually reveal themselves in the most horrendous way.

It is important to believe that Oedipus is to be seen as the best of mortals, even with a bad temper, or whichever bad quality we want to read in his behaviour. The Chorus does not change their attitude towards their king for a reason: even the best of mortals is so blatantly vulnerable to the world they cannot understand. Yet, he bears his extreme suffering with extreme strength. Oedipus' destiny seems unpredictable and unfair. If we are half as human as the Chorus, all we can feel towards the end of the play is deepest sympathy.

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<sup>267</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980:203).

To recapitulate: it is part of the human condition not to know what is going on. All through the play, things that were attributed to *τύχη* turned out to be the design of the gods, so we should be careful even in saying that Oedipus was picked at random. Human ignorance amounts to the inability to recognise unity behind plurality, and therefore the inability to see the great scale of reality. The point is made in several ways. One of them is time: only humans depend on the passing of time to analyse the past, understand the present, and infer things about the future. However, their memory is limited and their physical presence, necessary to witness events, is limited as well. Therefore, causal chains are often so buried that they become irrelevant in the interpretation of the present: no one was there, no one remembers, no one will ever know.<sup>268</sup> All people have is what they can see in the present or near past.

Another source of confusion is the way in which the same person can be different things to different people, and play different roles at different times. This shows human lack of knowledge about themselves, but about the role of others in the continuum of collective life. Oedipus kills a man without knowing that this man is his father, who in turn tried to kill him years before. On the other hand, Oedipus had an oracle that he tried to avoid but could not, thanks to the intervention of others with equally partial perspectives on reality, from the Shepherds to the city that put him on the throne.

When they do not know themselves, people cannot know the nature of anything around them. In that way, they also misattribute the origin of events to chance or destiny. Anything that is out of one's control or that seems to happen out of no visible cause is attributed to chance.

None of this, however, means that people do not bring their own fate upon themselves, quite the contrary. As humans and intelligent beings, they will necessarily judge and act according to their best judgment. The tragic aspect lies exactly in the fact that they are the active executioners of their own fate, without knowing what that fate is. Ultimately, someone's fate is simply the conditions of their birth, and the way their life will develop, within the constraints established by those, until the end of their life. Oedipus was born to kill his father, under the constraint of an oracle

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<sup>268</sup> Jocasta's attempt to drop the investigation could, in a sense and if it were a possibility at all, stop suffering and be forgotten.

dictating as much. Whatever our parents and grandparents did might and will influence our current position in the world: sometimes it is possible to see that direct influence, sometimes it is not. In Oedipus' case, there was nothing to be seen, quite the contrary, and yet he did the deeds he was trying to avoid. The gods know more, see more, and decree the lot of mortals. In the *OT*, it is because Apollo intends to make Oedipus find out about his past that he finds out about his past in the right timing to make it all more terrifying.

Interpreters who do not want to see determination in Oedipus' life, tend to attribute whatever happens to his personality.<sup>269</sup> Personality is only another aspect of the constraints that dictate one's behaviour from birth on, and an aspect that is not possible for the agent to choose. Oedipus' personality did not allow him to stop the investigation, even when it was becoming clear that he might be the culprit, it is true. He will carry on because that is "who Oedipus is", but Oedipus is the honest researcher as much as he is the man born to kill his father.

Some interpreters point out that the play ends with Oedipus in a better position than at the beginning, knowing the patterns of his life and reaffirming his status as a tragic hero, being at once the man most hated by the gods and the symbol of the greatness of human spirit.<sup>270</sup> While that is certainly true, it is hardly any consolation.<sup>271</sup> The play ends on a bleak and pessimistic note, where all the potential consolation comes from the solidarity of other humans for their shared condition. Oedipus has learnt and will learn even more as a wanderer in the later play, but it is not necessarily a learning that he would have wished for, had he had the means to

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<sup>269</sup> Dodds (1966:43), for example. Though Dodds reaches the same conclusions about Oedipus' character that could be accepted by most interpreters, his insistence in reading the play without the gods is surprising. Acknowledging the direct involvement of hostile divinities (or hostile in this particular moment) does not diminish Oedipus' greatness in any way.

<sup>270</sup> A status that, for Reinhardt (1979:132) contrasts with Creon's at the end of the play: "the character with no fate, the character alien to fate, Creon serves as the unchanging standard against which all the changes are measured (...); the "one who is safe from tragedy". Creon's role in the play and his cautious attitude and in speech certainly make a clear contrast with Oedipus. He is also one of the few characters who does not have a double function at different times. However, he is never put in a position where he has to act either, until the very end where he assumes responsibility over the city. On Oedipus as the symbol of human greatness and intelligence, see e.g. Dodds (1966:48); for the combination of this greatness against the greatness of the gods, cf. Knox (1957:195-6). On Oedipus empowered with self-knowledge and creating patterns, cf. Segal (1981:247-8).

<sup>271</sup> Not even the promised re-ascension to power *post mortem* will feel like a compensation to Oedipus in the *OC*, as shall see. Oedipus is destroyed by becoming aware of reality, and that cannot be changed.

simply avoid his own downfall. No one in the audience, internal or external, would want to be Oedipus, despite the time of prosperity when the Chorus says that people used to envy him. Yet, there is a sense in which we all are.

## Oedipus at Colonus

With *Oedipus at Colonus*, we reach the last extant treatment of the Theban myth in Sophocles. Here the poet uses an account of events immediately preceding Polynices' attack on Thebes as a vehicle for his exploration of a number of additional topics. While it is perhaps above all in this play that the question of fate and responsibility in regard to human action is examined in most detail, this topic in its turn serves as a hook upon which to hang the treatment of two further matters. The first is the problem of personal conduct and what constitutes appropriate behaviour; the other concerns unpredictable reversals of fortune. The two lines coexist: those who act rightly deserve to be rewarded (and the other way round); the reversals of fortune are unpredictable but constant. However, not all those who act rightly are in fact rewarded, and it is possible for people to act wrongly without knowing it. Sophocles weaves the two themes in his portrayal of the destinies of the characters. Fate is ultimately unpredictable, and sometimes people suffer for reasons they cannot identify, but bad conduct will always result in punishment.

The Oedipus we meet in the *OC* is different from the man we left at the end of the *OT*. He is now fully aware of what is to happen to him, and we know, from the beginning, that he is to acquire some sort of power after his death. The discussion of his past now serves to justify his present status on the threshold of heroization: he did, unwittingly, the horrible deeds that were fated for him, he was sent into exile, and arrived at Colonus after a promise of rest. Nonetheless, he will still have to convince the Chorus to receive him rather than casting him out again, based on the fame of his pollution.

The play is structured around the patterns of the suppliant plays and the narratives of heroes whose bodies are a promise of benefit to a foreign land. None of these patterns, however, will be followed strictly. We shall start by looking at the structure of the text, once again in connection with Sophocles' choices regarding the myth, and the implications of these choices in the play.

Oedipus' life is still dictated by the oracles of Apollo. We shall analyse those in Section 2, and the aspects of fate that tend to seem random and independent of human present action (ancestral curses, oracles). In that section, we will analyse

Oedipus' own take on what has happened to him and, as an exercise, investigate whether the outcomes presented as the play progresses are the only ones possible, or if, as happened in the *Antigone*, there is a feeling that there is still a lot to play for.

Oedipus' three defence speeches are, we shall maintain, essential to assure us of Oedipus' moral innocence, required for the type of figure that he is about to become. The reasons for his sufferings, we shall suggest in section 3, belong to the aspects of fate that are unpredictable, except in their major patterns of oscillation between polar states. The speech of Oedipus to Theseus, as they first meet, is better understood in contrast with the mystical thought of the time, and we shall use the example of Empedocles to suggest an interpretation of Oedipus' new status, and of what he says about the world's being eternally in a process of change. Still with Empedocles in mind, we shall look at the end of Oedipus' life, and at the end of his portrayal as a paradigm of all humankind, to become a guide and, eventually, a daemonic power after his death, free from the sufferings of the world.

In the fourth section, we shall focus on the second trend, and on the problems of conduct. Unlike what happens in the *Antigone*, where a heavy stress was put on the possibility of Creon's learning, in the *OC* there is no room for a change of attitude: there are those who are evil by nature, and those who are not. One function of the episodes is to underline the different types of conduct and their outcome, focused on demonstrating the necessary consequences for those who act wickedly. There is in the play some sort of reward for good conduct, that will be attributed by Oedipus to Athens. In this section, we shall look briefly at the importance of the correspondence between word and deed, and at the weight of concepts of friendship and persuasion. Finally, we shall discuss whether the destinies of each character can in any way be seen as a compensation for their conduct, and will pick up again the question left hanging in section 2 on whether action can change fate, or whether thanks to their inborn personalities, people are condemned to act as they do.

## **1. The text: structure of the play and treatment of the myth**

Even though not intended to be performed as a trilogy, and even though it is questioned whether many passages were written by Sophocles' hand at all, the

structure of the *OT* and the *OC* shows that some of the continuities are clearly intended.<sup>272</sup> This has been noted by many, and more recently by Adrian Kelly who, elaborating on Bernd Seidensticker's list, points out that at a superficial level there is a clear scheme of mirroring moments, as well as what he calls "chiastic relationships" between the roles of key characters of both plays.<sup>273</sup> The relevance of this parallelism depends on whether or not we believe that there is a dialogue between the two plays, and that the *OC* is in any way trying to answer issues raised in the earlier text. These issues would, necessarily, be questions on the nature of fate, the causal relation between actions and outcomes, responsibility, the reversals of fortune, the veracity of the oracles, and the lessons to be learnt from Oedipus' example. Some of them are picked up by the *OC*, some of them are not (e.g. the veracity of the oracles is never questioned). While the Oedipus of the *OC* discusses his past and offers his interpretation of the conditions in which his life turned out the way it turned out (cf. section 2 below), the conclusion of the play does not show him as the paradigm for all humankind — quite the contrary, he is set apart from the rest (e.g. the cry of Zeus in 1621ff. and 1664-5). Now, Oedipus will be elevated to a supernatural status of sorts, initiating a hero cult in the vicinity of Colonus.

Is Sophocles, then, writing his second play about Oedipus to discuss the same matters as the earlier play? Or is he using the earlier play as a familiar background from which to depart on a tangential adventure? The second option seems the most likely. The discussion about the circumstances of Oedipus' errors serves as the background against which moral problems of conduct are raised, and a fundamental focus of the attention is on behaviour. There are, certainly, implications for the morality of the play in the way fate is portrayed, they just offer nothing new to our evaluation of the *OT* — Oedipus' defence is, after all, the same we would have made for him in the earlier play, namely, that he is morally innocent of his errors because of

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<sup>272</sup> But see Jebb (1900:l-lvi) on the excessive labeling as spurious of any problematic aspect of the *OC*.

<sup>273</sup> Seidensticker (1972:264-274); Kelly (2009:45-51). The main parallelisms being Oedipus as a hero in the opening of the *OT* and the closing of the *OC*; the scene with Tiresias in the *OT* matching the scene with Polynices in the *OC*; the middle scene with Creon in both plays; Oedipus "interrogation" (Kelly's quotation marks) just before the ending of the *OT*, and right after the start of the *OC*; Oedipus as blind beggar in the end of the *OT* and the beginning of the *OC*.

his lack of knowledge of the circumstances, even if he is responsible for doing those deeds.

An unavoidable amount of paraphrasing will be needed in the later sections, so we shall be sketchy here. The play opens with a transgression. The quasi-comical cliché of the blind man walking where he should not and stepping on sacred ground is here amplified by the fact that Oedipus is the man who, in a previous play, did not see what was in front of him, and who started the earlier text in a godlike position answering the prayers of his citizens. The blind beggar is, just like the Oedipus of old, touching what he should not touch, and involuntarily transgressing the divine prohibitions because he cannot see. Except that even though he knows not that the place where he has just entered is the grove of the goddesses, as soon as he learns about that fact, he will recognise it as the place where he was destined to be. He will be able to interpret the descriptions made to him by Antigone (33-4), in the same way that Tiresias needed to share his way with the boy, two using the sight of one, in *Antigone* 898-90. To justify his stubbornness and certainty that he has reached the place where he is meant to be, Oedipus tells us immediately of a second oracle (or a continuation of the first one, it is not clear) that has guided him since he left Thebes. There is no tone of irony — Oedipus is to be believed. The situation is the inverse of his past flight from Delphi to Thebes. Before, he was running from his city to avoid an oracle. Now he is exiled, and his wandering has an end in sight promised by an oracle. Oedipus knows that he has reached his final resting place. What he does not know until the arrival of Ismene is the importance of his place of burial to the city where he is buried, and her arrival will be the landmark of the play for the beginning of the episodes with the apparent obstacles Oedipus still has to face.

The grove, suitably, belongs to the Eumenides, and the positive name of the avengers of crimes of blood suggests the upcoming appeasement reached by the end of the play. In fact, most of the important information to secure the outcome for Oedipus will be given in the prologue and first episode.

For the first time in the Theban plays, the Chorus does not know Oedipus' identity at first, and then only recognises him for his negative reputation. Here Oedipus has to gain the sympathy of the Chorus, rather than counting on the respect given by his position or by his recent past as a saviour of the city. A lot of the play will focus on

the building and destruction of bonds of friendship, and the Chorus' status as strangers to Oedipus has to be overcome on stage.

After Oedipus' first defence, the Chorus agrees to call Theseus. Before Theseus arrives, however, the surprising appearance of Ismene comes to add a political dimension to the problem.<sup>274</sup> It guarantees as well that Oedipus will have the support of the Chorus by the time Creon arrives. We hear the new oracle, and Oedipus curses his sons for the first time. We are then in the position to meet Theseus and have his guarantee that Oedipus is protected. From this moment on, there is no doubt that Oedipus will be in Colonus until the end of his days. (cf. section 2). The tensions of the action are not used to make the audience fear for Oedipus' destiny, but to underline the aspects of conduct between the different characters, and to raise questions of retribution and reward, and punishment of those who are not just.

Ismene's arrival will also anticipate Creon's appearance, or at least the appearance of an embassy from Thebes, whom the girl must have outrun to bring the news at first hand. As suggested above, there is no reason to think that Creon might succeed, even when he kidnaps the girls, but the kidnapping is the necessary action to trigger Theseus' response. It will both give the king of Athens the chance to prove on stage his righteous conduct and how he keeps his word, and it will demonstrate Oedipus' words (914ff.) on the reversals of fortune and how strife between Athens and Thebes, at present unanticipated, could, after all, arrive unexpectedly (cf. sections 3 and 4 below).

After the situation with Creon is solved, a second interruption occurs with the arrival of Polynices. This will be the scene where the audience will meet a relentless Oedipus and side, if anything, with Antigone and Theseus in their appeals for pity (but the sensibilities of audiences vary, and there is a case to be made on the serious offences that bring a rightful punishment upon their doers).

Oedipus' anger reaffirmed, Polynices leaves to fulfil his destiny at Thebes, and the thunder from Zeus brings the play back to its religious opening. Oedipus is raised to power, Theseus is given the gift of the knowledge of his burial place, and the two girls are sent back to Thebes at their own request.

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<sup>274</sup> As pointed out by Winnington-Ingram (1980:250).

## 1.1. Suppliants and saviours

Against the view that the play is “episodic” and disconnected, it has been noted by many that the text is divided into logical sections that are built around two traditional story-patterns: the so-called “suppliant play” and the narratives of hero-cults.<sup>275</sup> The first element dominates mostly the first half of the play, even though the promise of salvation to Athens is present from the beginning on and plays a crucial part in convincing the Chorus to respect the rules of hospitality.<sup>276</sup>

Several commentators have noticed that this is not a typical suppliant play, and how Oedipus never puts himself at Theseus’ mercy, but rather offers himself as a gift of protection to Athens.<sup>277</sup> In traditional supplications, the suppliant is submissive and vulnerable to the protector; here, Oedipus is the one offering a gift that will last for the generations to come in exchange for his protection. On the other hand, the other formal supplication, Polynices’ to his father, is rejected, marking the transition to the other story-pattern, and introducing the theme of the intransigent reaction of Oedipus, already displaying his power as a hero.<sup>278</sup>

Polynices’ supplication is rejected, because of Oedipus’ implacable sense of justice, but also because of his anger. It is commonly assumed that a hero, to become one, does not have to have lived the most virtuous life, and that their wrath must be placated is one of their usual features. On the other hand, no matter how Antigone’s

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<sup>275</sup> On the articulation between the suppliant and the hero patterns, the central study is Burian’s (1974), who argues (p.408) that the only reason why the play would seem episodic is a misinterpretation of its central theme: not “the transformation of Oedipus into a hero”, but the very process of that transformation, through a sequence of moments of trial and success, the hardest of all being the confrontation with a Polynices who is portrayed “as sympathetic as possible” (p.424). Winnington-Ingram (1980:249-54) divides the play into five movements that are not incompatible with Bowra’s (1944:311) former division into three main moments. In Bowra’s view, the play is divided into a movement where Oedipus shows his love to his friends, another where he is capable of great hatred, and a final movement, his heroization, where the two aspects are brought into a synthesis. More recently, cf. Hesk (2012:179-81).

<sup>276</sup> Though Burian (1974:418) has demonstrated that the suppliant pattern returns with Creon’s entrance, after the more egalitarian scene between Theseus and Oedipus.

<sup>277</sup> E.g. Bowra (1944:310-1), Kelly (2009:76ff).

<sup>278</sup> Cf. Burian (1974:425): “He rejects the suppliant with the powers of a prophet to foretell the future, and of a *daimon* to determine it. There could be no harsher demonstration of the old man’s new powers, no more effective prelude to the mysterious transfiguration that follows”. But I sympathise with Easterling’s (1967:10) point, quoted in Burian’s note 39, that this is all the more tragic if we look at Oedipus “as a man to whom we can respond as human beings”.

plea might move the audience before Polynices' entrance, Oedipus' justice is never questioned after his exchange with his son.

This double-role of Oedipus as both suppliant and saviour, as Peter Burian points out, has already been established by the Chorus as early as 486-7 (τὸν ἰκέτην σωτήριον), and it is the alternation between the two, that structures the play.<sup>279</sup>

Besides his intransigence, there are two aspects of the cult of heroes that are relevant to the understanding of the *OC*.<sup>280</sup> One is the fact that the grave of the hero marks a delimited area that is deemed to benefit from the presence of the remains it holds. It is commonly a foreign country to which the hero has come.<sup>281</sup> In this case, it will be Athens, and from the beginning of the play we know that Oedipus has chosen to offer his mortal remains to the vicinity of Colonus.

Secondly, there is the connection of heroes with blood lines. Walter Burkert points out that “the hero cult, in fact, is not an ancestor cult at all; its concern is with effective presence, not with the chain of blood across generations, even though founding ancestors might naturally receive heroic honours”.<sup>282</sup> Regardless of the rhetorical importance put here and there in the three Theban plays in the “doomed generation” of Oedipus, in the *OC* more than ever, individual conduct is addressed. On the other hand, by his heroization, Oedipus will be set apart from the rest of mortals, and he will become a hero because some of his features were already surpassing those of an ordinary man. His heroicization brings no rescue to his line, quite the contrary, it will even seal their extinction, but brings Oedipus, individually, the power to harm his enemies and benefit his friends.

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<sup>279</sup> Burian (1974:414), where he discusses the textual problems with the reading of σωτήριον. I agree with his argument, though, that the reading makes sense, compared with what Oedipus has already revealed about his current double status.

<sup>280</sup> For a comparison of the *OC* with other narrative patterns of hero cult in Sophocles, cf. Currie (2012:338ff).

<sup>281</sup> See Parker (2011:117-8) and Bowra (1944:314-6) for earlier bibliography on the establishment of new cults.

<sup>282</sup> Burkert (1985:204)

Burkert remarks, quoting from Aristophanes' *Frogs*, that the heroes are the distributors of good and evil, seen with the power to repair injustice and punish wrong doers.<sup>283</sup> That is, after all, what Oedipus will do on stage.

## 1.2. Sophocles' choices regarding the myth

The things that happen to Oedipus in the *OC* are, coherently with the *OT*, triggered by the oracles of Apollo. Sophocles has kept the option only hinted at in the end of the *OT*, that Oedipus was, at some point sent in exile. That exile, Oedipus tells us had at first been desired by him, but was not conceded then (the story is told in e.g. 761ff.; in 1354ff., he blames Polynices directly; cf. also *OT* 1518, γῆς μ' ὄπως πέμψεις ἄποικον). He is exiled only when his passions have softened, and for no apparent reason: there is no obvious change in the situation, nor, as far as we know, a new oracular instruction. This change in timing of the exile, from the immediate punishment of Oedipus to the cold-blooded and apparently gratuitous decision to send him away, allows Oedipus a reason resent his sons and brother-in-law. The problem of what age the two siblings were supposed to be at the time is hardly relevant: Oedipus has presumably been in exile for a long time when the play starts, and his children are adults. There is no mention that they were too young to have had any influence in the decision regarding the exile before, and we should therefore assume that they were old enough.

In the *OC*, we do not learn of two complementary oracles given to two different people, but we learn of two complementary oracles about Oedipus. The first one is fundamental to explain Oedipus' stubbornness refusing to leave the shrine of the Eumenides, (cf. section 2 below), whereas the second brings the excuse for the following scenes with Creon, Theseus, and Polynices. Being oracles, by definition, utterances about the future that cannot be changed, they are the unquestionable trigger behind the change of mind of the Thebans regarding Oedipus' presence in their land. It is not through regret, reconsideration, piety, or any other sort of reason

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<sup>283</sup> Burkert (1985:208).

that Creon and Polynices come to see Oedipus, but because an oracle has shown that the former king's burial place would bring benefit and disadvantage.<sup>284</sup>

The fact that Oedipus is exiled is also a fundamental condition for the religious aspect of the play and his connections with hero cults. The wandering polluted man learns through his suffering and achieves an all-enduring status, that allows him to become both the most doomed and the most powerful of men. He can now find his resting place in a foreign land, having the power to choose whom to curse and whom to protect. Had Oedipus remained in Thebes, none of the plot would, of course, make any sense.

Another choice is to give Polynices a case that can move the internal audience of the play, and eventually the external audience as well, juggling with the tension between Oedipus' fairness in his retribution for the offence of his sons, and the horror of his curse and lack of pity for the suppliant Polynices.<sup>285</sup> The cruelty of reiterating the curse and the fact that that cruelty does not have a negative impact in the way Oedipus is seen reaffirms his status as a hero. On the other hand, as said above, both suppliant scenes are put in contrast: Oedipus will reject his son's plea, without offending the gods, and his unending anger against his sons is contrasted with his unending love towards his daughters. By the end of the scene Oedipus is already a daemonic figure, able to find his way to his grave unaided.

## 2. The oracles, the curses

The theme of fate and prophecy is brought up several times in the *OC*, but in ways that contrast with the previous treatment of the myth of Oedipus, with the exception of the three defence speeches, where the claim can be made that the uncompromising nature of the oracles ensured that his well-intentioned attempts to circumvent them were doomed to failure.

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<sup>284</sup> But see Jebb's (1900:71) note to 402, on how receiving Oedipus back is not really an option for Thebes.

<sup>285</sup> It is important to note that the play presents both sons as guilty, not favouring one side over the other. Oedipus' refusal to go back to Thebes, either for Polynices or for Eteocles, condemns both.

In the *OT*, even though we learn in the prologue that Creon has been sent to Delphi, we are led to think that the god is to answer about a concrete and present matter: the plague in Thebes and how to save the city from it. It is only later that we learn more than we would have asked for, to the point that the original matter is forgotten. We learn that Oedipus' life has all been guided by oracles, not only because everything happening around him narrowed down the possible exits into a single outcome, but also because the initiatives that we are told he took in the past were triggered by the wish to avoid the prophecies of Apollo. Those prophecies, issued as a *fait accompli* rather than an order, terrified Oedipus enough to make him run in the opposite direction.<sup>286</sup> In fact, the one time in the *OT* that Oedipus is given a direct order with instructions by the god, he follows it: he starts an investigation to find the murderer of Laius.

Here again the oracles guide Oedipus' destiny, but this time they are seen as unquestionably true and as something that Oedipus will conscientiously follow. As mentioned above, the play opens with Oedipus, once again, touching what should not be touched, but refusing to move once he is aware of it. He announces that he has changed, and that suffering has taught him endurance (7-8, στέργειν γὰρ αἰ πάθει με χῶ χρόνος ζυνῶν / μακρὸς διδάσκει καὶ τὸ γενναῖον τρίτον). Rather than wrong, this time entering blindly the grounds that should not be touched is the right thing to do (44-5, he will never leave again), and he asks for the king to be called so that he could offer a benefit, the nature of which he cannot yet reveal (70-4).<sup>287</sup> The very fact that he has entered the grove of the Eumenides, he will say, is the sign given by Apollo for Oedipus to interpret that he is in the right place (the "agreed sign of his fate" in 46, ζυμφορᾶς ζύνθημ' ἐμῆς), according to the oracle (84-95, where he anticipates the thunder of Zeus). The first appearance of Oedipus is, therefore, contrasting with the Oedipus that fled Corinth. He still starts the play willing to fulfil

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<sup>286</sup> Or the symbolically opposite direction, for I know not whether Oedipus crossed from the Peloponnese near Corinth or if he took some other way. If he did go through near Corinth, then the path to Delphi might have been the same as his father's coming from Thebes. That does not change, of course, that the two were going in opposite directions when they met.

<sup>287</sup> The arrival at Colonus is also contrasting with the first arrival at Thebes. Both times, Oedipus was a wanderer. Here, he is a blind beggar and the dreaded grove of the Eumenides turns out to be a hospitable harbour (to borrow the image from the *OT*). In the previous play, his glorious entrance in the palace of Thebes turned out to be the key to fulfil his oracles, after committing a crime that would offend the Erinyes.

Apollo's oracle, but this time it is an oracle that he knows to be about himself, and that he has to move forwards towards a geographical point. He will arrive again at a foreign land of which he will become a citizen, after wandering for a long time (cf. *OT* 1458, ἀλλ' ἡ μὲν ἡμῶν μοῖρ', ὅποιπερ εἶσ', ἴτω). He will be able to recognise from a set of landmarks that this city is his destination. Not only has Apollo given him the necessary and unambiguous signs to recognise that he has reached the promised final place, but he is also enabled to recognise signs that point to the moment of his death. This ability to read what is to come from signs from Apollo places him on a par with Tiresias, or the prophets of Delphi.

Oedipus' conviction that the god has given him instructions that he can read is startling. He is, after all, the one that failed in doing that before, when he was the prince of Corinth. In the prologue of the *OT*, we had Oedipus claiming to be fighting alongside Apollo. Here he will say that Apollo sent him to the grove of the Eumenides and beg for the goddesses not to reject both of them (86, Φοίβω τε κάμοι μὴ γένησθ' ἀγνώμονες). The main difference is that this play ends with Oedipus' claims being confirmed, as well as his new status as someone with superior knowledge. Oedipus, for once, understood his fate.<sup>288</sup> And in case the audience (internal or external) does not believe his claims, they will be confirmed twice in the play, first by the strife with Thebes over a "minor argument", and secondly by his supernatural death, witnessed by Theseus alone (cf. section 3 below).

The setting too offers clues to the prophesied destiny of Oedipus: the place where he sits in the grove of the Eumenides is described by the citizen of Colonus as the "brazen entrance" (57, χαλκόπους ὁδός, referred to again in 1591 in the words χαλκοῖς βάρθοισι), and stands for the place which was believed to be the frontier between the world of the living and Hades, to which access was given by a set of steps.<sup>289</sup> If Apollo leads Oedipus to rest at the final border, then it is likely that the

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<sup>288</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980:265), following Knox (1964:193n11), suggests that Apollo might be less present because Oedipus acquired some gift of prophesy on his own. However, this power must have come from somewhere, and we are told that Oedipus knows what he knows from Apollo.

<sup>289</sup> On the importance of the locations in this play, cf. Jebb (1900:xxx-xxxviii) or Winnington-Ingram (1980:339-40).

death of Oedipus will happen at some point in the play.<sup>290</sup> He will, indeed, return to these steps for his farewells to the public, before leading Theseus away.

Not even Oedipus, however, knows the full extent of what is prophesied for him. More important to the development of the action of the play than the new “old” oracle, is still the second oracle to come, issued much more recently, and brought unexpectedly by Ismene, as Oedipus waits for Theseus. Ismene’s appearance precedes the probable arrival of Creon, and gives the necessary information for the following scenes.<sup>291</sup>

She starts by telling of the decision shared by her two brothers, whom she calls “ill-fated” (365, ἂ δ’ ἀμφὶ τοῖν σοῖν δυσμόροιον παῖδοιν κακὰ), not to take the throne, so that they would not stain Thebes (368, ἐᾶσθαι μηδὲ χραίνεσθαι πόλιν) through any possible continuation of the doomed line represented by their house (369-70, λόγῳ σκοποῦσι τὴν πάλαι γένους φθοράν, / οἷα κατέσχε τὸν σὸν ἄθλιον δόμον).<sup>292</sup> However — and her words imply that she is only guessing at the reason — she attributes to a god or a sinning state of mind (371, ἐκ θεῶν του κάλιτηρίου φρενός),<sup>293</sup> and to a wicked strife (372, ἔρις κακὴ) the fact that the two siblings changed their mind and started a fight for the throne.<sup>294</sup> She then tells of Eteocles’ taking the throne, and of Polynices, elder and exiled by his younger brother, organising an attack from Argos (374-81). Once again, the way in which both brothers are bringing a civil war upon Thebes is exactly the fulfilment of the negative consequences for the city that they had originally wanted to avoid, as if part of the so-called curse over the

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<sup>290</sup> At the very end of the *OT*, 1528-30, the Chorus says that no man can be judged happy before he has crossed the border of life. I agree with Winnington-Ingram’s (1980:255) interpretation that Oedipus is not to be judged happy anyway. What he acquires when he crosses the border is power.

<sup>291</sup> However, cf. Burian (1974:412) on how Sophocles chose to make “the supplication initially quite independent of the pursuit (by Creon’s men)” by bringing Ismene in after the initial reaction of the Chorus, rather than giving Oedipus the totality of the oracles from the beginning. One of the reasons, he argues, is Oedipus’ reaction: “the scene, then, is designed to reveal the growth in Oedipus’ understanding of his heroic destiny, and consequently the growth of his power”.

<sup>292</sup> See Jebb (1900), *ad loc.*, about the contrast of λόγῳ with the subsequent passions.

<sup>293</sup> Cf. also section 3 on random small causes in the origin of changes of political state.

<sup>294</sup> Jebb (1900:xxv) points out the double-causation for the civil war, “inspired by the evil genius of their race, and by their own sinful thoughts”. The result, Jebb concludes, is that “the two sons no longer appear as helpless victims of fate; they have incurred moral blame, and are just objects of paternal anger”. He is right, as he is right to underline that the timing of Oedipus’ curse after the strife has broken off makes for a greater dramatic effect, as Oedipus’ final “weapon” against his sons on stage.

house. None of this is necessarily strange. It is, however, the dimension of personal choice and greed that will bring the actions of Polynices and Eteocles closer to the pattern of Creon in the *Antigone* than to the innocence of Oedipus, notwithstanding Polynices' attempt to compare his own exile with that of his father in 1256ff.

The strife between the brothers, Ismene stresses, is not a matter of words, but something that has already been set in motion by their deeds, which she contrasts with their vain promises (382-3, ταῦτ' οὐκ ἀριθμὸς ἐστίν, ὦ πάτερ, λόγων, / ἀλλ' ἔργα δεινά); the brothers have already initiated the fight. For our present concerns, it is important to underline the closing sentence of her report: τοὺς δὲ σοὺς ὄπου θεοὶ πόνους κατοικτιοῦσιν οὐκ ἔχω μαθεῖν (383-4). The civil strife in Thebes represents yet another set of sufferings inflicted upon Oedipus, sufferings which have a seemingly irrational cause (and are therefore attributed to the gods) in the change of mind of his two sons. Oedipus answers wondering how she could ever have expected that the gods would protect him (385-6 ἦδη γὰρ ἔσχευς ἐλπιδ' ὡς ἐμοῦ θεοῦς / ὦραν τιν' ἔξειν, ὥστε σωθῆναί ποτε;). This is one of the few instances of irony in the play, since Ismene does bring Oedipus the key to the vindictive side of his destiny.<sup>295</sup> Ismene will confirm that she had expected as much, from the new oracles that she is about to report to Oedipus. Oedipus, on the other hand, has already announced that Apollo has promised him rest and a gift to his hosts, but does not know yet that the fate of Thebes too lies in his hands, allowing him a retribution for the exile by making him needed again (he starts to understand it more clearly in 450-4).<sup>296</sup> On the other hand, Ismene's apprehension is justified, in that this also must bring new sufferings, mostly for the two sisters who will have to contend with the consequences of the quarrel between their brothers, after Oedipus' death, which in turn signals the end of Oedipus' line, left without any male descendent.

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<sup>295</sup> There are two sides of Oedipus' reaction to Polynices' petition and its alternative in support of Eteocles. One is simply justice: Polynices is attacking Thebes, and it is unthinkable that Oedipus should support that. The other is retribution for the earlier dishonouring of the father. I call it "vindictive" above, but do not wish to make it sound like a way for Oedipus to satisfy his thirst of revenge. His reiteration of the curse on his sons is ultimately just, and, unlike the "overreaction" at the crossroads in the earlier play, it is not the excessive payment for a smaller offence.

<sup>296</sup> Note, however, that the idea that the gods are offering Oedipus' some sort of compensation is hardly that consoling after a life such as the one Oedipus has lived. Cf. 395, γέροντα δ' ὀρθοῦν φλαῖρον ὃς νέος πέσῃ.

But there is a fundamental difference: when Oedipus speaks of his sufferings in his dialogue with Theseus in 595-601, he is referring to the exile imposed on him by the Thebans, with the assent of his sons, in cold blood, long after he had ceased to wish to be exiled (e.g. 591, on the sons rejecting the exile before). It is against those, his human enemies, that Oedipus will soon acquire the power of revenge. In no way is it ever said that Oedipus' future power is a compensation from the gods for wronging him in the past — that would imply saying that the gods were wrong to begin with. In the third stasimon, the Chorus will still sing about how it is better not to be born or to die as soon as possible, and certainly not about how the gods give people a benefit to compensate them from former misfortune.

Ismene informs Oedipus that the salvation of Thebes from the civil war depends on him, who will be sought by both sides, thanks to his promised power. This is the exchange in 389-394:

ΙΣ: σὲ τοῖς ἐκεῖ ζητητὸν ἀνθρώποις ποτὲ  
θανόντ' ἔσεσθαι ζώντ' αὖτ' εὐσόιας χάριν.  
ΟΙ: τίς δ' ἄν τοιοῦδ' ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς εὖ πράξειεν ἄν;  
ΙΣ: ἐν σοὶ τὰ κείνων φασὶ γίγνεσθαι κράτη.  
ΟΙ: ὄτ' οὐκέτ' εἰμί, τηνικαδὺτ' ἄρ' εἴμ' ἀνὴρ;  
ΙΣ: νῦν γὰρ θεοὶ σ' ὀρθοῦσι, πρόσθε δ' ὥλλυσαν.

Is: One day you will be sought after by the men of that land, alive or dead, for the benefit of prosperity.

Oe: Who would achieve any good from a man like this one?

Is: It is said that their power will come to be in you(r hand).<sup>297</sup>

Oe: When I am no longer anything, then I am a man?

Is: Now the gods raise you up; they have destroyed you before.

Oedipus' reaction is of surprise towards the apparent reversal of fortune, by being considered a “man” again (393).<sup>298</sup> Ismene, in her answer in 394, still sees this new power as a sign that the gods, previously destroying Oedipus, are now favouring him. As for the people, the reactions differ, and the daughter of Oedipus may not know the plans of the gods, but knows what has been decided in Thebes. Creon will come to bring Oedipus back in a condition of submission, as a slave, not even inside the

<sup>297</sup> Implicitly, the power for any of the sides in Thebes will only materialise when they have Oedipus' body.

<sup>298</sup> It is not clear yet that he will need to be dead. On the other hand, he has already introduced himself in his prayer to the Eumenides as a ghostlike figure, rather than a man in his full capabilities.

walls (as told by Ismene 399-400, and confirmed in the dialogue 404-8). Later, Polynices will offer to bring him back to the palace (1342), but Theseus unambiguously offers Oedipus the citizenship of Athens (637). Oedipus does not need to wait for those two interventions to decide that he will never favour the envoys of his sons; he reiterates in 408, 450-3, now with a secular reason, the decision he had already announced based on Apollo's signals that he was not to leave Colonus again. Jebb notes that Oedipus at first misinterprets Ismene, and thinks that the new oracle comes to replace the old one. Once he realises that the Thebans will still be interested in the benefits from his tomb only, that will be kept outside, and not in his presence in Thebes (399-400), he “sees that the new oracle does *not* cancel the former, but merely confirms it in one aspect, viz. in the promise of ἄτην τοῖς πέμψασιν (93)”.<sup>299</sup>

If there was still anything left to fear about Oedipus' future, the following lines of Ismene's report dispel the doubts. Oedipus declares that the Thebans will never get their hands on him (408, οὐκ ἄρ' ἐμοῦ γε μὴ κρατήσωσιν ποτε). As Oedipus' conversation with Ismene proceeds, it becomes clear that if the Thebans are unable to take control of him and he is, on his death, buried beyond their borders, in the Athenian territory, his anger will spell defeat for Thebes in some later conflict in the vicinity of his grave (411, τῆς σῆς ὑπ' ὀργῆς, σοῖς ὅταν στῶσιν τάφοις). This prediction has the authority of Delphi behind it (413-5), and when Oedipus learns that both his sons were aware of it (417), and have not responded by recalling him, his wrath knows no bounds. That knowledge causes Oedipus' first curse against both sons, to which we shall return shortly. The curse ends with Oedipus declaring his certainty about the doomed fate of his sons, a certainty he has from comparing the oracles old a new, and how Apollo has fulfilled them in 450-54:

ἀλλ' οὐ τι μὴ λάχωσι τοῦδε συμμάχου,  
οὐδέ σφιν ἀρχῆς τῆσδε Καδμείας ποτὲ  
ὄνησις ἦξει· τοῦτ' ἐγῶδα, τῆσδέ τε  
μαντεῖ' ἀκούων συννοῶν τε τὰζ ἐμοῦ  
παλαίφαθ' ἄμοι Φοῖβος ἦνυσέν ποτε.

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<sup>299</sup> Jebb (1900:71).

They will never obtain this one as ally, nor shall they have any benefit from this Theban rule. I know those things, as I listen to her prophecies [Ismene's], and I compare them with the ones spoken to myself long ago, which Phoebus is now fulfilling for me.

Oedipus is referring to the oracles brought by Ismene and to the oracle that he knew already about the end of his wandering, and considering the two of them together (συννοῶν). They do not contradict each other, rather they are complementary, and provide Oedipus with the power to dictate that the current rule of Thebes, be it Creon and Eteocles', be it Polynices', will not be successful. He challenges Creon to come, and promises the Chorus salvation for the city, and toil for his enemies (459-60, τῆδε τῆ πόλει μέγαν σωτήρ' ἀρεῖσθε, τοῖς δ' ἐμοῖς ἐχθροῖς πόνους).<sup>300</sup> We are here in the realm of certainty, not watching Oedipus' disorientation anymore. The half-episode ends with Ismene leaving the stage to carry out the required purification on behalf of her father.

The two oracles are, then, at the origin of all action, and the play develops from their exposition to their fulfilment (rather than from their fulfilment to their exposition, as in the *OT*). It has been noted that one of the effects of Ismene's intervention is to shift matters from the realm of the purely religious into the world of politics.<sup>301</sup> If that is the case, then Ismene also brings the second main theme of the play, when it comes to destiny: the topic of good conduct. This does not mean, of course, that her oracle says anything about good conduct (unlike the oracle in the *OT* that demanded the expiation of a crime), but it is thanks to the oracle she brings that Creon and Polynices will appear (Polynices admits it in 1331-2), and it is thanks to the benefit promised by that oracle that the contrast between their conducts and that of Antigone, Theseus, and Oedipus will be staged.

If supernatural fate is the ultimate engine of the action, and if it accounts for what happens to Oedipus, it does not excuse any of the decisions made by the characters on stage. There are in the *OC* two very dominant themes. One involves the unexplainable reversals of fortune (cf. section 3), and the other relates to personal

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<sup>300</sup> A detailed analysis of the topos of helping friends and harming enemies is made by Blundell (1989:226-259) in the book by the same name, starting with this passage and arguing that the double principle is in the structure of the whole play. I agree with most of her analysis.

<sup>301</sup> E.g. Winnington-Ingram (1980:250).

conduct (cf. section 4). The oracles, this time, will not predict anything that overlaps the two, as they did in the *OT*, by implying for no discernible reason that Oedipus would act wrongly because he was destined to do so unknowingly.

The major exposition of the supernatural fate independent of the agent's wishes is in Oedipus' three defence speeches, to which we shall move briefly. Before we do so, however, a last remark on the fate distributed by the gods. Oedipus claims (87f.) that his arrival in Colonus had been foretold to him by Apollo and also that the god's authority guarantees the truth of his words at 623 (which makes the following 628 necessarily rhetorical), and Theseus will echo that claim (665). Oedipus will also assign the "mouth of the god" (603) as the main factor constraining his sons' actions. However, Apollo's presence is not ominous as in the *OT*, neither is the notion of an ancient curse used as anything other than something that may perhaps have happened in the past, so distant that it is irrelevant. We are, however, in the realm of the Erinyes, but the crimes against kin that they, with Oedipus, seem to be avenging are the recent offences of the sons of Oedipus.

Nonetheless, as we shall see below, some of the actions that we see performed are but the continuation of things long ago made irreparable. They will be, for good and for ill, reiterated on stage, both by renewed offences (Creon), or by new curses (from Oedipus). Thus, as Polynices leaves the scene to return to Thebes, the Chorus sings about fate being accomplished, renewed with new sufferings, and how they will never question a decree from the gods, even when they do not understand it 1447-55:<sup>302</sup>

νέα τάδε νεόθεν ἦλθέ μοι  
κακά βαρύποτμὰ παρ' ἀλαοῦ ζένου,  
εἴ τι μοῖρα μὴ κιγχάνει.  
μάταν γὰρ οὐδὲν ἀζίωμα δαιμόνων ἔχω φράσαι.  
ὄρᾳ ὄρᾳ ταῦτ' αἰεὶ χρόνος, στρέφων μὲν ἕτερα,  
τὰ δὲ παρ' ἡμᾶρ αὐθις αὐζῶν ἄνω.  
ἔκτυπεν αἰθίρ, ὦ Ζεῦ.

I have seen these new evils come from a new origin, grievous evils from the blind stranger, or perhaps *moira* is overtaking. For it is not for me to say that a

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<sup>302</sup> The lines have raised discussion: some believe they comment on the preceding scene, others that they look forward to what follows; cf. Kamerbeek (1984:198-7) for a survey of these interpretations. I side with Jebb (1900 *ad loc.*) and Burton (1980: 268-9), reading them as a comment on what has just happened (at least up to 1454), with special agreement with Jebb's note on how the Chorus differentiates Oedipus' responsibility for his sons' fate from what would already be their fate anyway.

decision of the gods is ever in vain. Watching, watching forever over these things is time, overturning one situation and restoring another from one day to the next.<sup>303</sup>

The heavens resound with the crash of thunder, Zeus!

Two aspects deserve comment here. First, the very confusion between what is μοῖρα and what is coming παρ' ἀλαοῦ ζένου. The novelty for the Chorus is that it is through Oedipus' curse (and through his son's decision to leave for Thebes) that they see the realisation and inescapability of Polynices' fate. The fate was there from the beginning, but Oedipus' words make it actual. On the other hand, and here it is plausible to think that the Chorus is not commenting on Polynices any more, the general claim about time bringing about good and bad fortune at different moments brings us back to the point where the play had been left before the interventions of Polynices and Creon, namely, the point where Oedipus was telling Theseus about the wheel of time (cf. section 3). Here, however, it will not be to justify the possible strife between the two cities, but to prepare the ground for what is to come, fulfilling Oedipus' promise. He is about to be elevated in power, putting an end to the years of exile. The intervention of the Chorus is interrupted by the thunder of Zeus.

### **2.1. Oedipus' three defence speeches**

It has been said many times before that Oedipus' extreme suffering is startling because there is no visible cause in his behaviour to justify his fall, and that that is exactly what makes him a paradigm of the human condition. In the three defence speeches, two of them to the Chorus, the other in response to Creon, Oedipus will give his own evaluation of his actions, of the actions of others around, and of what came by the decision of the gods. These speeches, far from being meant as unconvincing, as has been suggested by some interpreters, play a fundamental role in

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<sup>303</sup> Following Jebb's suggestions for the problematic aspects of the text (1900:223-5).

the heroization of Oedipus, along with the contrast of his conduct with that of Creon and Polynices.<sup>304</sup>

The first speech is originated by the Chorus' attempt to drive Oedipus and Antigone out of Colonus. Antigone's emotional plea, in sharp contrast with her argument with Creon in the earlier play,<sup>305</sup> will introduce the topic of Oedipus' actions being unwilling, a fact that she assumes as part of the story the Chorus already knows (239-40, ἔργων / ἀκόντων αἰώντες αὐδάν). At the origin of the actions, she will remind them, is a god leading the way, from which situation no mortal would have been able to escape (252-4 οὐ γὰρ ἴδοις ἄν ἀθρῶν βροτὸν / ὅστις ἄν, εἰ θεὸς ἄγοι, / ἐκφυγεῖν δύναιτο). To the Chorus, she attributes a power equivalent to the gods, namely conceding their favour, χάρις (248-9 ἐν ἕμῃ γὰρ ὡς θεῶ / κείμεθα τλάμονες. ἀλλ' ἴτε, νεύσατε τὰν ἀδόκητον χάριν). So far, the only thing the Chorus may have heard was that Oedipus had a great benefit to offer Theseus, in return for a small favour (72, ὡς ἄν προσαρκῶν σμικρὰ κερδάνῃ μέγα). The one other reference to Oedipus' future power, in 93, has not been heard by anyone other than Antigone. At this moment, not even Oedipus himself knows the details of the second oracle.

Antigone is placing on the Chorus a power that will belong to Oedipus. The elders of Colonus, however, afraid of the consequences of disrespecting the gods, refuse her plea. Oedipus' first apology picks up on that refusal, by introducing another theme constant throughout the play: the matching of word and deed. In this case, the reference is to the reputation of Athens as respecting the gods and sheltering

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<sup>304</sup> Kelly (2009:52ff.) and Allan (2013:179-87) make the case for Sophocles to be making Oedipus' apologies deliberately weak and flawed. I disagree with most of Kelly's analysis, and shall discuss it in the following pages.

On the other hand, I agree with Allan's main points that there is no moral evolution from the *OT* to the *OC*, and that in both plays Oedipus is to be seen as "both responsible and polluted" (p.187). However, I do not think that there is a need to make the arguments inconsistent for the audience (and the Chorus) to know that Oedipus is the doer of awful deeds — that is what they already know! Oedipus' role will be to convince them that he is *also* innocent. He never claims that he did not do any of those things, nor does he declare himself guilty *tout court*. His position is already and necessarily ambiguous, but ultimately, he *is* the man that was bound to do those things from birth. Ultimately, the audience should be able to still sympathise with him, and understand the difference between reality and appearances, and how was it possible that someone essentially good would do those horrible things.

<sup>305</sup> Antigone, 242ff., will appeal to a kinship that does not exist, and will look the Chorus in the eyes, unlike the pose she had adopted against Creon. Here she is pleading; before she had accepted the consequences of her burial of Polynices.

strangers (260-3, esp. θεοσεβειστάτας ... ζένον σφύζειν) versus the Chorus' attempt to drive them away. Ironically, again, Oedipus will ask whether they fear his name, his body, or his deeds (265-6 ὄνομα μόνον δείσαντες; οὐ γὰρ δὴ τό γε / σώμ' οὐδὲ τάργα τάρμ'). His deeds, done long ago, were, as he will argue, more “suffered” than “executed” (266-7, ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα μου / πεπονθότ' ἐστὶ μάλλον ἢ δεδρακότα), and his (dead) body will be the very material centre of his future power. The first argument appears in 270-4:

(...) καίτοι πῶς ἐγὼ κακὸς φύσιν,  
 ὅστις παθῶν μὲν ἀντέδρων, ὥστ' εἰ φρονῶν  
 ἔπρασσον, οὐδ' ἂν ὧδ' ἐγιγνόμην κακός;  
 νῦν δ' οὐδὲν εἰδὼς ἰκόμην ἴν' ἰκόμην,  
 ὑφ' ὧν δ' ἔπασχον, εἰδόντων ἀπωλλύμην.

And yet, how was I evil by nature, someone who was paying back after having suffered; not even if I had done it in full awareness, would I have turned out to be evil. As it happens, not knowing anything, I went where I went, and I have suffered under their hands, who knowingly were destroying me.

Everyone analysing this passage has noted that there is more than one line of argument condensed in it. First, the problem of being evil “by nature” (ἐγὼ κακὸς φύσιν);<sup>306</sup> second, the question of ignorance (Oedipus neither knew the identity of Laius nor that, in killing him, he was fulfilling his oracle); third, the matter of self-defence (which will be brought up again in the second and third speeches); and finally, the matter of intention (his accidental killing of his father versus the deliberate attempt to kill him as a baby, by both his parents).

Of the four arguments, the first and second are essential for Oedipus' moral innocence, a moral innocence that has to be assured and reassured for his ending in the play to be satisfactory rather than outraging. Oedipus is basically well-intentioned man who acted wrongly because he could not have acted otherwise with the

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<sup>306</sup> We shall return to this below, but the problem of generational evil is relevant: Oedipus, even though he was born to fulfil an oracle that made him commit evil deeds, does not consider himself intrinsically evil. He does not accuse Laius of that either; but his punishment to his sons is to break the generational ties by saying he is not their father anymore, ties that are strongly kept between the daughters and their brothers. Creon is seen as evil by nature, even if he says he is not. Oedipus is, however, destined to suffer from birth, and so are the female children, from the conditions in which they are born (which does not, of course, take away their responsibility for their deeds). The male siblings' conduct confirms and adds up to their doom. Polynices will say that if he is not the son of Oedipus (if Oedipus disowns him), then he is the son of an evil doom, but either way he is called the son of Oedipus in 1323-4 — and Oedipus will indeed reiterate his son's evil doom.

knowledge available to him. Now he will be the same man (with the same φύσις), but with some newly acquired understanding and power. Were Oedipus evil by nature, the play would have collapsed.<sup>307</sup>

The argument of self-defence works in two ways. First, there was an outside provocation to which Oedipus had to react (as he will say later, when inviting others to put themselves in his place), and it would have been impossible not to do so, regardless of how he qualifies his response as overreaction in the *OT* (810, οὐ μὴν ἴσην γ' ἔτισεν).<sup>308</sup> On the other hand, the same wording will be used by Creon to justify his violent actions against Oedipus (953, ἀνθ' ὧν πεπονθῶς ἠξίου τὰδ' ἀντιδρᾶν, a variant of this idea of retaliation has already been used by the Chorus in 229-33 to justify their initial betrayal of Oedipus after luring him out of the grove). That, rather than approximating the two, sets them in clear contrast: Oedipus is genuinely reacting to a provocation, whereas Creon, who has appeared with false words of peace, had already kidnapped Ismene behind the scenes. Oedipus' violence against him is justified by the previous knowledge that he is lying (cf. Ismene's report, 399-400).

Finally, the matter of intention, crucial to the whole play. Oedipus did not choose to kill his father or marry his mother. His sons, however, chose not to speak up when he was exiled, chose to break their truce, chose to seek him only after they heard of potential benefit; Theseus chooses to protect Oedipus, Creon to be violent. In the

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<sup>307</sup> Kelly (2009:53) disagrees, convinced that Oedipus cannot claim not to have any problem “by nature” to an audience that would have been aware of the house of Laius. I think one ought to distinguish between hereditary misfortune (Antigone will talk about her father's inborn disgrace in 1671) and innate bad character. Oedipus is making a point about moral guilt. As far as moral guilt is concerned, either he nor his daughters do anything that deserves the extreme sufferings they endure, and neither does Laius, by that matter.

<sup>308</sup> Kelly's (2009:53-4) other objections are that Oedipus cannot claim passivity after he says he is paying back what his parents have done; that in the *OT* he admits his over-reaction, and that he does not mention the oracle given to Laius but justifies his own wrongs with his oracle. I agree with Jebb (1900:*ad loc.*) reading ἀντέδρων as referring exclusively to the attack in the crossroads. As for the over-reaction, I do not think much weight should be put into it: there is a numeric issue that would be unbalancing anyway, if Oedipus killed several men because he was provoked, had he not won that battle, he would have been provoked by several men against one. As for the oracle of Laius, this is the only place where he blames his parents for knowingly wanting to kill him, which is true, since their reaction to the words of Apollo was to expose the son. When later Oedipus will refer to Jocasta marrying him, he will underline that she did not know what she was doing either.

same way, his parents were aware of what they were doing when they exposed him on Cithaeron.<sup>309</sup>

Oedipus' speech has the effect of convincing the Chorus to wait for Theseus to judge on whether to protect him or not. In the meanwhile, Ismene is sent to perform the purification. The Chorus, out of curiosity now, has further questions for Oedipus who, again, does not want to speak.<sup>310</sup> Oedipus reiterates that the deeds that caused his suffering were not his choice (521-3).<sup>311</sup> This time, he addresses the wedding to Jocasta, which he blames on the city offering him a gift (426-7). Rather than a hypocritical attempt to say that he was forced to marry (as Kelly seems to suggest), the lines suggest simply that the city offered him a bed that, without his knowing (οὐδὲν ἴδριν), was his ruin (ἄτα).<sup>312</sup> They say nothing of the city's intentionally setting him a trap or deliberately hiding some telling detail they possess — for Thebes too, Oedipus seemed to be the saviour they were in need of at the time. Quite the contrary, the marriage was a gift (repeated in 540, δῶρον), that turned out to be an unexpected disaster. The two daughters are living reminders of the incest (534-5), therefore sharing in Oedipus' ruin (1135-6).

With a similar structure of interrogation (cf. 437-541 scheme of question and answer with 545-8), the Chorus asks about the second crime. Once again, Oedipus answers with self-defence and lack of intention.<sup>313</sup> In this second defence the

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<sup>309</sup> Kelly (2009:54) accuses Oedipus of conveniently only using the oracle to apologise for his own actions, and not for his parents'. The major distinction here, however, is not what caused an action, but how much was known of it. The parents chose to avoid the oracle by exposing the child.

<sup>310</sup> Kelly (2009:55) sees in this refusal a sign that Oedipus is not completely innocent. Both Oedipus and Ismene stress elsewhere that speaking of evil things is living them a second time. That seems a convincing excuse to me.

<sup>311</sup> The text is diabolically uncertain in several places that are relevant to the interpretation. For a survey of the emendations suggested to 521 and 547, see Finkelberg (1997).

<sup>312</sup> Kelly (2009:56), with his note 11, where he remarks that one of the MSS readings attributes the ignorance to the city. Both would be valid points.

<sup>313</sup> Kelly (2009:57) argues that Oedipus only brings up the theme of self-defence, explicitly, in the third speech. I am unsure why would he think this.

presence of a divine cause is not clear,<sup>314</sup> but there is the claim that Oedipus is νόμος καθαρός (548). This is to be read as referring to human justice, so that Oedipus' innocence is established from both a civil and a religious point of view. Besides the setting up by the gods, Oedipus was also led by the events in the human sphere. The two types of cause were present already in the *OT*, and inseparable, as we have seen. After receiving an oracle, Jocasta and Laius still had to actually have a child and then to decide to expose it (of course, the oracles never mentioned the attempt to kill the baby), Thebes still had to be afflicted by the Sphinx and reward her saviour, and so on. In that way, the eventual "will of the gods" takes the form of the web of human circumstances that build up a chain of coincidences in which Oedipus finds himself entangled. It is possible that the argument of divine (mis)guidance would appeal more strongly to the Chorus, and was thus used first, when Oedipus' permanence in Colonus was dependent on persuading the elders.

Theseus will not need any explanation from Oedipus, as has been made clear in Theseus' opening speech, 551ff.<sup>315</sup> The third defence speech is prompted by Creon's intervention, after the kidnapping of Ismene has been revealed, when he attempts to justify his actions on the grounds that no city would wish to harbour a polluted person, or refuse to turn him into his family when requested to do so. The first few lines, in defence of the accusation of incest and murdering, contain one final argument, that Oedipus has not advanced so far, in 964-8:

(...) θεοῖς γὰρ ἦν οὕτω φίλον,  
 τάχ' ἄν τι μηνίουσιν εἰς γένος πάλαι.  
 ἐπεὶ καθ' αὐτόν γ' οὐκ ἄν ἐξέυροις ἐμοὶ  
 ἀμαρτίας ὄνειδος οὐδέν, ἀνθ' ὅτου  
 τάδ' εἰς ἑμαυτὸν τοὺς ἐμούς θ' ἠμάρτανον.

<sup>314</sup> Unless one adopts Lloyd-Jones' emendation to 547. Regardless, it would still be the combination of the oracles that decreed Oedipus' life with his innocence in a civil trial. I agree with Allan (2013:182 with n28) that an *atē* was never enough to evade responsibility, but I do not think that is what Oedipus is doing. Allan is right to remark that pollution comes from the act, and not from the intention, but we have just witnessed the Chorus giving detailed instructions on a ritual of purification (though for a different fault), and there will be a second one towards the end of the play. The stress seems to be rather on how in spite of being the one that killed his father and married his mother, Oedipus is still of righteous nature and, in what regards Athens, even beneficial. Cf. Finkelberg (1997:574-5) on the supposition that Oedipus would by now be purified and is no threat to Athens.

<sup>315</sup> Walker (1995:173) points out that that would be the norm, rather than the opposite, and that suppliants do not ever have to prove their innocence.

Such [*sc.* suffering] was dear to the gods, perhaps angered with the family from long ago.<sup>316</sup> For taking me by myself you would not find any error with which to reproach me, in retribution for which I have done wrong against myself and against mine.

Once again, Oedipus enumerates what he has suffered, claiming that it was not his will, but the will of the gods that he would suffer. The novelty is that he now stresses that the reason for this suffering (or punishment by the gods) must be found in the ancestral generations, since there is no cause in his lifetime that would explain such fate (there is no suggestion that it should be in Laius' either). He will support that by saying strongly, in 969-73, how the oracle came before his birth, condemning him even before his life begun:

ἐπεὶ δίδαζον, εἴ τι θέσφατον πατρὶ  
χρησμοῖσιν ἰκνεῖθ' ὥστε πρὸς παίδων θανεῖν,  
πῶς ἂν δικαίως τοῦτ' ὄνειδίζοις ἐμοί,  
ὅς οὔτε βλάστας πω γενεθλίου πατρός,  
οὐ μητρὸς εἶχον, ἀλλ' ἀγέννητος τότ' ἦ;

For if not, show me, if a decree of the gods was coming to my father, in an oracle, that he would die at the hands of his child, how could you justly reproach me with this, who had no yet been begotten by my father nor carried by the mother, but was still unborn?

This shifts the responsibility to the time where Oedipus was not yet even alive, but it does not attribute it to his direct ancestors. He has blamed his parents before for the exposure, but in the remaining lines of his third defence, he goes out of his way to stress that Jocasta was equally ignorant of the fact that she was marrying her son (982, οὐκ εἰδότη' οὐκ εἰδυῖα), and that his father, were it possible to bring him back to life as a witness, would testify for the circumstances of their meeting not to have been propitious to an introduction (992-9).<sup>317</sup>

When Oedipus advances that he might be paying for an ancestral crime, that does not necessarily clarify anything about his fate. As the Chorus remarked in the *OT* 483ff., there was no ancient cause against the Labdacidae they could remember. Lacking a cause that can be pin-pointed, the supposition is a moot point. Oedipus

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<sup>316</sup> In agreement with Webster (1936:31) that the possibility has a rhetorical force.

<sup>317</sup> Antigone too (*Antigone* 515) will say that Eteocles would not judge her cause unfair.

will have offered, however, an explanation of sorts for the random changes of fortune, in his first encounter with Theseus. We shall look at the scene in section 3 below, in connection with Oedipus' acquiring a daemonic power. For now, it is enough to say that, by shifting the cause of his misery to the time before his birth, together with his ignorance about the acts he was committing, and the circumstances that led to them and that he could not control, Oedipus has convincingly stated his moral innocence.

## **2.2. Alternative possibilities and unique outcomes**

In the analysis of the previous plays, we have done the exercise of asking whether there were moments in the play where the audience was invited to think that things could still be otherwise. Rather than counterfactual speculation about things outside of the text, the exercise served the purpose of trying to understand how Sophocles may be playing with certain ideas of fate and choice through the very structure of the play, leading the audience's expectations in different directions, from the open possibilities of the *Antigone*, dependent on the timing of Creon's change of mind, to the closing inwards spiral of the *OT*. In both plays, the figure of Tiresias relatively early in the plays' development was fundamental to set the focus on the sources of anxiety (Antigone's eventual salvation, and Oedipus' walk towards the revelation of his past).

The same exercise can be done with the *OC*. This is, perhaps, the play in which more things are apparently to be decided on stage. The reason for this, as we hope to demonstrate, is that most options have already been cut off by the chain of cause and effect, and that the succession of obstacles between Oedipus and his end seem to serve purposes other than to make the audience anxious about what is going to happen, namely to serve the contrast of attitudes between characters.

In the first episode, there are three moments when Oedipus has to persuade his interlocutors, which is not so strange, given the importance of concepts such as πίστις, φιλία, and keeping one's word in the play. All of them seem to turn out well for him, in stronger or milder ways: the Chorus may be too scared to decide what to do, but they pity him and wait for Theseus, who will believe that Apollo led Oedipus' steps and will concede him citizenship immediately.

The first 46 lines of the play establish a few fundamental things, namely that a) Oedipus has wandered (in other words, “been led by his fate”, cf. *OT* 1458) and has now reached an important landmark; b) time and suffering changed him in some way (though presumably not in nature); c) he will stay in Colonus.

There is nothing negative in Oedipus’ first portrait. He and his daughter, faithful guide for all those years, arrive at a quiet place outside of the main city. He starts by claiming that all the years of wandering taught him endurance. On the other hand, the attitude towards the people of the place they arrive at is, from the beginning, one of respect (cf. 12-3). While a great part of the horror of the *OT* was caused by the irony of Oedipus’ role in the search for the murderer of Laius, it was never the case in the former play that Oedipus purposely hid the truth or spoke words that he did not plan to maintain.<sup>318</sup> The audience with the *OT* in mind might have remembered that trait, but even if not, the certainty with which Oedipus says that he has arrived at his destined place leaves little room for doubts. The same goes for Oedipus’ piety. When the stranger tells him to stand up, as soon as he sees Oedipus in the sanctuary, it is strange that Oedipus chooses not to move. Rather than taking away credibility from his claim, the fact that he knows he can enter the sacred ground of the Eumenides and find shelter and not trouble by doing so is significant.

Just as he asked his daughter to describe the area at which they had arrived, he asks the citizen of Colonus to describe the goddesses to whom the grove is dedicated. They are the daughters of the earth and darkness (40, Γῆς τε καὶ Σκότου κόραι), it is said. And to Oedipus’ inquiring on their name, the positive term Eumenides, will be given (the all-seeing Eumenides, even, in 42, τὰς πάνθ’ ὀρώσας Εὐμενίδας).<sup>319</sup>

The contrast with the *OT* is great: Oedipus, who had been chased down by Apollo and the Keres in the first stasimon, is now guided by Apollo to the grove of the goddesses who avenge crimes of blood, and that grove is a harbour, rather than a place of trial (even if he will make his defences). This arrival is, of course, diametrically opposed in appearance to his first arrival at Thebes, where he thought that he had reached a good harbour (*OT* 422-3) but which turned out to be his ruin.

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<sup>318</sup> There is surprisingly little irony in the *OC*, compared with the former two plays.

<sup>319</sup> The daughter of darkness, who see everything, provide a kind of parallel for the condition of Oedipus who, though blind, unerringly “sees” that he has come to the right place.

In the end, however, both arrivals led him to an ascension to power. But the most important aspect is that Oedipus' main persecutors are here changing roles. If the Eumenides are benevolent to him from the beginning, and Apollo gave him the signs to recognise his destiny, then it is unlikely that Oedipus turns out to be wrong. He has recognised the signs of his fate, he will be the supplicant of the Eumenides, and he will never move again (44-5, followed by a formal prayer in 84ff.).<sup>320</sup>

From then on, there will be little doubt as to what will ultimately happen and, as far as Oedipus is concerned, the issue will rather be to see how and when it happens. The citizen from Colonus is sympathetic. The Chorus will oscillate between sympathy, curiosity, and fear. Oedipus makes two of his apology speeches to them, but they are not determining, as the Chorus leaves the judgment to Theseus. Ismene arrives with news that only confirm Oedipus' certainty, but announce some obstacles to be fought on the way. The king of Athens, when he finally arrives, does not need to hear Oedipus' defence at all, and offers him citizenship and protection. By the end of the first episode, Oedipus' position is absolutely secured, both in the religious and in the civil realms. Towards the end of the play, if the audience has been paying attention, they will not be surprised by the thunders that scare the Chorus, for they have been announced by Oedipus already in 94-5 as the signs given by Apollo for Oedipus to identify the time of his death.

In the following episodes, the two sides of the strife in Thebes, announced by Ismene, will make an appearance. Creon's persuasive speech is, from the beginning, very unlikely to convince anyone in the audience or in the Chorus, for all heard Ismene telling her father about Creon's intentions to keep Oedipus in the outskirts of Thebes (399-401). The fact that Creon starts by lying, does not help his cause. When he finally resorts to violence, it is the time for "Athens to prove her worth", as Antigone had put it earlier, in 720-1. And that is all it will be about: a contrast between people like Creon and people like Theseus, the values and might of Athens versus the values of Thebes sinking under the rule of corrupt people, and an opportunity to demonstrate on stage that, as Oedipus says to Creon in his speech on the reversals of fortune (cf. section 3), the peace between Athens and Thebes will not

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<sup>320</sup> When, in the *OT*, Oedipus starts by swearing he will fight for Apollo and Laius and investigate the whole matter of the murdering, he keeps his word.

last forever. We shall return to the portraits of Creon's and Theseus' characters: for now, it is enough to say that Creon's antipathy makes him very unlikely to succeed. Oedipus has Theseus by his side, and there is a point being made throughout the play that the wicked shall not be rewarded by fortune. The kidnapping of the girls is an annoyance and a demonstration of Creon's bad character, but not a real factor of anxiety towards the outcome of the play.<sup>321</sup>

The one scene where, perhaps, the emotions of an audience might be oscillating, and hoping for a different outcome, is the scene with Polynices, for whom Sophocles has even made a case, as seen above. We shall look at the ways in which the son of Oedipus is portrayed in a later section, but, for now, it is important to advance a few details. First, that it is the once scene where Oedipus meets the resistance not only of Theseus (who attends to suppliants), but of Antigone, who even condemns him as excessive if he does not respect the ties of blood and agrees to see his son (1189 ff; there is, however, no reproach from either Antigone or Theseus after the scene between Polynices and Oedipus). Oedipus has already cursed his sons twice in the play (cf. section 3), and it is unlikely that he will retract such violent words. He only agrees to see Polynices because of his host's and daughter's insistence. In the whole scene, he remains unmoved, and the only progress that is seen is from cold silence to outspoken rage, culminating in the third curse.

Two things could have happened in the scene: Oedipus could have mellowed to his son's plea (even though a supplication is not necessarily accepted, the expectations would be that it is), and Polynices, after the failure of his mission, could have decided not to attack Thebes (as Antigone begs him to do in 1416-7). Oedipus going back to Thebes is out of the question since he has made up his mind in the prologue. The extreme anger, expressed by his silence and first condemned by Antigone and Theseus in human terms, is plausible for the hero Oedipus is becoming, and the power promised to him by Apollo means that he will be able to protect his friends (Athens), and harm his enemies (not so much Thebes, but his two sons and Creon, against whom he bears a deep resentment). Though Polynices' opening remarks show him ready to bewail the plight of his father and sisters as well as his own — an

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<sup>321</sup> In 1034 Theseus suggests that Creon has been warned and had the chance not to fulfil his threats, but it is necessary that for Oedipus to stay in Athens. Athens is portrayed as noble and Creon and the sons of Oedipus as unworthy of his favour.

approach that appeals to Antigone's sense of family loyalty — his motivation is at bottom no nobler than his brother's was in seizing the throne. The description (1308ff.) of his armies poised to devastate Thebes is scarcely likely to produce a favourable impression, and Antigone's attempt to warn him of the futility of what he intends (in the exchange beginning at 420-1) is dismissed in a way that reveals how little he cares for his own safety or for that of his allies.

The curse, however, is not, on its own, the origin of Polynices' doom. Polynices will blame it on his brother (1292ff.), on his own actions regarding his father (1265-5, though he does not connect his dishonouring of his father with the present suffering; he finds his side just, 1305-6), and finally, on the "Erinyes of his father" (1432-4, referring to the vengeful curses sealing his fate). Ismene has blamed it before on some hostile divinity (371-3), but the fact remains that the fall of the two brothers had already been set in motion by the very choice of starting civil strife. Oedipus only reiterates by his curse something that would already be the necessary result of a chain of action. One way or another, the brothers would fight. One way or another, Thebes would suffer from the consequences of that fight. Polynices knows, as he departs, that he will lose (1345). When he arrives at Athens, he thinks that his future still allows him two options; success or death (1305-7). The alternative is never between attacking Thebes or returning to Argos. Therefore, Oedipus' choice will decide the outcome of the attack, even before it happens. Once Oedipus chooses, Polynices knows his destiny.<sup>322</sup> In 1441 and 1443, the fact that he is to die has become a necessity, against which it is pointless for his sisters to pray.

But it is not only Polynices who will die. At the time the fight started, the oracle about the necessary condition to win it was not yet known, presumably. Without Oedipus favouring a side, both sides are lost. It is guaranteed that the two siblings will kill each other, as predicted by their father (1387-8). With their fight, Thebes will suffer greatly. Antigone tries to persuade Polynices not to go, asking what is the κέρδος of destroying the native city (1421). Polynices answers with his plan to hide the truth from his allies (1429-30) which is an interesting precaution to minimise the risk that things might still be otherwise. Given Polynices' fatalism, it is natural for him

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<sup>322</sup> In 1269-70, Polynices thought that faults can be healed but never made worse. He had nothing to lose either from his attempt to win his father's support, and that is his one hope for victory.

to think that, regardless of Oedipus' position, his companions would follow him (or that at least they would be moved by the same sense of shame that makes him not want to be mocked by his brother in 1422-3). However, through silence (which he sees as an attribute of a good leader), he will make sure that no one even tries to change the course, and that the battle will be fought by an army that still has hopes to win.

Finally, before he leaves, Polynices ties the sisters to the promise that they shall return to Thebes to bury his body. Whether or not this is a nod to the text of the earlier play, it is consistent with the sisters portrayed in the *OC*. Both of them loyal to their families, their mission towards their father is done, so it will be time to turn to their brothers. In the fairly anticlimactic end of the play, Theseus (1773-6) will agree to send them back to their home town for a certain renewed dose of sorrow, from which the traits of their characters will not let them escape.

The appearance of Polynices is, therefore, important for two main reasons. First, it establishes the clear contrast between the human pity of Theseus and Antigone versus the already supernatural implacable anger of Oedipus (that is ultimately accepted rather than condemned, cf. section 3), and the contrast between the motivations of Polynices and Eteocles versus their two sisters, each pair of siblings representing strife or loyalty. Secondly, it concludes, by anticipation, the part of the story concerning Thebes. With Oedipus' refusal, both brothers will kill each other. As has been noticed before, with Oedipus new power also comes the continuation of the doom of the Labdacidae (including his beloved daughters), but it is a doom, in the case of the brothers, that is brought upon themselves, and for which Oedipus has little responsibility up to the moment when he reiterates the inevitable by a dramatically terrible curse. Had Oedipus accepted Polynices' supplication, he would be consenting not only to kill one of his sons for the benefit of the other, but also to bring about the destruction of Thebes, which would be a very strange thing for Oedipus to do.

There are, therefore, two equally important threads that are used to explain fate. One of them is the oracles, and the type of events that cannot be predicted from one's behaviour. However, the motives of gods are never questioned, as can be seen from the Chorus' affirmation quoted above, or in Oedipus' willingness to assign the

original cause of his ancestral bad luck to some event in the forgotten past. The event might have been only an irrelevant disturbance (as Oedipus points out to Theseus), but the one certain thing about the reversals of fortune is that they are constant in time, and that the small alterations will necessarily happen, making the search for an original cause of divine punishment futile. The other thread that justifies what happens to people in their lifetime is their conduct. In the *OC*, there is the clear confrontation between trustworthy and untrustworthy people, between love and hate, and between proper conduct and what should be condemned by the gods. The two threads are not incompatible or necessarily contradictory. One of them is presented especially in the beginning and the end of the play (including the scene with Theseus in the first episode), the other, even if overlapping here and there, is stronger in the scenes with Creon and Polynices. We shall now turn to both of them in closer detail.

### **3. First thread: the reversals of fortune and its Presocratic parallels**

Both in the *Antigone* and in the *OT*, the topic of the mutability of fortune is presented mostly by the Chorus' reflections on what they see on stage, and their analysis of the unpredictable fates of the protagonists. In the latter play, Oedipus starts rich and powerful, only to end as the victim of the worst of woes, with a prediction of exile and mendicancy. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Chorus seems unable to comprehend the chain of cause and effect that emerges from the complex web of events that reveals itself in the course of the play, so that right until the end of the play it fails to accept the inevitability of Oedipus' fall.

In the *OC*, the theme is taken up again. This time, however, the focus is not so much on Oedipus' destiny; even though it is commented that the gods have been against him or on his side at different times, his ultimate destiny does not come as shocking and unpredictable, through the exposition of his ultimate ignorance about himself. The protagonist undergoes a drastic reversal of status, from the beggar to the hero, but that is not sung by the Chorus as the common denominator of all humans, who now are raised by the gods, only to be thrown back down at some other moment (they do make a reference to time changing the status of everything, but in a brief intervention that is not clear whether it is to be understood regarding Polynices or

Oedipus in particular, as mentioned above). Here the theme is first introduced by Oedipus, as part of his argument on the benefits that the possession of his body will bring to Athens, and is anticipated by Theseus as he arrives and sees the beggar, reminding him of his own past experience (551ff.).

The theme is prompted by Theseus' question in 606 on how "bitterness" between the two cities would come about. Oedipus' explanation, which extends for over twenty verses between 605 and 628, is extraordinary, and echoes a type of doctrine primarily found amongst the so-called "Pythagoreans", of which Empedocles may be the best extant example before Plato's time (whether he was a Pythagorean or not is another problem...).<sup>323</sup>

Together with the eternal patterns of change exposed by Oedipus, two other aspects are important in the portrayal of his final fate: one, as mentioned above, is the connection to the hero cults and the tradition of the possession of the body of a hero as relics for the protection of the land. The other is the presence of a religious and philosophical mystery of sorts, suggested by Oedipus through what he says and chooses to keep silent, and through the type of teaching he has to offer to Theseus.

This presence of the language of the mysteries is acknowledged by most commentators of the *OC*, especially regarding the last rituals performed by Oedipus before his death. There are, however, other elements that suggest that Sophocles was making use of contemporary religious and philosophical ideas, all of them with the mysteries of Eleusis as common background. Two of those elements are the unity of opposites and the wandering through the elements, present in much of the presocratic corpus.<sup>324</sup> They shall interest us, inasmuch as they contribute to the understanding of the fate of Oedipus, as well as of the explanations of why things happen as they do in the mentality of the play.

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<sup>323</sup> It is generally assumed by most scholars that Empedocles belonged to a Pythagorean school of some sort. The affirmation on its own is innocuous enough, but problems start when defining what exactly would be a Pythagorean before Plato. For the Pythagoreans, the fundamental study is still Burkert (1972). Cf. also Kahn (2001).

<sup>324</sup> Seaford (e.g. 2012:28; 2012:41) demonstrates the origin of these ideas in the mysteries by contrasting the presocratic material with the Hymn to Demeter and the so-called "orphyic" golden leaves, printed in e.g. Zuntz (1971). Behind his demonstration is the thesis that the introduction of the monetary system influenced radically the modes of thought of presocratic philosophy and of tragedy. I will leave the discussion of that hypothesis aside, for it bears no immediate consequence to the issues of fate and chance.

### 3.1.1. Seaford's thesis on the unity of opposites in the *Oresteia*

In several articles and a recent book, Richard Seaford builds the case for a reading of the *Oresteia* as the confrontation of two models of thinking based on the unity and separation of opposites.<sup>325</sup> In his words:

Various puzzling passages of the *Oresteia* can only be understood as expressing the need to differentiate the unity of opposites if escape from the cycle is to be achieved. (...) This escape comes, in the *Eumenides*, only after the emphatic differentiation of chthonic and Olympian deities, and the replacement of a Herakleitean model of unity of opposites by a Pythagorean model of their reconciliation.<sup>326</sup>

According to Seaford, the unity of opposites, present in Heraclitus, is expressed in the text of the three extant Tragedy writers by sentences that say one thing and its contrary in the same breath.<sup>327</sup> In the *Oresteia*, he argues, the resolution of the conflict is made in a first step by the “differentiation of united opposites”: represented in action, it would be, for example, differentiating the killing of Agamemnon from the killing of Clytemnestra, between “offence and counter-offence”.<sup>328</sup> A third moment, the one which he attributes to a Pythagorean mode of thought, would be the harmonious interconnection of the once hostile opposites, with an asymmetrical prevalence of the “positive” side of each pair. This reunion of the opposites under a new arrangement (represented in the trilogy of Aeschylus by the *Eumenides*) would bring permanent blessing to the polis and “permanent escape from the cycle of violence” caused by the initial unhappy unity of two contraries. In other words, a conflict results from the violence generated by two opposing forces amalgamated in a forced union, that needs to be separated to be understood and judged on its own, in order to be reconciled with the eventual prevalence of the “best” principle.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Most (but not all) of the articles were recapitulated in Seaford (2012).

<sup>326</sup> Seaford (2003:141).

<sup>327</sup> Examples in Seaford (2003:148).

<sup>328</sup> Seaford (2003:149-50).

<sup>329</sup> The idea would be familiar to Anaxagoras. For the epistemological functions of the νοῦς, and knowledge acquired through separation, cf. e.g. Laks (1993:29).

From the Pythagorean tables of contraries, Seaford identifies in the text of the *Oresteia* the presence of all the pairs that are not mathematical notions (limit-unlimit; odd-even; one-many; right-left; male-female; still-moving; straight-bent; light-darkness; good-bad; square-oblong).<sup>330</sup> Out of those, by the end of the *Eumenides*, the positive aspect prevails with a slight advantage, and the other half is integrated (rather than annihilated). Balance comes from this integration, rather than from the one-sided alignment with one of the elements of the pairs. Many of these contrasts are also present in the *OC*.

The insight of Oedipus is often presented as a contrast between light and darkness, seeing and not seeing (in 1650-3, Theseus covering his eyes with his hands suggest a bright light as well), which is also a contrast between the dark Erinyes and the solar Apollo, between chthonic and Olympic. The play around life and death is present too, with Oedipus appearing as a ghostly figure when he first prays to the Eumenides (109-10), realising that he will count as powerful after he is dead (389ff., quoted above) and receiving his burial rituals still in life (1598ff.). The gender contrast is made by the masculinization of the daughters in 337ff., where they acquire the positive qualities that should normally belong to their male siblings. The contrast between movement and stillness is made by the opposition of Oedipus' wandering years with the arrival to his resting place; the opposition between exile (negative) and his new citizenship (positive). Finally, as we shall see in section 4 below, the contrast between good and bad (or love and strife) is fundamental to the whole play, and expressed especially by the different attitudes of Theseus/Oedipus/the girls against those of Creon/Oedipus' sons.

On the other hand, Seaford himself related this permanent escape from the cycle of violence for the polis, achieved by the conciliation of opposites, with the permanent escape of the individual represented in the mysteries as achieved by the the soul through the "cycle of cosmological transformation".<sup>331</sup> Here, he points out another fundamental difference between what he calls Heraclitus' mode of thought and the Pythagorean model: while for Heraclitus the elements change into each other

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<sup>330</sup> For the specific identification of each pair, cf. Seaford (2012:293-300).

<sup>331</sup> The expression is from Seaford (2003:146). Cf. also Seaford (2012:271-2).

constantly (water evaporates and becomes air, for example), for the Pythagoreans there is a stable subject undergoing these changes from one element to another.

Most of Seaford's parallels between the *Oresteia*, the narratives of the mysteries, and the Heraclitean/Pythagorean cosmologies are also present in the *OC*. First, there is the very structure of the play: the combination of Apollo's protégé begging for the benefit of the chthonic Eumenides, staged from the start, is a contrast between the two worlds that is bridged at the end by the thunder of Zeus announcing Oedipus' end, and by Theseus' unifying prayer to the Olympian and chthonic gods (1653-5). Seaford's remark that the mysteries were seen as contests is also compatible with Burian's analysis of the episodes of the *OC* as the trials that Oedipus must go through for his promised heroization,<sup>332</sup> and Bowra's intuition that the episodes are divided in a moment of thesis (Oedipus' love for his daughters and blessings to Athens), antithesis (Oedipus' extreme hatred and cursing of Thebes) and synthesis (Oedipus' heroization), matches the moments of κρίσις and κρῆσις suggested by Seaford for the trilogy of Aeschylus.<sup>333</sup>

However, the contrast between Heraclitus and what can be taken from Philolaus (Seaford's named source for the Pythagorean aspects) does not drain the possibilities of clarification that the corpus of the presocratics might bring to the text of Sophocles, when it comes to the explanations of the relations between cosmology and human destinies. More than Heraclitus (and perhaps as a palpable example of some sort of Pythagoreanism), there is the text of Empedocles.

### 3.1.2. Empedoclean echoes and the final destiny of Oedipus

It is important here to repeat a caveat. Sophocles is writing a play. The analysis below aims at demonstrating an order of religious and philosophical motifs present in the *OC*, and not a thesis that Sophocles was himself adhering to a doctrine, nor that

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<sup>332</sup> For the vocabulary of mysteries and athletic contests, cf. Seaford (1994:279). For the episodes as the necessary trial for the heroization, Burian (1974:408).

<sup>333</sup> Bowra (1944:312).

he evolved from one sort of belief to another.<sup>334</sup> As much as it would be interesting for the biographers to know what exactly the cult of Asclepius was about (though ancient medical practices had a lot in common with presocratic investigations on theology and cosmology), and why Sophocles should be mentioned in an anecdote as a wonderworker able to control the winds in the same breath as Empedocles controlling the weather in Acragas,<sup>335</sup> the life of the author has little significance to the text of the play. The consequences beyond the immediate interest of the *OC* that might be drawn towards the end of this section regard exclusively the place of doctrines of Pythagorean inspiration in Greek thought, and how they might have been less marginal than some scholars have sustained at different times.

For the sake of the contrast, Oedipus' speech in 607-620 is worth quoting here almost in its entirety, and then we shall proceed slowly in its comparison with the text of Empedocles:

ὦ φίλτατ' Αἰγέως παῖ, μόνοις οὐ γίγνεται  
 θεοῖσι γῆρας οὐδὲ κατθανεῖν ποτε.  
 τὰ δ' ἄλλα συγγεῖ πάνθ' ὁ παγκρατῆς χρόνος.  
 φθίνει μὲν ἰσχὺς γῆς, φθίνει δὲ σώματος,  
 θνήσκει δὲ πίστις, βλαστάνει δ' ἀπιστία,  
 καὶ πνεῦμα ταῦτ' οὐ ποτ' οὔτ' ἐν ἀνδράσιν  
 φίλοις βέβηκεν οὔτε πρὸς πόλιν πόλει.  
 τοῖς μὲν γὰρ ἤδη, τοῖς δ' ἐν ὑστέρῳ χρόνῳ  
 τὰ τερπνὰ πικρὰ γίγνεται καὶ θῆσι φίλα.  
 καὶ ταῖσι Θήβαις εἰ τανῶν εὐήμερεῖ  
 καλῶς τὰ πρὸς σέ, μυρίας ὁ μυρίος  
 χρόνος τεκνοῦται νύκτας ἡμέρας τ' ἰών,  
 ἐν αἷς τὰ νῦν ζύμφωνα δεξιώματα  
 δόρει διασκεδῶσιν ἐκ μικροῦ λόγου.

O dearest child of Aegeus, only for the gods is there ever no growing old nor death, but all-powerful time brings confusion to all else. The strength of the earth decays, decays too the strength of the body; trust perishes, and distrust springs up; the same wind never blows forever between friends nor from one city to another; for some immediately, for others at a later time, the sweet

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<sup>334</sup> Halliwell (1986:190) makes the same point about his interpretation of the crossroads in the *OT*. He puts it more synthetically than I do, justifying why acknowledging and giving importance to Sophocles' use of religious material should neither be neglected nor labelled to heavily: "only those who regard Sophocles as more of a theologian than a dramatist will expect him to deal consistently in doctrinal assertion or conclusive demonstration of divine agency".

<sup>335</sup> Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* 8.7.8., printed by DK in the testimonia for Empedocles (A 14). Seaford (2012:281) notes a similar anecdote about Aeschylus being a Pythagorean.

becomes bitter, and then again it becomes love. In the same way, if now the weather is bright for Thebes and you, immeasurable time engenders countless nights and days, as it goes by, in the course of which the pledged harmony of today, they will scatter by the spear, over a minor cause.

The first move is to place the individual situation about the uncertainty of how a war would turn out between Athens and Thebes into a pattern of change that anyone would recognise as true, indexing it to the universal change.<sup>336</sup> The first affirmation is that for all mortals things are vulnerable to be destroyed in the course of a lifespan, against the divine perfection, qualified by permanence in time.<sup>337</sup> The verbal form *συνχεῖ* suggests that this destruction occurs by disintegration, or confusion, or, as it seems plausible to say without inputting too much in the text, the breaking down of one thing to mix it with another in inharmonious and unfitting ways. In Empedocles' poem as well divinity is equated with perfection and stability in time (though Empedocles allows different stages of divinity and all of them are ultimately destroyed),<sup>338</sup> with its maximum representation in the Sphairos, described in B27-29.

All the other living beings know a birth and a death. Oedipus proceeds to compare the physical processes of decay of the earth and the of individual human body (610), both examples of compounds of matter liable to be affected by the action of psychological notions such as "trust" and "distrust" (611). The alternation between generation and decay, full functioning and corruption is, once again,

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<sup>336</sup> The comparison with the weather means that sooner or later the weather will change, and it might be favourable or not. When is that going to happen, no one knows, but it is certain that it will happen.

<sup>337</sup> The idea is not, of course, exclusively in Empedocles, but is universal in Greek literature. Kamerbeek (1984:97) points out its presence in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, 328, 9.

<sup>338</sup> In agreement with Barnes (1982:499): "Like men, these gods are not eternal [B23] but at best long lived (*dolichaiōnes*): being elemental compounds, they cannot survive the complete elemental dissociation at the time of total Strife, nor the utter fusion in the years of the Sphere. Finally, and fifth, there are the *daimones* of 442 [B115]. They have a divine status; yet they are not eternal, their lot is 'long-lived life (*makraïōn biotos*)'. The *daimones* and the long-lived gods of 195 [B23] have much in common: parsimony suggests their identification".

paralleled in the text in *On Nature/Purifications*.<sup>339</sup> The whole cosmic cycle is seen as the alternation of supremacy between love and strife. After a determined time, an “eternal oracle of necessity” (B115.1-2), there is a crime of blood (B115.3-4), and the cycle of change starts, away from the blessed ones (B115.6-14). In the same way, at a determined time (again, the notion of turns is important) strife corrupts the round god of B27-29.<sup>340</sup> The process is described, e.g., in B30 and B31, where the action of strife is also represented by the creation of limbs in a previously undivided and harmonious form:

B30

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ μέγα νεῖκος ἐνὶ μελέεσσιν ἐθρέφθη,  
ἔς τιμὰς τ' ἀνόρουσε τελειομένοιο χρόνοιο,  
ὅς σφιν ἀμοιβαῖος πλατέος παρ' ἐλίλαται ὄρκου

But when strife had grown [lit. been nourished] great within its limbs  
and leapt up to its prerogatives, as the time was being accomplished  
which has been established for each in turn by a broad oath.<sup>341</sup>

B31

πάντα γὰρ ἐξείης πελεμίζετο γυῖα θεοῖο.

For one after another all the limbs of the god were being shaken.

B26 printed below sums up the process described as a cycle in several other fragments, where the one thing that does not change is the constant alternation

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<sup>339</sup> I am convinced by the thesis defended by several scholars (first advanced independently by Osborne in 1987 and Inwood in 1992, and then made stronger by Martin's and Primavesi's edition of the Strasbourg Papyrus in 1999) that the extant fragments of Empedocles were part of one and the same poem. However, this is not the place to discuss that matter, and I shall refer to the text by both names, or simply as “poem”. Regardless of the arrangement, I believe that the fragments are neither incompatible nor contradictory.

The fragments will be referred to by their number in Diels and Kranz (1951) collection, even though the text will follow Inwood's edition.

<sup>340</sup> We shall return to the matter of the crime of blood and the conditions in which it is performed shortly.

<sup>341</sup> All the translations of the Empedoclean text are by Brad Inwood (1992).

between temporary stages of decay and growth (B26.1-2; B26.11-12),<sup>342</sup> just as Oedipus' one certainty in his speech to Theseus is the constant alternation between states (a line that ends with φίλα, the harmonious force in Empedocles' work).

ἐν δὲ μέρει κρατέουσι περιπλομένοιο κύκλιοι,  
καὶ φθίνει εἰς ἄλληλα καὶ αὖξεται ἐν μέρει αἴσης.  
αὐτὰ γὰρ ἔστιν ταῦτα, δι' ἀλλήλων δὲ θέοντα  
γίνοντ' ἄνθρωποι τε καὶ ἄλλων ἔθνεα θηρῶν  
ἄλλοτε μὲν φιλότητι συνερχόμεν' εἰς ἓνα κόσμον,  
ἄλλοτε δ' αὖ δίχ' ἕκαστα φορούμενα νεΐκεος ἔχθει,  
εἰσόκεν ἐν συμφύοντα τὸ πᾶν ὑπένερθε γένηται.  
οὕτως ἦ μὲν ἐν ἓκ πλεόνων μεμάθηκε φύεσθαι  
ἦ δὲ πάλιν διαφύοντος ἐνὸς πλέον' ἐκτελέθουσι,  
τῇ μὲν γίνονται τε καὶ οὐ σφισιν ἔμπεδος αἰών·  
ἦ δὲ τὰδ' ἀλλάσσοντα διαμπερές οὐδαμὰ λήγει,  
ταύτη δ' αἰὲν ἔασιν ἀκίνητοι κατὰ κύκλον.

And in turn they [the four elements] dominate as the cycle goes around,  
and they shrink into each other and grow in the turn[s assigned by] destiny.  
For these very things are, and running through each other  
they become men and the tribes of other beasts,  
at one time coming together by love into one cosmos,  
and at another time again all being borne apart separately by the hostility of  
strife,  
until by growing together as one they are totally subordinated.  
Thus insofar as they learned to grow as one from many,  
and finish up as many, as the one again grows apart,  
in this respect they come to be and have no constant life,  
but insofar as they never cease from constantly interchanging,  
in this respect they are always unchanged in the cycle.

In Empedocles' poem, this alternation is described often, in “allotted turn” (B26.2). In the text of Sophocles (614), the time is not necessarily the same for all processes, nor necessarily possible to predict, but the one thing that is certain is that the time will come when the processes happen. However, this is a cycle, and the stages are only temporary. That is stressed by Oedipus too in 614-15, which

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<sup>342</sup> Rather than in its pendular movement, or its unique progress from strife to love, as argued by Bollack (1965:95-124). There is no one reading against the cycle. Other examples of two-stage interpretations are Long (1974:397-8), who includes a *status quaestionis* up to the 60s, O'Brien (1969:337ff.) for a detailed bibliography on Empedocles in general, or Solmsen (1975:238ff.). For the old and traditional reading of the four-stage cycle, cf. Guthrie (1962), O'Brien (1969:156ff.), Graham's (1988) article fully dedicated to the topic, Barnes (1982:308ff.), Inwood (2001:44-9), Trépanier (2003:8ff.).

conveniently ends with φίλα, “friendly things”, recalling the harmonious force in Empedocles’ work.

The vocabulary used by Sophocles in his passage has a strong resonance with Empedocles in general:<sup>343</sup> the process of decay is described by the verb φθίνω (B26.2 above, even personified in B123), and the subject of either decay or mingling is the all-englobing “these things” (plural neutral forms αὐτά and ταῦτα are the subject of most descriptions of the processes of change in Empedocles, and stand for the four elements as the roots of everything; and τὰ ἄλλα in the passage of the *OC*), all things that exist, from all spheres of the world. All living beings “come together” (συνερχόμαι) in Empedocles, which echoes the συγγεῖ in the Sophocles text, even if used to describe the opposite movement.<sup>344</sup> In the lines added to B17 by the Strasbourg Papyrus (ensemble a(i).9 and a(ii).1, that repeat the motive already present elsewhere in the text), Empedocles too uses the verb βλαστάνω, not to describe the growth of distrust, but the birth of trees, men and women, beasts and birds, a birth that he says in B22 that happens under strife.<sup>345</sup> The verbs modified with the prefix συν- are also used in both texts to describe the harmony under love, ζύμφωνα in Sophocles, and εἰσόκεν ἐν συμφόντα in B26. Additionally, the wandering of the δαίμων after it has become polluted, as it is described in 115.6 (to which we shall turn briefly in the next subsection), is that it will wander for τρίς μυρίας ὥρας — in Sophocles, the changes in the course of life happen when the μυρίος χρόνος engenders μυρίας νόκτας.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> The same happens with the vocabulary in Ajax’s speech (esp. *Ajax* 669-76ff), where the alternation is described as a αἰανίης κόκλος.

<sup>344</sup> There is an argument to read Empedocles’ love and strife as having equally unifying and separating powers, the problem being the type of mixture. Things united under strife do not work properly as organisms (cf. B22), whereas things united under love do.

<sup>345</sup> That the current stage of people were born under strife’s predominance is also clear from, e.g. B118 or B124.

<sup>346</sup> The vocabulary present in the relatively short speech of Oedipus goes even further in its use of words familiar from Empedocles’ poem. The πνεῦμα is used to describe physical processes, and we learn from Sextus Empiricus’ *Adversus Mathematicus* 9.26-30 that the word might have been used to describe a spirit of sorts, pervasive to all living beings, that would justify the moral conduct preached by Empedocles, by unifying all the world in kin. The words for bitter and sweet are also used in the description of the unification of similar things under Aphrodite in B90.

The idea of things happening in the course of time is obviously present as well, as is the idea of violence disrupting the harmonious state (B30-31 above, and *OC* 619-20, where the pacts of men are broken by the spear). The insignificance of the cause, the ἐκ μικροῦ λόγου in 620 is relevant: the cycle of alternation will happen regardless of human actions, and sometimes for the least unpredictable reasons (which does not mean, as we shall see, that humans should not be worried about leading a morally good life). Finally, just as happens in the text of Sophocles, the material processes of blending and separation are paired with the social relationships of human life. The notions of trust, persuasion, and discord (πίστις and ἀπιστία) seem to be fundamental in the *OC*, where πίστις and its corresponding verb are used no less than twenty-five times, and by every single character of the play. They are fundamental in Empedocles' poem too: the poet urges for learning the truth free from the madness that can affect the speech (B3.1, ἀλλὰ θεοὶ τῶν μὲν μανίην ἀποτρέφατε γλώσσης), as well as for judging the information from the senses correctly (B3.10 and B3.13). It is hard to make “jealous” men (B114, δύσζηλος) trust his muse (B4, ἀλλὰ κακοῖς μὲν κάρτα μέλει κρατέουσιν ἀπιστεῖν), men which are probably already accelerating their fall by “trusting in maddening strife” instead (B115.14).<sup>347</sup> As everything else in Empedocles, learning seems to be the result of a physical process depending on the correct arrangement of “all things” under love (cf. B110); so persuasion, just like love, is treated as something that can impregnate the matter of men, unless they are impermeable to it (cf. B114.2-3: μάλα δ' ἀργαλέη γε τέτυκται / ἀνδράσι καὶ δύσζηλος ἐπὶ φρένα πίστιος ὀρμή).<sup>348</sup> Empedocles, just like Oedipus, has learnt more than the common men, and has to persuade his disciple not to believe in the ideas commonly held. Oedipus persuades the Chorus that his transgression at the beginning of a play was not a transgression, but the sign that he has already attained a status of greater power and understanding.

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<sup>347</sup> Inwood splits DK B3 into two fragments, 9 and 14 in his numeration. Regardless of the arrangement preferred, the topic is the same. On persuasion as a cosmogonic tool of the mind to “curb” necessity, cf. Plato's *Timaeus* 48a.

<sup>348</sup> Perhaps these jealous men could be Creon and Oedipus' sons, more worried about their own gains than about the duties of pity? The contrast that Oedipus often makes between the conduct of his sons and the conduct of his daughters, or the conducts of Creon and Theseus points to some sort of consequences resulting from different types of behaviour. We shall return to that in the last section of this chapter.

Love and strife, trust and distrust are human emotions transposed to the cosmos as the names for the forces responsible for different states of matter, as well as for different states of things in the world of human relations. Oedipus goes further, and adds a third comparison to the list: it is the case not only that the macrocosmos reflects the functioning of each individual, but also that the relationships between men mirror relationships between whole cities. That larger social aspect too might have been present in Empedocles' poem, as suggested by the contrast between the world described in fragments such as B128 and B130, the domain of Aphrodite, and the opposite motion in, e.g., B145 and B139/ensemble d.

The lines in Oedipus' speech set the argument in grounds that are solid, universal, and easy to grasp. Any mortal can confirm, from the observation of their senses, that things change without apparent reason all the time, that organisms decay, and that new organisms are born. That one set of processes is associated with bitter, harsh, sorrowful feelings, while the other brings temporary happiness and harmony. The step to recognise that none of those states is eternal is a small one, as is the recognition that, to be spared from the mutability of the world, one would have to be a god, traditionally seen as immune to change. Oedipus knows these things, and he knows that they are part of the mysteries and that he cannot speak too much on them (*OC* 624, ἀκίνητα, the same adjective is used by Parmenides and Empedocles to qualify their spheres, e.g. B3.7 — the sacred things that must be kept secret are also the ones that do not change).<sup>349</sup> As we shall see, towards the end of the play, he acts as the initiate that teaches the disciple in secret, away from the masses.

We have been insisting that Oedipus' speech has strong parallels with Empedocles' poem. Part of it, in fact, has strong parallels with many other ancient Greek texts. The idea that at least one part of reality is (or seems to be) transient and in constant flux or alternating between opposites and that the realm of change is the realm of living things that are subject to death is present in many other contemporary authors, and it is not, alone, necessarily imply that Sophocles is adhering to any particular school of thought in his portrayal of the heroization in the *OC*. Neither is it the first

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<sup>349</sup> Oedipus continues by saying that he will conclude where he started, which Jebb points out, rightly, to be the "prayer for an Attic home". The sentence, however, also echoes Empedocles joining the ends of his story after a digression, and repeating what is good to say (B24 and B25).

time that Sophocles is making use of ideas present in the so-called Presocratics, as we have noted here and there in the previous chapters.

There is more to be said, however, about the parallels between Oedipus' speech and the narrator of *On Nature/Purifications*, that suggests that the coincidence of motifs plays a bigger role than just a casual colouring of Oedipus' rhetoric. For that, we shall move on from the speech that has been under scrutiny for the previous few pages, into the first arrival of Theseus and its connection with the end of the play.

### 3.2. The end of the OC and the end of Oedipus as paradigm

Theseus, as he arrives on stage for the first time, addresses Oedipus as an equal. We will turn to the whole of Theseus' speech in a later section, but it is relevant here to print the last four lines, 566-9:

ὥστε ζένον γ' ἂν οὐδέν' ὄνθ', ὥσπερ σὺ νῦν,  
ὕπεκτραποίμην μὴ οὐ συνεκσῶζεν· ἐπεὶ  
ἔξοιδ' ἀνήρ ὢν χῶτι τῆς εἰς αὔριον  
οὐδὲν πλεόν μοι σοῦ μέτεστιν ἡμέρας.

In this way, I would never turn away from a stranger, as you are now, nor would I refuse to help rescuing him: because I know very well, being a man, that my share in the day of tomorrow is no greater than yours.

The immediate context is Theseus' consenting to help Oedipus. His first reason had been that he also had once been in exile; here he adds to that a general consideration about the condition of all men. Jebb notices in his note to 567 about the forms ὕπεκτραποίμην and συνεκσῶζεν that the former appears in Plato's *Phaedo* 108b, and that the latter is recorded in the context of the separation of the soul from the body in Antiphon 5.93, but makes no further comments on that.<sup>350</sup>

Antiphon's passage concerns a claim for innocence from a murdering act. In it, Antiphon makes a strange affirmation where he opposes the body to an all-enduring ψυχή that is willing to endure great pains to confirm its innocence (ἐν γὰρ τῷ τοιούτῳ ἤδη καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀπειρηκός ἢ ψυχή συνεξέσωσεν, ἐθέλουσα ταλαιπωρεῖν διὰ τὸ μὴ

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<sup>350</sup> The only other occurrences in a simple TLG search were ὕπεκτρέπει in the *Trachiniae* 549 (as Deianeira comments on how Heracles will turn away from her decaying beauty to favour the younger rival); and συνεκσῶσας in Menander's *Dyscolos* 753, when Gorgias asks Knemon to meet the man who helped saving his life from a fall in the pit. On συνεκσῶζεν, Gagarin (1997:219) also notes that the double-compound is very rare.

ζυνειδέναι ἑαυτῆ). There are two aspects of relevance here: one is the activity of the ψυχή after the body has ceased its activity, the other is the long endurance of the former, through hardship. It has been noted elsewhere, e.g. Bowra (1944:354), that Oedipus' great quality is exactly his endurance in exile. In the same way, the Chorus tells his daughters towards the end that they must endure whatever their fate turns out to be (1694, τὸ φέρον ἐκ θεοῦ φέρειν).<sup>351</sup>

On the matter of a continuum of activity of sorts opposed to the body's decay, Oedipus himself tells Theseus not to judge his prize to Athens from the aspect of his body (576-8), a body whose burial place will guarantee eternal prosperity to Athens after his death (and, presumably, physical disintegration).

In the passage from the *Phaedo*, the myth on the judgment of the souls after the proofs for its immortality, Socrates describes the violent exile of the soul, which needs to wander before it can return to the world of the Forms.

The context starts a few lines earlier, in 107d: after death, each person's allotted δαίμων leads them to the gathering place of other souls for a judgment. They go to Hades, where they stay for a certain period of time, before being guided back to the place where the other souls are (107e). The road is not unique, but has many crossroads τριόδος, 108a), a belief he bases on the ceremonies of men.<sup>352</sup> The process is more violent for the soul that had a greater attachment to the body and to the visible world, who is guided by its allotted δαίμων through great suffering (108b). Once reunited with the kindred souls, the polluted soul (ἀκάθαρτος) that has committed a crime, and murdering is given as example of a possible crime, is avoided (our ὑπεκτρέπεται) by all the others, just like an exiled person in the physical world (or just like Oedipus in the prologue of the *OT* told the Thebans to do with the criminal and has supposedly to suffer himself in the time corresponding to his exile).

The context of these two occurrences might be just a coincidence, or it might be that the verbs were also part of the jargon of the mystic traditions dealing with exile and learning, as well as souls and bodies (even if material souls and bodies), or with the decay of the body and the permanence of some sort of thing that later would be

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<sup>351</sup> Cf. Jebb *ad loc.* for a discussion on the alternative emendations of the text. Contra, Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990:427) and Kamerbeek (1984:227-8).

<sup>352</sup> For the eventual Pythagorean inspiration of the tripartite crossroad, cf. Halliwell (1986:187-8).

called a “soul”. If that is the case, while Theseus is still saying that he will never turn his back and refuse helping a stranger, the words used might be a subtle alert for what is to come. He will never refuse someone who will no longer be ἀκάθαρτος, and he will help in their deliverance.

The story in Plato has a lot in common with the story told by Empedocles. In B115, the poet tells of the exile of the δαίμων for a determined number of seasons, and of its wandering in the world of change before it can be return to its original union:

ἔστιν ἀνάγκης χρῆμα, θεῶν ψήφισμα παλαιόν,  
αἰδίδιον, πλατέεσσι κατεσφρηγισμένον ὄρκιοις·  
εὐτέ τις ἀμπλακίησι φόνῳ φίλα γυῖα μῆνη,  
ἦός καίῃ ἐπίορκον ἀμαρτήσας ἐπομώσει,  
δαίμονες οἴτε μακραίωνος λελάχασι βίοιο,  
τρῖς μιν μυρίας ὥρας ἀπὸ μακάρων ἀλάλησθαι,  
φυομένον παντοῖα διὰ χρόνου εἶδεα θνητῶν  
ἀργαλέας βίοτοιο μεταλλάσσοντα κελεύθους.  
αἰθέριον μὲν γάρ σφε μένος πόντονδε διώκει,  
πόντος δ' ἐς χθονὸς οὐδας ἀπέπτυσσε, γαῖα δ' ἐς αὐγὰς  
ἡελίου φαέθοντος, ὃ δ' αἰθέρος ἔμβαλε δίης·  
ἄλλος δ' ἐξ ἄλλου δέχεται, στυγέουσι δὲ πάντες.  
τῶν καὶ ἐγὼ νῦν εἶμι, φυγὰς θεόθεν καὶ ἀλήτης,  
νεῖκει μαινομένῳ πίσυρος.

There is an oracle of necessity, an ancient decree of the gods,  
eternal, sealed with broad oaths:  
whenever one, in his sins, stains his dear limbs with blood  
... [the text is corrupt here] by misdeed swears falsely,  
[of] the daimons [that is] who have won long-lasting life,  
he wanders for thrice ten thousand seasons away from the blessed ones,  
growing to be all sorts of forms of mortal things through time,  
interchanging the hard paths of life.

For the strength of aither pursues him into the sea,  
and the sea spits [him] onto the surface of the earth and earth into the beams  
of the blazing sun, and it throws him into the eddies of the air;  
and one after another receives [him], but all hate [him].  
I too am now one of these, an exile from the gods and a wanderer,  
trusting in mad strife.

Here, too, the wandering δαίμων is treated as an exiled person who has committed a crime. We have noticed in the previous chapter the similarities between this description and Oedipus' situation at the end of the *OT*, as well as the exile of

Apollo. We have also stressed that from a hostile situation of wandering comes the possibility of a certain type of knowledge, and we can add now that this wandering after a fall caused by a pollution of some sort is a necessary condition for the subsequent purification and learning. A parallel notion is the idea that the initiate has to step aside to learn. Whatever ways there are for knowledge of the mysteries, they do not seem to be in the most travelled path.<sup>353</sup>

It is hard to know what exactly this δαίμων is, and what precise significance should be attached to the process of being tossed from one element to the other. Exactly because Sophocles is writing a play and not a didactic poem or a treatise, rather than discussing here ancient theories of the soul, it is wiser to steer away from too strict definitions and be content with a few broader generalisations.<sup>354</sup> That leaves us still with a lot of information to unpack. First, that there is some sort of continuity, some sort of endurance through adversity, both in the subject of Empedocles' poem and in Oedipus' character. Second, that the period of suffering, ultimately, is limited, and after a certain time, the δαίμων returns to its original place (which we shall suggest matches Oedipus' supernatural death). Finally, that there is a crime of blood, and that absolutely nothing is said about the willingness to commit it, nor the reasons why anyone would commit it, other than, perhaps, necessity.<sup>355</sup> As will be argued below, one of the reasons for Sophocles to have Oedipus presenting three different apologies might be that the requirements for his heroization in terms of the mysteries include purification and some sort of moral innocence.

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<sup>353</sup> The words “initiate” and “mysteries” are likely to cause a great deal of irritation amongst scholars, for meaning everything and nothing at the same time. I will be using them to refer to the “secret introductory rites into the different mystery cults”, rather than the “puberty rites”, to adopt Graf's (2003:9) distinction.

<sup>354</sup> At least in the present work: if my suggestion that the *OC* has strong connections with the Pythagorean thought of Empedocles' type is valid, then perhaps a more detailed study would be worth pursuing on its own.

<sup>355</sup> It should be noted, however, that none of the eight occurrences of ἀνάγκη or its compounds in the text is used to justify Oedipus' condition. They often take the sense of “forcing someone to do something” or “constraint” (as fear does in 655). More interesting, perhaps, is the use in 603 and 605, where the word of Apollo will constrain the events, forcing the Thebans to seek Oedipus (in a sense of cause and effect). The same general sense of “forcing” happens in the three occurrences in the *OT*, except for 877, where ἀνάγκη stands as doom, but the necessary resulting consequence of the tyrant's excess. There, the preferred method of referring to unexplained destiny is, as we have seen, an alternation between μοῖρα and τύχη. The one place in the Theban plays where ἀνάγκη is used as necessity *tout court*, or “what must happen” is in *Antigone* 1106, where Creon recognizes that it is vain to fight it.

At the beginning of the *OC*, Oedipus is still hated and rejected by all, and we see on stage the Chorus' first reaction to him (e.g. 226, ἔξω πόρσω βαίνετε χώρας). Creon too points out that that should be the natural reaction of the Athenians towards a polluted man (944-6). In contrast, scholars have noted the exaggerated welcome from Theseus, who does not need Oedipus even to tell his story, and who comes bringing concord after distress again, bound to Oedipus even before meeting him, thanks to their common experiences.

The element of aleatory fate within the boundaries of necessity is extremely important in the case of Oedipus.<sup>356</sup> In the same way that the end of peace between the cities could happen sooner or later, but would happen, and that love and strife would alternate in the Empedoclean cosmology, there seems to be a random element in the ones chosen to go through the suffering of the exile (and the matching learning through that suffering). In B115.5, Empedocles says that the δαίμονες won a long-lasting life by lot (λαγγάνω). That would match the complete absence of justification as to why Oedipus was ever condemned before birth to kill his father and marry his mother. As has been noticed in the chapter on the *OT*, as well as elsewhere in the present chapter, the reasons for Oedipus' error are attributed to the gods (since it was against his will and it was predicted by Apollo, whose influence in Oedipus' life does not seem to have diminished, as we have seen in section two), but it is never said that the gods are punishing him for anything in the past. In the same way, against Bowra's conviction that all questions are answered and that the gods are now compensating Oedipus for past suffering, Oedipus' new status is not a compensation for his fall — it is rather that his fall was of the type that brings learning.<sup>357</sup> Neither is it ever explained why Oedipus had to be, so to say, trapped by destiny in first place. If the comparison with Empedocles holds, then the answer, unsatisfactory as it may be if

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<sup>356</sup> There are two types of change possible: one is the regular change (day and night, winter and summer, reign of love and reign of strife). Another is the change over a minor event, which everyone knows will happen but does not know when (rain, conflict between cities). The latter type is included in the bigger scale of things both in Empedocles (no one knows when the Sphere will be broken, just that it will be), and Sophocles (no one knows when Athens and Thebes will be at war).

<sup>357</sup> Bowra (1944:349). Winnington-Ingram (1980:255), who also quotes Bowra, rightly alerts for the "impossible calculus between suffering and honours" that a payback from the gods would presume, and that one has to avoid "some Christian theodicy, namely that sufferings in this world may be compensated by eternal bliss".

The Chorus, however, sees it as a payback from the gods. However, in the same passage, the Chorus is worried about their own reward from helping Oedipus, and fearing the rage of Zeus (1477-85).

one is looking for a chain of cause and effect, is simply that “it happened by chance”. We have suggested that in the *OT* the horror expressed by the Chorus as they learn of Oedipus’ life was exactly because of the absence of a visible chain of cause and effect, and the recognition that all humanity is vulnerable to the same random changes of fortune.

It is important to note, however, that already in Empedocles there is a possibility for a δαίμων that has formerly shed kindred blood to overcome his doomed life. Empedocles presents himself both as a δαίμων that erred (B115), and as someone who is, in the eyes of the rest at least, no longer a mortal (B112.4 ἐγὼ δ’ ὑμῖν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός), and who wonders why is he even taking the trouble to explain to others about the cosmos, when he has overcome the mortal condition of those vulnerable to the cycle (B113, ἀλλὰ τί τοῖσδ’ ἐπίκειμ’ ὥσει μέγα χρῆμα τι πράσσω, / εἰ θνητῶν περίεμι πολυφθερέων ἀνθρώπων;). The process seems to be gradual in Empedocles’ human *scala naturae*, and the result of an active investment in cultivating one’s newly acquired knowledge. First, they become prophets, poets, doctors, and leaders of men, until they become gods (B146) and share a table with the other immortals, free from suffering (B147, ἀθανάτοις ἄλλοισιν ὁμέστιοι αὐτοτράπεζοι / ἀνδρείων ἀχέων ἀπόκληροί, ἀτειρεῖς). The professions of those about to ascend to a divine status are all connected to either guiding others, or to the manipulation of nature and healing (cf. the description of the wonderworker thought to be Pythagoras in B129 and the things Empedocles himself is sought for in B112, from healing to prophecies). Oedipus has already been a leader of men, then fell, then though blind reached a new type of knowledge through wandering in exile, and is now on stage with the power to curse his sons and protect his friends, and the ability to understand prophecies.

A great part of the extant fragments of Empedocles’ poem has to do with rituals and dietary precepts for purification. There are two moments of purification in the *OC* as well, one of them taught in detail by the Chorus in 469ff., the other, the ritual to the gods and the strange dressing of the dead (while still living) described by the Messenger in 1598-1603.<sup>358</sup> In 1130-6, Oedipus steps back from his first impulse to touch Theseus because he is still polluted. On the other hand, Oedipus takes the time

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<sup>358</sup> Bowra (1944:318) also compares the water used in purification in 469-70 with Empedocles’ B143.

to elaborate his defence three times throughout the play. We shall return to this in the next subsection but it seems plausible to say that the stress laid on Oedipus' moral innocence, as well as on his purification, is triggered by the type of deliverance from the cycle of suffering preached by Empedocles. In *On Nature/Purifications*, even though men slaughter each other blindly without noticing they are kin (just as Oedipus slaughters his father without knowing of their blood relationship), the initiate already knows better. He has been through a process of wandering, learning, and purification, and he is already morally above to the others who still follow strife. We shall also see later that in this play, even though there is no guarantee for good conduct, bad conduct tends to be punished (as the Chorus expected in the second stasimon of the *OT*, reinforced in the *OC* as well in 1536-7). Hence, if Oedipus were to be seen in a negative light, his surpassing of the human status and his new power would not be seen as just by mortal standards.

Theseus' last two lines raise yet another point. He will help Oedipus because of his solidarity with another man in the same condition, a condition that is shared with any common mortal, namely, ignorance of what tomorrow will bring. This solidarity, we have seen, is the note on which the *OT* had already ended. In the sense that "it could have happened to any of us", Oedipus was, in the earlier play, a παράδειγμα for humankind. Earlier on in this play, Oedipus invited his audience to put themselves in his shoes (992ff.), and to imagine how would they would react in a situation similar to his own at the crossroads where he disposed of Laius.

Oedipus' status, however, is not as a paradigm of mankind anymore in the present text.<sup>359</sup> He starts by claiming that he has learnt "patience" through suffering in the opening. This is Jebb's translation of στέργειν in 7, which is right, but does not convey the sense of "contentment", or, it would be plausible to think, of resilience acquired over time, associated with the harmonious action of a force such as love).<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Garvie (2005:81) puts it candidly: "as so often in Sophocles' plays, we may admire the hero, while finding other characters more attractive, and we ourselves never hope to emulate him. We shall not be given the status of 'heroes' when we die".

<sup>360</sup> As we have mentioned above, this patience, or endurance, might have become Oedipus' fundamental quality. It should be read as his capacity to endure hardship, rather than a taming of his temper. When Creon accuses him of not having changed (804-5), he may be right, but that is irrelevant. Oedipus' temper may not have changed, but, more importantly, Oedipus' character has persevered in a long span of time through the harsh life in exile.

Gradually, we learn that he not only learnt patience, but we see that he has the knowledge of his own power and the offer he has to make to Athens (576-8 and that it is after his death, 582). He knows that his death will come soon, and that he will be able to identify the signs leading to it (e.g. 94-95; 1475; 1511-2; 1514-5), as he had been able to identify his arrival in the right grove of the Eumenides (44-6; 84-93). He says that he will speak the truth of Apollo (623), and he hints at a type of knowledge that cannot be shared in public (624), but that he will be willing to pass to Theseus, once they are away from the rest (and again, in 1518ff.).<sup>361</sup>

As said elsewhere in this and the former chapters, wandering is a condition for a certain type of knowledge in ancient Greek thought. As many critics have noticed, and Oedipus says it himself, (1542-3, ἐγὼ γὰρ ἡγεμῶν / σφῶν αὖ πέφασμαι καινός, ὥσπερ σφῶ πατρί) he becomes a *guide* to others in the *OC* (1542-3) rather than a *paradigm*, it might be added. In the final scene, Oedipus does not need his daughter anymore to lead the way (1520-1), and is finally ready to both to indicate to Theseus the place of his death (together with whatever it is that almost blinds Theseus in 1650-2), and to see the end of his own cycle of suffering and wandering. As the Messenger stresses, (1663-5, ἀνὴρ γὰρ οὐ στενακτὸς οὐδὲ σὺν νόσοις / ἀλγεινὸς ἐξεπέμπετ', ἀλλ' εἴ τις βροτῶν / θαυμαστός), his death was not like the death of a common mortal, even less so with the voice of the gods calling for him to hurry up (1622).<sup>362</sup> In a sense, it was not a complete death either, since his power endures.<sup>363</sup> As happened with Empedocles' belief, Oedipus is already more powerful than men still in life, and extends that power after death, or after he is freed from his own determined period of suffering.

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<sup>361</sup> It is also curious to note the use of silence in the play. Near the beginning and at the end, Oedipus stops speaking and goes off to hide from the eyes of the many, first for protection, then to take Theseus to his dying place. In 215, he is pushed to the limits and forced to speak on what he would not want to revive. In the ritual prescribed by the Chorus, the prayers have to be said inaudibly (489). In 1044ff., the Chorus will sing of the seal of silence of the mysteries. In the scene with Polynices, Oedipus' first and lasting reaction is not to say a word. Finally, the protection of Athens is dependent on Theseus' silence, and will last as long as the secret is passed exclusively from king to king. Plutarch (*Symposiacs* 728 d-f), quoted as a source of Empedocles' B5, points out how silence was sacred for Empedocles and the Pythagoreans, and how they were to hide their teachings in their mute minds.

<sup>362</sup> On the details of the speech of the Messenger, as well as an argument against the reading of 1583-4 as Oedipus obtaining "eternal life", cf. Easterling (2006).

<sup>363</sup> In 1600ff. the daughters dress him as they would normally dress a corpse. There is no doubt that Oedipus knows what is about to happen.

As the scene progresses, the vocabulary of the unseen, of death, and its divinities takes over: from the prayers of the Chorus in fourth stasimon to Demeter in 1600, and Zeus Chthonios in 1606. We are no longer in the realm of Apollo, but are entering the realm of the chthonic deities, closing the circle opened in the prologue by the arrival at the grove of the Eumenides, daughters of the Earth and the Darkness. After Oedipus' death, Theseus, who is still the bearer of Oedipus' secret in the world of the living, is seen praying to the gods of both realms (1653-5).<sup>364</sup>

Oedipus' ultimate destiny, however, is not convincingly a matter of anxiety in the play (and probably not intended as a matter of anxiety at all). Exiled, he has become closer to Apollo. When he says in 628 that the things are thus, unless the gods are fooling him (εἴπερ μὴ θεοὶ φεύσουσί με), the remark is rhetorical. He has known from the beginning that he is guided by Apollo (cf. section 2 above), and, unlike the Oedipus who previously misinterpreted the oracles, this Oedipus is no longer in a position of being fooled by his wrong mortal assumptions. He is no longer in a position to suffer the reversals of fortune either. Now, he is a source of good fortune and happiness for his friends, observers of good conduct (1554-5, εὐδαίμονες γένοισθε, κάπ' εὐπραζία / μέμνησθέ μου θανόντος εὐτυχεῖς ἀεῖ).<sup>365</sup> The play is not about Oedipus' future — he will die soon, and that is clear. The play is rather about Oedipus' liberation from this wheel of fortune, so to speak, and his elevation to a divine status, such as is promised to the adepts of the mysteries of the type Empedocles had to teach. Oedipus' divine status means that he now has the power to protect and harm, even after his own death, and to distribute curses and blessings.

We have been focusing on one half of the first episode, and on the end of the play. But there is more to say about the destiny of those that remain, and who do not have a special status like Oedipus'. Oedipus' future is certain, and his toils about to come

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<sup>364</sup> The connection of Oedipus' daemonic powers with the chthonic realm, besides his prayer in the prologue, had already been established by his invocation of the "paternal darkness of Tartarus" in 1389-90, in the final curse against his sons.

<sup>365</sup> Garvie (2005:80) is right in pointing out that "Oedipus' curse will destroy Antigone, whom he loves, as well as those he hates. So the movement towards Oedipus' glory is matched throughout by a contrary movement that leads the further ruination of the house". This ambiguity of roles, healing and destroying at the same time, is not unusual, and Apollo would be a prime example of it. However, the question here is another: would Oedipus' power be enough to change anything in Antigone's destiny? Had he helped Polynices, Antigone would suffer the death of Eteocles, and so on. Oedipus reiterates fates already in motion, but he does not correct them or create them.

to an end, but what about his family, what about his enemies, what about his friends? Theseus has already stated his sympathy with the situation of the exiled man at the beginning, but why would he believe that there is a benefit to come from his burial?<sup>366</sup> The Chorus recoils in terror when the lightning is heard (1456). Oedipus' new prophetic status, just as happens with Tiresias in the earlier plays, is confirmed on stage: as he predicts, a small cause triggers a battle between Thebes and Athens when Creon kidnaps Ismene and Antigone. If any doubt remained, his word is proven to be right, and Theseus will be shown to behave in the best way a king might be expected to behave, true to his promises. Creon's intervention, if successful, would not have meant a reversal in Oedipus' life. From beggar to beggar, the Thebans were not intending for him to be allowed inside the city ever again. By dramatic convention, such outcome could never happen, and the episode must therefore have a different function. That function is double, as suggested above, both to validate Oedipus' status as a man who sees more than the rest, and to give Theseus the chance to show his worth on stage as well, by contrasting his conduct with Creon's. We shall look at the contrast of attitudes between each character at a later stage in this chapter, and also at how these attitudes relate to their destinies. Before we do so, however, a few more words must be said on the "heroization" of Oedipus.

### 3.2.1. Oedipus' own daemonic power: curses and blessings

The first time Oedipus mentions that he brings benefit to Athens is in 72, after asking for Theseus to be called. He promises that in all he will tell him, there will be sight (74, ὅσ' ἂν λέγωμεν πάνθ' ὀρώμεντα λέξομεν, which obviously points at the type of sight proper to Apollo's priests or to prophets, since Oedipus is blind). In the prayer said to the Eumenides in 84ff., witnessed by Antigone only, we learn that Apollo promised that after a certain time (ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ in 88), Oedipus' life would come to a close (91 ἐνταῦθα κάμψειν τὸν ταλαίπωρον βίον, with the verb denoting circularity), offering benefit to his hosts and ruin to those who exiled him (κέρδος and ἄτη in 92-3). Oedipus now has the power to identify Apollo's words by a

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<sup>366</sup> Oedipus' promised benefit does not seem to be the condition for Theseus' protection. The King of Athens seems to be predisposed to help the beggar in any case, based solely on the rules or right conduct. Oedipus' benefit is a welcomed extra.

definite set of signs, which he enunciates in 94-5.<sup>367</sup> He prays to the Eumenides to help him in accomplishing his end (101-4) and for their pity since he is now nothing but an εἶδωλον, both in the sense that he knows he is on the way to death already, and that he has reached the lower limit of his existence, as a polluted exile (109-10, οἰκτίρατ' ἀνδρὸς Οἰδίπου τόδ' ἄθλιον / εἶδωλον: οὐ γὰρ δὴ τόδ' ἀρχαῖον δέμας).

Oedipus then hides in the grove of the Eumenides, off the main path, to learn, by hearing, about the citizens of Colonus (113-6). As he comes out, he explains that, for a blind man like him, sight comes from hearing (139, φωνῇ γὰρ ὄρω). However, that bears more significance than just quoting a saying about blind men: namely, Oedipus has been guided by words, the words of the oracles, all his life (cf. section 2). Words are powerful and bring things to reality, be it by reviving one's memory (e.g. Ismene in 363-4), be it by making something an inevitable fact that could only be ignored while it was not mentioned (cf. Jocasta's reaction in the *OT* 1056- 73, as she understands the truth, but still tries to dissuade Oedipus for making it explicit verbally by the testimony of the Shepherd), be it by the power of prophecy and curse. The words that Oedipus proffers in the play are the visible (or rather "audible") token of his new power, as they are inspired by the gods and put into words the fate of the other characters, by distributing harm and benefit. On the other hand, the Eumenides, it is said several times, are the goddesses that are revered by silence. Oedipus alternates between keeping silence and cursing in the scene against Polynices (cf. section 4), and when he eventually curses him, it is with the powers of the Eumenides together with those of Apollo. This is also an alternation between the sun-god and the darkness to which Oedipus declares himself akin later, and an alternation between the gods of the living and the chthonic gods and the gods of the dead; it is plausible to infer that, after being tossed around by all, Oedipus knows all spheres of the cosmos.<sup>368</sup>

Oedipus repeats his wish that there can be mutual benefit for himself and Athens in 208-9. That is followed by Ismene's arrival, confirming that there is a new oracle

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<sup>367</sup> The grove itself seems to be off the main road, and a place that Oedipus could only reach thanks to Apollo's guidance, to learn of his final destiny. Cf. 98.

<sup>368</sup> Both silence and the sun seem to have been important for the Pythagoreans. Empedocles has a demonstrated reverence for both. Cf. also Jebb's (1900) note to 130ff. for the silent salute to the Eumenides.

of Apollo that reiterates the benefit that Oedipus will be able to confer, magnifying it to a supernatural dimension: it is a benefit that will be felt after his death, and that will give Oedipus the power to choose to whom to attribute it (392, ἐν σοὶ τὰ κείνων φασὶ γίνεσθαι κράτη). The choice has already been made when Oedipus mentions in the prayer quoted above that he will benefit his hosts and doom those who exiled him, but the Chorus did not hear that. Now they know that Oedipus' claim might be true, and that his claim depends on their hospitality, which they had almost withdrawn not long before.<sup>369</sup> Ismene also announces that Oedipus' power will come from his *post mortem* rage against the Thebans (411, τῆς σῆς ὑπ' ὀργῆς, σοῖς ὅταν στῶσιν τάφοις).

Oedipus' first curse (421ff.) starts by wishing for himself the power to control the outcome the contention between his two sons (the prayer starts by begging the gods not to change the fate set in motion by the strife between the brothers, ἀλλ' οἱ θεοὶ σφιν μήτε τὴν πεπρωμένην / ἔριν κατασβέσειαν), who are already fighting by the spear (the diplomacy of the spear versus the diplomacy of the pleas is a topic in his speech to Theseus, as seen above). The curse terms are clear: that none of the two brothers wins, not that they are sent in exile (i.e. that both die, 425-7). Since the winning side depends on Oedipus' choice, by not taking either side, Oedipus condemns both. After reiterating that Athens shall be rewarded for their help (457-60), Oedipus is asked to perform the rites of purification to appease the Eumenides.

When Theseus arrives, Oedipus knows already that his offer to him is his dead body (576ff.). Theseus gives him the benefit of doubt and makes him a citizen (or he truly believes him, but it is a promise that cannot be confirmed immediately, unlike how Oedipus can confirm Theseus' worth straightaway — Theseus declares only much later that he fully believes Oedipus), and Oedipus reiterates his blessing to Athens (643), refusing, however, to leave Colonus, since that is the place where lies his promised power over the Thebans (644-6, εἴ μοι θέμις γ' ἦν· ἀλλ' ὁ χώρος ἐσθ' ὅδε ... ἐν ᾧ κρατήσω τῶν ἔμ' ἐκβεβληκότων). Though indeed this is all part of the

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<sup>369</sup> Had Ismene not arrived with the news, the Chorus would have no reason to suspect Creon, nor would they know that in hosting Oedipus there would be benefit for them, rather than for Thebes.

prophecy, as a convergent human action is needed; Oedipus' future depends on Theseus (648, εἰ σοί γ' ἄπερ φῆς ἐμμενεῖ τελοῦντί μοι.).

In the scene with Creon, there are three curses paired with three blessings. The first curse comes in 787ff., where Oedipus sends his ἀλάστωρ (the field of revenge and paying back of a wrong is clear) against Thebes, by condemning his sons to death, with the help of Apollo and Zeus (793). Oedipus is reiterating his original curse that, in itself, was already reiterating the destiny already revealing itself in the quarrel between the two brothers (themselves bringing an ἀλάστωρ to Thebes). However, there is a difference between something that happens and something that is announced in advance as destined to happen: the latter has a much stronger emotional impact in the audience and, as we have seen in these plays constitutes a guarantee as to the eventual outcome. The brothers' inevitable destiny is brought to reality by Oedipus' words, as is confirmed in the minds of the audience by what they already know about the Seven. It is important to note, again, that Oedipus is reacting to his sons' previous actions, in Sophocles' version, only long after they have occurred. He is not said to have cursed his sons as soon as he was exiled (he was, after all, polluted, cf. Ismene's words in 402); he curses them now when they seek him for their own benefit.

The second curse is against Creon only, for the harm against Oedipus' daughters (cf. the description that the Chorus makes of Creon's actions as a crime against kin in the second stasimon, 1074-178). This time, Oedipus curses Creon with both the Eumenides and Apollo. He is condemned to a long life, and we know from the third stasimon that the longer the life, the longer the suffering (though Jebb's suggestion that this refers to Creon's loss of his family in the *Antigone* is plausible). In third place, 1003-1013, comes a short double-prayer, that the goddesses do justice by punishing those who forgot the Athenian virtues (namely, Creon, 1008-9), and that they protect the Athenians for their reverence to the gods (1005-7).

By the time of the second stasimon, the Chorus too is already claiming some prophetic gift (as they do in the *OT*, but this time they get it right) that Theseus will win the battle. Between one song and the next, there is a moment of peace, with Theseus restoring his daughters to Oedipus and proving his word. However, the transition is to the grimmest song of the whole play, the third stasimon on how the

ideal is not to be born, for life is full of sorrows (1225ff.).<sup>370</sup> What the Chorus sings is meant to be universal. No matter how long one lives, death comes to all (1239ff. establishes, for the first time, the connection between Oedipus and the Chorus, as elders and at the end of their days). Especially relevant is that everyone dies ἀκρατέζ (cf. 1236), without power. We have seen above how the death of Oedipus was also the end of Oedipus as a paradigm, and the transition into Oedipus the hero. That transformation, rather than happiness of any sort, is a transformation in power, as has been noticed by many scholars.<sup>371</sup> Oedipus will not die ἀκρατής, and his power will even increase with his death. The curses and blessings that he has been uttering will become true, as he has been claiming they will throughout the whole play. Finally, in 1516-7, Theseus acknowledges Oedipus as a prophet, and is persuaded that his words are true.

When we reach the final curse, the most terrible of all, the feeling that Oedipus' words have a definitive power is strongly evoked.<sup>372</sup> That impression is only confirmed by Antigone's reference to the curses (τοιαῦτ' ἀρώμαι, Oedipus says in 1389, praying for the Eumenides' aid) as things that have been prophesied (μαντεύματα in 1425, reinforced in 1426-7 as a reason for the rest of Polynices' army to give up) that will necessarily come true, even if, in her view, the return of Polynices to Thebes is the indispensable condition for them to come true, and something that could still be avoided.

By the time of the starting of the play, it is too late for Polynices and Eteocles to repair what has been done, and Ismene's report only reaffirms that fact from the early stages. Oedipus starts by breaking the bond of kinship by declaring that Polynices is not his son (1369, reiterated for good measure in 1383),<sup>373</sup> and that he

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<sup>370</sup> Cf. again Empedocles B22 on the births under strife, and the fragments that may be thought to describe the condition of mortals in the current world, B118-24. The Chorus proceeds to list in 1234-5 the evils of which Oedipus, his children, and anyone else alive are vulnerable to: φθόνος, στάσεις, ἔρις, μάχαι / καὶ φόνοι, which has parallels with Empedocles' catalogue of sorrows in B121.

<sup>371</sup> Most vehemently Winnington-Ingram (1980:255).

<sup>372</sup> For the contrast with Creon raising the stake from violent words to violent deeds previously, see Blundell (1989:237).

<sup>373</sup> In 937-8 it had already been said that Creon came from a just lineage, but his individual actions were not just. Here Oedipus breaks the line of nobility that the Labdacidae are still meant to keep, despite their misfortunes, even if by doing so might be condemning his own line to extinction (or, again, reaffirming the inevitable).

has his fate on his heels, as he walks towards Thebes. The personification of fate stalking down Polynices occurs in 1370-3 (τοιγάρ σ' ὁ δαίμων εἰσορᾷ μὲν οὐ τί πω / ὣς αὐτίκ', εἶπερ οἶδε κινδύνται λόγοι / πρὸς ἄστν Θήβης), and is a false hypothesis: Polynices' fate is to return to Thebes and die killing his brother. Oedipus' reiterated curses are now even more specific, closing every possible alternative to Polynices: he will never conquer Thebes (1385); he will never return to Argos (1386); he will die by kindred hand (1386), he will kill his brother (1387). By doing so, it is clear that Polynices has an unique path to follow, and no alternative whatsoever (which conforms to Polynices own sense of shame that he advances as a reason to return to Thebes). He goes silently towards his doom (1404, in spite of Oedipus' suggestion that he should go announce it everywhere in Thebes, in 1393), which, besides having implications in Polynices as a politician and a leader of armies, in the religious sphere reminds us of the silence of the Eumenides, and of the silence of Oedipus after his son's supplication. Polynices' burden is a curse intimately tied with the revenge of crimes against kin (Oedipus is justly attributing to Polynices the consequences of having formerly mistreated him, and only too late and for self-benefit having tried to fix old wrongs). It was in their name, and in the name of the paternal darkness of the Tartarus (1389-90) that Oedipus finished his curses, after all.<sup>374</sup>

As Polynices leaves, he is rushing towards his doom, as his sister puts it (e.g. 1440), and there remains no doubt that Oedipus' power is confirmed, with all curses and blessings stressing the same theme: Athens will be protected, Thebes will be harmed. The scene ends with the thunder of Zeus announcing his end. The result of Polynices' expedition is not in the play, but it must be believed that things turn out exactly as Oedipus says they will.<sup>375</sup>

Oedipus, therefore, is never condemned for excessive anger against Polynices. Quite the contrary, his reaction is implacable, but to be considered just. The most striking thing is that after he has pronounced his most violent curse, the signs from the gods that his time has come to an end arrive. Oedipus walks to death as a

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<sup>374</sup> Cf. Jebb's note on 1390 (1900:215-6) for four possible interpretations of this "paternal" aspect of the Tartarus, and its possibly deliberate ambiguity in regard to the relationship between Oedipus and Polynices.

<sup>375</sup> People in the audience may be familiar with the *Seven*. Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1021, written shortly before Sophocles' death and performed afterwards, would suggest as much.

powerful figure, in clear contrast with his arrival to the grove of the Eumenides. By then, he only knew he would have the power to benefit his friends, but even his aspect and physical incapacity would seem to contradict this claim. As Oedipus' death approaches, he does the rituals of purification, and acquires an unforeseen strength and vision that lets him do without his daughters as guides (1518ff.).<sup>376</sup> He will teach Theseus of things that are sacred and may not be spoken of (1526ff.).

As seen above, Oedipus ends as a distributor of good and evil, though the stress is put in the benefit he offers to Athens, keeping his promise to Theseus (e.g. 1554). His actions, even the curses, match what Apollo has predicted for him; once again, Oedipus' deeds confirm and coincide with the gods' decrees, but this time he is aware that that is the case.

The Chorus sees Oedipus leave and sings of the woes he has suffered, without any cause (the perplexity about the reversals of fortune is still present in 1565ff. where Oedipus' sufferings are qualified as πολλῶν and μάταν). They pray for Oedipus' heroization to be an indication of the gods raising him up again (σφε δαίμων δίκαιος αὔξοι),<sup>377</sup> but they do not say it is a reward or as a compensation for the former suffering; they say it is just, and that is perhaps the impression that the audience should be left with about Oedipus: he has suffered for no reason that can be identified in his lifetime or in the lifetime of the generations immediately before him, but his endurance of all the most extreme suffering makes him worthy of heroization. However, Oedipus has still suffered and, as has he has said before, he has already lost the best part of his life (395, γέροντα δ' ὀρθοῦν φλαῦρον ὃς νέος πέσῃ). Oedipus' new status does not contradict in anything the Chorus' former lament that life is filled with suffering and that the longer one lives (cf. Oedipus' curse against Creon), the more one will suffer.

#### 4. Second thread: actions, responsibility, and character

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<sup>376</sup> He is, on the other hand, guided by Hermes and Persephone, as it is fitting for the initiated in the mysteries. Cf. 1546.

<sup>377</sup> Unlike in third stasimon of the *OT*, the Chorus' prayer for something good is answered and confirmed by the Messenger's speech.

It is not unusual to find a message of moral nature at the end of the plays. The *OT*, peculiarly, teaches the audience something about their place in the cosmos, and their hopelessness in a world they cannot fully understand. In the *Antigone*, however, the basic precepts a king should follow not to become a despot are clearly pointed out, with the undeniable conviction that those precepts can and should be learnt. In Empedocles' poem, to stay with the same example from the Presocratic trends of thought, the main addressee is Pausanias, Empedocles' disciple. The very fact that the poem is pedagogical shows that for the initiate teacher there is something that can be taught. Despite the doomed state of all humankind, thrown between the cycles of love and strife, there is room for individual morals and ways of conduct. More so, there is the duty to preserve the most harmonious mixture possible, for as long as possible (cf. B1-4). In the *OC* as well there is a teacher and a disciple in the final scene. There is, however, more to be learnt from the play, for the non-initiate normal human being in the audience, through the confrontation of different types of conduct, represented by Oedipus, Creon, Theseus, Antigone and Ismene, Eteocles and Polynices (even if Eteocles' conduct must be judged from what is said, and from Oedipus' arguments for his revolt against both sons). A few notions are in play to define the conduct of each of these characters. First, there is, of course, intention. Then there are matters of motivation and self-interest, loyalty and pity, retribution, and finally the close match or the discrepancy between the truth of one's word and one's deed.

The problems are raised directly by the characters in the text. For our present purposes, most of the items on the list above are only relevant in so far as they reveal the good or bad conduct of each character, and the relation of that with their fate. The prevalent idea seems to be that someone wicked ought not to be rewarded by the gods (in agreement with the second stasimon of the *OT*), and that, sooner or later, they shall pay for their wicked conduct (cf. 1536-7, where the gods punish with ruin those who turn to excess). This idea is expressed several times in the play, e.g. in 1026-7, Theseus tells Creon that his conduct will bring consequences (τὰ γὰρ δόλω / τῷ μὴ δικάϊω κτήματ' οὐχὶ σώζεται), or in 1444-7, Polynices wishes his sisters will not suffer, for they have done nothing to deserve it (σφῶ δ' οὐδ' ἐγὼ / θεοῖς ἀρώμαι μὴ ποτ' ἀντιῆσαι κακῶν / ἀνάξια γὰρ πᾶσιν ἔστε δυστυχεῖν).

Good and bad conduct are defined, not so much from the results (Oedipus' former deeds being the prime example), but by the intention. As we shall see below, the contrast is made directly by Oedipus about his parents (cf. section 2), but also by what happens in each of the episodes: Creon never denies his actions, Polynices claims to share the situation of exile with Oedipus, but he has been exiled over something he has done, rather than something he has done unwittingly, and Theseus only answers Creon with violence in a genuine case of self-defence after the latter has offended Athens.<sup>378</sup> Closely bound up with intention is the matter of motivation: Polynices acts mostly in self-interest (bringing his father back to Thebes only occurs to him because he learns he needs Oedipus to win the battle); Theseus acts both for his own and the city's interest, and out of respect for the duties of hospitality; Antigone and Ismene act out of altruism the whole time, either by accompanying their father or risking Creon's displeasure by coming to him to report the news in advance, or by being willing to return to Thebes after their duties towards Oedipus are done, in order to assist their brothers.

Regardless of the oracles, curses, and prophecies, people's actions are still, in the *OC*, connected in a chain of cause and effect. Whether or not someone was doomed to do evil, the fact remains that they did evil, and that those deeds have consequences.

The stage is also the place for trials and administrations of justice. First, the Chorus judges Oedipus' case, then they judge Creon as well. Theseus punishes Creon with his earthly power for offending Athens and kidnapping the girls, while Oedipus punishes Creon and his sons with his divine powers, the same powers that allow him to reward Athens.

In the end, when it comes to the consequences of bad conduct, nothing in the *OC* is left without proper retribution. The one question that remains impossible to answer unless by invoking the power of necessity is why those who do good should also suffer. It is easy to understand why Sophocles would lack an answer...

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<sup>378</sup> For the view that Sophoclean characters are only defined by contrast (and therefore impossible to understand in isolation), cf. Woodard (1966b:6-7). For a defence of the characters' complexity and individuality, cf. Easterling (1977).

#### 4.1. Words, silence, deeds: persuasion, friendship, benefit

Creon lies from his first moment on stage, Polynices is ready to lie, Theseus keeps his word. We have noticed above that, for Empedocles, moral teachings were a matter of persuasion, to which not every man was receptive. We have also noticed that πίστις seems to be one of the most important notions of the play. It is, however an intermediary stage, and not a goal in itself (as Empedocles' persuasion opens the way for the disciple to cultivate love rather than strife).

It has also been mentioned above that πίστις and πείθω appear ver often in the play, in the lines of every single character (fifteen occurrences of πίστις and ten of πείθω). The two words cover three slightly different senses. One of them is closer to “trust” (e.g. the thing that decays in 611; the reliable omen of 87; the trustworthy Ismene in 356); another to “pledge” (e.g. Antigone asks which promise is it that make Oedipus call for Theseus in 1488; Theseus promising to recover the girls in 1039); yet another to “persuading someone of something” or “being persuaded” (e.g. the Chorus asks Oedipus to be persuaded to tell them his story in 520; Eteocles has persuaded Thebes to side with him in 1298; Creon allegedly acts on his conviction in 950).

The objective of persuasion, as a diplomatic tool by definition, is to create a bond of friendship, *sensu lato*, that leads to some sort of benefit (φιλία and χάρις are two of the other most important words in the play, the latter appearing twenty-two times, and several derivations of the former over forty times).<sup>379</sup> This benefit might be mutual (Theseus and Oedipus), or altruistic (Antigone and Ismene towards their brothers). The third option, a predominantly self-interest, seems to be despised by the prevailing morality of the play (Polynices' motivation). In this text, it might even not be considered a benefit at all, if given without consideration for the other's needs, and only benefit in appearance, but hiding bad faith (cf. Oedipus to Creon in 775-82).

“Persuasion”, despite its possibly material description in 611 (πίστις), is something that is traditionally based in words, words that have to be confirmed or refuted in a

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<sup>379</sup> In his note to line 662, Jebb (1900) points out that Aphrodite should not be in the catalogue of divinities expected in Colonus. The importance of love in the play should, however, justify her presence.

future time by actions. It is not by accident that there is in the play a heavy stress on one's truthfulness or lack of thereof, since one's real intentions and character are revealed by the correspondence between promises and their fulfilment (cf. section 4).

Persuasion, being the channel through which it is possible to reach a situation of concord, is also the channel that is blocked for Creon and Oedipus. Oedipus notices as much in 797 (ἀλλ' οἶδα γὰρ σε ταῦτα μὴ πείθων, ἴθι), as he suggests that the only possible solution for their conflict is for Creon to leave. That is because the essential basis of trust is impossible with Creon, whose words are not reliable, as has been confirmed by his deeds. The alternative to persuasion, or what happens when distrust grows instead (cf. 611) is violence and constraint. Creon uses force to kidnap the girls, and the two sons of Oedipus will fight a civil war.

There is, however, another situation where the ways of persuasion are blocked: that is the scene between Polynices and Oedipus. This time, Oedipus is above diplomacy, and reacts to Polynices' attempt at persuasion with an implacable silence that cuts off any possible reconciliation.<sup>380</sup> Worse, as Mary Whitlock Blundell notices, when he does finally speak, it is to seal Polynices' fate, rather than to negotiate.<sup>381</sup> The impossibility of negotiation with Oedipus is also the impossibility for Polynices to change the fate that had already been decided by his previous move of challenging his brother (and the even earlier move of offending his father). When Antigone pleads that he should not return to Thebes, Polynices answers that there is no room for persuasion against necessity (1441-2, Antigone: μὴ σὺ γ', ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ πιθοῦ. / Polynices: μὴ πείθ' ἄ μὴ δεῖ). Oedipus has claimed more than once in the play that he speaks with the backing of Apollo. His reiteration of his son's doom and his initial silence, reinforce Oedipus' new status as distributor of fate, and represent this

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<sup>380</sup> A religious sort of silence seems to be exclusive to Oedipus and to the Eumenides. Polynices' silence (and even the silence of the two brothers when they did nothing to stop Oedipus' exile) is a political silence that reveals traits of character.

<sup>381</sup> Blundell (1989:241) also notices, rightly, that Oedipus is one of the least stubborn of Sophoclean heroes, as he is persuaded by Antigone and Theseus to receive Polynices. I might add that he had already been convinced by Jocasta and the Chorus not to condemn Creon, against his will. Stubbornness and intelligence do not often go together, and it is a rather convincing trait of Oedipus as the intellectual hero that he is open to persuasion.

impossibility to negotiate with destiny after a certain point, i.e. that some actions have necessary consequences.<sup>382</sup>

Truthfulness and willingness to match words with deeds are, then, important virtues in the play. There are, however, other aspects of the portrayal of each person in the play, and their relation to their fate that are worth turning to next, mostly when set in contrast with the way in which other characters are depicted. It has been suggested above that the function of the episodes is exactly to stage this contrast of conduct; therefore, it is necessary to look at each pairing in turn.

#### 4.1.2. Theseus and Oedipus

The portrait of Theseus is made exclusively from a positive perspective. He is the best of men and the most righteous ruler that could be asked for, yet still a man who has to be initiated in the mysteries by Oedipus at the end of the play. Even though they are at apparently different social extremes (Oedipus as doomed beggar and Theseus as a reigning monarch), and even though Oedipus begs for Theseus' protection, the hierarchy between the two is not clearcut.<sup>383</sup> As has been noticed before, the play follows the structure of a suppliant play, without a real suppliant — instead, we have Oedipus offering a lasting gift to Athens in exchange for his protection — not a material token of his gratitude, but the supernatural protection of the city against her enemies. This power makes Oedipus rise in status towards Theseus, and echoes Tiresias' initial lines in his reply in 408-10 of the *OT*:

εἰ καὶ τυραννεῖς, ἐξισωτέον τὸ γούν  
ἴσ' ἀντιλέξαι· τοῦδε γὰρ κἀγὼ κρατῶ.  
οὐ γάρ τι σοὶ ζῶ δοῦλος, ἀλλὰ Λοξία·

Even though you are the king, the right to answer is, however, equal: over this I have the power as well, since I do not live as your slave, but as the slave of Loxias.

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<sup>382</sup> Theseus will eventually declare himself persuaded by Oedipus too, and treat him as a prophet in 1516.

<sup>383</sup> Walker (1995:171) goes even further and suggests that Oedipus, in his nobility, is the only person on stage whom Theseus “can recognize as a kindred spirit”. On p.186, he points out, on the relationships between host and guest: “under normal circumstances, a guest-friend is equal to his host, and their relationship is based on mutual advantage; a suppliant, on the other hand, acknowledges that he is inferior to his host, and that he can only beg for protection without offering anything in return”. Oedipus' position towards Theseus is, of course, quite different from the norm, as noted above.

He has the right to answer because he is the slave of Apollo, and not of Oedipus. Even though his position receives the name of δοῦλος, it brings him up to equality with the king. That Oedipus' status is parallel to that of Theseus is also suggested by the King of Athens' first words as he reaches the stage in 551ff. He leaves his palace to come to meet Oedipus, because he knows he is worth the attention of a king, and he addresses him with pity (οἰκτίσας in 557). Athens is famous as a harbour for strangers, but Theseus has also private reasons to help Oedipus. The most relevant point justifying Theseus' attitude is presented in 562-9:

(...) δεινὴν γάρ τιν' ἂν πράξιν τύχοις  
λέξας ὅποίας ἐξαφισταίμην ἐγώ,  
ὅς οἶδα καὐτὸς ὡς ἐπαιδευθὴν ζένος,  
ὥσπερ σύ, χῶς εἰς πλείστ' ἀνὴρ ἐπὶ ζένης  
ἤθλησα κινδυνεύματ' ἐν τῶμῳ κάρῃ·  
ὥστε ζένον γ' ἂν οὐδέν' ὄνθ', ὥσπερ σὺ νῦν,  
ὑπεκτραποίμην μὴ οὐ συνεκσῶζειν· ἐπει  
ἔξοιδ' ἀνὴρ ὢν χῶτι τῆς εἰς αὔριον  
οὐδέν πλέον μοι σοῦ μέτεστιν ἡμέρας.

You would have to be telling me of something so terrible I would recoil from it, as I know that I was myself raised as a stranger, as you are now, and that in exile I had to deal with the dangers that threatened my life, more than any man.<sup>384</sup>

Consequently, I would never turn away from a stranger, as you are now, nor would I refuse to help rescuing him: because I know very well, being a man, that my share in day of tomorrow is no greater than yours.

Just like Oedipus, he has been an exile before and suffered immensely, “more than any other man” (εἰς πλείστ' ἀνὴρ), but equal to Oedipus (ὥσπερ σύ). The recognition between the two kings is done, even if their movements of fortune have so far been opposite; Oedipus from wealth to misery, Theseus from misery to wealth. More important, however, is that just like any other man, he cannot judge himself luckier and more fortunate than any other man.

Theseus is applying to the way he rules the sentiments of the unnamed man of the Chorus in the *OT*, by recognising that he is not in control of his own destiny, in that he is not able to know what is to come. That ignorance is the common

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<sup>384</sup> Cf. Jebb (1900) *ad loc.* for the problems with the syntax of the passage.

denominator of every human, beggar or king, and humbles them all and reduces them together to the same status in relation to nature, gods, the eternal laws, or whatever they choose to call it. He will not turn his back (ἐξαφισταίμην) on Oedipus, not only because of the additional common experience that brings them together, but primarily because he would not turn his back on any other man in distress (in 1179-80 he urges Oedipus to receive Polynices in order to respect the gods).

Theseus is even nobler for saying these words before even hearing of Oedipus' offer — while there were duties towards supplicants, this decision of Athens is attacked as wrong by Creon, who argues that it is the city's duty to expel the polluted beggar (944ff.).<sup>385</sup> After he hears (and after he believes without questioning) the content of Oedipus' promises, he will not only protect him, but also make him a citizen (631). However, his prompt decision is not negative, as Oedipus' precipitation and temper could have been in the previous plays. Theseus admonishes Oedipus against temper in 592 and declares that he will not make decisions that are ill-informed, without hearing first (594).

His protective stance is similar to Oedipus' in the beginning of the *OT*. He will never fail Oedipus (694) and promises to act. He is not, however, going to be taught how to rule by the former king, and he has no fear (655). More importantly, the reason he has no fear is that he is self-assured of his mind, not giving away to emotions (659).

The first appearance of Theseus is followed, naturally, by a praise of Colonus. After we have seen their perfect king giving signs of the most just ways of dealing with things, it is time to exalt the glories of the city he rules, its mirror image (even though the Chorus has behaved in completely different ways until Theseus' arrival, by trying to send Oedipus away and then by interrogating him). His second return to the stage is after Creon's offence, and we shall return to it in 4.1.4.

His last appearance is both as the ruler of men (he will decide what to do with Antigone and Ismene), and the one who is worthy to learn Oedipus' secret and to transmit it to his successors from one generation to the next as hereditary blessing.

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<sup>385</sup> Kelly (2009:150n48) supports the view that Theseus ought to have heard already about the promise of benefit brought by Oedipus. Whether or not that is the case, it is impossible to know. We do know that he has heard that Oedipus was around, and that he is told about his benefit only after the propitious introduction he makes after seeing the Theban.

### 4.1.3. Creon and Oedipus

In the *OC* unlike the other two plays Creon is portrayed as a downright villain even before his arrival. The main features of his intervention are untruthful words and the use of violence. His rhetorical strategy at points, makes use of Oedipus' own arguments, in a twisted way. The audience and the Chorus are prepared to dislike him (which is not necessarily the case regarding Polynices).

His approach is announced by Antigone, to whom it is now the time for Athens to prove her worth (720-1 ὦ πλεῖστ' ἐπαίνοισ ἐλόγούμενον πέδον, / νῦν σὸν τὰ λαμπρὰ ταῦτα δὴ φαίνειν ἔπη). The request is echoed by Oedipus' words in 724-5 (ὦ φίλτατοι γέροντες, ἐξ ὑμῶν ἐμοὶ / φαίνοιτ' ἄν ἤδη τέρμα τῆς σωτηρίας). That is exactly what this most lively scene will be about: an opportunity for the contrast of the words and deeds of the vile Creon with the words and deeds of Oedipus, but, above all, of Theseus.

Creon appears with a mellifluous speech to persuade Oedipus but, above all, to persuade the Chorus to let him do what he came to do (731ff. he appeals to his old age as a guarantee that he will not use force). The Chorus' reaction, surprising for the Theban, is expressed physically, by stepping back (728-30). The fact is that they have already heard from Ismene about the intentions of Creon, and, even though they will still have doubts about what the right conduct for them would have been towards the end of the play (when scared by the thunder), they have already seen their king make Oedipus a citizen of Athens. Creon tries to reassure them that he intends no violence, and that his actions reflect the deliberation of the citizens of Thebes (741, πᾶς Καδμείων λεῶς).<sup>386</sup> His apparent respect for Athens (a quick mention of the city as worthy of respect in 760), once again, echoes unconvincingly Oedipus' own initial praise of the city and intentions to respect their traditions, that the audience has witnessed in the prologue.

Creon is here to persuade Oedipus, he says in 735-6. As we have seen in the previous section, the opposite of persuasion is violence, and violence breaks bonds of

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<sup>386</sup> Theseus will later remark that the conduct of the Thebans is not the same as Creon's, but Oedipus will, in his curse, direct his anger towards the city as a whole as well (787ff.).

trust — Creon’s plan B, already in practice while the first conversation takes place, is the kidnapping of his nieces.

Creon’s argument starts by an appeal to kinship, and to the necessity for Oedipus to hide his pollution in Thebes, κρύπτειν (775 and again in 777). The verb reappears in the description of Oedipus’ death. Considering that Creon is not inviting Oedipus back to the palace from which he exiled him, the “hiding” referred to might be the burial of the corpse after his death — the one thing Creon is interested in, after all.<sup>387</sup> Creon’s argument is that, though Athens is friendly, Oedipus’ first duties of reverence are towards Thebes, who nurtured him (759-60, ἡ δ’ οἴκοι πλέον / δίκη σέβοιτ’ ἄν, οὔσα σὴ πάλαι τροφός, which is not even true, since Oedipus was raised in Corinth).

Creon’s appeal to kinship is dismissed by Oedipus based on the previous sentence of exile, and his new offer labelled as a friendship by force (καίτοι τίς αὐτῆ τέρφις ἄκοντας φιλεῖν;). His main line of defence is to demonstrate that Creon’s words are the opposite of his deeds (which he reiterates in 762, 774, 782), and that his speech is a misleading stratagem (762, μηγάνημα ποικίλον).<sup>388</sup> Creon is a liar (794-5, τὸ σὸν δ’ ἀφίκται δεῦρ’ ὑπόβλητον στόμα, / πολλὴν ἔχον στόμωσιν), and therefore his actions have negative consequences, rather than the blessing he came for (795-6, ἐν δὲ τῷ λέγειν / κάκ’ ἄν λάβοις τὰ πλείον’ ἢ σωτήρια). Oedipus has indeed the power to make sure Creon will suffer the consequences of his actions, and utters a curse on his sons, and on Thebes. It is, however, only after the kidnapping of his daughters that Oedipus curses Creon and his line individually, indulging in anger, as he can now (cf. Theseus’ moderation, not giving Creon the payback he deserves in 905ff.).

The first exchange confirms the main ethical request that a person guided by evil intentions and dishonouring the gods (Creon is ἀσεβῆ in 823) may not be rewarded. Thus 794-7:

τὸ σὸν δ’ ἀφίκται δεῦρ’ ὑπόβλητον στόμα,  
πολλὴν ἔχον στόμωσιν · ἐν δὲ τῷ λέγειν  
κάκ’ ἄν λάβοις τὰ πλείον’ ἢ σωτήρια.  
ἀλλ’ οἶδα γάρ σε ταῦτα μὴ τείθων, ἴθι ·

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<sup>387</sup> Blundell (1989:233n27) makes a good point on how an Oedipus taken by force to Thebes would hardly be expected to bring them any benefit.

<sup>388</sup> The Sphinx is ποικιλωδός in *OT* 130. Her weapon of choice were verbal riddles.

But you came here with a dishonest mouth, sharper tempered than iron; by saying those things you will come off with more harm than benefit. But since I know I cannot persuade you of this, go.

Oedipus' sources of knowledge, as he says immediately before, are Zeus and Apollo. Creon is just a liar. As such, his words obtain more loss than gain, and Oedipus has the power to make sure that is the case. It is interesting to note that Oedipus admits no possible point of contact or possibility of resolution of the conflict. Creon is not permeable to his persuasion, as the harsh men of Empedocles B114 mentioned above who would not believe the truth from the gods. The situation also has a parallel in the argument between Creon and Antigone in the earlier play: two irreconcilable positions in a situation that will only be resolved by force or higher authority.

It is by force that the scene develops. In 818-9, Creon announces that while they were speaking Ismene has been kidnapped, and orders his guards to seize Antigone as well. The pace is now faster. The Chorus intervenes and moves towards Creon (834-5), determined to prove Athens' strength and send Creon away. Creon threatens with war (837), as if he had not just started it by kidnapping the girls under Athens' protection; Oedipus points out that he had predicted as much (838). The Chorus gives the alarm to the rest of the citizens to come and help (841), while Antigone cries for release (844-5). Creon accuses Oedipus of bringing all this trouble upon himself for indulging in anger (848ff.), and announces that he will snatch Oedipus as well. The Chorus argues with Creon (661), Oedipus argues with Creon (864); Creon tells Oedipus to shut up (865, ἀδῶ σιωπᾶν)... and Oedipus pronounces another curse! Jebb, *ad loc.*, plausibly suggests that it is Creon's reference to silence that reminds Oedipus to invoke the Eumenides in this new curse, that he proffers in their name and the name of Helios (another name for Apollo?) in 864-70. This time the curse is against Creon.<sup>389</sup>

Creon mocks Oedipus by asking the Chorus if they see what he is doing (871, ὄρατε ταῦτα...);. By doing so, he is cutting the blind man from the scene, as someone

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<sup>389</sup> Jebb (1900) *ad loc.* further suggests that the curse upon Creon entails condemning him to live to an old age like Oedipus', surviving his sons and wife, as happens in the *Antigone*. Nothing else is said of Creon's future after he leaves stage, but Jebb's suggestion is plausible, if the audience still has the *Antigone* in mind.

who cannot be aware of what is going on around him. Oedipus who, of course, sees more than Creon at the moment, remarks that the Chorus can see both of them (872-3, implying that they are in the right position to be judges of their respective behaviour). Creon declares that his *θύμος* will not bend (874, the accusation he had earlier made against Oedipus). The Chorus intervenes again, invokes Zeus (882, which is dismissed by Creon), having declared that it is the honour of the city that is at stake now (879), accuses Creon of *ὑβρις* (883), and calls for help before the Thebans can cross the borders (885-6).

Help comes in the form of Theseus, in 887. Creon has now offended a guest, the city, and the gods, and Theseus demonstrates his promise of protection by rescuing the girls.

#### 4.1.4. Theseus and Creon; Athens and Thebes

Theseus starts by putting urgent action before words, and sends the Athenians after the two girls (897-903), for the sake of honour (both the military honour of Athens which is at stake because suppliants have been kidnapped, and his own honour, in view of his promise to Oedipus that he would be kept safe). In 905-6, he shows more restraint than Creon is worthy of, warning that if he indulged in his anger, Creon would not leave unscathed (Theseus' *sangfroid* sets him apart from Creon, and eventually from Oedipus as well). However, since Creon has started the war, Athens answers by using force (907-918). More interesting for our current purposes are 919-23:

καίτοι σε Θῆβαί γ' οὐκ ἐπαίδευσαν κακόν·  
οὐ γὰρ φιλοῦσιν ἄνδρας ἐκδίκους τρέφειν,  
οὐδ' ἄν σ' ἐπαινέσειαν, εἰ πυθοῖατο  
συλῶντα τὰ μὰ καὶ τὰ τῶν θεῶν, βία  
ἄγοντα φωτῶν ἀθλίων ἰκτῆρια.

It was not Thebes who raised you to be evil; she is not accustomed to nourish unjust men, nor would she approve, if she learnt that you were seizing what is mine and what belongs to the gods, by taking away by force the pitiful suppliants.

Thebes has not *taught* Creon to be evil, nor would the Thebans ever defend what Creon is doing, as he tries to claim, especially disrespecting suppliants.<sup>390</sup> There are two important things to point out here: one is the separation between Creon and his city.<sup>391</sup> This move makes Creon's responsibility individual, and not the result either of a base tradition in Thebes, or of democratic consultation. Secondly, by stressing that Thebes has not raised Creon in this custom, Theseus in effect brands him as evil in character, (a charge rejected by implication in Creon's rhetoric at 743 and by Oedipus of himself in 270). If Creon is evil by nature, then there is no room for pedagogy nor for persuasion (which matches Oedipus' words in 797, quoted above).<sup>392</sup>

Oedipus always acted with the best intentions, but the wrong results in the *OT*. In the *Antigone*, there was room for Creon to learn better, even if it would necessarily be too late. Here, good people might act wrongly through ignorance, but someone who acts intentionally wrongly and proudly so is beyond redemption and must be punished.<sup>393</sup>

Theseus is the opposite of Creon. He knows how to treat suppliants, and how to behave as a stranger in another land (926-7). He warns Creon before using violence, and his words are an exact match of his deeds (935-6).

Creon argues that it was his conviction (950, πίστις once again) that Athens and the council of the Areopagus would never accept a man as polluted as Oedipus (he stresses the causes of pollution first, in 945-6), that inspired his confidence that he was therefore doing a favour to Athens by taking him away. He argues that it was Oedipus who was introducing the discord (note especially πικρὰς in 951, contrasting with πίστις, as it did in Oedipus' speech on the reversals of fortune), and that he was defending himself (953, ἀνθ' ὧν πεπονθῶς ἤξιουν τάδ' ἀντιδρᾶν, echoing Oedipus'

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<sup>390</sup> In his initial speech quoted above, Theseus will say that he was raised in exile. There is a positive connotation of what hardship will teach.

<sup>391</sup> See Jebb (1990:149) on the hypothesis that this separation was introduced by Sophocles' grandson.

<sup>392</sup> Blundell (1988) has an interesting study on the matter of birth as defining character. Her focus is Neoptolemus and how his birth might give him potential nobility, but this nobility has to be confirmed by moral choices (the contrast is with Odysseus' baseness in the play, in spite of his noble birth).

<sup>393</sup> The contrast will be with Polynices, acting intentionally wrongly but putting himself in the suppliant position and begging for his father's pity.

own defences). He finds his anger legitimate, and declares that there is no ageing for it (the enigmatic 954-5, θυμοῦ γὰρ οὐδὲν γῆρας ἔστιν ἄλλο πλὴν / θανεῖν θανόντων δ' οὐδὲν ἄλγος ἄπτεται, perhaps slightly less enigmatic if we consider anger as an eternal moving force of the cosmos, as Empedocles did).

Creon's final claim that he is right and in the weaker position without his escort is answered by Oedipus' longest defence. After that, Theseus puts a stop in the argument (1016), before it is too late to stop Creon's men (as if the Athenians he called for as he arrived were only now ready to pursue the kidnappers). Unlike Creon in the *Antigone*, here there is little uncertainty that Theseus will act in time. He forces Creon to lead the way to his men, with a warning in 1025-7, that reinforces the idea central to this chapter that conduct has consequences in one's fate:

ἀλλ' ἐξυφηγού· γνώθι δ' ὡς ἔχων ἔχει  
καί σ' εἶλε θηρώνθ' ἢ τύχη· τὰ γὰρ δόλω  
τῷ μὴ δικάϊω κτήματ' οὐχὶ σώζεται.

Lead the way: know that the seizer has been seized and chance overtook you as you hunted. Gains got by unjust stratagems cannot be kept.

Here τύχη stands for destiny (cf. previous chapter): the necessary outcome of injustice is to be caught. Creon's offence, as the Chorus has pointed out before, is a matter of justice, and it is not right to have benefit coming from dishonesty. Therefore, Creon must suffer. He will not have the support from Athens, which he needs to take Oedipus back quietly, because his actions result from the violence of his daring (1029-30 ἐς τοσήνδ' ὄβριον (...) τόλμης).

At the end of the scene, Creon renews his threats (for when he is back in Thebes, cf. 1037), and Oedipus expresses the wish that Theseus be rewarded for his nobleness and for his righteous actions (1042-3). There was no change in Creon's attitude, nor in Theseus', nor was that ever an expectation, but the diametrical opposition of the two characters is now well defined. Theseus recovers the girls because he is brave and just, Creon is defeated because he is a deceitful villain. The first of the two major obstacles was, after all, an easy one, with the sides of the quarrel having been decided beforehand, from Ismene's intervention and Theseus' promise of protection.

The ground is now ready for Oedipus to keep his promise. Theseus effectively protected him, and his worth was proven when confronted with the Theban hostility.

Not only will Athens receive the blessing from his grave, Theseus has been confirmed as deserving the right to be the witness to his secret. As Theseus returns, victorious, with the two daughters, Oedipus reiterates his blessing to the king, now in much stronger and powerful terms than his short prayer in 1042-3. He states his reasons especially in 1124-7

καί σοι θεοὶ πόροιεν ὡς ἐγὼ θέλω,  
αὐτῷ τε καὶ γῆ τῆδ', ἐπεὶ τό γ' εὐσεβὲς  
μόνοις παρ' ὑμῖν ἡὔρον ἀνθρώπων ἐγὼ  
καὶ τοῦπιικὲς καὶ τὸ μὴ ψευδοστομεῖν.

May the gods fulfil my wish, for you and for this land, for with you only, above the rest of men, have I found reverence, and fairness, and someone who does not speak falsely.

Theseus excels amongst men in piety, justice, and truthfulness. Hence, as far as Oedipus has the power to concede his blessing, Theseus deserves it fully. The audience, if they have been galvanised in the previous scene, can now be content for a moment.

A last note on Athens and Thebes: even though Theseus is the king of Athens, and acts on his own, it is important that the elders of Colonus follow. Theseus is here the uttermost representative of the values Athens stands for, as is made abundantly clear at various points in the text. On the other hand, Creon's moral deficiencies, like those of the sons of Oedipus, do not extend to their city. Whether or not Theseus' defence of Thebes is a later addition (cf. above), it is part of the complete text we have, and it makes sense in the context of the general contrast between inborn good and inborn bad character in the rest of the play. Also, one of the things that shocks Antigone in the quarrel between the brothers is the destruction of the city under their individual anger (a consequence predicted by the brothers before their fight, as is reported by Ismene, and strong enough for them to abdicate from the throne, at least for a time).

#### **4.1.5. Oedipus, Polynices, and Antigone**

The scene with Polynices is more affecting from the emotional point of view than the one with Creon. To begin with, he is part of the family of three of the characters

who have been on stage (and even doubly so, since he is at once Oedipus' son and brother, a double kinship and source of woes that Oedipus stresses between him and his daughters during the second interrogation of the Chorus). We have heard from Ismene about the quarrel between the two brothers (guided also by an evil deity, cf. section 2 above), and from Oedipus about how they have not done much when he was exiled (assuming that they were old enough to have done anything by that time). Regardless of their youth at the time of the exile, however, we know that what triggers Polynices' wish to see his father is the fact that the new oracle is public, and that, exiled, Oedipus is his last chance of victory over Thebes (1326-32).

If the trigger is self-interest, however, the appearance of Polynices as a suppliant, in contrast with Creon's violence, is more likely to win him the sympathy of the internal and external audiences.

The first description of Polynices comes from Antigone in 1249-50, after the stasimon. He comes alone and crying, and she confirms his identity, already guessed by Oedipus. Symptomatically, Polynices enters wondering whether he should weep for himself first (1254-5, *πότερα τὰμαυτοῦ κακὰ / πρόσθεν δαρκρύσω*). His justification for his own present misery echoes the story of Oedipus; he has "learnt too late" that he has mistreated his father (1264, *ἀγὼ πανώλης ὄψ' ἄγαν ἐκμανθάνω*), and that he is the worst of men (1265-6, where he can testify to it himself, rather than be judged by others, *καὶ μαρτυρῶ κάκιστος ἀνθρώπων τροφαῖς / ταῖς σαῖσιν ἤκειν· τὰμὰ μὴ 'ξ ἄλλων πύθῃ*).<sup>394</sup> His late learning, however, is closer to Creon's in the *Antigone* than to Oedipus in any of the plays. Oedipus learnt too late what he could not have learnt earlier, nor could one person alone have advised him to do otherwise, but Creon learns too late what everyone is shouting at him almost throughout the whole play. Polynices too has learnt too late that his actions could have unfavourable results. He did not learn that when he was doing the right thing, all the time he was fulfilling an unavoidable destiny. He certainly did not learn either that he should never have embarked on the course he had chosen. In fact, he is convinced that he is the one who has been wronged by his brother (1295ff.), and he only considers having wronged his father after hearing the second oracle (or at least

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<sup>394</sup> In contrast with Creon, who never recognises he acts wrongly.

that is what is to be understood in Ismene's report). He has learnt too late that he would need his father on his side now.

On the other hand, Polynices arrives in Thebes as a suppliant, and Sophocles, as we have seen above, provides him with a case, in a variation of the myth that has to be meaningful. It might be the case that the audience is meant to oscillate between understanding Polynices' position, and fearing the implacable reaction of Oedipus, even if not questioning it. Antigone's sympathy for her brother, especially her speech in 1181ff., is likely to be touching, and is touching enough to make Oedipus agree to receive his son (which contrasting the portrayal of both sons and sisters, reinforces the loyalty and love the young women stand, consistently, for).<sup>395</sup>

Furthermore a contrast between Oedipus and Polynices, both as exiled and as supplicants, fails in the parallels Polynices tries to draw. After hearing Oedipus' defence three times, the audience is prepared to tell the difference between father and son; between innocently falling into a trap of fate, and acting out of self-interest.

While Polynices is not lying, as Creon was (though he will do it as he leaves), not everything is convincing in Polynices' speech and motivations. Even Antigone, who is the one pleading for her brother, notices that Polynices' sinister catalogue of warriors in (1309ff.) announces a bloody war ending in the destruction of Thebes. Is the audience meant to take this as a red flag, even before Oedipus speaks? Antigone's questions before her brother leaves (cf. above) invite us to think as much.

Finally, we see Polynices accepting the destiny that he knows has now become inevitable. His plea to Oedipus, triggered by selfish motives or by the genuine recognition of a former wrong (one does not exclude the other, but the well-being of Thebes does not seem to be a motivation behind the destructive civil war) was the only possibility to change the outcome (cf. section 2). Strategy was not the key, nor the time of the attack, nor alliances, but simply the supernatural promise that Oedipus' grave would bless its location. Polynices knows this, just as he knows that he lies under his father's curse (1323).

By the end of the scene, in his farewell to Antigone, Polynices shows us that he is also a leader ready to lie (in contrast with Oedipus in the *OT*, and even Theseus in

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<sup>395</sup> Antigone's intervention also makes her character consistent with her portrayal in to the earliest play, but that is not necessarily a concern of Sophocles.

the present play, who are seen deliberately deciding in front of their citizens), and for whom his personal sense of honour is more important than the salvation of Thebes.<sup>396</sup>

It is very possible that Polynices' scene is purposely made ambiguous: Polynices behaved wrongly and might have been motivated by self-interest, but he is still Oedipus' son (and brother), and appears in a position of submission.<sup>397</sup> With Antigone's plea, and the fact that Oedipus is condemning his own line to an end, the audience might be invited to pity him. Oedipus's reaction, as we have seen above, is cold and implacable.<sup>398</sup> The offences made by his sons against him were intentional, and as a point of contrast he has the support given to him by his daughters. Doing good and forgiving means reciprocity and, in this play, the ones that host and the ones that answer supplications have something to gain. Oedipus is in a new city, with the status of citizen, he is with his two daughters, whom he identifies with love and strength from the beginning (cf. 337ff. and the comparison with the Egyptians), and with the certainty that he has nothing else to lose. Also, he knows what will happen, and he knows he is not destined to return to Thebes. More than harming an enemy or acting against kin, what Oedipus is doing, from his new condition, is applying the strictest justice, and distributing to his sons the consequences of their wrongful deeds.

#### **4.2. Justice, redemption, compensation, power: do actions change fate?**

We have seen the contrasting ways in which kings are portrayed, the contrasting reactions and motivations of supplicants, and the contrasting conducts of the children of Oedipus. We have known from the start (oracles are always true) that, regardless of what happens in the play, therefore, regardless of what he does, Oedipus will die and, in death, reach the power of protecting those who give him burial.

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<sup>396</sup> Cairns (1993:226) finds this concern for Polynices' honour understandable, though incompatible with the forgiveness expected from Oedipus.

<sup>397</sup> In the *Antigone*, where we have another appeal from a son to his father to change his mind, it is clear that Haemon is the one in the right.

<sup>398</sup> Antigone's arguments are sound, and the limits of wrath a topic that appears already in the *Iliad*, e.g. with Achilles withdrawing from his anger when he recognises himself in Priam's suffering.

On the one side, there are the characters representing *φιλία* and *πίστις*. Antigone and Ismene, and Theseus are the positive side, so to say, of the six people directly affecting Oedipus. On the other, Creon, Polynices, and, even though out of the play, Eteocles are the ones who cannot be trusted, and align themselves with violence and *ἔρις*. There is a stress, as we have seen, on the matching between words and deeds, and restraint and anger.

Their actions, to some extent, decide their fates, and Oedipus, with his new daemonic condition, is doing nothing more than reiterate what will already happen in any case. Polynices and Eteocles will fall, not only because Oedipus curses them, but because they have misbehaved — Eteocles by snatching the throne from his brother with precedence, Polynices by bringing war to his hometown, both by dishonouring their father and being power-hungry Creon will suffer (eventually, in another play, but here he is defeated) because he brings violence to Colonus by kidnapping Ismene (which he is already doing regardless of the results of his persuasion), and by lying about his true purposes.

It is said a few times in the play (as mentioned above), and it is fitting to make sure that the audience of what is, by nature, a moral performance does not leave feeling fooled, that the bad men must pay for their actions. That is assured in the *OC*, even beyond the point where some sort of forgiveness could have been well accepted, as in the case of Polynices' supplication.

Theseus and Athens, conversely, are rewarded for their hospitality, and their reputation as a harbour for suppliants is confirmed. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that the loveable and righteous characters will not suffer (being born is already a guarantee of suffering, in any case). Besides the unexplainable toils of Oedipus (or explainable only by the necessity of suffering in the wheel of fortune), his curse against Thebes (or the Thebans' conduct) brings further woes to Antigone and Ismene.<sup>399</sup> Their suffering, however, is also brought upon themselves by their own traits of character. Polynices makes them promise to return to bury him and, more than just a connection to the *Antigone*, that is a confirmation of the sisters' loyalty towards their family. After their father's death, there is nothing for them to do in

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<sup>399</sup> Oedipus' final power, again, does not seem to be a "compensation" from the gods by anything they made him suffer, but the result of his learning through suffering, that gives him power and sets him aside from the rest of men.

Colonus, whereas they still hold a flimsy hope that their return to Thebes might change the course of events between their brothers (1770-2). Even if not, it is their duty to return to their kin, and to return to bury them.

That brings us back to our question in section 2: do actions change fate? Could any of the characters have acted otherwise, or have learnt something, or paid attention to a warning and changed their mind (as Theseus warns Creon, for example)?

Yes and no. Yes, there is, to some extent, a possibility of improvement, or of taking personality traits to extremes. Oedipus is the greater example of that in both directions: he becomes stronger and wiser in his wanderings, and surpasses the rest of mortals, but he also sees his rage and his vindictive power growing. Theseus proves his worth and learns the secrets taught by Oedipus. The Chorus, who oscillate between what might be good or wrong doing, eventually is moved by pity towards Oedipus and leaves the ultimate decision to their king. On the other hand, Eteocles and Polynices, who try at first to deny their wish for power for a higher principle, cannot resist it in the end. Polynices comes as a suppliant but ends out lying to his men and charging against Thebes because it is too late to change his course. Creon arrives with violence and leaves with violence, renewing his threats even as he sees he has been defeated.

But none of them changes what could be called their nature. None of them learns (not even before it is too late) to act differently. In conformity with what happened already in the other plays, people act according to their φύσις, and that is stressed in the *OC* as well, when Creon or Oedipus speak about their inborn baseness, or when the word that qualifies nobility of character is γενναῖος, stressing the origin of the quality as something that runs in the blood, rather than acquired during life.<sup>400</sup> Those who are good ought to cultivate that goodness and expurgate the taints that their ignorance brought upon them, and even then, they have the guarantee that they will suffer at some point in the cycle of change. Those that are bad will, sooner or later,

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<sup>400</sup> Of course, both pairs of siblings are born of Oedipus, but, as Polynices points out, they are sons of Oedipus' cruel fate (i.e. they are the result of an act of incest of which Oedipus was a victim too). On the other hand, as a result of their conduct, Oedipus disowns his sons as if they were not from the same matter as himself. Oedipus may change between anger and love, but he does not conscientiously offend his parents or the gods.

abandon themselves to that evil nature. Polynices' repentance is instrumental rather than a reflection of a change in nature.<sup>401</sup> While his plea might have been hard to turn down by a human court (and there are a lot of judgments in the *OC*, where characters make decisions on what they see all the time, e.g. the Chorus telling Theseus that Oedipus is just in 1014-5), Oedipus can indulge in his implacable anger and remain unmoved — he has now a divine-like power to punish those who act wrongly, and the fact that he reiterates his curse does not leave a bad taste in the audience's mouth, as violent as it might be.

## 5. Conclusion

Life, for those that must die, is filled with suffering. Suffering comes from the actions of others against one, but also from some sort of necessity that dictates that no condition remains the same for too long. Evil behaviour, however, is always condemned, sooner or later. Sometimes the reason one suffers might be so buried in the past that it is impossible to identify, and inquiring after it is redundant. For that reason, Sophocles goes to great lengths *not* to provide us with any more background of the Theban story than the strictly necessary.

Oedipus does not suffer because his father did something wrong, nor because anyone else in his line that he can remember did something wrong. He suffers because, at some point in the lifespan of his family, necessity made it so that a state of peace changed into a state of distress, or because all mortal things are vulnerable to change and alternation of states between happiness and misery. If our comparison with Empedocles was at all convincing, it might even be that some ancestor has committed a crime of blood somewhere in the past. Whatever it was, it cannot be pinpointed from the present.

Oedipus' errors were already attributed to him before his birth — his moral innocence is absolute. Yet, he, just like all mortals, had limited knowledge of his own

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<sup>401</sup> This is not to say that Sophocles' characters, justly known for being rather complex, are bi-dimensionally good or bad in all his plays. In the *OC*, however, the distinction between good or bad according to nature is much bigger than in the other plays dealing with the Labdacidae, and all conflicts are, from the beginning, impossible to solve. In the *Antigone*, the conflict would have been solved if the characters were not stubborn, but the resulting moral portrait of Creon does not picture him as outright evil, unlike it does in the *OC*.

actions. Unlike all mortals, though, he has endured the uttermost sufferings through the realisation that he has committed two of the greatest crimes a society can imagine, and he has survived years of exile. During that time, he has learnt. He acquired some sort of prophetic skill that allowed him to know what would happen and to be able to read the signs of the gods. He acquired secret knowledge about the workings of the world. He learnt that some things must be kept with absolute silence.

One of the focuses of the play is the transformation of Oedipus from an example to all mankind, to someone completely set apart from it, and he is set apart through his learnings in the time of exile.<sup>402</sup> He started the *OT* with an apparent superhuman status, as a king, a solver of riddles, the saviour of Thebes who answers to prayers, from which he falls into becoming the uttermost example of human frailty and suffering. Despite the extremes, people could recognise themselves in Oedipus' life, vulnerable to the unpredictable forces of fate.

The situation is reversed in the *OC*, where he appears "under-human", polluted, and exiled, to end as a hero. He is ready to ascend in the *scala naturae*, acquiring the power to benefit his friends and harm those who have offended him. As for himself, he will die soon, and be freed from the vulnerability to change that defines every other human. Oedipus' new knowledge can be taught, but has to be taught in special conditions. His future cult based somewhere around Colonus will assure the protection of Athens as long as Theseus' line keeps his secret. Oedipus' liberation, however, is not to be seen as the gods compensating him for past injustice; the gods are not unjust, because necessity says that mortals always change from trust to distrust over small arguments, even if we do not know why they came about. Oedipus overcomes his condition, from the most disgraced of mortals to a chthonic power, because he has endured his sufferings and because he has learnt. Not as a rectification.

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<sup>402</sup> Hesk (2012:172-3) justifies the play seeming "static and dull" to Wilamowitz (1917), Bowra (1944) and Waldock (1951) with the contrast between the written text and the actual performance. I am convinced that one of the main reasons why the *OC* is less famous than the other two "Theban plays" is that Oedipus' heroization is alien to most modern audiences, and so are the mysteries surrounding it. On the other hand, Hesk considers the episodes "credible dramatic threats to the fulfilment of that [Oedipus'] destiny", and Easterling (1967:1-2) maintains that Oedipus is all too human during most of the action of the play. I think Oedipus' certainties concerning his destiny are to be believed and taken seriously, and that the "human empathy" in the play is not so much concerning its protagonist but the people around him (which does not mean that we are not to be convinced by Oedipus, just that he is no longer a symbol of all humanity).

As he arrives at Colonus, asking for protection, he has to persuade the Chorus that he brings benefit. The theme of trust and persuasion, on the basis of any relationship of friendship and mutual benefit, pervades the whole play. Creon, Polynices, Eteocles cannot be trusted and act for themselves. Theseus, Antigone, Ismene, and eventually the Chorus (though the Chorus oscillates) are great examples of good moral conduct, and deserve to be rewarded for it. The girls, however, grow up in conditions that will not allow them a reward — their characters and loyalties make them go back to Thebes to support their brothers, even when they know their death is inevitable, but their altruism and familial love is their main feature. It is not unusual in Sophocles that someone's character is the very condition for their ruin, and that does not change in the last play. On the other hand, their birth was already the result of Oedipus' incest, and the idea that the line is condemned plays some role in the emotional appeals to the audience. What is to become of a character is in the end determined by what that character does.

Creon and the Theban brothers suffer because their intentions are not good. Theseus is rewarded because his actions match his words, and he respects the gods and acts honourably towards other humans.

It is never said anywhere in the three plays that those that do good will necessarily be rewarded; what is hoped for is that those who do evil will *not* be rewarded. Other than that, mortals are born for suffering. If there is a moral message, and there certainly is, it seems to suggest that doing good will increase one's chances of having a blessed life, and doing evil will increase one's chances of having a miserable life. However, no mortal is free from toils at one point or another of their existence (even Theseus has already been exiled!). The pessimism of the *OT*, which arose so much out of the horrendous realisation that mortals have no way of judging their own actions, is only slightly attenuated in the last play.

## Conclusion

### 1. The razor-edge of fate: open-ended destinies and causal chains

ὠκύμορος δὴ μοι, τέκος, ἔσσειαι, οἱ ἄγορεύεις·  
αὐτίκα γάρ τοι ἔπειτα μεθ' Ἑκτορα πότμος ἑτοῖμος.

You are doomed to a swift end, my child, just as you say;  
for immediately after Hector, death is certain for you.

The lines are from the *Iliad* 18.95-6. Achilles has just told Thetis that returning to his homeland will never be a possibility to him, now that Patroclus lies dead. The death of Patroclus, just past, caused his decision to stay and fight, but the consequences in the future are known. If he stays, he dies. The condition had been set already back in 9.410-6, where Achilles reports the words of his mother and says that he has two destinies to choose from: to die young but with glory in Troy, or to go home and live long, without renown. Before, treasure was not enough of a reason for him to stay in Troy, but now the death of the friend made him change his mind. Why did Achilles linger around for long enough, that his options were cut short? Was the return to Phthia ever a real possibility?

The chain of necessary events, i.e. Achilles' stay means his death, has no cause other than the guarantee given by his divine mother. Yet, if one thing happens, then the other must follow.

In the three plays, we have met some situations where the fate of the characters was apparently open between two alternatives. First, in the *Antigone*, Tiresias' warning to Creon that he had to act before the catastrophe. In the earlier play, Creon's edict conditioned Antigone's reaction, which conditioned Haemon's and Eurydice's reactions as well, turning back to Creon's ultimate fall. He had, apparently, an option, perhaps the only genuine option in the three plays, but it was dependent on every second taken to perform it. Once he wastes that time, Antigone kills herself, and all the other deaths will follow.

In the *OC*, Polynices believes that he has still two possible fates, depending on whether or not he persuades his father to return to Thebes with him. If Oedipus accepts, Polynices will be victorious. If Oedipus refuses, Polynices will inevitably die. Just as in Achilles' case, Polynices' defeat is not a matter of chance but a prophesied

certainty. If his father does not support him, then the death of the two brothers will follow. There is no reason, however, for Oedipus to support his son. Not only have both his sons offended him and he has now the chance for some sort of vindictive justice, but also Polynices' intention is to attack Thebes; Oedipus' resentment is specifically against his sons and Creon, not against the city. On the other hand, Apollo has told Oedipus that he had reached the place where he was to end his days. Thus, Polynices knows that, with Oedipus rejecting his plea (and shame not allowing him to give up from his mission), his death will follow.

The *OT* might very well be the exception here, since the only option that could have been considered by Oedipus never poses itself as a real alternative: Oedipus cannot drop the investigation. If he does so, he will be betraying the city and his promise to Apollo. In either case, as Tiresias tells him, the truth will surface by the end of the day, regardless of what he does. However, the truth will surface by the end of the day exactly because Oedipus is pursuing it, and has no choice but to pursue it to the last consequences. Once the plague started, all the other steps of discovery will follow. The start of the plague is an event out of Oedipus' control.

The only other option for Oedipus to avoid his fate would have been Laius not having a child. That does not depend on the protagonist, however, and nothing is said about the alternatives for Laius: only that if he had a child, his death would follow.

## **2. Vain fights with necessity**

Be it because of shame, ignorance, stubbornness, or simply by the other people's reactions to one's deeds (Antigone to Creon's, Oedipus to Polynices'), the two alternative possibilities are narrowed down to an univocal path. Then, what seemed to be a choice becomes "fate", since the chain of events is determined in advance. One thing follows the other.

The idea that fighting necessity is vain is expressed in the three plays. Both Creon in the *Antigone* and Polynices in the *OC* say as much once their options are cut short.

Oedipus, on the other hand, states from the beginning of the *OT* that it is pointless to try to force the gods, and even if he is the major example of someone trying his best to circumvent his oracles, he will end as the one letting destiny guide him.

In the *Antigone* and in the *OC*, the narrowing down of possibilities was dependent on external factors, but also on the characters' conduct: Antigone only defies Creon because Creon proclaims the edict, and Polynices only needs to beg for Oedipus' help because he has once offended him.

In the *OT*, the picture is different. There has never been anything other than one single path, leading Oedipus from birth to the present through every necessary step to fulfil his prophecy. Here the main issue is the deficiency of perception. Everything that seemed to be a coincidence, or happening out of chance, turns out to have been a piece in the predicted destiny.

The situation at the end of the three plays is the same: it is vain to fight fate, for once things are in motion, they will happen, and it is not possible to stop time from bringing them about. However, in the *Antigone* and the in *OC* there has been at some point an opportunity to follow a different path. In the *OT*, if that opportunity has ever arisen in the past, it was not for Oedipus.

### **3. Innate causes, states of mind, responsibility**

In the *OT*, most of what happens to Oedipus is out of his control, and seems to happen by chance. Yet, he is the one who is skilled enough to defeat the Sphinx, strong enough to fight the adversaries on the road, noble enough to initiate the investigation and to carry it on to the end.

In the *Antigone*, Creon finds himself in the situation of having to deal with the end of the civil war, yet it is his personality that leads him to stubbornly proclaim an edict that seems to go against everyone else's common sense.

In the *OC*, Oedipus claims that he did what he did in ignorance, and that he was condemned to do it from birth, but he will never deny his responsibility in his misdeeds. Not even Polynices, who sees himself as a victim of his father's curse (a curse that only comes after the offence), will deny his own responsibility for what he has done.

In the three plays too, the personality of each character is determined by birth and regulates the way they act. On the other hand, slightly less fixed than the character, are the states of mind that determine the actions (Oedipus is frustrated or

angry, Creon is angry or stubborn, Antigone is obstinate). However, states of mind tend to change only when it is already too late.

Creon is stubborn in the *Antigone*, but in the *OC* it is strongly suggested that he is evil by nature. Oedipus is similar to his father in the *OT* (which is probably why they fight), and noble by nature in the *OC*. Antigone's personality in the early play reminds the Chorus of her father's.

On the other hand, birth also determines the situation in which each character has to live their lives: Oedipus is born to kill his father, and his children, in all the three plays, are born from a union that should have never existed and suffer the consequences of that origin.

#### **4. External causes**

Besides conduct, character and biological origin, there is a combination, in the three plays, of different explanations of the origin of events. In all of them, chance is excluded. The situation in the *OC* and in the *OT* is determined by Delphi. In the *Antigone*, by what has already happened between Eteocles and Polynices (and their connection with the doomed destiny of their family is established in the first few lines of the play).

Another aspect is the clash between individual fates of different people in the same group. For Oedipus in the *OT*, all the contingencies of his life were created from birth into adulthood by people other than himself: Laius had a child, the Shepherds rescued him, Polybus adopted the boy, the Thebans never investigated the crime. In the same way, Antigone kills herself before Creon has the time to repent, dictating the following deaths, that bring catastrophe to Creon's house. Polynices' fate depends, ultimately, on Oedipus' decision (though predicted as it was by Delphi both that Oedipus would remain at Colonus and that his body would benefit one side of a struggle).

The fact that one's fate depend on the interaction with other people makes it easy to understand the personification of external forces involved in life. Justice, Chance, Destiny, and, of course, the gods are seen as physically close, even if invisible, contributing to the outcome of events. The *OT*, however, where the influence of Apollo is the strongest, the presence of divine forces is alluded too, but never

demonstrated by a miracle. The demonstration that Apollo is at work is the very path of Oedipus' life and the way all pieces converge; in the *Antigone*, the gods manifest themselves by sending a timely storm to assure Antigone's capture, and by rejecting Tiresias' sacrifices. The most direct sign from the gods, however, comes at the end of the *OC*, with their calling of Oedipus as he reaches the end of his life. There too, the gods are seen as directly interested in Oedipus' destiny, now conceding him a power that sets him apart from the rest of humans.

It must be noted, however, that even though the gods might be interested in Oedipus' life, the gods alone are never used as a justification for the things that happen. The absence of an ancestral punishment reinforces this aspect too: whatever is fated to happen (or the gods want to happen) is confirmed and corroborated by the human agents, whether or not they are fully aware of their actions. That will be the theme of the *OT*, and a topic of reflexion in the *OC*.

## 5. Eternal alternation

We have said above that chance is excluded from the three plays. That is and is not true. There is a certain type of chance that is necessary in one of the explanations given for the events in the world of change. That is integrated in the idea in the *OC* and the *Antigone* that there is a cycle of change, to which all humans are subject. This draws in many notions common to the presocratic philosophy of the time, where the world that can be observed by the common mortal is framed between the alternation of opposites (e.g. night and day). On the other hand, it implies that no one state will last forever. Socially, it is used in the *OC* to explain why peace and war alternate. The guarantee in the cycle is that things will eventually change, but it is impossible to predict how, when, and why. This adds the point that the cause of a change in the situation might be minor, but also suggests that the cause might be lost in time. At some point, something disrupted the balance and the situation changed.

All humans are vulnerable to this cycle, therefore it is impossible to predict that a state of happiness will last forever, and only with the passing of time can someone look back and judge their own lives.

In this sense, there is not necessarily justice either. While in the three plays it is a requirement that the wicked pay for their deeds, and the anguish comes from the fact

that good people sometimes do wrong and must pay too, in the long cycle of change that is not necessarily the case, at least for the Messenger in *Antigone* 1157-60:

τύχη γὰρ ὀρθοῖ καὶ τύχη καταρρέπει  
τὸν εὐτυχοῦντα τὸν τε δυστυχοῦντ' αἰεὶ·  
καὶ μάντις οὐδεὶς τῶν καθεστώτων βροτοῖς.

For fortune raises up and fortune makes fall both the fortunate and the unfortunate, forever: and no one can be the prophet for men of the things established.

The condition of all mortals is to be vulnerable to this alternation and, with regard to that, they are equal. Oedipus, when he is made a hero in the *OC*, escapes from this cycle.

## 6. Ignorance and conduct

The ignorance of mortals regarding their own future and the whole of reality is, of course, most central to the *OT*. Humans have a very limited perception of reality, to the point that they do not even know who they are, as is the case of Oedipus. Oedipus, after the failure of his calculations and deductive methods, will be able to understand more by the end of the play, but there is no positive note of possible improvement: this is the situation mortals are condemned to live in, and they can only hope that their lives have been as free from evil as possible.

In the *Antigone*, however the stress on the necessity and possibility for Creon to learn pervades the whole play: it is, in theory, possible for him to change his conduct and to become a better ruler. That the learning comes late is a traditional motive of tragedy, but the guidelines for reducing the number of possible mistakes all mortals are condemned to are there. Creon's tyrannical tendencies and prejudice do not allow him to learn in time.

In the *OC* the type of learning is different. Oedipus has gathered in exile a type of knowledge that allows him to read the signs of the gods, as well as to hold some sort of prophetic powers. It is a knowledge he will transmit to Theseus in the secrecy of the mysteries. By becoming a hero, Oedipus' status is separated from that of the rest of the mortals, and so is the scope of his knowledge.

So from the three plays, the *OT* is probably the one with the most bleak and pessimistic situation, to be made universal and describe the condition of all mortals. It is a hostile environment, with the gods and reality playing against the best intentions of the ignorant agent. In the *Antigone*, the world of the city and its politics is probably the one closer to life: it is not surprising that the political situation in the play has attracted so many readers in so many times, and that it has been adapted to other political situations. It sounds closer to the life in the real world than the dead end ways of the oracles in the *OT*. The *OC*, again, sets a separation from the common people: Oedipus' destiny is an exception, and even though his newly acquired knowledge can be transmitted, it is only so in the context of cult.

## 7. Justice

As most commentators have remarked, “believe that events — unpleasant events — are caused by divine powers, and sooner or later you will speculate about the motives by which the divine powers actuated.”<sup>403</sup> The “fairness” of Oedipus' downfall in the *OT*, or even of Antigone in the *Antigone* and the *OC* has been at the centre of much debate.<sup>404</sup> Especially the heroization of Oedipus at the end of the *OC* is seen often as the gods fixing former wrongs, and compensating Oedipus for the past. In none of the three plays, if the question of the gods is ever raised (and it is raised by the Chorus in the *OT* at least), is the final answer ever negative. Oedipus suffers because he has committed wrong deeds. We pity him because he was morally innocent of those deeds, but he has committed them nonetheless. Why was he ever fated to do it from birth? We shall never know, but not even the Chorus seems to question it anymore. In the slice of Oedipus' life presented on stage, most of the ancient causes are already buried by time in the past, and in the end are either unknowable or irrelevant: the gods, who can see everything without the temporal limits, will know the origin of trouble. And if the origin of trouble does not lie in the

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<sup>403</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1965:39).

<sup>404</sup> Greene (1944:141), for example, rightly remarks that “suffering is by no means always the punishment of moral guilt.” He will, however, give a weak argument for the deaths of Antigone and Jocasta (p.147), who die because “the poet wants them to die”, rather than because they are fulfilling any sort of design. Anything in the play happens because the poet wants it to happen, and Jocasta's and Antigone's deaths are the culmination of human actions taken to their uttermost consequences, and framed in the pattern set by Delphi to the house of Oedipus.

ancestors, human knowledge is so limited that they are enough to bring suffering upon themselves in the present, by acting in ways they cannot fully understand. Thus, the wicked are seen paying for their behaviour in the *OC*, in the same world where the just appear to suffer unfairly. The gods seem to be both the guarantors of happiness and sorrow, but acting as forces of eternal balance, rather than from anthropomorphic motives such as jealousy (despite the heavy personification of the agents of fate).<sup>405</sup> We shall never know why was Oedipus condemned to do what he did, though we know that Antigone and Polynices, Ismene and Eteocles were born out of a union that was an inversion of the natural order to begin with, voluntary or not. There is a sense in which every single human is condemned to suffering, and that sense is the limitation of perception and the vulnerability to the world of change, to the passing of time, and to death.

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<sup>405</sup> Cf. Kitto's (1958:49) cosmic justice, but also Lawrence's (1998:13-4) remark that the cosmic justice still does not tell us why Oedipus or Laius and not someone else.

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