Two plays by Sophocles

Oedipus Tyrannus
Antigone

Oedipus Tyrannus and the Denial of Conception[1]

1. Conception

In English, the words "to conceive", "concept", "conception", "conceptualization", etc., have related though distinct meanings:

(1) To "conceive" a child. This is a technical term, and refers specifically to the onset of pregnancy.

(2) We speak of an invention as proceeding from an inventor's "conception" of how it will work.

(3) One "conceives" or "pictures" images in the imagination. In this usage it stands for intuition. If some phenomena can't be comprehended in intuition one says that it is "inconceivable". As in, "The government is wasting an inconceivable amount of money on the occupation of Iraq."

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[1] **The translation quoted throughout this essay is that of Hugh Lloyd-Jones: "Sophocles: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus, Harvard UP 1994". It is not always my preferred translation, either in terms of poetry or drama, but it evidently has the merit of being the most semantically accurate rendition of the Greek text.**

(4) "Concept" is somehow stronger than its close synonym, "an idea", in that it implies greater universality. Compare "I have an idea" versus "I have a concept"

(5) The activity of "concept formation" is a process of conception (in the sense of a child 'being conceived') that leads from an 'unstable' mixture of ideas, images and impressions, to the stable form one calls a "concept".

In our discussion of the 'concepts in' and the 'structure of' Oedipus Tyrannus, we will be interested in particular in the (if one might put it that way) *the conception of the conception of Self*. which statement we interpret as: "the slow, indeed very painful process of *conception* whereby Oedipus is forced to a new *conception* of his own identity". Before the culmination of the slow revelation of the truth, Oedipus was ignorant of his own nature. The knowledge, when it does come, falls short only of killing him outright, and leaves him blind and helpless.

In this essay we focus on the 3 "conceptions" that interact richly in the drama of Sophocles' great masterwork, *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

***(A) Conception* : as in physical procreation: the complete and completed process, from the planting of the seed to the birth of the new living creature: insemination, conception, pregnancy, birth.**

***(B) Conception*: as in the research and development of an idea, the process with which we are familiar through the way science is practiced : 'conceiving hypotheses', posing problems, gathering data through observation, experimentation, testing, and the final emergence of "concepts" (evolution, dark matter, plate tectonics, etc.)**

***(C)Conception:* we appropriate the word to a a new meaning, by using it to refer to the *assimilation of shock* , that is to say, the gradual triumph of understanding over something *inconceivable*, or shocking. Specifically we have in mind the acknowledgement or incorporation or resignation to of some fact that may be clear to the**

intellect but emotionally incomprehensible to the heart. Serious crimes fall into this category[2]

All of these meanings of "conception" are relevant to Sophocles' play: its' through-line is built upon the *birth* of an understanding tragic to its recipient, though cleansing to Thebes.

As Tiresias tells him (*"This day shall be your parent and your destroyer"*), the person one refers to as "Oedipus" is born and dies at the same moment. The 3 procreative stages of insemination, pregnancy and birth, are reflected in the metaphorical personages and temporal structure of his crimes.

The assimilation of some emotional assault, or trauma, leads to spiritual growth, or healing, which is also a birth process, a form of conception. Oedipus is devastated by the revelations he receives, yet he also grows in stature: although more miserable, in fact blinded, he is in some sense 'healthier' than he was in the previous state of ignorance.

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[2] Since we cannot conceive of why someone could bring himself to commit a horrible murder, we put him to death (at least in this country).

Birth is not always positive: some children emerge stillborn, others emerge with hideous anomalies. It is the same with the psychological birth process: sometimes the emergence of a new idea, or 'concept', can be in the form of the implantation of a fixed idea, the nurturing of some addiction or the development of a vice, the pursuit of deluded goals or the dedication to fanatical schemes of vengeance.

Thus: although the 'opening'of the psychic eye' of Oedipus is a healthy development, the extreme shock of the revelation leads him to blind himself with Jocasta's brooch, an extension of those traits of impulsiveness and rashness that led him to flee Corinth, murder Laius, marry Jocasta, and accuse Tiresias and Creon of plotting against him.

In the play, all interpretations of the idea of "conception" are subsumed in the somatic representation: parricide/incest. The background structure, the metaphorical machine present in the static background, the passage through parricide and incest, stands as a representation of a diseased mental process.

In this interpretation we part decisively with Sigmund Freud: the "Oedipus Complex" is not a collection of illicit urges which reside in the Unconscious and seek their outlet in the external world, but an over-reaching somatic metaphor for the process, known as "denial", of rejecting a train of thought and the possibility of its assimilation, when it is leading to a place where one does not want to go. This is the representation of human psychology portrayed in this play. It has nothing to do with biological urges and impulses.

The through-line, interweaving a skillful counterpoint between the various conceptualizations in the structure of the play, takes the form of an intense, grim intellectual torture that transports the heart and mind of the protagonist from a near-total ignorance at the outset of the play, to a blinding understanding of his true nature.

Oedipus himself has also, in a sense, received the "reward" of intellectual understanding, lifted from mental darkness through the revelation of an evil fate.

2. Denial

The successive phases of curiosity, rejection of the truth and a recognition that is too painful to bear imposed by the force of circumstances, correspond to what, in modern terms, we call the phenomenon of *denial* . These are the recurring stages of an eternal cycle, one that does not end even though the play is over.

The heightening pace of the drama is built upon a series of denials.

(1) By fleeing the court of Corinth, Oedipus attempts to deny the curse laid by Pelops and Apollo on the house of Laius. This in and of itself would not suffice to make for interesting drama. What places it in the first place in the annals of theatre, is the vision of Sophocles, whereby he compounds the curse by suggesting that *Apollo gives Oedipus the kind of personality that must, of necessity, impel him to his doom*. He is rash, he is impetuous, he is vain. His rashness is symbolized in the rash murder of Laius; his vanity in the drunken hubris that led him to accept marriage

with Jocasta as the reward for vanquishing the Sphinx. In some sense he is coupling with catastrophe. Jocasta is indeed the mother of catastrophe

(2) Denial of the possibility that the man he murdered at the conjunction of the 3roads ,from Delphi, Daulis and Thebes , might have been his father.

(3) The fatuous conceit that the vanquishing of the Sphinx somehow made him invulnerable, is a form of denial. This delusion of invulnerability hangs over Oedipus through the play; he invokes it repeatedly to scorn those who counsel him to stop persisting in his line of inquiry. Quote:

> ***"May whatever will be, burst forth! … I regard myself as child of the event that brought good fortune, (*a clear reference to the Sphinx*) and shall not be dishonored!" (Lines 1076-1084)***

This delusion of god-like invulnerability has the same effect on Oedipus as Macbeth's conviction that he can only be killed by "someone not of woman born".

(4) Sophocles, who appears to have understood human psychology

better than almost any other playwright, provides a masterful portrayal of the standard defense-by-accusation of the mind afflicted with denial: projecting one's own crimes onto others.

The cruel revelations spitefully hurled at him by Tiresias are digested without being assimilated, and are quickly transformed into a coherent conception: that the accusations are without substance, but part of a conspiracy between Tiresias and Creon to kill him!

(5) Even the final self-mutilation is a denial, yet one more rash act of violence, a metaphor for the inability of his mind to bear witness to an inconceivable truth.

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The grand contrapuntal scheme of the Oedipus Tyrannus

As in serious music, the action of the play is laid out along independent lines which interact in both consonance and dissonance, and moving, sometimes in conjunct, sometimes in contrary motion:

(1) There is the perverse chronological progression, The perverse progression from his murder of Laius, his father,

through the acquisition of a delusion of invulnerability by vanquishing of the Sphinx, which leads the city of Thebes to proclaim him king and foist upon him an incestuous marriage with Jocasta. Note that, unlike the situation one finds in "Hamlet", there is no direct connection between the murder of Laius and the wedding with Jocasta. By contrast, Claudius murders old Hamlet, *in order to* marry Gertrude and become king. This *compounding* of two motives into one leads (symbolically) to Hamlet's paralysis, for it gives him the impression that the entire universe is united against him.

The disjunction of errors in the case of Oedipus has a different interpretation. By murdering Laius, Oedipus annihilates the past and his roots, and thereby stumbles into an arena in which he is doomed to wander about blind. That, combined with his pride, guarantees that he will commit acts of enormous folly, of which there can be none greater than a marriage with one's mother.

(2) The second contrapuntal line, the counter-subject as it were,

is in the portrayal of the growth of intellectual awareness. This "march to the gallows" is accentuated by the pronouncements of Creon (invariably delivered with some sanctimonious or sententious twist), the "inconceivable" accusations of Tiresias, finally the innocent narratives of the Messenger and the Herdsman, which, against the force of a rain of increasingly hysterical denials, must culminate in the "birth" of an "intellectual child", that is to say, tragic understanding. Aristotle himself comments on this in the Poetics:

"A reversal is a change of actors to their opposite, as we said, and that, as we are arguing, in accordance with probability or necessity. E.g., in the Oedipus, the man who comes to bring delight to Oedipus, and to rid him of his terror about his mother, does the opposite by revealing who Oedipus is." **(Poetics, translation Richard Janko, 1987)**

(3) In step with the increasing intensity of the light of understanding one finds the growing horror at the meaning of the revealed reality. Since this is too much to bear, Oedipus falls into a state of mental illness, the stages of which are revealed against the basic chronology. One witnesses the distress of a mind groping in total blindness towards a truth that is unmerciful as it is irresistible. We watch

him descend from his concern for the sufferings of the population of Thebes, to anguish at the equivocal pronouncements of Creon ("My blood runs neither hot nor cold at words like these. "), to rage at the cruel taunts and insults of Tiresias, to the projection of his crimes onto Creon, followed by realization, horror, guilt, self-mutilation.

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On the dramatic representations, in Greek literature , of the life of the mind.

There are numerous examples in Greek literature and philosophy of the technique of employing larger-than-life dramas and institutions to illustrate, by analogy, the nature and activity of the soul.

Of these Plato's dialogue, The Republic, is the most famous. Plato invents an "ideal social order" for his polis that serves as an enlarged representation of the life and mentality of the just individual. From my reading of it, Plato's definition of justice is not that much different from that of Karl Marx's: "To each according to his need, from each according to his ability", combined with a hereditary caste system not unlike that practiced today by the Hindus.

Plato's "ideal city state" has always been heavily criticized. Karl Popper's debunking of The Republic in *The Open Society* is so severe that it might be considered more of a put-down of The Republic than a sober analysis. Yet, if it fails in its attempt to give us a faithful morphism between the just state and the just human being, it will still continue to be prized as a work of the imagination. Nor could it pose so many challenging hypotheses did it not also contain a measure of truth.

For, after elaborating his vision of the ideal state, Plato pulls off a truly brilliant to*ur-de-force*. So as to portray the ways by which the just individual descends inexorable into an abyss of error, falling away from the ideal of justice to eclipse by tyranny, Plato draws a connection between the subsidiary forms of government and the decisions of a person who had grown up under the conditions of a *previous* government ! Thus, the *oligarchic* psyche is found in a person who grew up under a *timocracy* (stoic, Spartan, rule of honor), and rejected it; the *democrat* grew up under an *oligarchy* and rejected that. This close interweaving of person and polis is extraordinary.

This form of demonstration by analogy, with continual references between the metaphor and the reality, is also found in the Oedipus Tyrannus. All the stages of the procreative process of conception, denial and revelation, are related to those of the intellectual process, and from these to the various emotional states. Given that the argumentative trope of reasoning by analogy is a common legalistic procedure, one may perhaps detect an echo of the methods of Protagoras and his school of Sophists.

Another example may be found in Euripedes' tragedy "Medea". In its ritual acting out of the stages, whereby the actions of Medea progresses from a simple assault on Glauce, the new bride of Jason, to her father-in-law, Creon, to murdering her own children, one witnesses a larger-than-life reconstruction of the stages of thought and conception in the mind of someone bent on vengeance. We are all inter-connected: vengeance against others is not possible without destroying as well was the avenger herself holds dear, what is, in a sense, a part or extension of herself.

Vengeance is a passion, and passions are by definition insatiable. It cannot be satisfied by any amount of compensation; indeed it sets up a feedback loop of positive reinforcement, a form of addiction that increases through its gratification. Other versions of the myth of Medea portray her as continuing her career of murder wherever she goes.

It is my contention (based on my limited knowledge of the classics) that in the Oedipus Tyrannus Sophocles may have created the finest of all Greek constructions of a larger than life metaphor, namely the passage of a mind bent on folly, through parricide to hubris to incest, that perfectly matches the process whereby the human mind afflicted with denial proceeds to reject the natural mental activity leading from inquiry to understanding.

***Oedipus Tyrannus* is therefore a portrayal, in larger-than-life dramatic form, of the workings, in the unconscious mind, of the conceptual processes of *Denial*.**

3. A Comparison with Christianity

The Christian saga depicts the passage of an earthly existence of a deity through Death into Eternal Life. All 5 stages of the psycho/physical processes of life: Pregnancy, Birth, Existence, Dying and Death, with their torments are experienced, then triumphed over, by the sacred scapegoat. Through cosmic rebirth, Christ is liberated from the chains and fetters of mortality.

The myth is not unlike the Hindu/Buddhist portrayal of the ascent to Nirvana through liberation from the Wheel of Becoming, the principal difference being that, for some reason, Christianity rejects the program of rebirth through several lifetimes to arrive there [3] . It appears that even Christianity needs to modify this grim winner-take-all script with inventions such as Limbo and Purgatory.

The notion that Christ "takes upon himself" all the sins of the world, resembles the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahayana Buddhism. He is totally enlightened, yet waits "until the last blade of grass enters Nirvana" before going there himself.

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[3] **with the notable exception of the Cathars, whose doctrines are a blend of East and West.**

There may in fact be more direct connections between these two major religions: Alexander's armies established contact with Buddhist India in the 4th century BCE. A thriving Graeco-Buddhist (180 BCE –10 CE) grew up in Bactria central Asia, several centuries before the advent of Christianity.

The resurrecting *birth process* symbolized in these Christian narratives may be contrasted to the blighting *by hubris and denial* of the birth process as portrayed in Oedipus Tyrannus. The play portrays the inverse process, the descent from freedom into bondage, a negative revelation that does not promise salvation but the inevitability of doom. One might argue that there is a kind of "weak salvation" in the awakening of Oedipus to the truth of his condition, although the Greek mind seems to have had little time for such "sentimental" notions as hope, salvation, liberation, mercy and so on. To know the truth of one's doom, at least in the Greek theatre, seems to be the only permissible form of intellectual enlightenment.

Another observation, which may have relevance: because Christ "obeys" the Father, and accepts his Fate, his destiny is to be reunited, after inconceivable sufferings, with Him in Heaven.

Because Oedipus "slays", then "usurps" the Father, rebelling against his Fate, his destiny is to wander as a blind homeless beggar until his death, (when he is absolved by Zeus).

4. Aristotelian Reversals

In the Poetics, Aristotle states that there are 3 elements indispensable to a Greek tragedy: recognitions, reversals and sufferings.

A *recognition* is a change from ignorance to knowledge. Oedipus fate is sealed by an escalating crescendo of recognitions. Sufferings, those things intended to arouse terror and pity, are so numerous as to make discussion superfluous.

Let us therefore look at the list of *reversals*:

(i) Murder of Laius: Violence to the Father- usurpation- acquisition of a property (Thebes) of which Oedipus is totally ignorant- hubris- short-range victory- prelude to catastrophe

(ii) Defeat of the Sphinx: from being a homeless fugitive, the destiny of Oedipus is reversed into his being appointed king of Thebes.

[4]Marriage and child-bearing with Jocasta. As Oedipus is in fact a Theban, marriage to any woman of the city might have turned out to have been incestuous. Of all the proscribed marriages, he stumbles into the worst. The act of incest is a symbolic synonym for barrenness and sterility, the suppression of creativity by returning to the womb from which one has emerged. Though victorious on all fronts, Oedipus embraces his total ruin.

(iii) The ironic "good news" of the Messenger, which turns out to be the most frightful. (See the commentary by Aristotle)

(iv) The grim reckoning stemming from the revelations of the Herdsman

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[4] This is very 'American': one 'proves' the justice of one's way of life by acquiring economic success and social prestige.

5. List of denials

(1): In a vain attempt to outwit a pre-ordained doom Oedipus is exposed on Mount Kithaeron.

(2): For the same reason Oedipus flees Corinth.

(3): Oedipus enters blindly into the arena of his Becoming by the murder of the Father.

(4): Encounter with the Sphinx. The seeds of paranoid delusion are planted. Thus, a mental condition, a heedless personality, and a pre-ordained fate are united to a common end.

(5): Marriage with mother: the suppression of living creativity and imagination symbolized by the union of close relatives: sterility, barrenness

(6): Extreme hostility, co-existent with denial, of the unwelcome revelations of Tiresias.

(7): Oedipus accuses Tiresias, then Creon, of plotting against him. This is a dramatic representation of the mechanisms of projection.

Sophocles shows us how a fixed idea comes to fruition in the mind of his protagonist.

(8): To destroy the eyes that have been witness to the forbidden sight of his mother's body Oedipus blinds himself with her brooch.

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6.Commentary on the Script of Oedipus Tyrannus

It is assumed that the reader is familiar with the play. Ideally he/she will have a copy of one of the many translations of it beside him.

Opening: the crowd of suppliants

The text indicates that there are only two groups of Theban citizens in the delegation sent to Oedipus: the very young and the very old. Oedipus makes a point of addressing the children first (*"Children, latest to be reared from the stock of Cadmus"*). The child-bearing women and able-bodied males have all gone to the shrines dedicated to Athena and Ismenus (*a son of Apollo associated with Thebes*).

The priest is identified as a priest of Zeus, although the god most often referenced in the play is Apollo. It was Apollo, in response to the request of Pelops, who placed the curse on the house of Laius.

Oedipus' towering vanity stems from his vanquishing of the Sphinx. It is this, not the murder of Laius, which leads to his being offered the crown and queen by the citizens of Thebes. Thus, contrary to the Freudian interpretation, Oedipus does not murder Laius *in order to* marry his mother. This might be seen as just a minor detail, but it is significant that the direct source of the folly of marrying a close relative comes from errors stemming from his vanquishing of the Sphinx. If the Sphinx itself be taken as a metaphor for wisdom, one could say that Oedipus kills wisdom to pursue folly.

The opening speech of the priest of Zeus to Oedipus is significant:

"It is not because we rank you with the gods that I and these children are seated at your hearth, but because we judge you to be the first of men, both in the incidents of life and dealing with the higher powers." (Lines 30-40)

Note: the priest relinquishes his own role as intercessor with Zeus, and hands it over to Oedipus! His argument is that Oedipus is

closer to Zeus because he defeated the Sphinx. This explains why a religious procession was organized to address the civil authority:

"The tribute of the cruel singer (Sphinx)
The extra strength given by a God."

The priest slyly makes direct appeals to Oedipus' vanity. His praise is subtly twisted into a potential indictment: Oedipus risks going down in history as a betrayer of the trust of Thebes, if he does not continue to uphold the confidence the city invested in him for ridding the city of the Sphinx. The irony is extreme, as it is throughout the play.

Oedipus' responding speech is very far from that which a tyrant would deliver. He is not yet a tyrant, but will become one. The moment of the change is noted by Creon:

CREON: It is clear to me that you yield with hatred, and you are formidable when far gone in rage. Such natures are hardest to bear for themselves, and justly. (Lines 673-675)

In the work of a great playwright no event, incident or observation is without purpose. Thus one has a right to ask why Oedipus complains, several times, about the delay in Creon's return from the Oracle at Delphi. This carping establishes the fact that Oedipus is impatient by

nature. Yet there is a deeper explanation, one that touches upon Creon's character.

Slow to admit his own failings, Creon is not above giving advice to everyone else. Every time he opens his mouth he has to deliver some sententious bit of moralizing wisdom. His first lines are

Creon: ***I say that even troubles hard to bear, if they chance to turn our well, can bring good fortune.***
Oedipus***: But what is the message? What you are saying now makes me neither confident nor apprehensive (Lines 87-90)***

But Creon is hiding his embarrassment: he knows very well that he was remiss, 20 years ago, in not mounting a vigorous search to find the murderers of Laius. This might have prevented the marriage of Oedipus with Jocasta, that is to say, the more serious of the violations against the laws laid down by gods and men.

Oedipus goes back inside the palace. All the children (the "unmarried young") leave. The elders remain to form the chorus of lamentation:

"The fruits of the glorious earth do not increase, and no births come to let women surmount the pains in which they cry out"

This is a reference not only to the state of local agriculture, but also to the many sufferings that Jocasta endures and has yet to endure:

(a) The suffering of giving birth to Oedipus

(b) The suffering of abandoning him on Mt. Kithaeron

(c) The renewed pains of childbirth when, as a middle-aged woman, she gives birth to the 4 children of Oedipus

(d) The suffering of discovering the true nature of her marriage.

(e) The suicide

The priest and chorus chant responses to Creon's message. Oedipus returns to deliver his decisions:

"I shall speak the truth as a stranger to the story, and a stranger to the deed" **That is to say, a stranger to himself.**

In the blackest of all ironies of the script, Oedipus utters the great curse against the murderer of Laius and all who might protect him. This rash speech is an incredible moment in theatre. He condemns not only himself, but all friends and family that may have been involved. In some sense he has extended the curse of Pelops and Apollo:

all the members of his family, Jocasta, Antigone, Eteocles and Polyneices, and Creon will come to grief. (The authors of the Greek myths appear to have overlooked Ismene!)

The leader of the Chorus, (who sometimes functions as an additional actor), says that one ought to go through proper channels and consult with Apollo. However, in this case Apollo appears to be ignoring their pleas; therefore the best option is to consult with a priest of Apollo. Tiresias derived his gift of prophecy directly from him.

Both Creon and Tiresias are criticized by Oedipus for delaying their arrivals. It's clear why: Creon is scolded for not having searched for the murderers of Laius far more diligently than he did; Tiresias, because he knows the truth and refuses to share it. Tiresias states that there is no point in sharing knowledge that can't bring benefit to anyone:

"Alas! How dreadful it is to know when the knowledge does not benefit the knower! I knew this well, but I suppressed it, else I would not have come here. " **(Lines 316-318)**

The obduracy of Oedipus and the taunts of Tiresias work

each of them into a rage, expressed in a series of uniquely wounding *stichomythia* . Oedipus accuses Tiresias of either doing the murder himself or arranging the conspiracy to do it. In response, Tiresias employs the malicious strategy of spitting out the truth at a well-chosen moment when one knows it can only rub salt in the wounds of one's adversary, thereby guaranteeing that it will not be understood.

Tiresias restates the details of Oedipus crimes 5 times, but his accusations fall on the deaf ears of a man consumed by hostility and fear. Indeed, Tiresias deliberately arouses the wrath that rejects the truth.

After Tiresias' departure, the psychological projection of Oedipus' fear is extended to include Creon. Oedipus delivers a celebrated speech on the power of envy. Whether Creon is envious is irrelevant to the issues; yet it appears that Sophocles does attribute a measure of envy to Creon's intentions. His defense of his innocence (that he is the brother of Jocasta and therefore has no use for the power of kingship) smacks of hypocrisy; the argument is less than convincing. Yet the audience also

understands that Creon is very far from being someone who would murder the reigning king.

Pushed against the wall, Oedipus re-iterates the pathetic refrain that his vanquishing of the Sphinx proved that he has god-like powers. Yet, almost immediately afterwards he is gripped with the awareness of his impending doom. A new tone of desperation comes into his utterances, one that will remain there until the final reckoning:

Creon: ***But if you understand nothing?***
Oedipus: ***None the less I have to rule!***
Creon: ***Not if you rule badly***
Oedipus: ***Think of the city, the city!***
Creon: ***But I, too, have a share in the city, and not you alone.***
(Lines 625-630)

To absolve Creon of guilt is to concede that Tiresias' charges are valid. By his own oath then , Oedipus is forced into exile.

Creon: ***"You are your own worst enemy"*** **(Another sententious saw):**

Oedipus: ***"Will you not let me be and depart?"***

[5]Entrance of Jocasta. Clearly she is no stranger to the quarrels between Oedipus and his brother-in-law. She has the softer touch; she can get Oedipus to open up, whereas Tiresias and Creon only incited him to further anger.

Oedipus: ***He says that I was the murderer of Laius*****.**

Creon never said anything of the sort.

A "projecting mind" imagines things that were in fact never said and never took place. This is a brilliant psychological insight by Sophocles

Reduced to total despair, Oedipus speaks a version of the ***Eli, Eli*** **attributed to Christ:**

Oedipus: ***O Zeus, how have you decided to act with regard to me?*** **[6]**

Oedipus recognizes that he is the murderer of Laius, but still does not realize that he is in fact Laius' son. He goes indoors. Jocasta makes offerings to Apollo and waits for the Herdsman. But it is not he who

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[5] Or, to paraphrase: Will you please go, damn it!

[6] Here, as elsewhere, the Hugh Lloyd-Jones translation looks poor indeed. He admits to having sacrificed poetry for accuracy.

appears, but the Messenger. It is the brilliant *coup-de-theatre* praised throughout the centuries. It will be the destiny of this Messenger to turn several more twists in the garrote around Oedipus' neck.

Between lines 925 and 1055, Jocasta listens silently to the exchange between him Oedipus. As his (and her) fate is revealed, her anguish grows until it becomes unbearable. [7]

Once again Oedipus' words reveal that he is consistently off the mark. He misinterprets Jocasta's anguish as her expression of personal shame from the possibility that her husband may have come from low-born stock. Once again he takes refuge in his "triumph" over the Sphinx:

Oedipus: ***I regard myself as child of the event*** **(defeat of the Sphinx)** ***that brought good fortune, and shall not be dishonored. She is my mother.***

The choral response states that Mount Kithaeron is his mother: a far more sinister progenitor! Hereon in, the remainder of the play follows inexorably from what has preceded it. I merely remark that the energy with which Oedipus rejects the normal interpretation of the

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[7] **One wonders how the Grecian actors communicated such escalating horror while wearing masks!**

unfolding pattern of revelations is equaled only by his fanatic insistence on seeking out the truth. He persists until its crushing import can no longer be denied. Curiosity, fascination and rejection operate with equal strength until the inevitable catastrophe.

Antigone

Although Antigone, daughter of Jocasta and Oedipus, is the heroine of Sophocles play, I would argue that its central figure is Creon. He himself is free of any connection to the polluted lineage of Laius. Still, the twisted complexity of their claims of inheritance directly affects Creon's unstable political situation, greatly reducing his options and threatening his power to make decisions.

The play opens in the period following the mutual slaughter of the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices, before the walls of Thebes. The civil war was inevitable: Jocasta was both the mother and grandmother, Oedipus was their father.

Yet Antigone, Oedipus' and Jocasta's eldest daughter, would be the natural heir, the one who should have been chosen to rule Thebes following the death of her brothers; but she is a woman. My impression of the society depicted in the Theban trilogy is that it was not unheard of that Thebes should have a queen rather than a king. What right, indeed,

does Creon have to the throne, being related only to Jocasta, herself only the wife of Oedipus?

Indeed, in *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus states that Jocasta's authority in matters of government is at a level with his own:

> ***Creon: Then answer me. Did you marry my sister?***
> ***Oedipus: Of course I did.***
> ***Creon: And do you rule on equal terms with her?***
> ***Oedipus: She has all that she wants from me.***
> ***Creon: And am I not a third and equal partner?***
> ***Oedipus: You are.... (etc.)***

(pg. 14, Oedipus Tyrannus; trans. Berkowitz & Brunner; Norton Critical Edition, 1970)

The reasons given by Creon to deny Antigone her rightful place could hardly have been convincing to Sophocles' Theban: blasphemy, her age, her sex, the dubious character of birth. On the grounds of this stern, though typical tirade (*Compare this to the bombast of Claudius in Act I, Scene 2 of Hamlet, who accuses his step-son of every sin imaginable because he continues to mourn his natural father*), Creon arrogates to himself the right to govern Thebes.

Waiting in the wings, a well-worn political solution has already been decided upon: Antigone is to *marry* Hermion, Creon's son, thereby

re-establishing the "blood lineage" from Laius through Creon's grand-children. One might call it a kind of genetic money-laundering.

Creon's claims to the throne rest on flimsy grounds indeed. He has good reason to fear the presence of factions in Thebes united under the banner of Antigone's stronger right. Creon is only the brother of Jocasta, thus with no claim by blood inheritance to the throne. But Antigone's descent from Laius is *double*: she is both the grand-daughter of Laius and his son's sister; it matters little that she never once in the play expresses any interest in supplanting her uncle.

The insecurity in Creon's position obliges him to impose his authority by force. He justifies this by a conventional sophistry, a time-honored argument that is always self-serving, yet always has some merit to it: if he steps down from the throne, anarchy and chaos will prevail:

Creon: Anarchy! Anarchy! Show me a greater evil!
That is why cities tumble and the great houses rain down
That is what scatters armies!
(pg 212, The Oedipus Cycle, trans. Fitts and Fitzgerald, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1949)

By honoring Eteocles, the defender of Thebes, with all the rites of burial imposes by religion, tradition and duty, Creon affirms his commitment to the sacred institution of kingship through descent by blood. By consigning the soul of Polyneices, rebel invader of Thebes, to Hades, Creon symbolically *casts out the blood- pollution in the lineage of Laius*. **Obliged as he is to take sides in the civil war between Eteocles and Polyneices, he has, so he claims, chosen the side of Thebes.**

All of Creon's anxieties are clearly stated in his opening speech:

Creon : ... the princes Eteocles and Polyneices have killed each other in battle; and I, as next in blood, have succeeded to the full power of the throne:

The irony could not be more complete. He is next in blood to their mother, not their father. Their mother's family had no claim to royalty.

I am aware of course, that no ruler can expect complete loyalty from his subjects until he has been tested in office.

Creon fully recognizes that his claim to the throne must be supported by extraneous proofs. He therefore announces his decision to afford burial to Eteocles and cast off Polyneices:

... This is my command, and you can see the wisdom behind it. As long as I am king no traitor is going to be honored with this loyal man. But whoever shows by word and deed that he is on the side of the State - he shall have my respect and reverence while he is living, and my reverence when he is dead.

Observe that the political dilemma Creon faces is somewhat similar to the one presented to him in the final scene of the play Oedipus Rex:

Creon: What do you ask of me?
Oedipus*: Cast me out of this land. Cast me out to where no man can see me. Cast me out now.*

Creon: *I would have done so, you can be sure. But I must wait and do the will of the gods.*
Oedipus*: He has signified his will - with clarity. Destroy the parricide! Destroy the unholy one! Destroy Oedipus!*
Creon: *That was the god's command, I know. But now - with what has happened - I think it better to wait and learn what we must do." (Norton Critical Edition, pg. 32)*

Creon's dilemma in the *Antigone* **is that he must do something** *immediately* **to assert his authority over the Thebans, something that demonstrates his command over the situation facing the city-state, something that proves to the outside world that his reign will not become entangled with the domestic affairs of that lunatic Oedipus**

family. *"State before family!"* he proclaims; by which he means *"Their family!"*

***Antigone* places its audience at the center of an insoluble conflict, between the usurpation of power based on an indirect family connection (Creon), and the assumption of power through a legitimate but polluted family connection (Antigone). Each antagonist is obstinate, uncompromising, unyielding. Each justifies their actions on the grounds of sacred duty. Each is driven by political forces outside of their control. And each is doomed to destruction, driven on their inexorable collision course through the fatal structure of cause-and-effect initiated by the primal crime of incest.**

The Theban Trilogy may thus be seen in its entirety as an explication, in dramatic form, of how a false relation in the structure of kinship will pit close family members against each other, ending in the violent destruction of all concerned.