The Ignorance of Oedipus

In almost\(^1\) everybody's opinion, the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles shows a progression of knowledge in Oedipus. At the beginning of the play he is ignorant of the major facts that he has killed Laius, and that Laius was his father; by line 726 he suspects the first fact, but is not sure of it; at 1182 he cries 'Oh, Oh, everything must have come true!'. Dealing with a well-known legend, of which at least the version in *Odyssey* XI 271-80 must have been familiar to most of his audience, Sophocles elected to show not the actual killing by Oedipus of his father and his marriage to his mother, but his discovery of the truth. To a modern reader, the emphasis of the original legend would seem to be the terrible 'crimes' which Oedipus has been manipulated into committing, and some authorities make predestination the main emphasis of the play also (e.g. Allègre and Maddalena), or complain bitterly of divine injustice (e.g. Waldeck). I would side rather with those who believe that, as is characteristic of him, Sophocles has made the divine element more remote, and has focussed attention rather on the actions and motivations of the human beings who were on the stage before the eyes of the original spectators.\(^2\)

Oedipus, then, might be regarded as a kind of primitive detective. We must, however, be wary of applying the standards of the modern detective story to him. As Bain well points out (pp. 142-3) we must remember that the play was designed to be heard, not read. The elaborate back-and-forth checking that Goodhart, Vellacott, and Vickers in particular engage in was

---

\(^1\) The main exceptions, Vellacott and Goodhart, will be discussed later. In general, I shall refer to works listed in my Bibliography by author's name only.

\(^2\) For a fuller discussion with extensive bibliography, see e.g. D.A. Hester, 'Oedipus and Jonah', *PCPhS* 203 (n.s. 23) (1977): 32-61, esp. 56-7. Typical is Versenyi (1974), p. 220: 'What motivates all Oedipus' acts is his restless probing, his critical intelligence, his uncompromising, restless demand for the truth'.
David A. Hester

(as they admit) not possible for Sophocles' original audience. Nor should we rashly assume that the detective process itself was Sophocles' main interest, or even a subordinate one. He may rather be concerned to make a contrast between the knowledge of those through whom the gods speak and the ignorance of those who have to rely on unaided human intelligence; such, indeed, is (as Gellie, p. 86 observes) the major emphasis of lines 366-462.

Which being said, there is nevertheless a concern, which has worried many critics, that even by ancient standards the solver of the riddle of the Sphinx does not do very well in solving this riddle. Voltaire's remark (p. 24) is famous: 'Cette Oedipe, qui expliquait les énigmes, n'entend pas les choses les plus claires [This Oedipus, who used to explain riddles, does not understand the most obvious things]'; similarly Waldock (p. 162): 'His wits seem flaccid; he lags noticeably in putting two and two together. The pattern of the truth eludes him till every last thread is in place'. Before the play began, Oedipus was already aware that his name meant 'Swell-foot'; and this was reflected in the actual condition of his feet (1031-6). He had been told by a drunkard that he was not the real son of Polybus and Merope, and was sufficiently concerned about the accusation to consult the Delphic oracle (779-88). This oracle refused to answer his question on this matter, but foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother (789-93, 994-6). Shortly afterwards he killed an unidentified man who was important enough to travel with an escort and old enough to be his father (800-13). He then married a woman old enough to be his mother. Given this existing information, how could he fail to put it together with the copious additional information supplied by Teiresias and Jocasta, and thus attain the truth well before he does? Admittedly, when the original spectators saw the scene between Oedipus and Teiresias, they did not yet know how much Oedipus knew, but Teiresias' charge that Oedipus had killed Laius was absolutely clear (350-3, 362, 449-51), and his accusations of incest scarcely less so (366-7, 414-23, 452-60). The further revelations of Jocasta (711-25) are almost immediately followed (as we have seen) by Oedipus' statement of his own previous knowledge, so that we are invited to put these two sets of facts together, and wonder at Oedipus' failure to do so. When his one apparent life-raft (that Polybus and Merope were his parents) is snatched away from him in 1016-46, to the visible distress of his wife (1060-75), Dawe (p. 21) is entitled to ask how he could possibly fail to realize his true parentage. It will be my objective in this paper to investigate some of the attempts which have been made to explain, or even explain away, this ignorance of Oedipus, and then to offer my own
suggestion on what Sophocles may have been trying to achieve in his portrayal of it.

The first major attempt at a radical solution is that of Wilamowitz. In what may be seen as a healthy reaction against the elaborate psychological and philosophical analyses of Oedipus’ character which were then, and continue to be, produced (Untersteiner is a prime example), he insists that Sophocles is not really concerned with character portrayal as such. He may choose to provide some degree of motivation for the way a character acts in a particular scene (e.g. Oedipus’ anger, which leads him to suspect a conspiracy between Creon and Teiresias), but Sophocles’ own motivation is always to produce the maximum possible dramatic impact. If this involves the presentation on stage of a character acting in a way that no real person could have acted, i.e. in an ‘unmotivated’ way, so be it. On the Teiresias scene he comments (p. 78):

Aus all dem sieht man, dass das, was der Dichter hier will, sehr weit entfernt ist von allen psychologischen Feinheiten, und dass die Wirkung dieser Szene, die heute noch jeder empfinden wird, durchaus nicht auf Darstellung sogenannter Charaktere beruht. Der Dichter will keineswegs irgendwelches Charaktere in einem durch sie selbst bestimmten Kampfe zeigen, sondern er will die, wenn man will, stoffartige Wirkung der dramatischen Situation so stark wie möglich herausbringen [From all this it may be seen that the poet’s intentions here are very far removed from all psychological subtleties, and that the effect of this scene, as nowadays just about anyone would realize, has nothing to do with the portrayal of so-called characters. The poet does not intend in any way to show any kind of characters in a conflict which arises from their mutual interaction, but he intends to present what may be called the substantial effect of the dramatic situation in as strong a form as possible].

Similarly Waldock (p. 149)— ‘Insistence on character seems to me at every point a mistake’— and Drexler (pp. 116, 19-20).

There is no denying a considerable element of truth in these observations. In subordinating character to plot, they stand in the tradition of Aristotle (Poetics, chapter 6); in accusing Sophocles of lapses in credibility, in the tradition of Voltaire (p. 24):
Tant d'ignorance dans Oedipe et dans Jocasta n'est qu'un artifice grossier du poète, qui pour donner à sa pièce une juste étendue, fait filer jusqu'au cinquième acte une reconnaissance déjà manifestée au second [So much ignorance in Oedipus and Jocasta is only a crude artifice of the poet, who, to give his play a reasonable length, spins out into the fifth act a realisation already made obvious in the second].

Waldock's delightful unmasking of the 'documentary fallacy' (pp. 11-24), which arises from mistaking stage characters for real people, is a potent weapon with which to attack modern exponents of psychology in Sophocles. But few nowadays will go so far. If stage characters have nothing in common with real people, how are they to arouse in us the pity and fear which Aristotle sees as the function of tragedy? If Sophocles' methods are as crude as Voltaire believed, how is it that his play continues to delight modern audiences while Voltaire's 'improved' version is largely a museum-piece? To reduce tragic characters to a kind of puppet, jerked around the stage by the poet, is a last resort, to be accepted only if all attempts to find reasonable motivation in Sophocles' character-portrayal have failed.

This is not the only kind of fatalism which has been invoked in an attempt to solve the problem of Oedipus' ignorance. The fatalistic implications of the legend have already been noted; some commentators have sought to extend this into the problem of ignorance also. It may be that Oedipus is, so to speak, the counterpart of Cassandra; as she was foredoomed not to be believed (Agamemnon 1212), so he was foredoomed not to believe. The classic statement of this view is probably that of Maddalena:

Gli dei, che avevano voluto che si compisse il destino vaticinato a Laio, ora volevano che si rivelasse il destino compiuto [the gods, who had willed that the destiny foretold to Laius should be fulfilled, now willed that the fulfilled destiny should be revealed].

Oedipus' blindness is 'a tool of Phoebus' (p. 271). If the gods determine everything, Oedipus cannot know the truth until they choose to reveal it (1258, 1329-30). Variants appear in Allègre and Vickers. To Allègre, the intellectual blindness of Oedipus is that which the gods inflict on those
The IGNORANCE of OEDIPUS

they are determined to destroy (e.g. Iliad XVI 684-91, Antigone 620-5); he sees an element to culpability in it which Maddalena (286, 300-19, 306-7) denies. Vickers prefers to stress the extent to which Oedipus' actions are determined by the combination of false 'knowledge' which is given him and true knowledge which is withheld. In a careful analysis he demonstrates that Oedipus' information reaches him in a dislocated form,\(^3\) and concludes (p. 507) 'It will now be clear that Oedipus is for a long time unable to reason or deduce successfully because events have conspired to push him (and Jocasta) into accepting plausible but false premises, from which only false deductions are possible'. He goes on to dismiss Waldock's remarks on Oedipus' lack of intelligence.

This is clearly a very different kind of fatalism from that of Wilamowitz and Waldock. The puppet-master is Apollo rather than Sophocles. Again, it is a useful corrective not only to their views, but to that of Vellacott, which will be discussed later. But if Oedipus is so much in the grip of forces outside his control that we can assume in advance that his ignorance will stand firm until Apollo intervenes directly and unmistakeably, how are we to appreciate the scene with Teiresias and the two scenes with Jocasta, where Oedipus seems to be within a hair's-breadth of sharing the fatal knowledge, which we already possess, but somehow manages to produce each time an alternative explanation? Surely Wilamowitz is right in one respect: Sophocles is concerned that these scenes should have the maximum dramatic impact. This is achieved by our remaining in anxious suspense, expecting the Oedipus must surely work it out for himself this time, and each time being disappointed. We can have no such feelings for a puppet.

Another theory, which is especially akin to that of Vickers, seeks a partial solution to the problem by reducing the amount of information available to Oedipus. The fullest statements are those of Carrière and Knox (1980); the latter, by providing a comprehensive bibliography of those who espouse or oppose this view, has relieved me of the necessity of doing likewise. Oedipus, on this theory, leaves the stage on uttering, or shortly after uttering, line 446. He thus hears the unambiguous accusation that he has killed Laius (for which he has, as he thinks, an adequate explanation) and some veiled references to his incestuous family life (which Teiresias, at line 438, refuses to clarify). He does not hear the much clearer charges of incest contained in Teiresias' last speech. Knox is

\(^3\) For a shorter version, see Bain: 138.
careful to avoid the unintentionally comic sight of a blind prophet addressing an empty stage by asserting (against Carrière) that Teiresias can hear Oedipus' departure and is 'addressing a retreating back'.

This theory, if sound, offers some justification of Oedipus' ignorance in this scene. But is it sound? I still find the staging very difficult to envisage; how Oedipus fails to hear some ten lines of Teiresias' speech, but Teiresias still expects him to hear his 460-1 'Go inside and think this out!', which is surely not addressed to a just-having-disappeared back. More fundamentally, the theory takes no account of a similar problem in lines 717-22, where Oedipus seems likewise to ignore a statement which should have revealed the truth to him. In this latter passage, there is no possibility of a retreating back, since Oedipus and Jocasta continue their conversation. Vellacott (1970 pp. 229-30, 1971 p. 185) mentions a film which has Oedipus turning away at this point and not hearing these lines. Surely the best explanation must be one which accounts for both passages; it must explain why Oedipus has, for the moment, just stopped listening. If such an explanation can be found, the theory of a retreating back becomes unnecessary. I shall attempt this explanation in my later discussion.

Freud, in his oft-cited remarks about Oedipus, stopped short of stating that he actually had an 'Oedipus complex', which drove him to kill his father and marry his mother. Not all his followers have been so cautious. Anzieu hints that Oedipus at some level of consciousness knows more than he appears to; Kaufmann states (p. 139) that his emotional trouble makes him unable to accept the truth. As Kaufmann (p. 125) admits, Freudian theory applies more to the myth than to the play, but it might be of some use in explaining the peculiar mixture of insight and ignorance displayed by Oedipus. It is fortunate that Vermant has adequately dealt with this theory by demonstrating (inter alia) that on the basis of clear statements in the play (e.g. 719, 774-5, 794-7) any filial feelings of Oedipus must have been directed towards Polybus and Merope.

---


5 Carrière attempts (unconvincingly) to argue that the latter passage does not necessarily correspond with what Oedipus knows about his own origins; Knox ignores it.

6 E.g. in Woodard (s.v. Benardete), pp. 101-4.
Oedipus who is the helpless victim of his own sub-conscious is not much more interesting (and, in ancient time, far less likely) than one who is the helpless victim of Apollo.

There remain two radical theories that leave us—or, to be precise, the more perceptive of us—studying a totally different play from that which has been long enjoyed by lesser mortals. These theories have in common not only their appeal to our intellectual vanity, but also a dangerous affinity to the 'documentary fallacies' of Waldock. On the other hand, they stand in direct opposition to each other in their interpretation of the text.

The first is that of Vellacott, put forward (1970 [1964] p. 207) 'in the spirit of Oedipus himself, who when faced with a puzzle could not resist following a fact to its logical conclusion'. He notes that Sophocles has given Oedipus more previous knowledge of the facts than one would expect, and finds it inconceivable that both he and Jocasta would not have been aware—or 99% aware—that they are co-operating in fulfilling the oracles given to them; we have a picture (p. 214) 'of Oedipus and Jocasta living together in mutual love, each having chosen to believe as truth the one per cent possibility that their marriage was lawful; building up for themselves a version of past events which was satisfactory and painless, even if it involved some dangerous corners, and pushing the terrible probability further and further into the recesses of forgetfulness'. The new pronouncement from Delphi has destroyed the possibility of further concealment; Oedipus and Jocasta are co-operating in a charade (in which, as appears from the 1967 article, the chorus increasingly comes to play the role of an unwilling confederate) to ensure that the truth of what they have done should come out, but not the more deadly truth that they knew what they were doing when they did it. In his book (p. 104) Vellacott does not insist that this is the only possible view:

The traditional view holds that Oedipus at the opening of the play believes himself to be the son of Polybus and Merope; that he has never thought of connecting the man he killed on the road from Delphi with Laius, king of Thebes, or of suspecting that Jocasta is his mother. It is obvious that this will generally be the impression given by a good performance to the absorbed spectator; and it would seem that this was the effect intended by the author for the majority of his popular audience.
The thesis which I hope to establish by a detailed examination of the whole play is that Sophocles intended the careful reader (and perhaps some unusually acute spectator) to see Oedipus as having been aware of his true relationship to Laius and Jocasta ever since the time of his marriage. The main problems in the play, if logically followed through, lead to this conclusion; and such an interpretation is the only one which comes near to answering all these problems.

We thus have a play written at two different levels. As a spectator I have been absorbed but not unusually acute; perhaps I can make amends by being a careful reader. What this reader is to believe emerges on pp. 119-20:

Fortified by this necessary fabric of fiction, Oedipus lived as an adored king and a devoted husband and father. Yet, even if he was the son of Polybus and therefore not polluted, he was still guilty because he had ignored Apollo’s warning and taken risks it was criminal to take. Aware of his guilt, he tried to atone for it; for seventeen years he gave himself to the care of his family and city and earned love and veneration. Then the plague came; and Oedipus knew that the unforgetting gods were at work, that his happy life was at an end, and his ordeal before him. There was only one way to save Thebes: to have the truth brought out, and the polluted man banished, if not killed. But, to reveal to the citizens that their beloved king had for all these years deceived them, and was by his own fault responsible for the plague, would be an unnecessary cruelty. That part of the truth belonged to Oedipus alone. The other part, the bare facts, must be disclosed as it were by accident, as the result of an inquiry initiated by Oedipus himself.

Vellacott follows this up with a scene-by-scene analysis of the play, from which it emerges, inter alia, that Creon is also a conscious but reluctant participant in the charade (p. 177 “There are lines in this dialogue which fit exactly the supposition that Creon long ago put two and two together, keeping all such thoughts strictly to himself”). Remarks which, on the orthodox view, are examples of unconscious (dramatic) irony, are interpreted by Vellacott as consciously ironical, as the interlocutors
exchange hints of their secret knowledge while refraining from blurting out the truth in public.

Vellacott's basic assumption—that any really intelligent person would find Oedipus' ignorance incredible—is denied by Perrotta, Bain, and Vickers in particular; I shall return to this point. In the meantime, I should like to examine the consequences of assuming his theory to be true. Oedipus, then, before the play begins, has long been 99% certain of his guilt, and the plague has removed the 1% of doubt; his anguish (58-67) can well be imagined. His strategy has the following objectives:

(1) To make it clear to all that he was the killer of Laius, and by accepting banishment to save Thebes;

(2) To conceal from all who do not already know it that he has long been aware that he was Laius' killer and Laius' son.

(With respect to his first objective, it is not altogether clear why he has to force a public inquiry rather than just departing, as he did before; and with respect to the second, it is not at all clear whether he expects, or wants, his parentage to be discovered; but one must grant Vellacott some licence.)

Oedipus is faced with a problem that will require all his ingenuity. Not only the Delphic oracle, but Creon and Jocasta, are largely unknown factors; any or all of them may conceal what Oedipus wants discovered or blurt out what he desperately needs to conceal; his dilemma is well described by Vellacott on p. 139.

The first problem for this theory comes in the prologue. Why does Oedipus insist (91-4) that the unreliable Creon should produce the pronouncement of the unreliable oracle in public, rather than, as Creon himself suggests, giving Oedipus a private hearing, which would enable him to adapt his strategy to it? Vellacott does not tell us. The dialogue proceeds, with its robber/robbers confusion (in which, curiously, the oracle seems to share—107); Creon departs, the chorus enters, and Oedipus is left to confront them.

The chorus are, as Vellacott calls them, 'the outer circle'. As the play begins they are not involved in the tacit conspiracy of Oedipus, Creon, and Jocasta, though they grow in knowledge as the play goes on. They are thus less likely to produce the truth than any of the main characters, but
Oedipus has a potent weapon to extort any information they have: the curse (233-51), which he utters against the killer and any accessory after the fact. Oedipus clearly believes in Apollo and in prophecy (if he does not, Vellacott’s theory disintegrates). Why, oh why, does he knowingly lay this double curse upon himself in order to achieve nothing with respect to his two main objectives? Vellacott, silent on this point on pp. 153-4, astonishingly returns to it on p. 202, observing of the chorus ‘We may pardon them for not going one step further to ask “Why then did the king pronounce a curse, knowing himself guilty?”’ We may indeed pardon the chorus, but I can find no excuse for Vellacott.

Teiresias enters, and proves unco-operative. Compliments, appeals, even insults fail to induce him to reveal his secret, so Oedipus has recourse (345-9) to a false accusation that Teiresias himself was party to the killing of Laius. This is effective. Teiresias names Oedipus as the killer (350-3, 362). The infallible prophet obligingly adds (366-7, 413-5) that Oedipus is ignorant of his real identity.

Vellacott’s play, like Voltaire’s, has ended in the second epeisodion. Oedipus has achieved both his objectives: to reveal that he is the killer, to conceal the extent of his previous knowledge. All that he has to do now is to make an edited version of the speech he actually makes to Jocasta later (774-832) and so plead guilty to the killing. To continue his inquiry is superfluous and extremely dangerous, since he has clearly not co-ordinated his part with his two quasi-confederates, and either of them (but especially Creon, whom Oedipus goes on to savagely attack) may at any moment destroy Teiresias’ convenient assumption of Oedipus’ previous ignorance. Any careful reader who has been momentarily attracted by Vellacott’s theory can now abandon it, probably with considerable relief, as the charade he has been studying hardly merits the name of ‘tragedy’.

Goodhart and Ahl are, in a sense, putting forward a theory that is the antithesis of that of Vellacott (whom Ahl on p. 267 describes as ‘eccentric but often brilliant’). They are agreed that Oedipus was, in all probability, not the killer of Laius. Goodhart accepts that he was Laius’ son, and asserts that when this became apparent he is so shaken that he abandons his perfectly reasonable belief that Creon and Teiresias were in a conspiracy to kill Laius and are now conspiring against Oedipus himself. Ahl considers the evidence on parentage to be as tainted as that on homicide. Conceding (pp. 4-5) that the established form of the myth presented him as son and killer of Laius, he produces examples of the varying of myth in plays (though none as radical as that he is proposing).
He then proceeds with a detailed study of the play, in which it appears that (as in Vellacott) just about every character is playing games, and concludes (p. 265):

Oedipus’ doom, like that of the Sphinx’s generalised man, becomes the doom of all men through the poetic form of Sophocles’ play as readers struggle to believe, and so often do believe, that Oedipus’ guilt is proved. If every character in Oedipus becomes another Sphinx whose riddle Oedipus fails to solve, so too we readers may become Oedipus-like if we assume that the myth is a ‘given’, that it is ‘fate’, and that the hero, ‘the self’, is the only character who has motives and ambitions. We can remain as oblivious to its pluralism as Oedipus. But we do not have to.

Both Goodhart and Ahl are obviously well acquainted with modern detective stories and with Freudian psychology (although not with Wilamowitz and Waldock). I should like to concentrate on Ahl, as his version is later, fuller, and more radical. Let us see what his careful reader is expected to assume:

1. Apollo’s oracle to Laius—that he would be killed by his son—is, as Jocasta maintains, not merely misleading but simply false;

2. Apollo’s oracle to Oedipus—that he would kill his father and marry his mother—is totally unrelated to his oracle to Laius;

3. This oracle is also false, unless we are to see the fulfilment of its first part (as Oedipus momentarily does) in Polybus’ dying through grief at the loss of Oedipus; we are not, presumably, intended to assume that Oedipus will now go on to marry Merope;

4. Not only Apollo, but almost all the human characters in the play, are telling lies. Ahl speculates (p. 207) on their motives: those of Apollo and the anonymous drunkard are ‘beyond critical reach’; Teiresias may be seeking revenge for being
outwitted on the Sphinx; the Corinthian is hoping for some reward. The only clear motive is that of Creon: to gain the throne;

5. Jocasta, who seems to be the only relatively honest witness, tries to stop the enquiry because she thinks Oedipus is about to be convinced by a lying messenger that he is her child (Or has she her own fears? The discussion on p. 188 is rather ambivalent). How does she try to refute these lies? She rushes off stage, leaving it free to the liar, and kills herself (unless, of course, the palace messenger is also telling lies). As Ahl admits on p. 208, her suicide is seen by most critics as confirmation that she is convinced that Oedipus is her son. Surely they are right? Ahl has been to considerable pains to establish her as the one (relatively) reliable witness available to Oedipus, and her suicide confirms that she knows she is Oedipus' mother, and refutes his view as conclusively as Oedipus' self-cursing refutes Vellacott's.

Agatha Christie might induce us to discard the myth, ignore the oracles, and accept a last-minute revelation by Hercule Poirot of the guilt of Creon. Sophocles had no Hercule Poirot available, and the clues 'discovered' by Ahl seem far too slight to enable his audience to come to so radical a conclusion. I cannot believe that Goodhart and Ahl have achieved anything but a brilliant, though involuntary, illustration of Waldock's 'documentary fallacy'.

In attempting my own analysis, I shall start with two basic assumptions which are fairly self-evident and which, I believe, have been sufficiently established in my discussion of contrary views. The first is that Oedipus does not know that he has killed his father and married his mother. The second is that Sophocles' purpose is to bring the truth to light as a result of Oedipus' own inquiry, not through divine revelation.7 If there is fatality in the play itself, it arises from Oedipus' own character; being the

7 Odyssey XI 274. C.f. Maddalena.
kind of person that he is, he cannot abandon his quest for the truth. In the Antigone, Teiresias was used in his obvious role as a kind of deus ex machina, to appear late in the play and settle the issue. In the Oedipus Rex he must either be left out altogether, or be brought on early but disbelieved. This latter course will be a major challenge to Sophocles’ ingenuity as well as Oedipus’, but perhaps the dramatic impact will justify the risk. Bain well observes (p. 143):

Once Sophocles decided on a confrontation between Teiresias and Oedipus early in the play, he was inevitably faced with difficulties. The seer knows the truth and must be forced to reveal it (otherwise why bring him on at all?). Oedipus must not accept what he says. By arranging his material in the way that has been described here Sophocles skates on thin ice, but with a triumphant conclusion.

To justify Bain’s last point, of course, requires a detailed examination of the text.

The opening passages of the prologue need not detain us long. It does not need the scholiast (line 1) to tell us that Oedipus’ character is that of a lover of his people and one who takes forethought for their welfare. It is not really an exaggeration when the priest calls him (33-4) ‘foremost among men in the calamities of life and in dealings with the gods’, but there is an ominous ring, especially when the priest finds it necessary to state that he is not equating Oedipus with a god. The gods do not welcome competition from mortals. Tall poppies are liable to be lopped. Aeschylus’ chorus may assert that it is not prosperity itself which incurs divine wrath, but the arrogance which it naturally engineers; Sophocles’ gods may not be so civilised. In line 216 we shall see that the man/god division seems to have got slightly blurred in Oedipus’ mind also. To us, this does not constitute a justification for the way that the gods are treating Oedipus (especially since his ‘punishment’ has long preceded his ‘crime’), but it is the nearest Sophocles comes to offering one.

---

8 So especially Reinhardt, Knox, and Versényi. I agree with Knox that the mss. reading in 376-7 should be kept; see his discussion (1957), pp. 7-8.

9 So Herodotus I 32 (Solon), III 40 (Amasis), VII 10 (Artabanus); cf. Agamemnon 750-62, and see Bowra, pp. 187-9.
The basis for the priest’s confidence is above all Oedipus’ success in solving the riddle of the Sphinx (35-9). Sophocles is concerned to give us an early reminder of this feat, which will recur with greater emphasis in the scene with Teiresias. Now, as then, Oedipus relies on a combination of his own wits with divine aid; he has sent Creon to consult the Delphic oracle (68-77). Creon now arrives. It is characteristic of Oedipus (though, as we have seen, awkward for Vellacott) that Oedipus tells him to speak in public (93).

He does so, and his account of the oracle produces our first real difficulty. ‘Phoebus is clearly ordering us to take vengeance on the killers of the dead Laius, whoever they are’, he reports (106-7). Sophocles will, in the sequel, make a good deal of the singular/plural confusion (Goodhart makes even more). That the eyewitness should falsely use a plural also in 122-3 causes no real difficulty, and the scholiast on 118 is equal to the task; he is exaggerating to conceal his own cowardice. Greene (p. 85) appropriately compares Falstaff (Henry IV Part One, II.iv). Apollo has no such reason, nor can he plead ignorance.

Various explanations have been offered. Schlesinger (pp. 55-8) revives an interpretation of Hölderlin,\(^{10}\) by which Creon is giving his own interpretation of the oracle which Oedipus wrongly takes as a direct quotation; this constitutes his *hamartia*. It is hardly the ‘great *hamartia*’ assigned to him by Aristotle. Greene (pp. 82-4) is on firmer ground in citing other ‘emotional’ uses of plural for singular in lines 496, 572, 980, 1007, 1176, 1185-6 and 1406-7. Newton (1975 pp. 53-5, 1978-9 pp. 106-7 points out that the word translated ‘killers’ may also mean ‘those who kill themselves’ or ‘rulers’, and sees a veiled reference to the disasters which will befall Oedipus and Jocasta. Any or all of these explanations may be a sufficient explanation for what is (at the moment) an unemphatic use of the plural.

That Oedipus should pick up these plurals with a (collective?) singular in 124 is no doubt a typical touch of Sophoclean dramatic irony. It is also characteristic of Sophocles that he prepares for the following scene by two more unemphatic references: a possible conspiracy, and a further mention of the Sphinx. Oedipus concludes (135-6, 145-6) with two more mentions

---

\(^{10}\) *Anmerkung zum Ôidipus* (Übersetzungen Wiener, 1972), pp. 239-47.
of a partnership between himself and Apollo; there will indeed be a partnership, but not the kind of one that he envisages.

The parodos and the curse also need not detain us long. The gap between reality and appearance widening; the chorus appeals for aid against the plague to the god who has sent the plague, and Oedipus’ words are a sufficient reminder to an informed audience that Oedipus is laying a curse upon himself; as Schlesinger (p. 51), Bain (pp. 139-40) and Dawe (p. 12) remind us, there is no gradual disclosure of the story to them. One point may be made: that in what he still regards (275, 280-1) as a partnership between himself and Apollo, Oedipus is in some danger of usurping the god’s role as answerer of prayers (216). One may think of the story of General de Gaulle, at the height of his power, ringing dial-a-prayer and asking ‘Are there any messages for me?’. But it is a slight hint.

Teiresias enters, and Oedipus’ appeal for his help (300-15) seems irresistible. It does not prove so. Teiresias knows the truth but will not tell it. It does not need Wilamowitz (p. 75) to tell us that if he wasn’t going to speak he shouldn’t have come; Teiresias tells us so himself. Wilamowitz’s conclusion—that Teiresias is not a real person—is quite wrong; ‘all too human’ would be a better description. Sophocles brilliantly characterises him in a few lines as a grumbling old man, resenting the summons he has obeyed and dropping dark hints of his own superior knowledge (316, 328, 341) and the ignorance of others (324-5, 329, 337-8), which he refuses to explain. It is hardly surprising that Oedipus calls him a traitor to Thebes (339-1, 340) and an utter scoundrel (334); Teiresias remains confident (343-4) that he will not be forced to speak.

His confidence is misplaced. Oedipus may be furious, but his fury does not prevent him from thinking; it is rather a stimulant. By 345 he has found a plausible explanation for Teiresias’ obstinate silence: that he

---

11 Pace Knox (1957), pp. 9-10; he is concerned to equate the plague with the Athenian plague early in the Peloponnesian War.

12 Gellie’s discussion (pp. 84-6) is good here, and a useful supplement to the specialist works; see also Knox (1957), pp. 26-8 and 84-5, and Schlesinger, pp. 67-71.

13 Kane (190-1) concedes that Oedipus’ logic is reasonable, but says that because of his limited perspective he cannot draw true conclusions. Similarly,
was involved in a conspiracy to kill Laius. He flings this charge at him, and it proves sufficient to break Teiresias' resolve. It is Oedipus (he says) who should maintain the silence which he has complained of in Teiresias; he has cursed himself, since he is the polluter. When I was a child, the standard retort to any insult or threat, unless one could think of a better one, was 'The same to you with knobs on'. It is not just a matter of mutual anger; Sophocles has carefully contrived that the credibility with which Teiresias began this scene has been thoroughly undermined, so that the crucial accusation, when it at last comes, sounds like a crude and unconvincing attempt to score a debating point. Perhaps the old prophet is already in his second childhood; certainly he is concerned to score debating points (his line 358 is a beauty). His involvement in the exchange of insults is clear from 364: 'Do you want me, then, to say something else to make you even angrier?' It is in this unpromising context that his second, and more obscure, accusation is launched; Oedipus is associating with his close kin in an (unspecified) shameful way (366-7). Again we have Sophocles' favourite device: a brief hint that will be developed later.

For the moment, it is hardly surprising that Oedipus ignores this latest insult to concentrate on the main issue: the charge of murder. Applying the maxim 'cui bono', he expands his conspiracy theory to name the principal conspirator, Creon, who will succeed to the throne if Oedipus is deposed (378, 380-9, 399-400). This natural deduction hardly justifies the strictures of Leineks (1982 p. 91, citing inter alia Alfrég p. 356, cf. also 1975 pp. 36-8): 'Oedipus' immediate response to Teiresias' accusation is to drop the search for the murderer and to devote his efforts to proving his innocence instead. For Oedipus proving his innocence is far more important than finding the murderer of Laius'. Has Leineks forgotten Oedipus' willingness to sacrifice himself to save Thebes (443) or Creon (659, 669-70), proved by his relentless pursuit of a truth he knows will be disastrous for him in 1150-70? The real divorce is not between Oedipus and Thebes but between Oedipus and Apollo; when the Sphinx is mentioned again (390-8), far more emphatically, it emerges that it was not a partnership between god and man that solved the riddle (the divine element, represented by Teiresias, being mysteriously absent) but the
unaided efforts of ‘the ignorant Oedipus’ by himself (there is an ironical
pun on oida, ‘I know’, and Oedipus; see Kaufman, p. 130).

Teiresias replies by enlarging on his veiled accusations of incest (412-9)
and forecasting disasters yet to come (418-25). By now he is clearly
enjoying playing with Oedipus, uttering truths that his opponent will not
recognise. When Oedipus interrupts the exchange of invective with a
straight question that (again) hints of things to come, ‘Who begot me?’
(437), Teiresias replies with a riddle, ‘This day will beget and destroy you’.
He withholds from Oedipus the one vital fact—his father’s name—that would
have linked the accusations of murder and incest together. By the time that
he says specifically (453) that Oedipus is a Theban, the king, though (pace
Knox) present in body, is no longer listening, and the first entirely specific
accusations of incest (457-60) pass him by, all the more because the
prophet (as the scholiast on 447 points out) is still talking in riddling
language. Why should Oedipus bother any longer with this malevolent
old quibbler? We can now look back on the whole scene and appreciate the
truth of Bain’s remarks; Sophocles, skating with verve on exceedingly thin
ice, provides that each new piece of information should emerge in such a
way and at such a stage in the deteriorating situation that Oedipus has just
enough excuse not to accept it, and the audience is kept at a pitch of
dramatic tension.

Sophoclean choruses are not noted for their logic. The first reaction of
this one is to revert to the quest for the ‘unknown’ killer. When it does,
reluctantly, address itself to the confrontation it has just witnessed, it is
unwilling to adjudicate between prophet and king, and takes refuge in the
hope that Teiresias does not speak for Apollo; remembering the Sphinx, it
will not condemn Oedipus (483-511). Creon too has nothing new to offer,
only a careful and truthful exposition of his own unambitious nature and a
warning against premature judgement (582-615). Gellie well comments
(p. 88; c.f. Kirkwood pp. 133-4):

Creon in this play is always dead right—laboriously and
prosaically, intellectually and morally right. Oedipus is
nearly always dead wrong, but every instinct of the
audience says that it is better to be wrong like Oedipus
than right like Creon, especially if we are choosing kings.
Oedipus keeps getting wrong answers but he finds the
killer in half-an-hour’s playing time. Creon has spent
years waiting for the evidence about the murderer to
produce itself.
One is tempted to observe, with a celebrated historical authority, that Oedipus is ‘wrong but wromantic’, Creon ‘right and repulsive’. This may help our general viewpoint of the play, but is of no direct assistance on the problem of Oedipus’ ignorance.

This problem again becomes acute when Creon has left the stage. Oedipus tells Jocasta (705-6) that the quarrel between himself and Creon involved a prophet. Jocasta, seeking to reassure him by discrediting prophecy, now produces an apparently unfulfilled oracle (711-19):

An oracle once came to Laius, I won’t say from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers, that his fate would be to die at the hand of his child, who would be born to him and me. But as for him, alien bandits killed him (so the story goes) at a place where three roads meet; three days had not yet passed from the child’s birth when he fastened his ankles together and cast him forth, through his agents, on a trackless mountain.

Oedipus is shocked (727), and reveals the reason for his shock: that Laius was killed where three roads meet (730). After cross-examining Jocasta to extract further details, he reveals to her his own previous history (774-813). His parents were Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth; however, a drunkard at a feast said he was not Polybus’ true son. His parents denied this, but Oedipus continued to be so vexed by the rumour that he went to consult the Delphic oracle, which refused to answer his question, but instead revealed that he would marry his mother (and have children by her) and kill his father. This was why he fled to Thebes. On the way he met and (under extreme provocation) killed an old man with an escort in circumstances which closely resembled those which Jocasta has described. There is one major discrepancy; the sole survivor spoke definitely of ‘bandits’. The scene concludes with the instruction to send for him.

It cannot be denied that this scene poses greater problems than the Teiresias scene. Sophocles, as Gellie (p. 90) points out, could do nothing

about the basic improbability: that it had taken husband and wife so long to compare stories. But Jocasta has given Oedipus three pieces of information, of which he has grasped only one: 'where three roads meet'. He has failed to make any connection between the prophecy given to Laius (that he would be killed by his child) and that given to himself (that he would kill his father), or between the details of the exposure of Laius' child and his own ankles. Admittedly the oracle said 'child', not 'son', and the reference to the exposure did not specifically say that the ankles were pierced, but surely the coincidences are too great to escape notice, especially as the excuse that Oedipus had in the earlier scene is absent; he is not confronting a hostile and discredited witness. Dawe, after pointing this out (p. 15), continues:

If we are candid, we will admit that the real reason [why Oedipus acts in this way] is because Sophocles cannot allow the onward drive of the play to degenerate into a headlong rush; at this point suspicions must be nascent, not confirmed—at any rate as far as parricide and incest are concerned.

This Wilamowitzian note is insufficient. Sophocles, in this case, is not the prisoner of his plot. Nothing compels him to reveal the extent of Oedipus' previous knowledge, thus making the problem of his present ignorance even greater than in the Teiresias scene. He has chosen to do so, and if his gamble (like the Teiresias scene) is not forced upon him by plot considerations, presumably character has something to do with it; Lefèvre's discussion is useful here.

If we ask whether a real-life Oedipus could have failed to pick up these clues, I suppose the answer is that it is just possible. He is in a state of shock. The accusation that he was not Polybus' son and the prophecy that he would marry his mother and kill his father were filed in a different pigeon-hole from that labelled 'oracles, validity of'; the accusation was his reason for going to Delphi, the prophecy his reason for avoiding Corinth. We are not yet aware of his feelings about his ankles. Vellacott, who expects so much of his careful reader, expects surprisingly little of the average spectator (p. 209): 'A popular audience when absorbed in the speed of action is slower and less shrewd than the elders of Thebes. Most spectators at this point have not yet seen how “these things fit together”'. On the contrary; I would expect an audience to feel that there is something seriously wrong with Oedipus' reasoning powers here, which seem, like those of Creon and Antigone in the Antigone, to be deteriorating under
stress. He has ‘tunnel vision’. He sees very sharply the possible implications of what he is considering, and his cross-questioning of Jocasta (like his previous conspiracy theory) is very ingenious. He is not a ‘lateral thinker’; what he is not looking at he does not see.

The Theban elders, I believe (pace Vellacott) are less intelligent than most spectators; but they are by now well aware that something is badly wrong; that much, at least, is clear from their obscure and hotly debated second stasimon. It is not reasonable (with the scholiast on 863, 873 and 906) to attempt to confine their remarks to Jocasta, still less (Schlesinger pp. 77-86) to accuse her of _hybris_ (to the contrary Gellie pp. 88-9). Her attack on prophecy has had the reverse effect to that intended. The chorus now firmly believes that Oedipus’ attitude, as well as hers, is not acceptable, and that the oracles must be fulfilled. How, it does not yet know.

In the following scene, as in the preceding one, the opening stages need not be considered in detail. That Jocasta should appeal to the god whose oracle she is trying to discredit is a typical touch of dramatic irony, as is his apparent answer to her prayer in the news of Polybus’ death. Oedipus’ reaction (963-72) is rather more cautious than hers (946-7); he can produce a characteristically ingenious explanation (that Polybus died from longing for Oedipus, and so was, in a sense, killed by him) which would salvage some oracular credibility. But the further news, that Polybus and Merope were not Oedipus’ parents, but that he was found with his ankles pinned on Cithaeron, shatters Jocasta’s hopes. She now knows the whole truth, and her distress is evident (1056-75). At this stage, Dawe (p. 21) summarizes the evidence now available to Oedipus, and concludes: ‘The considerations above should have led even the least gifted intelligence to the right conclusion, let alone a man whose intuitive brilliance had solved the riddle of the Sphinx’. Vellacott is more tolerant (p. 215): ‘It has been proved many times that this sequence can be fully satisfactory in performance. The painful excitement allows no time for questioning’. In fact, I would expect an audience to see Oedipus’ final ingenious hypothesis (1078-9), that Jocasta’s distress is due to her chagrin at having married a foundling, as a desperate last grasp at a straw, even though it momentarily induces a none too intelligent chorus to set itself up as an unlikely prophetic authority (1086). This last refuge of an embattled mind, this

---

15 E.g. D.A. Hester, “Either ... or” versus “both ... and”, _Antichthon_ 13 (1979): 12-18, with refs.
last clinging to a fixed idea, comes from a drowning man. But even now, he would rather drown than abandon his narrow but sincere search for the truth (1170).

The one-sided battle between divine knowledge and human intelligence has come to its inevitable conclusion; ‘God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom’. But has Sophocles really written this play as an educational exercise, warning us to show due respect for oracles? The chorus may hold this view (898-910), and the scholiast on line 946 believes them; but this is to say that the main purpose of Macbeth is to convince us of the infallibility of witches. Oedipus is far more interesting than Apollo. Nor is it enough to stress the ingenuity of the plot. At the very least, Sophocles has portrayed the leading character appropriate to his plot, and it is to this character that the play owes its continuing appeal.

That Oedipus should combine to a remarkable degree intelligence and single-minded devotion to an important but narrow goal should not surprise us. For intelligence, Sophocles had as a model Homer’s Odysseus, and he brings out the better and worse aspects of this type of person in his Ajax and Philoctetes respectively. Single-mindedness is characteristic of every Sophoclean protagonist. But these elements blend best in Oedipus. Far removed from the mediocre man wrongly advocated by Aristotle (Poetics, chapter 13), he displays intelligence and devotion to truth at their greatest and most disastrous. Performing elegant acrobatics on a tight-rope, he devises for himself mirages and traps well beyond the capabilities of a lesser man. Kane’s comment (p. 208) that ‘intelligence displayed in a perceptual vacuum can be worse than mere ignorance’ comes close to the truth. If one looks for his counterpart in real life, one can only note that Vellacott (1970 [1964] p. 207) proposed himself for the role. But we cannot, in the last resort, do without Oedipus any more that we can do without Socrates. Although his disastrous fate, like Socrates’, serves to distract attention from his positive achievements, nevertheless he deserves the already cited tribute of Gellie (p. 88): with all his blunders, he has saved his city.

David A. Hester
Department of Classics

16 1 Corinthians i.25 (Jerusalem Bible).

17 Kaufman (pp. 136-7) suggests Freud as a candidate.
Bibliography

Only those works are cited which discuss at some length the question of knowledge.


———. *The Plays of Sophocles* (Amsterdam, 1982), pp. 87-114.
P H. Vellacott. ‘The Guilt of Oedipus: The Chorus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*’,
   with a comment by E.H. Dodd. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, translated
   by L. Berkowitz and T.F. Brunner (New York, 1970), pp. 207-
   Translated by J. Lloyd (Brighton, 1981), pp. 63-86.
   20-30.
Voltaire. ‘Lettres sur Oedipe III’ (1719). In *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris,
   1877), pp. 18-28.
A.J.A. Waldock. *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 143-
   68.
T. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff. *Die Dramatische Technik des
   Sophokles* (Zürich, 1917), pp. 69-88.

David A. Hester
Department of Classics
University of Adelaide