

INTRODUCTION*

I. THE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

When Homer (*Od.* 11.271ff.), in a piece of undistinguished poetry, alludes to the Oedipus story, he does so in these words:

I (sc. Odysseus in the underworld) saw the mother of Oedipus, the fair Epicaste, who committed an enormity (ἡ μέγα ἔργον ἔρεξεν) in ignorance, marrying her son. He married her after killing his father. But in time the gods made matters known to men. He ruled the Cadmean people in lovely Thebes in sorrow, through the dreadful will of the gods, and she went to strong-gated Hades, after stringing a high noose from the top of a room, gripped by her own misery, leaving behind for him many causes of pain, and all the things that the avenging spirits of a mother bring about.

Incest, parricide and suicide by hanging are the only themes that this, our earliest, account has in common with Sophocles' version of the story. In particular the bland statement that the gods made matters known to men contrasts in emphasis as sharply as possible with the Sophoclean version, in which it was Oedipus himself who made matters known (but see 1213); and the dismal continuation of Oedipus' rule in Thebes after the suicide of his wife/mother has no counterpart in our play. The facts of the tale in Homer are horrendous, but in its telling no religious or moral judgement is passed, and the poet, beyond a few perfunctory remarks about pain, seems no more excited over the wholly abnormal tale he is telling than if he were entering marriages and deaths in a parish register. The brief remarks about Oedipus who 'crashed to his tomb' (δεδουπότος Οἰδιπόδοσσι ἐς τάφον *Il.* 23.679f.) in the *Iliad* are even less illuminating.

The emotions of Aristotle (*Poet.* 1453b3–7) were more deeply stirred. 'A plot should be so constituted that even without seeing a performance the person who hears the events that take place shivers and feels pity at what happens – as anyone would do who heard the story of Oedipus.'

Clearly between the time of Homer and the time of Aristotle a huge change of feeling has taken place. What caused that change? In a word, Sophocles, who, in a play that won only the second prize (possibly because of the eccentricities of the voting system),** created a masterpiece that in the eyes of posterity has overshadowed every other achievement in the field of ancient drama. In it he played on certain latent terrors that are part of man's nature in all kinds of societies and at all epochs; terrors

* A helpful guide through the maze of literary criticism on this play is the article 'Oedipus and Jonah' by D. A. Hester, in *Proc. Camb. Phil. Soc.* n.s. 23 (1977) 32–61.

** See C. W. Marshall and S. van Willigenburg in *J. H. S.* 124 (2004) 90–107 for a detailed investigation of the voting procedures. The failure of Sophocles to win the first prize excited the indignation of the rhetor Aristides in the second century A.D., oration 46, 256, 11.

whose influence may pervade our lives in ways we scarcely guess; and if we are aware of them at all, it is because our eyes have been opened by Sigmund Freud, upon whom this play made such a profound impression. The following quotation comes from his *Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis* (transl. J. Riviere, ed. 2 (1929) 278).

The Attic poet's work portrays the gradual discovery of the deed of Oedipus, long since accomplished, and brings it slowly to light by skilfully prolonged enquiry, constantly fed by new evidence; it has thus a certain resemblance to the course of a psycho-analysis. In the dialogue the deluded mother-wife, Jocasta, resists the continuation of the enquiry; she points out that many people in their dreams have mated with their mothers, but that dreams are of no account. To us dreams are of much account, especially typical dreams which occur in many people; we have no doubt that the dream Jocasta speaks of is intimately related to the shocking and terrible story of the myth.

It is surprising that Sophocles' tragedy does not call forth indignant remonstrance in its audience . . . For at bottom it is an immoral play; it sets aside the individual's responsibility to social law, and displays divine forces ordaining the crime and rendering powerless the moral instincts of the human being which would guard him against the crime. It would be easy to believe that an accusation against destiny and the gods was intended in the story of the myth; in the hands of the critical Euripides, at variance with the gods, it would probably have become such an accusation. But with the reverent Sophocles there is no question of such an intention; the pious subtlety which declares it the highest morality to bow to the will of the gods, even when they ordain a crime, helps him out of the difficulty. I do not believe that this moral is one of the virtues of the drama, but neither does it detract from its effect; it leaves the hearer indifferent; he does not react to this, but to the secret meaning and content of the myth itself. He reacts as though by self-analysis he had detected the Oedipus complex in himself, and had recognized the will of the gods and the oracle as glorified disguises of his own unconscious; as though he remembered in himself the wish to do away with his father and in his place to wed his mother, and must abhor the thought. The poet's words seem to him to mean: 'In vain do you deny that you are accountable, in vain do you proclaim how you have striven against these evil designs. You are guilty, nevertheless; for you could not stifle them; they still survive unconsciously in you.' And psychological truth is contained in this; even though man has repressed his evil desires into his Unconscious and would then gladly say to himself that he is no longer answerable for them, he is yet compelled to feel his responsibility in the form of a sense of guilt for which he can discern no foundation.

Many critics would sweep aside most of what Freud has to say here. Yet there must be some reason why this play has exercised such a powerful and long-lasting fascination on the human mind. It is not as though its story had an immediate and obvious relevance to the lives of most of us. We do not expect to meet Sphinxes, kill fathers, marry mothers, blind ourselves, etc. We are entitled to argue that we

have enough to do in establishing contact with Sophocles' conscious mind without embarking on the attempt to understand his unconscious, or the way in which he is toying with ours. We may justifiably dismiss with impatience the lurid fantasies of those who see sexual symbolism lurking in every line. On the other hand it would be carrying impatience too far to treat the branching road as a mere geographical detail, for the imagery is common enough, representing a point where a crucial decision has to be made (see 716n., Theognis 911–12, Pindar, *Pyth.* 11.38f., Hdt. 1.11 (ἄλο ὄδοί, with a queen and her realm as the prize), Plato, *Laws* 799c, etc.), and that the structure of the play itself offers more than adequate justification for its mention. *Oedipus Rex*, we may insist, is a play about the legendary Oedipus, King of Thebes, written by Sophocles, and adhering to the curiously rigid conventions of Greek tragedy. It is not Man's Quest for his own Identity. It has managed perfectly well for two millennia, we may conclude belligerently, without any help from Viennese psychiatrists. It is right and good that we should say these things. But one who pursues the pedestrian trade of an editor and commentator is not well placed to deny that a poet may have a private vision that looks far beyond the confines of the art that he has inherited.

The one part of Freud's remarks with which almost everyone agrees is precisely the part over which the present commentator feels most hesitation. Freud dismisses the idea that Sophocles could be accusing destiny and the gods, and he speaks of the 'reverent Sophocles' and his 'pious subtlety'. Now Antiquity has many tales to tell of the easy-going Sophocles. We are told how this paragon of piety kept a holy snake in his house. What more natural than to ascribe to such a person the orthodox outlook of a country parson with a taste for the good life? The contrast with the brooding Aeschylus, and the protesting Euripides, affords the literary critic a peculiar satisfaction. Sophocles, it appears, was a genial old soul, with a knack of writing timeless dramatic masterpieces.

But is conventional piety manifest in *Oedipus Rex*? The question is not one to be solved one way or the other by selectively accumulating quotations with which to bolster one's case. But there is one prime piece of evidence, which even if it comes from a later play, does at least come from the author himself, writing about the same hero. It cannot be left unheard (*Oed. Col.* 962ff.):

(The killing and the marriage and all my misfortunes) were things I had to endure, alas, against my will. It was the way the gods wanted it, angry perhaps with my family from times past. So far as I myself am concerned, you could not find any offence to reproach me with that led me to do these deeds against my self and my kin. Tell me this: if a divine oracle was given to my father, to the effect that he was to die at his son's hand, how can you properly make that into any fault of mine, seeing that my father had as yet done nothing to give me birth, nor my mother either? At the time I was *unborn*. And if later my ruin became manifest, as it did, and I fought with and killed my father, not knowing what it was that I was doing, and who I was doing it to – how can you reasonably blame me for this act, which was nothing that I intended?

Oedipus goes on to point out that marriage with Jocasta was again something done in total ignorance, on both sides, of the reality of the situation.

Now it is certainly true that a speech for the Defence, from Oedipus himself, and from a different play, need not constitute the total objective truth. Yet if we examine the myth as told in *Oedipus Rex* and measure it against the speech just quoted, we have to concede that every word uttered corresponds precisely with the facts. Even in Aristophanes (*Frogs* 1182–5) we find the same evaluation, with the identical repeated stress on ‘before being born’. When, at 828 of our play, Oedipus asks if a man would not be entirely justified in passing the verdict of cruelty on the *daemon* who had visited him with such a fate, we may feel his rhetorical question can admit of only one answer. Outright condemnation of fate or the gods is not something to be expected of a playwright competing in a religious festival. But Sophocles’ Chorus and characters are notably silent when it comes to any actual defence, or even explanation (‘angry perhaps with my family from times past’ – but *why?*) of the workings of fate or heaven. The horror and sympathy they express for the human victim must imply a compensatory, if unspoken, verdict against those forces that permit, or cause, such things to happen. The Olympians are as they are: their help against plagues must be implored, for who else of more than mortal power can help us? Of course it is important that oracles should come true, for if they do not, how are we to orient ourselves in our lives? Suppose we all lived, all the time, εἰκῆ, as Jocasta recommends at a moment of great stress, and as Oedipus sees himself when fate seems to be tightening her grip on him? Weak, and ultimately alone, men pursue their course from the cradle to the grave against an imperfectly understood background. The benefactors of whole cities suffer physical outrage as soon as they are born, and end as blind beggars. But what is this to a Bacchus, as he romps over mountains in pursuit of dark-eyed Nymphs (1105–9)? If this is conventional piety, what price conventional piety? If Sophocles is, as Wilamowitz (*Hermes* 34 (1899) 57) said, ‘the most distinguished representative of the established religion of the Athenians’, what are we to think of that religion?

And even if one were to imagine that a court composed of gods or men had acquitted Oedipus of all guilt, like Orestes in Aeschylus, it would still not help him in the least; for what meaning would such an acquittal have in the face of the contradiction between what he has imagined he is, and what he is? Nor would the opposite verdict of ‘guilty’ add anything to his state. Orestes *can* be acquitted, by himself and by others, but Oedipus *cannot* be released from what he has recognised as the truth about himself. The question of responsibility for what has happened, wherever it is raised and in whatever form, whether this responsibility lies with men, with gods or with the laws of nature, and whether the answer is yes or no – this question, without which the greatest tragedies of Euripides and Aeschylus are unthinkable, just does not arise in Sophocles. So there is no decision here about justice and atonement – nothing would be more misguided than to regard Oedipus’ blinding as an atonement – or about freedom

and necessity. What we have had to consider is illusion and truth as the opposing forces between which man is bound, in which he is entangled, and in whose shackles, as he strives towards the highest he can hope for, he is worn down and destroyed. (K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, Engl. transl. H. Harvey and D. Harvey (Oxford 1979) 134)

Reinhardt's verdict is eloquent and perceptive. But who forged those shackles?

Freedom and Necessity. But, as we have seen, there is no Freedom, only Necessity. Why is it then that notwithstanding the underlying logic of the play, we are left at the end of it with emotions much more complex than those which would be engendered by the mere spectacle of a great hero being sandbagged by Fate, a story of oracles coming true? Why is it that we feel, as the play progresses, that we are watching a hero exercising free will to a degree not easily paralleled from any other Greek tragedy? To answer these questions we must keep separate in our minds what Sophocles has fused in his play: content, the data of the story, the most vital parts of which were determined at a time long before the play opens, and technique, the way the story is told before our eyes and ears from the opening of the play to its conclusion. We have already looked briefly at some aspects of content. It is now to technique that we turn, to learn how the play is actually put together in such a way that the illusion of free will is preserved against a certain background of necessity.

Artistically speaking structural analysis of *Oedipus Rex* is an act of vandalism; at least it is if after stripping it down we persuade ourselves that we have been victims of a confidence trick, that we have been wrong all these years to regard it as a masterpiece of construction, and that now, having penetrated into the poet's workshop, we know better. We must understand that what we are doing is, in effect, examining from a distance of a few centimetres the exact placing of paint on a canvas that enables an Impressionist to convey a ripple on the surface of water, or Rembrandt the glint of armour in a dim light. What we think we see as we look at the picture from an intended distance, and what is actually there when we get very close, may differ in ways that catch us totally by surprise. If the art of Sophocles turns out, on close inspection, to have more in common with the painter than with the watchmaker, that is no good reason to depreciate the quality of his skill.

Sophocles has severe technical problems to surmount. In the person of Oedipus there intersect two separate themes. He is the killer of the previous king of Thebes. He is also the man who has committed parricide and incest. When Aeschylus wrote his play about Eteocles, the son of Oedipus, he was also faced with a dual theme: for Eteocles was the captain of a beleaguered city, assailed by an army as Oedipus' city is assailed by a plague; and he was secondly the son of a family under a curse which finds fulfilment just as the oracles find fulfilment with Oedipus. Aeschylus' method of solving the problem was, not to put too fine a point on it, to treat the first theme up to 653, and then concentrate on the other. Sophocles is much more skilful, but there is still a limit to what he can do. The conventions of the medium in which he works will not allow him to use more than three actors, and there is much else in the way

of inherited convention which restricts his movements. He has therefore to exploit to the utmost a technique which he has developed over the years, a technique which at times defies the laws of natural logic or probability, and the laws of dramaturgy also – the latter a particularly venial offence, for Aristotle has not yet invented them. The principal casualties will be consistency of plot and consistency of character. But consistency is the virtue of tiny minds.

First impressions are of the highest importance. Aristotle (*Politics* 1336b 28ff.) tells us of an actor Theodorus* who would not allow even minor characters to appear on stage before him, since in this way he could best enlist the audience's sympathies. Sophocles seems to agree, for at the very beginning of his play he establishes in a handful of lines the leading characteristics of his hero. They are characteristics which an Athenian audience of the fifth century B.C. would admire as an embodiment of all that they believed was best in their own corporate life.

An aged priest describes to Oedipus the plight of the city in a speech of some 44 lines. At the end of it the audience in the theatre of Dionysus are much better informed. As for Oedipus himself, he hardly needed to be told. 'Known to me and not unknown' he replies in measured tones, 'are your motives in coming?' He has already taken steps to meet the menace, by sending Creon to ask the advice of the Delphic oracle. The happy coincidence, to which the priest himself draws attention (78), whereby Creon arrives dead on cue, is again perfectly legitimate stagecraft, a kind of dramatic shorthand for events which would in real life hardly work out so neatly. Just as Sophocles anticipated our unvoiced objection that it was unlikely that Oedipus would know nothing of the plague – particularly as he is supposed to be suffering from it himself, if we take 60 at its face value – by using the words 'known to me and not unknown', so here the arrival of Creon is prepared by having Oedipus say that he is surprised he is not here already. We are disarmed by the transparent honesty with which Sophocles avails himself of accepted stage convention to overcome certain improbabilities. If we were not so disarmed, we might fret over the sequence of improbabilities that follows. To put the audience in full possession of the facts Sophocles makes Creon tell Oedipus a number of things which Oedipus must have known already. 'We had a king once called Laius' says Creon (103). 'I've heard of him. Never actually saw him of course' replies Oedipus. Dramatic irony certainly, but at a price. When Aristotle (*Poet.* 1460a30; cf. 1454b7) writes that a play should for preference contain nothing improbable, but that if it does, the improbability should lie outside the tale, not in the play itself, and gives as an example ὥσπερ Οἰδίπλους τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι πῶς ὁ Λαΐος ἀπέθανεν, we have to reply to him that though the death of Laius may not be ἐν τῷ δράματι, τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι certainly is, and it is ἄλογον. The blanket of ignorance extends over the expository conversation that follows. Oedipus has been king of Thebes for a number of years, yet he knows nothing of his predecessor except his name. But his lack of curiosity does not prevent him from asking Creon

* See P. Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique* (Paris 1976), esp. 160f., 329.

some sharp questions about why the circumstances surrounding Laius' death were not more vigorously investigated.

In reply to one of these questions, Creon says (118) that when Laius made his last and fatal journey, all his retainers were killed except one. This sole survivor was unable to provide any reliable information except on a single point. 'What point?' asks Oedipus, adding that any clue, however tenuous, might enable them to find out a lot. 'He said', replies Creon, 'that Laius was killed not by the strength of one man, but many hands were raised against him.' The survivor was not telling the truth. If he had told the truth, the plot of *Oedipus Rex* as Sophocles conceives it would not work. Now we may say that the survivor was exaggerating from fear, or shame at his own conduct at a moment of physical danger. But that is an explanation invented by us, not one given by Sophocles, and it breaks down the moment we look at the wording of Oedipus' reply: what then made the brigand (singular) so bold? And this, just after he has been told with the utmost emphasis that there were a number of brigands. Is this a Freudian slip? It is not. When Creon reports the oracle at 107 he uses a plural, and so does Oedipus at 108. The Chorus use plurals at 292, though Oedipus again responds with a singular at 293 – which does not prevent him from using a plural at 308. Oedipus uses the singular here at 124, and again at 139, 225, 230, 236, but at 246–7 he says 'I curse the doer of this deed, whether he be one or acting with several others.' At 277 the Chorus use the singular, and at 715ff. Jocasta uses the plural.

It could hardly be more confusing. And it was meant to be. The simple mathematical proposition of 845 'one cannot be equal to many' must be present to our minds, but kept out of focus, for as long as possible. It is not for nothing that at 290 Sophocles describes the point at issue as *κωφά καὶ πολλὰ ἔπη*. The technique of blurring the prehistory of a play is one that Sophocles uses elsewhere, but nowhere else is it a matter of such urgency.

Voltaire was among those who noted another important difficulty over these lines. The obvious thing to do on hearing that there was a survivor was to send for him at once. Why does Oedipus not do so? This is the man whose intelligence so far exceeded all other men's that he was able to answer the Sphinx's question. This is the man with enough foresight to send Creon to the Delphic oracle. This is the man who has a moment ago said that no clue, however slight, must be overlooked; and said it, moreover, in connection with the survivor. This is the man who reviews censoriously the lack of energy exhibited by others in finding the killer, who promises that he himself will strain every nerve to find the guilty man. But in spite of all this, he fails to send for this one surviving eye-witness. Why? Because of the conflicting demands of the two themes that we noticed above. What Sophocles most wants to uncover is not the killer of the last king of Thebes, but the man who killed his father and married his mother. If Oedipus sent for the eye-witness now, we would have a very short play about the discovery of the killer of the king of Thebes, whose presence in the city was causing pollution and hence the plague. Sophocles has rather more ambitious plans in mind.

In the first choral song we continue with the theme of the plague. But when the song is over, it fades rapidly and soon vanishes almost entirely (allusions at 636, 665). It was simply a device to set the play in motion; when its object is achieved, we hear no more of it. Just as well, perhaps, for it would not do to enquire too closely into the reasons why the gods had allowed years to elapse between the death of Laius and the sending of the plague.

After the long curse speech which follows this choral song, packed with the kind of irony for which the play is famous, the plot receives its next nudge forward. The Chorus suggest that Teiresias be sent for. But Oedipus has anticipated them. Just as Creon had been sent to the Delphic oracle, so also someone has been sent to fetch Teiresias. Just as Oedipus expressed unease because Creon's return was overdue, so now he admits to surprise that Teiresias has not already turned up. After a moment of conversation with the Chorus, the sole purpose of which is to confuse still further the question of whether there was one brigand or more – except that the brigands may now have suddenly become merely 'wayfarers' (but see 292n.), Teiresias arrives, and is greeted in terms of extreme reverence. Oedipus, the most brilliant of men, greets the prophet with humility and trust.

Teiresias' first words are not encouraging: $\phi\epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}\ \phi\epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}$. 'What a terrible thing it is', he continues, 'to possess knowledge where knowledge can do no good to the one who has it. I knew this well enough, but I forgot it, otherwise I wouldn't have come.' Oedipus replies either with genuine concern, or if with humour, then humour of an even gentler kind than that with which he had greeted Creon's equally gnomic initial remarks (89–90). 'What is the matter? You look quite despondent.' – 'Let me go home' . . . and so the scene continues, with Teiresias refusing to give the information which alone can save the city. Relations between the two men deteriorate until at 362 Teiresias explicitly denounces Oedipus as the murderer of Laius. At 366 he hints at incest.

Now to accuse of causing the present plague the very man who had once liberated Thebes from a comparable scourge, the Sphinx (a thing which Teiresias himself had conspicuously failed to do (391 ff.)), is nonsense. Oedipus had never even seen Laius (105). To hint at incest is no less ridiculous, for Oedipus had taken the most extravagant precautions to keep far away from his parents, as he supposes them to be, Polybus and Merope. Oedipus saves till later (562–4, 568; see below) the really devastating question: if Teiresias was so knowledgeable about the murder of Laius, why did he keep silent so long? If he was determined to keep silent, why did he answer Oedipus' summons at all? Because he *forgot* (318) the validity of a gnomic reflection? Oedipus' anger on behalf of the city has every justification, and on his own behalf every *apparent* justification. The audience would have felt much sympathy with his attitude. It is likely that at the time the play was produced they had themselves just lived through a great plague, and were disillusioned with prophets (Thuc. 2.47.4).

The allegations of Teiresias become clearer and clearer until at 447–62 he delivers a speech which has caused the more conscientious students of Sophocles much worry.

I have said what I came to say, and now I am going home, unmoved by fear in your presence. You cannot hurt me, and I will tell you why. The man that you have been looking for all this time, with all your threats and proclamations about the murder of Laius, that man is here. He is supposed to be a stranger living in our midst, but in time he will be found to be a native Theban, a turn of events that will give him no pleasure. He who once had vision will be blind; no longer wealthy, he will be a mendicant, feeling the ground before him with his staff as he traverses a foreign land. And every one will know that he is both the brother and the father of his own children, the son and husband of the woman that gave him birth, the man who killed his father and climbed into the empty bed. Now go and think about that for a while, and if you find that I have spoken false, then consider that I know nothing of prophecy.

There is no way round this speech. It is useless to say (G. M. Kirkwood, *A study of Sophoclean drama* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1958) 129) ‘Oedipus . . . flies into a terrible rage . . . Teiresias can shout aloud the whole truth without any chance of Oedipus’ discovering it.’ Line 747 affords one refutation, and the Chorus afford another, for with the echoes of the prophet’s denunciation still ringing through the theatre of Dionysus, they begin their song with the artless words ‘Who is it that the Delphic oracle spoke of?’ and at 483 they say ‘The sage observer of birds has made some extremely disturbing remarks, which I can neither approve of nor reject, and I simply don’t know what to say’ – though they do in fact carry on for another 25 lines. The technique which Sophocles is using here is one very familiar to us from all his extant plays, but some critics feel that here, at any rate, the technique has been pushed beyond acceptable limits. The essence of the matter is this: the apparent failure of the highly intelligent Oedipus to grasp what has been said to him is unconvincing; and the structure of the plot suffers from premature disclosure.

To the second point we can make two answers: (a) that *Oedipus Rex* is not concerned with gradual disclosure of the story to the audience, but with gradual disclosure to Oedipus, and it is important that every member of the audience shall be fully apprised, at an early stage, of just what there is to disclose. We shall accuse of exaggeration the comic poet Antiphanes (fig. 189 Kassel–Austin) when he says that you have only to say the word ‘Oedipus’ and everyone knows all the rest – his father Laius, his mother Jocasta, his daughters, his (male) children, what will happen to him and what he did. But even as we point out to Antiphanes that some of the younger members of the audience may be unfamiliar with the story, and that anyway there are to all intents and purposes no male children in *Oedipus Rex*, we shall be conscious of scoring cheap debating points rather than voicing deep and essential truths. We do better to employ argument (b): whatever one may think about Teiresias’ speech in its relation to the play as a whole, it affords a moment of tense theatrical horror. The blind, feeble, sullen priest is right, and we know that he is right. If only he were wrong.

As for the first point, the apparent failure of Oedipus at the time to grasp what is being said to him, we can do no more than admit that it is so, adding that Greek

tragedy at large teems with examples of inconsistency of character, and that actors of great professional skill can get away with almost anything. But some of those who have studied this play would not rest content with the application of these general considerations to this particular point.

Whatever misgivings we may have, we are given little time to develop them. The immediately following choral song takes our minds along a different path, and when it is over, religious considerations take second place as we watch a political argument between Creon and Oedipus, a secular counterpart of the Teiresias scene we have just been witnessing. The charge of collusion which Oedipus brings against Creon is natural enough. Creon would (and does) succeed to the throne if anything happened to Oedipus. If the argument '*cui bono?*' has any validity, it points to Creon, and it was Creon who had made the original suggestion, which led to so much unpleasantness, that Teiresias should be sent for. At least it seems to be agreed on all sides that Creon gave this advice (288, 555), though in fact he has had no opportunity to do so, at any time since his return from Delphi, without our knowing about it; and we have heard no such advice given. But this is not a point we have time to notice as the play unfolds, and it makes a very useful opening gambit in the cross-examination that begins at 555.

- Did you or did you not persuade me that I had to send someone to fetch the holy prophet?
- I did, and I stand by my advice now.
(A sudden new tack, apparently not connected with the first question.)
- How long is it now since Laius . . .
- Did what? I don't know.
- . . . perished in the fatal attack?
- It would be far back in the past.
(Again another apparently irrelevant question.)
- Was the prophet in practice at that time?
- Yes, as skilled as now, and held in no less honour.
- Did he ever make any mention of me at that time?
- Not at any time that I was around.
- Well, didn't you hold an investigation to find the killer?
- We did, of course, and heard all sorts of things.
- So how was it that this clever prophet of yours never said anything at the time on the matter?
- I don't know, and on matters that I do not understand I like to keep silent.

It is a good, crisp law-court scene, and it shows us how reasonable it was for Oedipus to suspect Creon and Teiresias. But if we have leisure to reflect, we shall see that Sophocles has put into the mouth of his hero questions which ruthlessly expose certain weak features in the foundation on which his own play has been built. If Sophocles had anachronistically heard of Aristotelian canons about construction according to probability or necessity, he could in his own defence have exploited the