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OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

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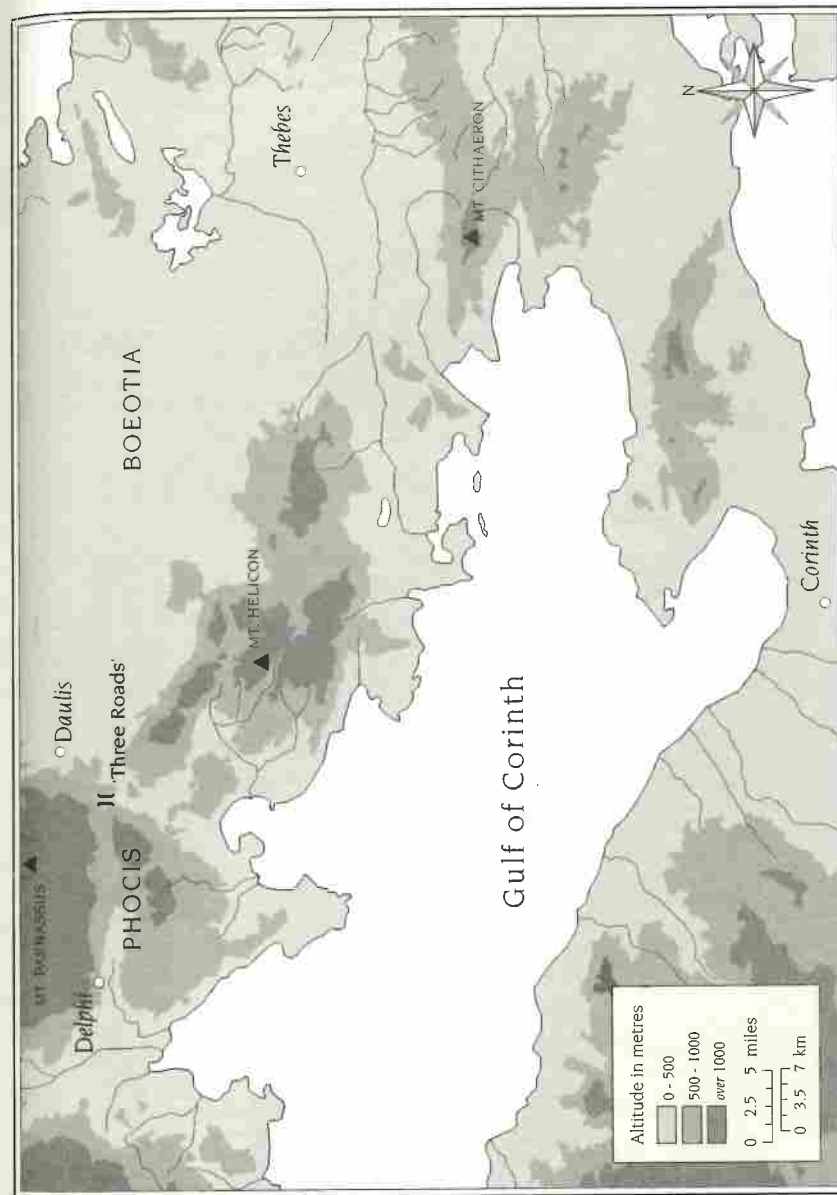
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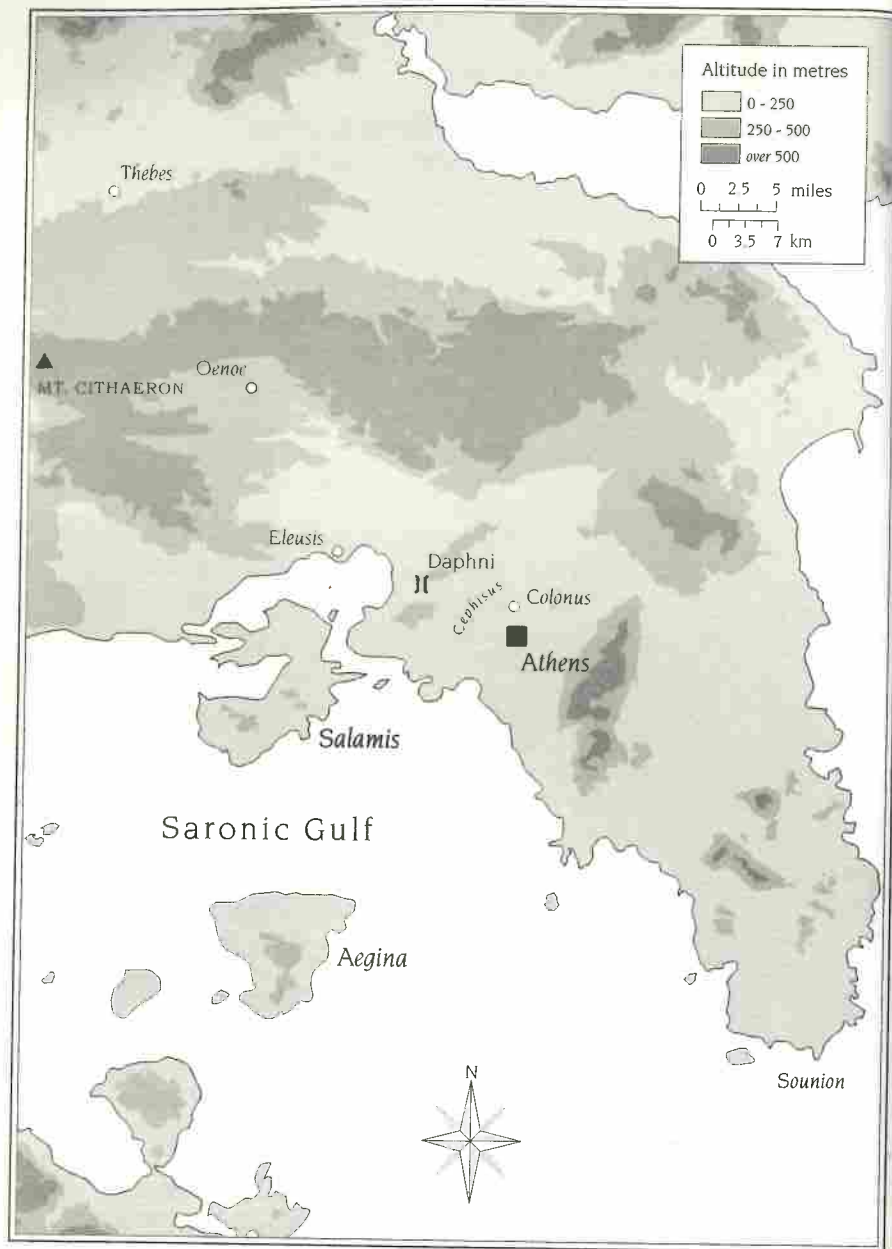
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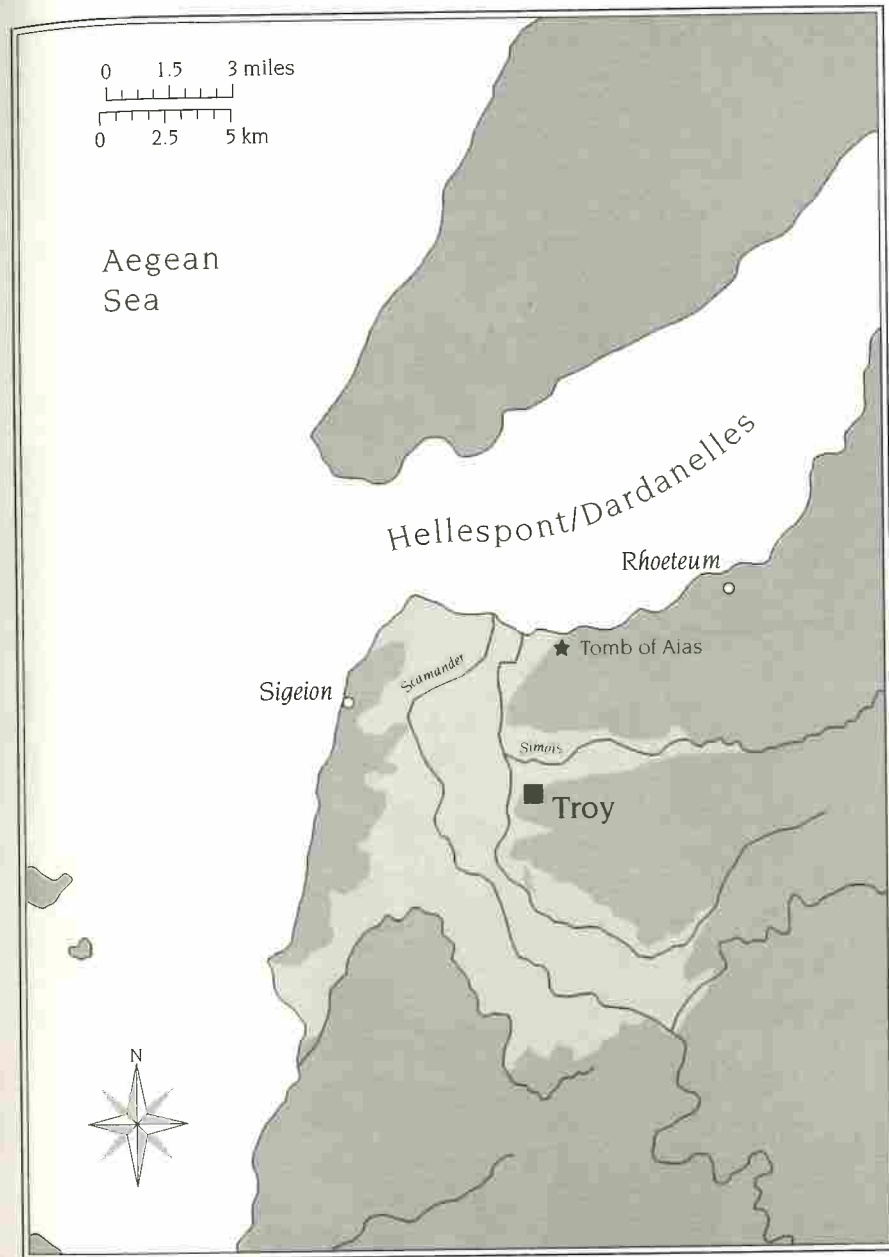
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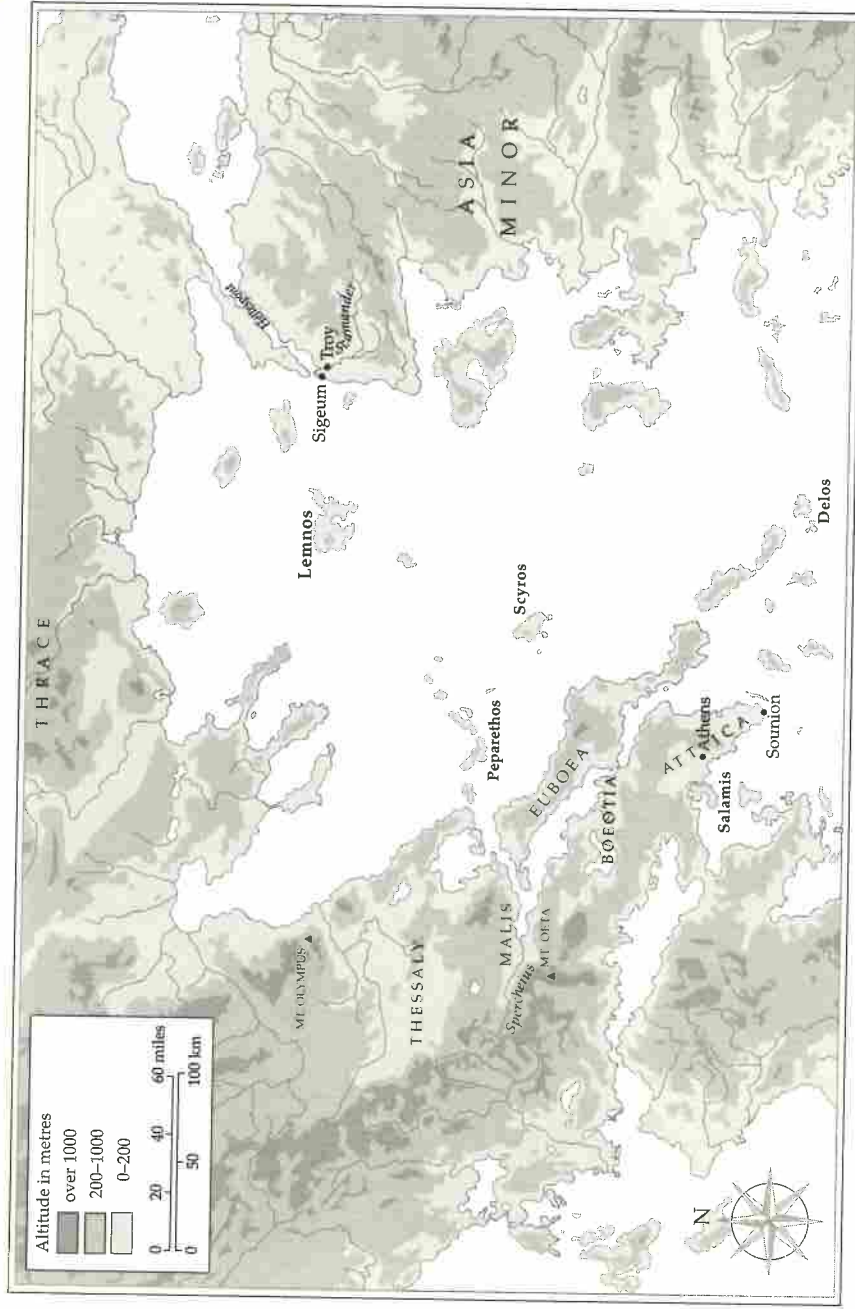
MAP 1 The life-story of Oedipus



MAP 2 Attica



MAP 3 Troad



MAP 4 Northern Aegean and Southern Thessaly

OEDIPUS THE KING

INTRODUCTION TO *OEDIPUS THE KING*

Note on the title: in Greek the play's title is *Oidipous Tyrannos*, which in Latin becomes *Oedipus Rex*. "Tyrannos" was very probably a subtitle, not going back to Sophocles, added to distinguish this play from his second *Oedipus*, subtitled "*epi Kolono*", "*at Colonus*". Whenever the soubriquet *Tyrannos* dates from, it does not carry the pejorative connotations of "tyrant". While the Greek word did collect a more and more negative usage during the fifth and fourth centuries this depended on context, and in *OT* [the conventional abbreviation] the word is used of Oedipus several times without any censorious associations—it simply means "sole ruler".¹

Archetypal Tragic Fall

From soon after its first performance *OT* came to be regarded as an archetypal Greek Tragedy. Oedipus' abrupt and total transition from prosperity to disaster epitomizes the tragic fall. He starts the play at the height of honour, power, and fame: he ends it broken, polluted, and powerless. The Messenger sums this up (1282–5):

Their old prosperity in days gone by was truly there:
but now, through this one day, there is instead
lament, disaster, death, disgrace,
and every ill that has a name—

But the play's extraordinary resilience rests not just on the pattern of the reversal of fortune, but on the how and the why. What does its drama exemplify about the human condition? Over the centuries there have been so many different shots at answers that, while showing how each age brings its own priorities to bear on the artistic creations of the past, they do also reflect the multiform richness of the ancient Greek work.

For Aristotle in his *Poetics*, written about 100 years after the play—and still the most influential treatise on tragedy ever written—its supremacy lay in the way that the handling of the plot aroused the proper

¹ The prominent use of the word by the chorus at line 873 is problematic because it does seem condemnatory, at least at first sight—see note.

tragic response (*catharsis*) in those who saw or read it. For Aristotle's Renaissance interpreters it resided rather in the fatal flaw (*hamàrtia*) of the great ruler, and its consequences: the play becomes a moral story of power, guilt, and punishment. For German Idealism the fascination came from the confrontation between the heroic individual and the constraints of the inevitable: the human will is seen locked in conflict with the higher powers, with Fate. Freud, who coined the term "Oedipus complex" in 1910, detected clues to subconscious sexual desires of all men; according to him, Sophocles divined the riddle of the subconscious and its disturbing secrets. At much the same time the early twentieth-century "ritualists" detected a Christ-like scapegoat pattern; the hero-figure has to be humiliated and expelled in order to save the society as a whole. Then mid-twentieth-century critics, most notably Bernard Knox, under the influence of Existentialism, singled out the individual will set against the pressures of mundane conformity; magnificent self-destruction is better than petty compromise. More recently, ideas about the relativity of values and cultural determinism have promoted socio-political contextualization, setting the aristocratic hero in tension with the anti-individualism of democracy. To these I would add an interpretation, explored on pp. 9–11 below, that *OT* is a gripping dramatization of the way that all humans have necessarily to construct their own life-stories, and how there is always a possibility that they might be terribly mistaken.

Each of these very various viewpoints contains some insight, even though some may claim more validity than others. This very multiformity is relevant to the play's retention of an archetypal tragic power that is still effective. Oedipus himself comes across as paradigmatic because, as all the various interpretations would agree, he is a kind of Everyman. The utter reversal of his life could happen to any man or woman. It is emblematic of this that the place where three roads meet, where Oedipus killed his father, is a specific locality on the "Sacred Way" to Delphi, the route taken by all Athenians and many others (see note on 733–4). As they go past the junction, they might well think, "There, but for good Fortune, go I". That same haunting thought lurks in the mind of anyone who sees or reads this disturbing yet still exciting play.

This setting-up of Oedipus as a kind of model is already inherent in the tragedy itself, almost a premonition of its own future canonical status. In his very first speech he refers to himself as "I, Oedipus, whose fame is known to all the world" (8); near the end he demands to be sent away to "this mountain which is famed as mine—my own Cithaeron" (1451–2). It is implicit in these phrases that he should be recognized,

not only within the Thebes of the play but throughout the whole world, as some kind of pattern of the hero and his fall. This stature comes out most clearly in the great choral song that is sung in response to Oedipus' realization of the whole terrible truth about his life-story (1189–96):

Who can add up, after all,
happiness in total
reaching more than seeming,
and decline from seeming?
With your fate before me,
paradigm before me,
yours, Oedipus, I boast
nothing human blest.

The Greek word translated here as "paradigm" is *paradeigma*: Oedipus is the model of the fragility of human good fortune.

Tracing and Explaining the Past

While Oedipus himself may exemplify the tragic fall, his play is in several ways *untypical* of Greek tragedy. To begin with, no other tragedy is so obsessed with reconstructing the past. Most are set at the time of the catastrophic turn of events, whereas in *OT* the events have already happened long before. The play is made around their discovery. It is permeated with the language of finding, exposing, throwing light, revealing. The plot is driven by Oedipus' quest to unveil knowledge: first to find out who is the person who killed the former king, Laius,² and hence caused the plague; and then, arising out of that and displacing it, the search for his own parentage. So the revelations are disclosed by working backwards from the known world of Thebes, to his killing of Laius, to his childhood, to the journey he made as a baby, and finally back to the house and bed of his parents.

This search for knowledge is even reflected in his name. Traditionally this was derived from *oid-*, meaning "swelling", and *pous*, meaning "foot", a reference to the mutilation of his feet as a baby. This is alluded to at line 1036, but in the play itself there is a more prominent connection made with a different set of *oid-* words meaning "know" and with *pou* meaning "where".³ Oedipus has to find out and know where he really is.

His life-story *seems* to have been a series of random events and choices which have generally turned out very well; he seems to be, as he puts

² For the proper pronunciation of this name with three syllables see note on 103.

³ See esp. 413–15, 924–6.

it, “born the child of Fortune in her generosity” (1080–1). But it turns out that, on the contrary, his journey since birth has taken a very particular shape: his life has been a circle, or, more accurately, an irregular circuit. It began and ended in the same place: the womb of Iocasta. As the chorus express it, with a touch of slightly macabre fascination, “you have made the voyage twice / into one engrossing harbour” (1207–8). And the beginning and completion of his life-route both passed through the very place where the play is set, the space in front of the royal palace at Thebes. He was carried out across here as a two-day-old baby; and he returned triumphantly across that space to become the husband of the queen who lives there in the palace.

Although the whole story is set back in mythical times, the places that it links together were still very real places at the time of its first performance in Athens, and are still much the same even today (see Map 1). So from Thebes, near the southern edge of the plain of Boeotia, the baby was handed to a trusted shepherd to be disposed of “on a trackless mountainside” (719)—this was Cithaeron, only some 15 km to the south of Thebes. And from there he was taken by another shepherd to his home-city of Corinth, some 50 km away across harsh terrain (see note on 1026 ff.). As Oedipus tells at lines 774 ff., he grew up there until, on his own initiative, he went to consult the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. On receiving the terrifying oracle about killing his father and sleeping with his mother, he sets off over land until he reaches the place where three cart-tracks meet, a location that is precisely pinpointed—see the note on 733–4. After his fatal meeting there with the old man, who is in fact his father, Oedipus continued on the mountain road to Boeotia, and so to Thebes. Here he defeats the Sphinx, and as a reward, marries the widow of the recently murdered king.

While there is this compelling shape to Oedipus’ life-story, that does not necessarily mean that is all the work of higher powers imposing their will on helpless human pawns. There are, however, features of Sophocles’ fashioning of the myth that have encouraged a widespread notion that Greek tragedy, and *OT* in particular, is all about Fate with a capital F. To put it simply (too simply to do justice to some of the highly metaphysical discussions), this approach maintains that everything is predetermined, either by the gods or by other inscrutable powers; and the point of the tragedy lies in watching the struggling humans act out what has to be. Oedipus is then seen as the supreme exemplar of this cosmic condition: he is a great man, who heroically defies his fate, and refuses to be crushed by it—even though he can still never avoid it in the end.

It is true that the oracle given to Laius has predicted Oedipus’ deeds

of patricide and incest before he is even born; and the prediction is reiterated when he consults the oracle himself. But, quite apart from the possible fallibility of oracles, or their possible non-literal meaning, this is far from predetermination in any sense that bears on the actual acting out of the tragedy. Fate is not an agent, and does not intervene to make things happen. Conversely, humans in tragedy are not seen as puppets or some kind of “automata” acting out the determinations of higher powers.⁴ They are portrayed as free agents, making their own decisions and choices, working out their own destinies, as best they can. Laius and Iocasta choose to expose the baby; the shepherd chooses to spare it (“I did it out of pity, master”, 1178). It was of Oedipus’ own volition that he went to Delphi, that he did not give way before the old man where three roads meet, that he faced the Sphinx, became king of Thebes . . . And so forth. None of the characters behaves like a puppet, or someone who is not in control of their own decisions and actions.⁵

Humans live their own lives, then, with only rare interventions or interferences from outside superhuman powers. And yet they always (of course) end up doing what the gods have determined, or the oracles have foretold, or the curses have called down. And in tragedy—unlike mundane reality—oracles, seers, dreams, curses, and suchlike always prove to be valid. So it creates a world in which it makes sense to say that human affairs are “double-determined” or “overdetermined”; that while the two (or more) causations interact to some extent, one does not subsume the other(s).

The gods are not what *make* the humans act as they do. Fate is a way of seeing things in the long term, a perspective that the gods have all along. The gods have decided or know what will happen in advance. So with the passing of time they can watch things fall into place; they sometimes give hints and glimpses to humans through oracles, omens, and so on. Meanwhile humans have to get on with their lives, and make decisions as best they can, trying to take into account any hints they may have received from the gods. But it is only with *hindsight*, after it has all happened, that humans can see how things have fallen into place; how, if seen from certain angles, events have made patterns. Thus, once the truth has been exposed, Oedipus can say, “Apollo, friends, Apollo / it was made my fate grow / ill, so ill” (1329–30). But he has still lived his own life, and, even at this terrible moment, he insists that it was his

⁴ Except when they are specifically maddened or possessed—the exception that proves the rule.

⁵ The nearest to an exception is two phrases in the messenger’s account of Oedipus’ behaviour inside the palace after discovering the truth—see note on 1258–61.

own decision to blind himself—he was not being controlled by any other power: “but my own hand, / no other, struck and made me blind.”

With hindsight, once everything has fallen into place, this may be seen as a kind of shape; but, as the events were being enacted, there was no malign manipulation at work. The agents acted in completely human and understandable ways. Only when the whole truth has been pieced together does it appear instead to be a horrible nexus of “Fate”.

Justice? Misfortune?

Granted that the humans make their own decisions, and are not manipulated by higher powers, then that surely entails that they are entitled to credit where credit is due, and that they have to take responsibility and blame for the things they do wrong. That is indeed, in my view, the general state of affairs in Greek tragedy. Does that mean, then, that *OT* is a story of a downfall that is deserved, even maybe an exemplary enactment of divine justice?

This kind of moralizing explanation has been widely embraced as a way of palliating the grim downward trajectory of the play. It has been supposed, especially in the early modern period, that Aristotle's term *hamartia* authorized this view; and, whether or not Aristotle meant his term to be moralizing (or rather, signifying a morally neutral though still disastrous mistake), the crime-and-punishment pattern of storytelling has inevitably been a powerful influence. So *OT* has been claimed to exemplify how ‘*hybris*’ precedes a fall.⁶ Some justify this by asserting that Oedipus has committed a damning crime, such as killing the old man he met at the three-roads, or recklessly defying the prediction of the oracle. Others have claimed that he has a fatal flaw, such as haughty pride, or tyrannical hunger for power,⁷ or even a wilful failure to recognize the obvious. And this, they claim, justifies the gods in bringing him down, imparting to the tragedy a satisfying shape and meaning.

Oedipus is, granted, not wholly innocent. He has killed strangers, even if arguably in self-defence. And he is undeniably hasty in becoming suspicious and angry. Most notably, he furiously and falsely accuses both Tiresias and Creon of conspiring against his rule. But this is surely

⁶ The word *hybris* is never used directly of Oedipus in the play, although it does occur in the prominent but difficult choral passage at line 873—see note. Modern scholarship interprets *hybris* as meaning, not reckless defiance of divine power, but something more like high-handed behaviour aimed at arbitrarily humiliating others, human or divine.

⁷ It would be a mistake to seize on the word *tyrannos*, which is used of Oedipus several times—see the preliminary note on the title above.

not enough to explain or justify his downfall. His strong and passionate temperament, and his insecurity in his power, are both characteristics that are essential for making the whole story convincing: it takes a man of this sort to have achieved what he has. As Creon says when he delivers a shrewd parting-shot, “you are oppressive when you go too far in anger” (673–4). This is true, but it does not amount to *hybris* in any sense of the word; and it is not “crime” enough to deserve the “punishment”. Oedipus is not innocent, but he is not presented by Sophocles as guilty of any outstandingly heinous fault. It is not his faults that give the tragedy its momentum.

There are some more far-fetched theories of how Oedipus is culpable. It has been claimed, for example, that his crime is stupidity, because he should have put two and two together long before, and thus avoided at least some of the disasters. And there have been “conspiracy” theories that say that he has known the truth of the situation all along, either consciously, in which case he has unscrupulously concealed it, or unconsciously, in a state of denial. But all such constructs are built on a “who-done-it?” approach which puts the pieces of evidence together in a completely different way and different order from the play itself. Sophocles has skilfully constructed the sequence and the human responses in such a way as to make it entirely convincing that Oedipus does not see the truth sooner.

If, then, the tragedy is not driven by Fate or the gods, and if it is not a story of crime and punishment either, what do Oedipus' quest and its consequences exemplify? The answer to this is (in my view) that he epitomizes the random vulnerability of human fortune, the fragility of the assumptions that make life prosper. The play does this by bringing out how humans (universally or almost universally, it may be claimed) necessarily construct life-stories for themselves, and how there is always the possibility that that story—our own story—may be terribly mistaken. There are innumerable features of any individual's situation which constantly have to be taken on trust in order to get on with life—foundations, “givens”, to do with place and time and relationships and social contexts. People could not daily distrust these “givens” and still get on with the business of living.

Yet not all of the elements of any particular person's story are invulnerable certainties. Most, if asked to enumerate the basic “givens” of their life-story, would begin with who their parents were, where they grew up, how they moved towards their present place and way of life, who are their most trusted nearest-and-dearest. Oedipus exemplifies this when he has to give an account of his past at lines 774 ff. From his

more recent past certain fixtures are taken for granted from the start of the play: he arrived in Thebes as a stranger, he overcame the Sphinx, he became the husband of Iocasta, he enjoys great power and respect in the city, and so forth. For most people, for nearly all the time, "facts" like these are facts and remain secure, undisturbed.

At the same time, everyone knows on some level that some features of our individual life-stories are vulnerable, that they may unfortunately turn wrong on us. The assumption of good health might, to take the least uncommon example, turn out to be unjustified. Or one's trust in someone close may be betrayed. Occasionally people even discover that a certain family relation is not actually genetic kin, or that the usual story about some member of the family is a fabrication. We are, at some level of consciousness, braced for single eventualities like these, traumatic though it would still be to discover any such unsuspected turn.

But it is very difficult for anyone to contemplate the possibility, however remote, that their own life-story is fundamentally mistaken from top to bottom, that it is a house of cards. If this were to be suggested, the first and quite rational response would be for the person to attempt to show that the challenge to their assumptions is mistaken. This is what we see Oedipus doing in *OT*. And, given the "dramatic irony" of knowing better than he does, we, the audience, watch with a growing sense of ominous anticipation. Oedipus rejects Tiresias as a corrupt fraud (wrong, but not unthinkable); Creon must be implicated; the insult about his father is imputed to drunkenness; Laius was, allegedly, killed by a gang, so not by him . . . Once the old Corinthian has added the startling new information about his parentage, Oedipus jumps to the conclusion that he is low-born; Iocasta's distress is put down to her snobbery about his pedigree. By the time that the old slave of Laius arrives, Oedipus has only a fragile membrane of evasions stretched between him and the truth. But he still stands by this while the facts press ever more heavily against it: as a baby he came from Thebes . . . but was not the shepherd's own child . . . from the house of Laius . . . from the hands of Iocasta . . . because of the prophesies . . . The final pieces in the reconstruction of his history break the membrane; or, to use another metaphor, they pull out the cards that have been holding up the whole edifice. The realization of the truth is not gradual: suddenly, in one terrible moment, Oedipus sees that his secure life-story has been totally and utterly mistaken, and that there is another, quite different set of explanations for everything that he has founded his life upon.

Fortunately such radical overturning of basic life-assumptions is rarely demanded from anyone. But it remains a remote possibility; and

some people do have to face drastic, even if not such total, revisions of how they see the whole course of their life. Oedipus is the extreme example, made more extreme by being a man of great fortune and power and prosperity. His own self-assessment is thus diametrically wrong (1080-3):

. . . I regard myself as born
the child of Fortune in her generosity,
and I shall never be demeaned by that.
She is my mother; and the Months, my brothers,
have delineated me as humble, then as great.

He is indeed the child of Fortune, as we all are, but in his case it is an ungenerous Fortune; and the passage of time marks him out as high and then as low, not the other way round.

The Puzzle of the Ending

There remains an as-yet unresolved dispute about significance of the conclusion of the play, and even about whether we have Sophocles' original ending or a later tampering. There is a worrying cluster of textual and dramaturgical problems in the last 100 lines of our play,⁸ but it is not these that are cause for concern so much as the contradiction of a whole series of pointers to a different final dispensation. These crop up first in three prophetic riddles posed by Tiresias, riddles that are not fully resolved, or, rather, are frustrated. First he predicts that (417-18):

. . . the fearful-footed curse
from mother and from father shall
with double spike expel you from this land.

He goes on to specify Mount Cithaeron as Oedipus' eventual destination (420-1):

There is no anchorage,
no hollow of Cithaeron's mountainside
that shall not resonate in echo to your cry . . .

And thirdly in his last speech he makes predictions about the person whom Oedipus is searching for (454-6):

From someone who has sight he shall turn blind,
from someone rich become a beggar,

⁸ The main problems are listed in the note on 1416 ff.

and then he'll make his way towards an alien land
by probing for his footsteps with a stick.⁹

Between them these seem to call for the "solution" that, when he has found out the truth, Oedipus will go into exile, and that he will make his way to the mountain.

In the closing scene Oedipus repeatedly urges that he should be thrown out of Thebes—see lines 1291–2, 1340–2, 1410–12, and 1436–7. And the destination of Cithaeron is specifically urged by Oedipus himself when he tells Creon (1449–54):

. . . you should not ever make
this city of my fathers have to harbour me alive in it.
No, let me go and live up in the mountains,
there, this mountain which is famed as mine—
my own Cithaeron—
the place my mother and my father, when alive,
had designated as my proper tomb:
so then I'll die as they had meant to do away with me.

At this stage, less than a hundred lines before the end, the audience is clearly being led to expect that this is how the play will conclude: the blind man will make his lonely way off to the trackless mountain where he had been taken to die when two days old. There would be a certain "poetic justice" to this; and there might also be a suggestion of the scapegoat ritual.¹⁰ It is obvious that there would be a certain cathartic satisfaction if the play were to end this way.

But *OT*, as we have it, definitely does not satisfy these expectations. Instead Creon says that the oracle must be consulted again before anything is done (1436–45, reiterated at 1517–19); although Delphi has already pronounced on the guilty man, he insists on double-checking. In keeping with this, it is explicit that Oedipus is taken back inside the palace at the very end (1429, 1515, 1521).¹¹ Some scholars believe that there is so much that is unsatisfactory in the closing scene that the relevant lines are not authentic Sophocles, and that his original play did indeed end with Oedipus making his way to Cithaeron. This is undeniably a drastic theory, which would change the whole burden of the play's conclusion, but it is not patently false, and for myself I do not think it is out of the question.

⁹ It may be worth noting, though, that in the final scene there is no sign that Oedipus has a stick. On the contrary, he needs both arms free to embrace his daughters.

¹⁰ This kind of ritual (the *pharmakos*) was not as prominent in Greek cult as in Judaic, but it was not unknown.

¹¹ The consequential stage-directions are discussed in the note on 1523–4.

Assuming, though, that our text is sound, and that Sophocles' play did indeed end with Oedipus being taken inside, then what is the point of arousing the expectation that he will be sent off into the wilderness, only to frustrate this purgative impetus? It must, it seems, be to emphasize the powerlessness of Oedipus, and his lack of understanding of the way that everything has changed. He still thinks he knows what is best, and he still wants to have his way, but he is overruled. As Creon says in his closing lines (1522–3):

Useless wanting to remain all-powerful,
since the power that you wielded
has not followed with you all your life through.

It would be a harrowing enough prospect if Oedipus were to set off alone into exile, but having to stay trapped in the polluted house at Thebes is arguably even worse. And it might be maintained that this is truer to the grim realities of the human condition. We cannot simply walk out on misfortune and put it behind us; we have to go on living with it. We are trapped inside the house of our life.

Whichever was Sophocles' ending, Oedipus remains one of great archetypes for bringing us face to face with the tragic aspect of the human condition. It is not for nothing that the play has come to be seen as paradigmatic.

CHORUS

Well, no more sound,
raise no more lamenting:
these things are bound
firmly to this ending.

°Antigone and Ismene, accompanied by Theseus and his attendants, depart in the 'foreign' direction, towards Thebes. The Chorus go in the other direction.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

NOTE that line numbers refer to the standard numbering of the Greek texts, not to the lines of this translation.

OEDIPUS THE KING

- 1 *ancient land of Thebes*: the powerful city of Thebes, with its ancient walls and their celebrated seven gates, was conspicuous in the plain near the southern edge of the large, relatively fertile area called Boeotia (see Map 1). In tragedy it is often called 'the city of Cadmus', as it is here in the Greek, after its legendary founder some four generations earlier.
- 3 *suppliant branches*: leafy branches tied round with bands of wool were often carried as a token of the ritual, when suppliants put themselves at the mercy of a person, or more often at the altar of a god.
- 5 *Paeon*: this was a title of Apollo, in his role as a god of healing. Some songs in honour of Apollo were known as 'Paeans'.
- 20–2 *before the double temple . . . of Apollo*: literally 'the double-temples of Pallas [Athena] and the prophetic embers of Ismenus'. Ismenus (probably more correctly Hismenus) was a special Theban cult-title of Apollo, and was also the name of the river that flowed past one side of the city. These lines may suggest a certain fascination with real Theban institutions.
- 30 *a profiteer in groans and tears*: Hades, the god of the Underworld, was sometimes known as 'Ploutos', which means 'Wealth', so this is a kind of word-play.
- 36 *that cruel singing lynx*: here and several times elsewhere the Sphinx is alluded to by a riddling phrase, as though it might be bad luck to speak her name. The only time she is directly named is by Creon at 130.
- 56–7 *A city's like a ship . . . but a hulk*: I agree with those scholars who argue that these two rather leaden lines have been added to Sophocles' text.
- 70–1 *Creon, brother of my wife, to Delphi*: the father of both Iocasta and Creon was Menoeceus, who was, like Laius, a descendent of Cadmus. Thebes was nearer to Delphi and its famous pan-Hellenic oracle than most Greek cities, but it still involved some difficult terrain round the southern flank of Mt Parnassus (see Map 1). (In 71 the oracle is given the grand periphrasis of 'the Pythian house of Phoebus'.)
- 103 *Laius*: this is the first allusion to Laius in the play, and his name will be heard again and again before it is finally found to be that of Oedipus' father. In this translation, as in Greek, Laius has three syllables, not two (as is often mispronounced in English): more or less 'La-ee-us'.
- 122–3 *He said . . . many hands*: this surviving eyewitness is the old slave of Laius, who will later be summoned. His false account of the number of those who killed Laius will prove crucial to the difficulties of reconstructing the past.

- 124–5 *how could any bandit . . . here?*: highway robbery was not a widespread phenomenon in ancient Greece, and Oedipus thinks first of a politically motivated payment, as he will later with Tiresias.
- 150–1 [SD] *The Priest and young people . . . from the city*: as the Priest and supplicants depart, the Chorus of Theban elders arrive and embark on their long opening song (the technical term “parodos” is sometimes applied). They are in effect the response to Oedipus’ summons in 144, even though they have gathered unrealistically quickly. A similar choral licence allows them to have heard already that there has been an oracle from Delphi, although they do not know what it says.
- 151–8 *What are you . . . and let me hear*: the first stanza (strophe) is addressed to Apollo, mainly through the device of addressing the voice of his oracle. At 153 he is called Paean (see note on 5) with the epithet “Delian” because he was born on the small Aegean island of Delos.
- 159–67 *First I summon . . . now come*: the second stanza (antistrophe) calls on Athena and Artemis as well as Apollo. As often in Greek prayers, help is asked for now on the precedent of previous favours. The Greek includes further elaborations of cult: Artemis has a “circular throne” in the centre (*agora*) of Thebes, and Apollo is given an epic epithet thought to mean “who shoots from far off” (omitted in the translation).
- 190–201 *Ares, war god . . . thunder blows*: Ares is usually the god of war, and a patron of Thebes; but here, although it is not explained, he is portrayed as the alien and hostile plague-god. They want him to be banished either to “the great hall of Amphitrite”, an ornate way of referring to the Atlantic in the far west, or to the dangerous Thracian Sea, which probably means the Black Sea to the east. The words of 198–9 (“Anything surviving . . . set to right.”), though plain, remain mysterious.
- 203–8 *Arrows from your golden bow . . . in her hands*: in the Greek Apollo is called “Lycian” and Artemis is said to leap through “the mountains of Lycia”, so the association seems to be with their cults in Asia Minor. I have omitted both these ornamental flourishes.
- 209–15 *Come too . . . every other god*: finally the chorus calls on Dionysus (here called “Bacchos” in the Greek) to help against the plague god. Dionysus, son of Zeus, was born at Thebes to Semele, daughter of Cadmus; the chorus even say he “shares his name” with Thebes. He is here, as often, associated with wine and with torchlight rites accompanied by his possessed Maenads.
- 216 ff. *At prayer . . .*: Oedipus’ abrupt intervention may make him seem almost godlike; but, taken in context, this is more likely a sign of his absolute authority rather than any more-than-human presumption. His proclamation echoes several features of Athenian murder investigation and prosecution. In Athens it was the task of blood-kin to pursue the judicial procedures; and this gives a special irony—characteristic of this play, of course—to Oedipus’ making himself out to be the surrogate son of Laius (264).
- 222–3 *it’s only later I’ve become a citizen*: Oedipus’ emphasis on not being a native citizen, but a late arrival, will turn out to be ironically false. The same point is implied by Tiresias at 452–4.

- 246–51 *I pray the guilty party . . . down on them*: I agree with editors who have cut these lines out as a weaker duplication of the preceding curse in 236–43 and a diminishing addition to Sophocles’ text. They may well have been added by an actor who wrongly thought that the curse was only on people who concealed the culprit and not on the actual agent. In these added lines the irony about Oedipus’ own household is too heavy-handed and is exploited too early in the play.
- 267–8 *Laius . . . Agenor long ago*: this solemn genealogy makes Oedipus seem like some kind of honorary successor to the royal line; he will in fact he turn out to be the direct blood-successor.
- 300 ff. *Tiresias . . .*: the blind prophet, affiliated to Apollo (see 284–5), was an awesome figure in several Theban myths. Oedipus is characteristically impatient in demanding a response from Tiresias, and addresses him on his arrival without giving him space to exchange courtesies. Throughout their whole confrontation Oedipus speaks in public terms, insistently invoking “the city” (*polis*), while Tiresias speaks in private, spiritual terms.
- 324 *thought*: I have translated a variant text rather than the more usually accepted “speech”.
- 337–8 *You criticize . . . your life with you*: the first riddling phrases from Tiresias. The word translated as “temperament” (*orge*) means passion, temper, disposition; and in a way, it is Oedipus’ passionate temper that has led to his living in his incestuous house.
- 376 ff. *Creon! . . .*: it seems to be Tiresias’ use of the word “fall” which sets Oedipus thinking in terms of a political coup plotted by Creon. It is a characteristic of Oedipus to work out alternative explanations; and here he turns to his strong sense of political insecurity.
- 413 ff. *you have your sight . . .*: it is with this speech that Tiresias gets into his full prophetic stride. And there is a shift of enigmatic gear at 417 ff., where the curse that will dog Oedipus is called *deinopous*, “fearful-footed”. This surely plays with the name Oidipous (“swollen-footed”). For further word-play with Oedipus’ name, see p. 5.
- 420–3 *There is no anchorage . . . voyage fair*: Cithaeron is the long mountain range some 15 km to the south of Thebes (see Map 1), and it will prove to have an important place in Oedipus’ life-story. But at this first naming it is wrapped up as part of Tiresias’ strange, riddling prophesy of the terrible things that will be discovered before the end of this play. These four particularly strange and haunting lines interweave three threads: (i) entering the harbour, which hints at Oedipus entering his marriage-bed and his own mother’s womb (see on 1207–10); (ii) Oedipus’ cries of distress when he discovers the truth, cries which will be a distortion of his wedding-song; (iii) the mountain whose harbour-like hollows will echo with lamentation.
- 425 *crush*: an editorial conjecture which makes stronger sense than the verb in the manuscripts, which means “level”.
- 447–62 *I’ll go then once I’ve had my say . . .*: some scholars, especially Bernard Knox, have made much of there being no response from Oedipus at the end of this powerful and intriguing speech, and of the way that he does not come

to the “obvious” conclusion that it is all about him. They have even proposed that Sophocles had Oedipus exit after line 446, leaving the blind Tiresias pontificating to thin air. But this is to miss the point that it is all in the form of riddles—at 456 even echoing the riddle of the Sphinx (“probing for his footsteps with a stick”). Oedipus does not realize that these are also literal facts; that while the answer to the Sphinx’s riddle was “mankind”, the answer to Tiresias’ is “you, Oedipus, but literally, not figuratively”. His silent departure shows that he is, for now, unable to meet Tiresias’ challenge to “go inside and work that out”.

458–60 *And he shall be revealed . . . who begot him*: in these three lines Tiresias sets up a kind of incantation: each contains a riddling pair of nouns: [he shall be revealed as] “both *a* and *b*”, and in each the second term is a two-syllable word beginning in Greek with a *p*.

463–82 *Who has the chanting crag . . . tormenting flies*: the first pair of stanzas dwell on the oracle and the unidentified murderer, who is envisaged as a desperate fugitive. There are several high-flown poetic allusions: “chanting crag” (463) because Delphi is perched high on the southern flank of Mt Parnassus (see also 475); “Zeus’ own son” (470) meaning Apollo, who can deploy his father’s armoury; “Earth’s primordial navel” (480) alluding to the sacred “omphalos” stone at Delphi which was held to be the navel of the world.

483–512 *How shaken I am . . . evil by my mind*: in the second pair the chorus is deeply disturbed over how to interpret Tiresias’ personal attacks on Oedipus. They know of no reason why he should have wanted to kill Laius (“the royal line of Labdacus”, 489). In view of Oedipus’ great benefit to Thebes in confronting the Sphinx (“the feathered girl”, 508), they are more inclined to doubt the authority of Tiresias, since seers are not necessarily infallible.

490 *Polybus*: the king of Corinth, believed to be the father of Oedipus, will have his place in the story explained at lines 774 ff. and later. It is difficult to know whether this allusion to him here is because he was already well known from previous versions of the myth, or if it is merely a circumstantial detail in preparation for a new version of Oedipus’ early life. The point is that the chorus believe that Oedipus’ ancestry had no connection with Labdacus, the father of Laius.

600 *A mind . . . corrupt*: it is widely agreed that this line is a sententious addition to Sophocles’ text.

624–5 *Now you have shown . . . when I see one.>*: something has gone wrong with the text here, and there must be at least one line missing; but there is no agreed solution among editors. I have given two consecutive lines to Creon, and then made up a line of my own for Oedipus, but this is mere guesswork.

649–97 [*Lyric Dialogue*]: the emotional atmosphere becomes so tense that Oedipus and the chorus break into a stanza in lyric dialogue in 649–68 (see p. xvii on this kind of mode). Then, after a few lines of spoken dialogue, ending with the departure of Creon, there is a matching lyric stanza in 678–97, but with Iocasta replacing the lines of Oedipus. This unusual sequence of dramatic technique marks the important transition between the Creon part and the Iocasta part in the middle of this very long act, which lasts from 513

to 862. With this the whole emphasis turns from the problems of the city (636 is the last allusion to the plague) to the reconstruction of Oedipus’ personal past.

716 *where three wagon-tracks converge*: the reported detail of the three wagon-tracks, dropped in circumstantially, turns out to be true (unlike the plural “bandits”), and to be a crucial piece of the jigsaw. The exact location will soon be pinpointed: see note on 733–4. It is important to be aware that in the mountainous terrain of Greece (as opposed to the fertile plains), tracks that could be managed by wagons were quite few and far between. They needed to have negotiable gradients, and were often engineered with ruts in the rock.

733–4 *The country is called Phocis . . . from Daulia*: this locates a specific place on the route over the mountains between Thebes and Delphi (see Map 1). About 25 km east of Delphi at the bottom of a long ravine descending from the Delphi direction lies a small upland plain, where one valley heads north to the town of Daulis, and another continues east towards the plain of Boeotia. Every traveller between Thebes and Delphi (in modern no less than ancient times) had to go past that junction, the “split road”—it became a site for tourists. Any Athenian pilgrim to Delphi travelling along this route, called a “Sacred Way”, would know this spot, an ominous place where the world of myth and the present world of the audience eerily brush by each other.

758–64 *I know he’s not . . .*: the old eyewitness was so keen to be far from the city because of his guilty secret: he knows the new king is the very man who murdered Laius. He also gives the deliberately false information that there were several robbers, not just a single man. His complicity and his lying, however well meant, are crucial to the misinformation on which the whole tragedy is built.

774–5 *Polybus . . . Merope*: Corinth (see Map 1) was an ancient and wealthy city, located at the trading “crossroads” of the isthmus which joins mainland Greece with the Peloponnese. Polybus may be an invention of Sophocles—it was a common mythological name—but he has been already mentioned at 490 (see note). It is implied that he is the chief power at Corinth rather than a hereditary king. Merope may also be invented for this play, and it is not clear what it means that she is said to be “from Doris”.

780 *not my father’s true-born son*: the insult slurs his paternity; it does not imply, let alone allege, that Merope is not his mother.

788 *to Delphi*: it is only a short voyage down the Gulf of Corinth to the port below Delphi (see Map 1).

794–7 *On hearing this . . . oracle fulfilled*: Oedipus is keen to make sure he never again goes anywhere near Corinth. His random route takes him north-eastward round the southern flank of Parnassus through Phocis (see Map 1).

811 *my stick*: the Greek word *skeptron* is used both of rough sticks and of formal regal sceptres (long staffs, often with an eagle on top). There is no explicit indication that Oedipus was holding one in this play, but if he was, then the *skeptron* wielded “by this hand of mine” becomes that much more vivid.

821–2 *with these same hands*: this physicality of the hands that killed Laius being

- the same hands that make love to Iocasta anticipates the almost macabre details of incest that will be explored later (see notes on 1208–13, 1403–9).
- 842 ff. *You said he witnessed* . . . : the plot is suspended on the single thread of the evidence as reported by the eyewitness about numbers (see note on 758–64). It never gets spelled out, however, that he told a direct lie; and the murder of Laius is not revisited, because from now on all attention is going to be focused on the earliest days of Oedipus' life.
- 863–910 [*Choral Song*]: in this grand and difficult choral song it is the task of the chorus not to draw authoritative morals but to attempt to make some sort of sense of what it witnesses in the tragedy (see p. xvii on the role of the chorus). Far from linear philosophical reasoning, it produces a tortuous, sometimes contradictory sequence of intuitions and protestations. So what this song does is attempt to make sense of the ways that Iocasta's scepticism about prophesy is sensible yet at the same time irreligious; and that Oedipus is a great ruler yet at the same time possibly the polluter of Thebes.
- 867 *Olympus*: from being simply the mountain-home of the gods, Olympus comes to mean the higher cosmic world.
- 873–83 *Proud arrogance . . . strong shield*: the chorus turns in the second stanza to human behaviour and its dangers. They start from the idea of *hybris*, a word which signifies a range of wrong behaviour allied to presumptuous bullying, here translated as "proud arrogance". After exploring the idea that *hybris* leads to a fall, it seems that in the closing lines they hope to exempt Oedipus from that implication: he is the beneficial champion-wrestler, not the bully.
- 873 *Proud arrogance begets bad kings*: the opening three words in Greek say "*hybris* begets a *tyrannos*", which I have translated as 'Proud arrogance begets bad kings'. This is problematic, however. First, *tyrannos* and related words are generally in this play used of a sole ruler in a politically neutral way. So to take the step of giving it a bad sense here, i.e. dictator/tyrant, while not impossible in the Greek of this period, goes against its usage elsewhere in the play. Secondly, the phrase seems bound to be referring to Oedipus; yet, however dubious some of his behaviour towards Tiresias and Creon, the chorus stays loyal and favourable to him: so neither *hybris* nor *tyrannos* (in the bad sense) seem to fit their view of him. A change of punctuation and of one letter would produce the more sententious meaning: "Proud arrogance begets proud arrogance as a tyrant." This is quite an attractive emendation, and would reduce the apparent application to Oedipus personally. I have stuck with the usually accepted reading, but without confidence.
- 896 *why should I dance and sing in the sacred chorus?*: this stanza has been largely spent on trying to establish some firm ground in the sphere of divine sanctions. If people behave appallingly, then surely, the chorus claims, they should incur punishment. And if such actions thrive, they conclude, "why should I participate in choruses?" The self-referentiality of the chorus-members questioning whether what they are doing at that very moment is justified has appealed to modern sensibilities. But, while that level of reference is surely there, it is clear in the context that participating in a chorus is thought of as primarily a pious religious observance. And there were other forms of

- choral participation that are more obviously religious, e.g. hymns, processions, dithyrambs, and paeans.
- 897–910 *If these signposts . . . and religion's going*: the fourth and final stanza is even less confident. The first part is covered by a conditional *if*: if oracles are not true, people will no longer have good reason to go to Delphi ("navel" of the earth—see note on 463–82), nor Abai, an oracle not far from Thebes, nor the great sanctuary of Zeus and Hera at Olympia. But towards the end they suspect unconditionally that the oracles concerning Laius and his family are proving false. And in that case, they conclude with the ominous fear that the significance of the divine is fading away—which it is not, of course, because the oracles will turn out to be true.
- 919 *Apollo . . . house*: there was probably a sacred stone of Apollo actually represented on-stage. Iocasta prays to him as "closest", which has an ominous further significance.
- 924 ff. [*SD*] *Enter the Old Corinthian* . . . : this new character has been conventionally known as the 'Messenger', but, since he does not even deliver a standard eyewitness report (unlike the proper Messenger at 1223 ff.), this label is more than usually unhelpful. He seems to be a welcome "answer" to Iocasta's prayers, but in fact he supplies knowledge which precipitates horrible recognitions of the past. It is not an absurd coincidence or stroke of Fate that the shepherd who gave the baby Oedipus to Polybus at Corinth should be the one who some thirty years later hurries to Thebes with the news that Polybus is dead, and that Oedipus has been proclaimed the new king. He has a personal interest in Oedipus; he is familiar with the drove-road over the mountains (see note on 1026); and he hopes for a reward in return for what he takes to be good news (explicit at 1006). Nor is it implausible that Oedipus should become king of Corinth (the word used in line 939 is *tyrannos*): nearly everyone at Corinth and everyone at Thebes believes Polybus to have been his father.
- 924–6 *where . . . where*: the old man is also misleadingly amusing, at least at first. His opening three lines all end with the syllable *pou*, and exploit the word-play on the way that the name of *Oidipous* is close to *oid-pou*, "know where"—see p. 5.
- 969–70 *unless perhaps . . . because of me*: the idea that Polybus might have died from missing Oedipus is not merely frivolous, since oracles were sometimes believed to have symbolic rather than literal applications. It also shows Oedipus' characteristic ability in finding ways of explaining away unwelcome evidence.
- 977–83 *Why should we humans . . . life most easily*: Iocasta's almost jubilant speech verges on a kind of anarchic creed of living in a haphazard, day-by-day fashion. Her claim is that men dreaming of sex with their mothers is as unimportant and random as oracles, and this is made to seem sensible. Yet it was these very lines that Freud made central to his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). The suggestion that it is good psychology to come to terms with this fantasy has an ironic resemblance to Freud's own ideas about therapy.
- 1022 *these hands of mine*: there is emphasis throughout the play on hands and

exchanges between hands, and I have hazarded the conjecture of adding one letter to the Greek—from *ton emon* to *tond' emon*—so that it comes to mean “from these hands of mine” instead of simply “my hands”.

- 1026 *forest glens of Mount Cithaeron*: this is only the second time that the mountain has been named in the play (see note on 420–3), but from now on it will become a more and more significant location. Corinth is a good distance away, some 50 km over harsh terrain across Mt Geranos, but there is archaeological evidence that Corinthians actually did take their transhumant flocks to Cithaeron for summer grazing in the upland valleys, and that there was an ancient track over the mountains. This route was intrepidly traced on foot by N. G. L. Hammond in 1953: the modern journey by road, via Eleusis, is about double the distance.
- 1034 *take your name from that misfortune*: the derivation of the name *Oidipous* from words meaning “swell” and “foot” is evidently taken as familiar here. But not a lot is made of this in the play as a whole.
- 1042 *the slave of Laius*: Iocasta has been standing by in silence ever since the Old Corinthian intervened at 989 ff. At some stage during this dialogue she must be supposed to have realized the whole terrible truth. It is impossible for us to pin down a precise moment: perhaps the mention of the ankles at 1032 ff.; or perhaps here, when the slave who took the baby to the mountain is identified. Iocasta knows well the trusted man who was given that task (left vague at 719). A much-reproduced vase from Sicily painted about 100 years later captures this moment in her silent gesture as she raises her robe to her face—whether or not this is how Sophocles himself staged it.
- 1062–3 *Take heart . . . lowly born*: Oedipus supposes that Iocasta is trying to put him off searching further because she is ashamed of his humble origins. He unwittingly twists the knife, because she knows well that, far from his having a slave for a mother, she is herself his mother.
- 1080–3 *But I regard myself as born . . . as great*: in rather exhilarated and high-flown terms Oedipus claims that, contrary to Iocasta’s snobbish prejudices, he is not ashamed of his origins, because he is “the child of Fortune (*Tyche*)”. Metaphorically this rings true; but while Oedipus talks of Fortune “with her generosity” (literally, “who gives well”), he is actually the child of Fortune who is malign. He then goes on, because Fortune changes with time, to invoke the Months as his close relations, who have raised him from humble origins to greatness: in truth time will, in the course of this play, have reduced him the other way round, from the highest to the lowest.
- 1084–5 *other than I am*: I have translated the transmitted text. An emendation (*atimos* instead of *pot' allos*) would produce the arguably stronger sense: “I’ll never shall turn out dishonoured, and never rest . . .”
- 1086–97 *If I trust my intuition . . . healing god, we sing*: in this jubilant and fanciful song, a false celebration before the full horror strikes, the chorus take their cue from Oedipus’ final speech of proud assertion. As they try to make sense of the new revelations, they move in completely the wrong direction, hoping that Oedipus’ mysterious origins will be a matter of wonder, and even of divine birth. They pin their optimism on the local mountain of Cithaeron,

- where Oedipus was handed over as a baby. In the first stanza they envisage that it will become the site of future religious cult, instituted to celebrate its place in his story. Choral singing and dance during the night of a full moon (1090) was a common occasion for Greek cult celebrations. In the Greek at the end of the stanza, they call on Apollo with the epithet *ieie* (four syllables), an invocation which seems to be associated with his role as Paean.
- 1098–1109 *Oedipus, who was your mother . . . company for play*: in the second stanza the unsubstantiated exhilaration becomes even more fanciful. With a strange blend of high-flown cult-titles and rather explicit sexual language, the chorus speculate that Oedipus might be the fruit of a union between a named male god and an anonymous mountain-nymph. They think of Pan (who lived in the wild and was apt to rape); Apollo (Loxias); Hermes, called “Lord of Cyllene”, the mountain in the Peloponnese where he was born; and finally “the Bacchic god”. While regularly accompanied by nymphs on the mountains, Dionysus is not usually portrayed as fathering children with them.
- 1108 *with sparkling eye*: the reading in our manuscripts describes the nymphs as “of Mount Helicon”. Since Helicon is in a different part of Boeotia and completely distinct from Cithaeron, and since this whole song is so centrally focused on Cithaeron, this word cannot be right. Fortunately the great scholar Wilamowitz hit on the emendation to an epic poetic epithet meaning something like “with glancing eyes”.
- 1110 ff. [SD] *Old Slave of Laius*: this old man has usually been known as “Herdsman” or “Servant”, but the defining role of his life was to have been a close and loyal slave to Laius. This is why he was given the sensitive task of exposing the royal baby; and he was one of the small band who accompanied Laius on his fatal trip to Delphi. Since then he has tried to live securely and quietly, away from the city, and from the king whom he alone knows was the killer of Laius.
- 1145 *he is the man who was that little babe*: the old Corinthian is rather pleased to recall that event so many years ago: as Oedipus stands between the two old shepherds it is a kind of re-enactment. Yet it turns out to be the last line spoken by this character. Far from being a source of pleasure, it is enough to make the old slave of Laius realize the truth about Oedipus’ life-story, that the baby he gave away on Cithaeron has grown up to be the same man whom he saw kill Laius at the place where three roads meet.
- 1154 *when you’re in pain*: it was standard practice in ancient Greece to interrogate slaves under torture. This is what Oedipus unhesitatingly threatens as he senses he is getting near the truth.
- 1171–2 *But she inside . . . your wife*: in the Greek word-order the old slave says “the woman inside . . .”, and then adds “. . . your wife”, knowing full well that she was also the wife of Laius.
- 1186–96 *Human generations . . . human blest*: the word *broton*, which comes in the opening and closing words of this powerfully sombre stanza, covers all of humanity and is not gendered. The chorus take Oedipus as their paradigm (the Greek word used in 1193 actually is *paradeigma*) for the “moral” that nothing human can aspire to a blessed state, which is secure only for the gods.

- 1208–13 *you have made the voyage twice . . . crying out aloud?*: here the chorus confront in lyric expression the sexual implications of Oedipus' incest, tapping metaphors which verge on the lurid. First they figure Iocasta's womb as a "harbour" (foreshadowed by Tiresias—see 420–3), twice visited by Oedipus, because this is where he was gestated as a baby and where he "plunged" as an adult. They then switch from sea to land, and invoke the image of the wife's womb as fertile furrows, a metaphor used in the ancient Greek formulae of marriage. They suggest, however, that Iocasta's womb should have screamed out rather than endure such horrible abuse. I have tried not to cloak these rather macabre expressions in euphemisms.
- 1209 *as a husband*: I have accepted the textual change from "father" (*patri*) to "husband" (*posei*), since this makes stronger sense.
- 1227 *the mighty river Danube or the Dnieper*: the Istros (modern Danube) and Phasis (modern Rioni) are two of the great rivers that flow into the Black Sea and from there into the Mediterranean. For the latter I have substituted the more familiar river Dnieper.
- 1258–60 *And as he raged . . . some guide*: although there is very little suggestion in *OT* of any direct intervention by a superhuman power (see pp. 6–8), the messenger makes it clear here twice that, in his perception, there was some strange external agent leading Oedipus on (the word used in 1258 is *daimon*, which is less distinct than "god").
- 1260–2 *he hurled himself . . . into the room*: it is hardly a heady excursion into Freudian symbolism to recognize in this narrative a re-enactment of Oedipus' incestuous displacement of his father. He forcefully breaks the closed doors of his parents' marital bedroom, and "plunges in"—the same image as was recently used at 1210 by the chorus of his entering his mother's "harbour". Also note the same "mother-soil" image at 1257 as the chorus had used at 1212 of his "father's furrows".
- 1278–9 *and kept on spattering . . . thick as hail*: these two lines are rejected by the Oxford Classical Text edition (OCT) on the grounds that this goriness is over-the-top, the kind of thing a fourth-century ham actor might have added. But there is no shortage of gory passages in fifth-century tragedy, and no evidence of a special taste for it in the fourth century. There are undeniably, however, textual uncertainties in all three lines, 1278–80.
- 1295 *watchers of a spectacle*: the Greek word for "spectacle" is *theama*, which is closely related to *theatron* and *theatai*, spectators. So these lines come close to a theatrical, or metatheatrical, allusion: the doors are to be opened to reveal "to you as well . . ." (1294). The messenger's mixture of revulsion with sympathetic emotion is quintessential of tragedy. The chorus also capture this contradictory state at 1303–6: they cannot bear to look, and yet they are eager to find out and even to see ("much to observe").
- 1297 ff. [*SD*] *Oedipus emerges . . .*: some have thought that the *ekkyklema* was used here (see p. xix); but Oedipus is not merely revealed, he is groping his way for himself, even though, as is emphasized, he has no one to guide him. The emotion and horror are too much to be contained in iambic speech, and in 1297–1311 both the chorus and Oedipus use anapaests, a chant-metre,

- somewhere between speech and song. After that, between lines 1313 and 1366, Oedipus expresses himself in song with the chorus responding with occasional spoken lines.
- 1329 ff. *Apollo, friends, Apollo . . .*: on the allocation of responsibility, see pp. 7–8. While Apollo has, in the long view, brought Oedipus' life-story to this horrible shape, it was his own decision to blind himself. He also goes on to explain why in his speech at 1379 ff.
- 1372 *down in Hades*: Oedipus supposes that he will take his blindness with him after death. But in general the Greeks had indistinct ideas about the physicality of the dead in the underworld.
- 1380 *though raised . . . in Thebes*: this intrusive line was probably added by someone else: Oedipus had, after all, been brought up in Corinth, not in Thebes.
- 1389–90 *both blind . . . beyond the reach of pain*: it is probable that these two lines were added later to Sophocles' text. They do not add much—nothing, after all, can be "sweet" now to Oedipus—and they weaken the conclusion of this part of his self-hating speech.
- 1391–1403 *O Mount Cithaeron . . .*: Oedipus constructs a kind of mental map of his life-story, and revisits the key places in it: Cithaeron; Corinth: the place in Phocis where the three roads meet, where further detail about its narrowness and oppressive vegetation give it an extra sinister quality. Finally Thebes is not named, but simply reached as "here". For the locations see Map 1.
- 1403–9 *O wedding, joining . . . wrong to act in deeds*: the Greek *o gamoi, gamoi* is conventionally translated "marriage, marriage". But this too polite: *gam*-words are associated with sex, and are, indeed, used of sex in non-marital contexts. The whole emphasis in these lines is on actions; and those actions are not celebrating weddings, but having sex. I have tried to reflect this explicitness. There seems to be a certain relish in the expression of these incest-distortions, including the recurrent motif about Oedipus' "seed" being sown in his mother's "field" (see note on 1261–2). This almost prurient explicitness may be one of the factors that drew Freud so powerfully to Sophocles' play: the suppressed **fascination of son-mother incest is made explicit** in words.
- 1411–12 *throw me . . . or hide me*: the transmitted text has "hide me outside . . . or throw me in the sea . . ."; I have followed some editors in reversing these two verbs.
- 1416 ff. [*Scene 11 to end*]: there is quite a concentration of problematic passages of one sort or another in the final 100 lines of the play. So much so that one scholar (R. Dawe) has recently argued that nearly all of this entire section is not by Sophocles, and that it replaces the original ending. This is, in my opinion, too drastic a solution, and it condemns much that is fully worthy of Sophocles. But, at the same time, it should not be denied that there are some real questions to be raised: see the notes on 1424–9, 1457, 1463–5, 1485 (on 1482–5), 1510, 1515–23, 1524–30.
- 1424–9 *<Yet I am shocked . . . inside the house immediately*: there is a substantial problem with the text at this point. The verbs in these lines are plural ("even if you've lost your sense of shame. . ." etc.), and so cannot be addressed to Oedipus alone. Most scholars have supposed that Creon is addressing some

attendants that he has just brought on with him. But this cannot be right: who are these anonymous lackeys that they should be addressed in such portentious and reproachful terms? It is most likely that the lines are addressed to the chorus, and, in view of the reproach, to Oedipus himself as well. But if this is right then there must have been some lost transitional lines in between lines 1422 and 1423, bringing the chorus into the picture. For the sake of completeness I have made up a couple of lines. The command at 1429 (“accompany him inside”) might then be addressed to the trusted elders of the chorus, or to a couple of personal attendants.

- 1451–4 *No, let me go and live . . . meant to kill me*: these lines are the culmination of the Cithaeron motif. The mountain exerts a kind of magnetic pull on Oedipus, and the idea that he should end his days where his parents meant him to die as a baby is so powerful that in some ways the postponement of his departure there is a disappointment (see further on pp. 11–12). And there is another level to this invocation of the mountain which is not commonly appreciated. Oedipus calls it “my Cithaeron” and says that it is “called” that: the Greek word even implies that it is “famed” as that. But it has only been a very short while since it was discovered, thanks to the old Corinthian shepherd, that Cithaeron had played any part at all in his life-story. Within the time of the play it cannot yet be famous, strictly speaking, for its connection with Oedipus (the deluded song at 1086 ff. is not enough for that). It is, rather, through mythical narratives that the connection between Oedipus and Cithaeron became celebrated. So a kind of complicity is set up between Oedipus and the *audience of the play*. It is for the public of future story-telling that Cithaeron becomes known as “Oedipus Mountain”, so to speak.
- 1457 *some fearsome doom*: Oedipus asserts that he has somehow been preserved from death for some reason. But what is this? His actual words say merely “. . . for some terrible evil”. These plain words are enigmatic, to say the least. Most critics have taken this as a prophetic forward-reference to his future sufferings, ending with his redemptive death and hero-cult at Colonus, as dramatized by Sophocles many years later in *Oedipus at Colonus*. But how is that invoked by “some terrible evil”? The vague phrase seems to be an inexplicable and disappointing anti-climax. It is not impossible, I think, that it may have been corrupted and/or shortened in its textual transmission, conceivably from something about the fate of a lonely death on the mountain.
- 1459 *the males*: the way that Oedipus’ two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, quarrelled with each other, and brought down curses from their father, was an essential and well-known part of the whole myth. These future conflicts are, however, only lightly hinted at here.
- 1462 *But for my girls . . .*: the two daughters, Antigone and Ismene (neither actually named in this play), are still little, too young to understand according to Oedipus at line 1511. Their fame, especially that of Antigone, may well have been largely the invention of Sophocles himself through the impact of his “hit” tragedy *Antigone*, and of this very scene here. He also makes them important in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Fourth-century sources take them for granted as integral; and that includes, interestingly, the Sicilian vase-painting (see on 1042), where their presence even acts as a kind of identifying signal for this play.

- 1463–5 (*whose dinner-table . . . put my hands to*): these three lines on how inseparable Oedipus has been from his daughters at mealtimes seems rather over-emphasized, and, assuming they are by Sophocles, they may be textually corrupted.
- 1485 *ploughman*: this word (*aroter*) is an excellent emendation of the manuscripts, that merely repeat “father” (*pater*). There is, however, some strange wording throughout lines 1482–5: and in 1482 I have omitted the baffling epithet “gardening” from before “father’s eyes”.
- 1510 [SD] *Creon does so*: it only makes sense for Oedipus to continue his speech if and when Creon agrees; and this must be done in a way that he, though blind, can register. This means Creon must put his hand on Oedipus, not the girls (the Greek could mean either). But it is strange that this gesture is not expressly acknowledged.
- 1515–23 *That is long enough . . . life through*: the metre changes to “recitative” trochaics, and most of the lines are divided between Oedipus and Creon. This is peculiar technique but would not in itself be good reason doubt the authorship of this dialogue. But there are also undeniable problems in content and expression. Except for the last two lines, they are disappointingly thin and awkward for such a climactic context. And four out of the eight lines are spent on pointlessly going over the same ground as has already been more clearly dealt with at 1434–45. It is hard to believe that Sophocles is responsible for this scrappy dialogue. But supposing that someone has added these inferior lines, then why? The best answer would seem to be to ensure that at the end of the play Oedipus goes into the house. (A possible motive for this might be to square the ending of this play with *Oedipus at Colonus*—see note on OC 433–40.) But does that suggest that in Sophocles’ original play Oedipus did not go into the house, but went off into exile? This is discussed further in the Introduction, pp. 12–13.
- 1523 [SD] *An attendant . . . city*: assuming that Oedipus goes into the house, helped by an attendant, as expressly indicated by Creon at 1515 (“time to go inside the palace”), this leaves a difficult problem for the staging of the end of the play. Since Creon has now taken over the rule of the country, and since he is now responsible for the children, it might be expected that he would go with them into the background building, the royal palace of Thebes. But this is surely out of the question: it would make terrible theatre for them to go off the same way as Oedipus, whether in front of him or behind. So the best that can be salvaged is for Creon to take them off by a side-road, presumably towards his own house. All this is, however, poorly indicated, which is not at all the way that Sophocles usually manages significant stage-action. If Sophocles had his original play end with Oedipus’ departure into exile, in the direction of Cithaeron, then Creon and the girls would simply have gone into the palace: for the attractions and drawbacks of this radical solution, see pp. 12–13.
- 1524–30 *Look at this, my fellow-Thebans . . . without disaster*: it is highly unusual to have the chorus-leader address the rest of the chorus in this way, yet is out of the question that the lines should be spoken by Oedipus himself (as has sometimes been supposed). Most modern editors are agreed that these

closing lines are not by Sophocles, and that they have displaced his ending, which was probably in anapaests not trochaics. The two main arguments raised against them are: (i) that some of the lines are found in Euripides, suggesting that they somehow existed independently; and (ii) that the text is heavily corrupted—the translation given here requires at least two substantial emendations. At the same time, it has to be said that the lines are a good deal better (or less bad) than the preceding lines 1515–23. The sentiments are generally appropriate to the play, and are less trite than the closing lines of many other Greek tragedies. If they replace genuine Sophoclean lines, they may still have been based on them.

AIAS

- 1 [SD] *Odysseus comes on . . . watching*: the setting is usually described as Aias' "tent", but it is clear that the quarters where he (like the other Greek leaders) has been living for the last nine years are envisaged as more substantial than that.
- There has been much dispute over how Athena was presented in this scene, mainly because of the phrase "even if you are invisible" in line 15. But if it once recognized that the point of that wording there is to emphasize how intimate Odysseus is in his relationship with the goddess, and not her visibility or invisibility, then it seems far the most likely staging is that she was simply on the ground close to him. It may still be, though, that Odysseus is supposed to be unable to see her. Or perhaps he does not even need to turn round in order to recognize her?
- 4 *at the fringes of the fleet*: this picks up an account of the layout of the Greek camp in the *Iliad* 11. The two most powerful heroes, Achilles and Aias, are allocated the end positions because those are the sectors which are most vulnerable to attack, and so need the strongest defenders. Those who know something of Troy and the entrance to the Dardanelles (Hellespont—see Map 3) would be aware that Achilles' famous tomb was at the western end of the shore, clearly implying that Aias was encamped at the eastern end.
- 17 *trumpet's brazen mouth*: the trumpet was for the Greeks primarily a battlefield instrument. It is the given epithet "Etruscan" here (its invention was often attributed to them), omitted in the translation.
- 19 *the famous shield*: Aias' huge and uniquely tower-like shield is prominent in the *Iliad*.
- 26 *all our captured flocks*: all the livestock that had been captured to provision the besieging army was evidently penned under some communal guard.
- 41 *Achilles' armour*: this is the first allusion to the competition mounted for possession of the god-made armour of Achilles after his death. This is taken as the already-known background to the play.
- 49 *the twin command*: the two Sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus, are often spoken of a pair.
- 97 *all bloody*: I have adopted a conjecture that, by changing two letters, produces "bloodied your hand" rather than "armed your hand".
- 110 *I'll lash*: there is no sign that Sophocles had Aias bring the whip on in this scene. But at some stage in the performance history, probably during the fourth century BC, it became customary for Aias to appear here carrying one. The play even acquired the subtitle "*carrying a whip*".
- 118–31 *You see, Odysseus . . .*: this key dialogue conveys vividly the unbridgeable divide between gods and humans. Set beside the immortals, humans, however great and powerful in their own microcosm, are puny and ephemeral. This may make Athena appear rather impersonal and sententious in human terms (and her words in 132–3 are scarcely the "moral" of the play), but the point is that the gods are not to be understood in human terms. Odysseus, by contrast, comes across as relatively magnanimous in his pity for Aias and his