

Article

# One Voice Too Many: Echoes of Irony and Trauma in *Oedipus the King*

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**Abstract:** Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* has often inspired concurrent interpretations examining the tragic irony of the play and the traumatic neurosis of its protagonist. The Theban king epitomizes a man who knows everything but himself, and Sophocles' use of irony allows Oedipus to discover the truth in a manner that Freud viewed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* as "comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis." Psychoanalytical readings of Oedipus at times depend greatly on his role as a doubled figure, but this article specifically investigates his doubled voice in order to demonstrate the interrelated, chiasmic relationship between Oedipus' trauma and the trope of irony. It argues, in fact, that irony serves as the language, so to speak, of the traumatic experiences haunting the king and his city, but it also posits that this doubled voice compounds the irony of the play and its hero. In other words, in addition to the Sophoclean irony that dominates the work, the doubling of the king's voice reveals a modified form of Socratic irony that contributes to the tragedy's power. Consequently, even after the king's recognition of the truth ultimately resolves the work's tragic irony, Oedipus remains divided by a state of simultaneous knowledge and ignorance.

**Keywords:** Oedipus; trauma; neurosis; irony; voice; doubled; echo; knowledge; ignorance

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For there are in the play not one Oedipus but two.

—Bernard Knox

According to Friedrich Hölderlin's diagnosis, the Theban king suffers from a problem of sight: "Perhaps King Oedipus had an eye too many" (Hölderlin 1984, p. 253). He possesses too much insight and subsequently seeks out knowledge beyond the scope of what is necessary or prudent. Hölderlin argues that Oedipus encounters trouble when he "interprets the oracle *too infinitely*" by linking together, with some assistance from Creon, Apollo's commandment to purge the city of corruption with the murder of Laius, the former king of Thebes (Hölderlin 1986, pp. 232–33). His capacity for unravelling riddles, which proved so valuable before the Sphinx, now imbues Oedipus with the confidence that his interpretation of the Oracle is the right one, and in the end we discover that this confidence is well founded. The king is correct once again, but Hölderlin claims that such knowledge has an intoxicating and dangerous effect that "provokes itself to know more than it can bear or grasp" (Hölderlin 1986, p. 233). His eyes, in a sense, are bigger than his stomach.

Nevertheless, Hölderlin's reference to the king's additional eye in his poem "In lieblicher Bläu" ('In Lovely Blue') immediately transitions in the following line from a problem of vision to a problem of voice: "This / man's suffering seems indescribable, unspeakable, / inexpressible" (Hölderlin 1984, p. 253). Although Hölderlin believes that what Oedipus discovers with his vaunted insight is ineffable in nature, there is an alternate reading of *Oedipus the King* that depends not upon the king having no voice but rather upon him having one voice too many. In the same way that Hölderlin attributes to Oedipus a superfluous eye that extends his interpretive powers past their limits, the king is also afflicted with a doubled voice that multiplies what we might consider the story of Oedipus,

thereby obscuring and fragmenting his identity. If it is Oedipus' extra eye that allows him to discover truths he cannot bear, it is the echo of his own voice that renders those truths unbearable.

In a particular sense, Hölderlin's interpretation echoes Tiresias's attempt, early in the play, to warn Oedipus and the audience of this doubled voice, a warning that also switches from vision to speech. The seer's diagnosis of the king begins with the same play on sight and knowledge that Sophocles consistently weaves throughout the tragedy:

“The double lash of your mother and your father's curse / will whip you from this land  
one day, their footfall / treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding / your eyes that  
can now see the light!”

But in the subsequent lines Tiresias shifts directly from Oedipus' future blindness to questions regarding the doubling of his voice:

Soon, soon  
You'll scream aloud—what haven won't reverberate?  
What rock of Cithaeron won't scream back in echo?  
That day you learn the truth about your marriage,  
the wedding-march that sang you into your halls,  
the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor!

(Sophocles 1984, ll. 476–84)<sup>1</sup>

Through his prophecy, Tiresias locates the origin of this additional voice in the rocks of Cithaeron, which reverberate with Oedipus' cries. By conjoining the king's voice[s] with the mountains outside Thebes, the prophet acknowledges the trauma at the play's heart, which splits Oedipus' identity and creates his doubled voice. In other words, Sophocles does not construct *Oedipus the King* around a story that is ineffable or inexpressible but rather around a story rendered ambiguous by the irony of its language and circumstance and the traumatized fragmentation of its hero. Oedipus' doubled voice tells two stories and he is the author of both, but the king does not recognize or recall the true narrative until the two voices are rejoined.

The result of this twofold voice is what Maurice Blanchot calls a “silent dialogue,” in which Oedipus converses “with the silence of the gods—the speech of the solitary man, a speech in itself divided and truly cut in two because of the silent sky with which it pursues its invincible discourse” (Blanchot 1997, p. 201). Oedipus receives no justification from the gods for his terrible fate, but Blanchot considers this heavenly silence to be productive in that the lack of a response provides a particular kind of answer, even if in the negative. Oedipus' compulsion to fill the emptiness caused by the missing response provokes a self-reflexivity that leads to epiphany. It creates, in other words, a psychological division in the Theban king that leads eventually to self-knowledge and the rediscovery of a trauma that is already inherently divided between knowing and not knowing. All the while, the conduit for this discovery is Oedipus' compounded voice, which proves to be as symptomatic as it is revelatory of his traumatic origin and identity.

The split is already spelled out in the name of Oedipus. The riddle regarding how to decipher the root “oid-” has long caused interpretative problems for the play's characters and its critics. “Οἶδα, the knowledge of the *tyrannos*, πούσ, the swollen foot of Laius' son—in the hero's name the basic equation is already symbolically present, the equation which Oedipus will finally solve,” Bernard Knox writes of this ambiguity (Knox 1979, p. 100) but this almost glides too smoothly over the trouble in the first half of the equation because “Oid-” can signify both ‘knowledge’ and ‘swollen.’ The characters make their own critical decisions about how to read the significance of the name, decisions that betray their particular perspectives, and Pietro Pucci notes that it is often the ‘swollen’

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<sup>1</sup> All citations and translations are from Robert Fagles's version of *Oedipus the King* with accompanying line number.

foot that is forgotten: “The text intimates by parochesis the connection of ‘Oidipous’ with the verb *oida* (‘I know’) and writes off the meaning that has in fact been at the origin of his name, from *oidao*, *oideo*, (‘to become swollen’) and accordingly, ‘Swollenfoot’” (Pucci 1988, p. 149). Because the play begins after Oedipus has already won his reputation for wisdom and riddle-solving, the ‘*oida*/I know’ root becomes the dominant reading. In the priest’s opening plea, for example, he praises the intelligence that saved Thebes from the Sphinx and reveals the city’s investment in the ‘know’ etymology. After all, their salvation relies upon this reading of the king’s name, and they are justified in the end, despite the catastrophic effect Oedipus’ knowledge brings down upon his own head.

It does not take long, of course, for Oedipus to fully adopt the more flattering nickname. Perhaps too willingly, he emphasizes this version of his name in his confrontation with Tiresias: “But I came by, Oedipus the ignorant, / I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds, / the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark” (ll. 451–53). Pucci uses the parochesis of the line ‘*ho meden eidos Oidipous*’ to argue that, “its sarcastic innuendo suggests that Oedipus reads his name as ‘Know...’” (Pucci 1988, p. 150). The outburst therefore represents an unusual break from the play’s dominant Sophoclean irony as Oedipus mixes hubris and Socratic irony in order to elide the connection between his name and his limp. His remark, in other words, betrays an attempt to forget an earlier wound. Like the priest before him, the interpretive urge toward ‘I know’ and away from ‘swollen’ helps to cement Oedipus’ political position because, as Knox explains, “his knowledge is what makes him *tyrannos*, confident and decisive; knowledge has made man what he is, master of the world” (Knox 1979, p. 100). Nevertheless, Sophocles’ mastery of tragic irony, which reveals the gap between the character’s ignorance and the listener’s knowledge, never allows the audience to feel comfortable with the king’s reading of his own name.

In Oedipus’ epithet, the convergence of this Sophoclean irony and the Socratic irony in which the king ‘pretends’ to be ignorant creates a knot of simultaneously valid and oppositional meanings that quickly exceed the king’s ability to control them. His feigned self-deprecation slips from his grasp and reopens an old wound instead of damaging the blind seer at whom it was aimed. Cynthia Chase analyzes the blowback Oedipus experiences from his attempted sarcasm:

In the very act of claiming reasoned control over language, Oedipus utters syllables that speak the opposite; the controlling utterance here is not his, but that of a fragmentary language speaking itself. “Lack- knowing- I know-foot”: in the very act of deploying a limited local irony, with his sarcastic references to himself as “the ignorant,” Oedipus produces an irony of that irony, which fragments meaning into material signifiers.

(Chase 1979, p. 61)

Chase isolates the way in which the tragic irony of the play manages to preserve the literal meaning of ‘ignorant’ despite Oedipus’ ironic intention; he unwittingly hits upon the truth of his situation, or he allows the audience to do so at the least. Even so, once one recognizes the uncontrollable play of the language, the ambiguity of the line begins to multiply until it escapes the grasp of the audience just as it had previously escaped Oedipus. For Chase, this is a purposeful mechanism designed to make the audience forget (momentarily) their complicity with Oedipus. “The double meanings thus mark our distance only to draw us in,” she writes (Chase 1979, p. 62). For my purposes, however, both Pucci and Chase have relied too heavily on the connection of Oedipus’ name with the root *oida* (‘I know’). Taking into consideration the fact that the more appropriate linguistic connotation resides with *oidao* (“to become swollen”) (Pucci 1988, p. 149), the possible significations of the line double again after reintroducing the original root:

1. Lack- knowing- I know- foot (literal) → Ignorant Oedipus
2. Lack- knowing- I know- foot (ironic) → Knowledgeable Oedipus
3. Lack- knowing- swollen- foot (literal) → Ignorant Oedipus
4. Lack- knowing- swollen- foot (ironic) → Knowledgeable Oedipus

Employing what Chase calls the ‘limited local irony’ of sarcasm, Oedipus seems to mean the second sense, but the tragic irony of the plot disrupts his intention and causes the second meaning to collapse back into the first: Oedipus is actually ignorant. While this reading of the line is entirely valid and appropriate, the substitution of *oída* with *oideo/oídao* is ultimately more significant because it produces an irony (present in the fourth sense of the line) that more aptly represents the doubling that Oedipus undergoes during the traumatic moments that instigate the tragedy’s action.

Although it may appear at first that the second and fourth interpretations of the line “ὁ μὴδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπουσ” contain negligible differences, the transition between ‘Know-Foot’ and ‘Swollen-Foot’ significantly alters the referent of the knowledgeable version of Oedipus. The interpretive knot grows more entangled as new questions arise. In addition to *whether* Oedipus knows or does not know, it becomes less clear *what* he knows and even more importantly, the line also obscures *who* it is that does the knowing. In terms of the second construction (Oedipus’ intended meaning), ‘I know’ refers specifically to the solution of the Sphinx’s riddle, which liberates Thebes and places Oedipus on the throne. On the other hand, as Chase explains, once his irony collapses back on him, the referent changes to the trauma of his origins as Oedipus shifts from knowledge to ignorance; his statement proves true rather than sarcastic. However, when *oída* becomes *oideo / oídao* in the third and fourth constructions, the line both retains and revises Chase’s referent in the sense that the thing known remains the traumatic event but the person who possesses the knowledge transforms from ‘Know-Foot’ to ‘Swollen-Foot.’ This is where the chaos of the play’s irony becomes most bewildering because ‘Know-Foot’ now represents a version of Oedipus that is ignorant and ‘Swollen-Foot’ embodies one who has known all along, who possesses knowledge of an event the significance of which has yet to be discovered. As a result, the play generates much of its power from a kind of chiasmic interplay between irony and trauma, in which the latter produces a fissure (in terms of knowledge) that then creates a space in which the former can function (in terms of language).

This leads us back again to the doubled nature of Oedipus’ psyche, which results from the traumatic series of events in which he is abandoned by his parents and subsequently murders one and procreates with the other. Knox describes this doubling in terms of a psychological game of cat-and-mouse:

One [Oedipus] is the magnificent figure set before us in the opening scenes, *tyrannos*, the man of wealth and power, first of men, the intellect and energy which drive on the search. The other is the object of the search, a shadowy figure who has violated the most fundamental human taboos, an incestuous parricide, “most accursed of men.”

(Knox 1979, p. 99)

Here Knox distinguishes the perpetrator from the king, but he also recognizes that these two figures occupy the same space, adding, “And even before the one Oedipus finds the other, they are connected and equated in the name which they both bear, Oedipus” (Knox 1979, p. 99). On the other hand, the malleable nature at the root of *Oidipous* means that the name of the king and the name of the parricide are not precisely the same. At the moment of his transgression, Oedipus can only be named ‘Swollen-Foot’ because he has not yet earned the reputation behind his ‘Know-Foot’ nickname. Likewise, within the action of the play, Oedipus avoids acknowledging his ‘Swollen-Foot’ name because he has repressed the traumatic events that occurred while bearing it. The king addresses this possibility only in his discussion with the messenger, who recognizes him as the infant with the bound feet. Regarding the ‘Swollen-Foot’ name, Pucci notes that “this etymology is, so to speak, the inscription on his feet that both functions as a recognition sign and agrees with the oracular

inscription" (Pucci 1988, p. 149). The timing is significant because the acknowledgement of the *oideo / oidaō* root coincides with the revelation that Oedipus is not Polybus' son, thereby marking the early limits of Oedipus' recognition and the moment at which his 'old affliction' begins to come to light (Sophocles 1984, l. 1132). Sophocles uses the reappearance of 'Swollen-Foot' to catalyse the king's return to the traumas of his youth; like the hysterical patients Sigmund Freud would study so many years later, Oedipus begins to "suffer mostly from reminiscences" (Breuer and Freud 1961, p. 4). He begins to remember experiences that he has forgotten but has always in some sense known.

By 1920, Freud's theory of 'reminiscences' had evolved into the 'compulsion to repeat' (especially strong in traumatized patients) found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The patient, Freud writes, "is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (Freud 1961, p. 19). The unique case of Oedipus, however, is more complex because he acts as both patient and physician. The over-confident investigator ('Know-Foot') is determined to discover a past that he ('Swollen-Foot') is simultaneously desperate to repress, and the irony of this internal conflict is that 'Know-Foot' remains in the dark while 'Swollen-Foot' clings to the shadows precisely because he is privy to the truth. The former represents the man who has saved Thebes and seeks to do so again. The latter, meanwhile, has been lost in the incomplete experience of the traumatic event and now must be exposed, rediscovered, punished.

The relationship between these two versions of Oedipus is most evident in Freud's later discussion, in *Moses and Monotheism*, of the twofold effect of trauma on the psyche. Positive reactions to the trauma constitute "endeavors to revive the trauma, to remember the forgotten experience, or, better still, to make it real—to live through once more a repetition of it" (Freud 1939, p. 95). This urge clearly dominates the 'Know-Foot' Oedipus, who is relentless in his pursuit of the truth. His 'fixation to the trauma,' as Freud labels it, will not allow him to stop his ears, but it also encounters opposition from the negative effect of trauma, which struggles against repetition: "The negative reactions pursue the opposite aim; here nothing is to be remembered or repeated of the forgotten traumata. They may be grouped together as defensive reactions. They express themselves in avoiding issues, a tendency which may culminate in an inhibition or phobia" (Freud 1939, p. 95). This avoidance of the issue has been the function of the 'Swollen-Foot' Oedipus ever since the traumas of his infancy and youth and for many years the defensive reaction was stunningly successful. Through the riddle of the Sphinx, the acquisition of a kingdom, the marriage to a queen and the birth of four children, 'Swollen-Foot' remains locked in the depths of Oedipus' psyche, refusing either remembrance or resolution. Only after the devastation of the blight and the oracle's command to drive pollution from the land does Oedipus unwittingly turn his riddle-solving prowess inward and the truth of his experience subsequently starts to surface.

At first the process is slow and arduous. A random memory flashes as Jocasta tells the story of her first husband's death: "Strange, hearing you just now," Oedipus confesses, "my mind wandered, my thoughts racing back and forth" (Sophocles 1984, ll. 800–2). With each clue, 'Know-Foot' descends deeper into his unconscious, but the further he descends, the more 'Swollen-Foot' resists, constructing the inhibitions and phobias that must be overcome. "But my mother's bed, surely I must fear—" Oedipus reasons after he realizes only half the prophecy has been disproven (l. 1068), and later, when the herdsman warns, "Oh no, I'm right at the edge, the horrible truth—I've got to say it!" Oedipus rails, "And I'm at the edge of hearing horrors, yes, but I must hear!" (ll. 1283–85). Even 'Swollen-Foot's' attempt to resist "hearing horrors" is countermanded by 'Know-Foot's' insistence that he continue to listen. The give and take between the two figures is characteristic of the neurotic symptoms that "constitute a compromise, to which both the positive and negative effects of the trauma contribute; sometimes one component, sometimes the other, predominates. These opposite reactions create conflicts which the subject cannot as a rule resolve" (Freud 1939, p. 96). And so Sophocles' play, by beginning after the traumatic events have passed, revolves around the conflict between two versions or divisions of its tragic hero.

This framing of the play's action is what prompts Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, to note that *Oedipus the King* is "comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis" (Freud 1940, p. 160). Chase's analysis of this remark makes the connection more explicit by arguing that, "*Oedipus Tyrannus* successfully dramatizes the activity of repression and unrepression—the 'abnormal defense' that characterizes 'psychoneurosis' and the peculiar 'process of revealing' that constitutes interpretation of dreams, or psychoanalysis" (Chase 1979, pp. 56–57). Because Chase focuses on Freud and not Sophocles, however, her essay declines to explore the specific literary methods by which Sophocles 'successfully dramatizes' these activities, methods which rely significantly on the figure of the voice and the trope of irony.

### The Voices of Oedipus

Multiple times throughout *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles invokes the figure of the disembodied voice to speak to the 'Know-Foot' Oedipus. At times, this voice will serve to warn Oedipus about the dangers lurking in the truth he seeks, while at others it represents a truth that he should and in some ways does already know, but in each instance Sophocles leaves the speaker ambiguous. It seems to me, however, that the disembodied voice betrays its own origin, speaking out from the 'Swollen-Foot' version of the king, and its resonance becomes both a symptom and a representation of Oedipus' original traumatization.

Jocasta, for example, recognizes the danger of this disembodied or unconscious voice, although she misidentifies what is dangerous about it. Speaking to the chorus, she laments her inability to prevent her anxious husband from listening. She notes that her husband is "beside himself" and complains that, "he's at the mercy of every passing voice, if the voice tells of terror" (ll. 1001, 1004–5). The queen purposefully resorts to a vague, disconnected voice because she wants to emphasize its fleeting nature, its lack of foundation in the sense of both locus and truth. Following the pattern of the play, however, Jocasta says more than she means as tragic irony compounds the significance of the lines. The audience knows that the 'passing voice,' which echoes warnings from the Oracle and Tiresias, specifically seeks to communicate what are, from the perspective of 'Swollen-Foot,' the terrible ramifications of his traumatic past. The queen attempts to minimize this terror because she has no desire to listen to the voice, but Oedipus feels compelled to hear because he suffers from a neurosis that Freud sees "as a direct expression of a 'fixation' to an early period of their past" (Freud 1939, p. 96). Jocasta therefore unwittingly describes the symptomatic compulsiveness that results from the internal antagonism between her husband's positive and negative reactions to trauma, which are together expressed through a doubled voice.

Unsurprisingly, the first instance of this voice is heard by the seer, Tiresias, who with characteristic prescience identifies it before it has spoken. Returning again to the scene in which he angrily interrogates the king about his parentage, we see the prophet adopt his own brand of Socratic irony by asking a question to which he already knows the answer: "Soon, soon / you'll scream aloud—what haven won't reverberate? What rock of Cithaeron won't scream back in echo?" (ll. 479–81). Tiresias doubles the voice in an echo that rebounds back on Oedipus because the power of the prophecy exists not in the scream itself but rather in the place from which it is repeated: the rock of Cithaeron. Thomas Gould explicitly marks the importance of this line, explaining that Cithaeron is "a very special mountain: it is where Oedipus was exposed as a child, and where he will beg to be exiled to when he has blinded himself. Tiresias and the audience know this, but Oedipus and the Chorus do not" (Gould 1970, p. 66, n. 421). In other words, the doubled voice functions as a trigger for the prophecy's tragic irony, but there is an additional, secondary consequence of the echo and its geographical origin. Tiresias's specific mention of the mountain on which the infant Oedipus was exposed allows us to read one voice (the scream) as originating from 'Know-Foot' Oedipus while a second voice (the echo) reverberates from 'Swollen-Foot' Oedipus, who already knows, like the prophet, the trauma that prompts the cries and has the wounds to prove it. Later in the play, the voice will again emanate from precisely these wounds.

After the messenger arrives at Thebes to spread the news of Polybus' death, he attempts to assuage the king's anxiety by proving that Polybus and Merope are not Oedipus' biological parents. He relates the story of rescuing Oedipus at Cithaeron and then, when Oedipus asks why he needed rescue, the messenger responds as though the king should already be aware of his history: "Your ankles . . . they tell the story. Look at them" (l. 1131). He describes how the king's feet were fettered and adds, "you got your name from that misfortune too, the name's still with you" (ll. 1135–36). For corroboration, the messenger effectively disowns his claim to the story by explaining that the wounds in Oedipus' feet have already told the tale. In this instance, the voice comes from the literal 'Swollen-Foot' at the root of Oedipus' name and then expands out to the figurative 'Swollen-Foot' existing within Oedipus' psyche. Again, the (partially) disembodied voice resonates from a locus that already knows the story of the trauma.

At this point, because the discussion consists of the witnessing and representation of a trauma, one cannot avoid its similarity to Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, which likewise focuses on a wound that speaks. In order to explore the ramifications of a wound that bears witness, Caruth reinterprets Freud's allusion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* not to Sophocles' Oedipus but rather to Torquato Tasso's Tancred and Clorinda.<sup>2</sup> Caruth claims that the strength of the scene lies not only in the *repetition* of a wound but also (and perhaps more so) in "the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*." She continues:

The voice of [Tancred's] beloved addresses him and, in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated. Tancred's story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know.

(Caruth 1996, pp. 2–3)

With a few alterations, this argument could fit Oedipus and his wounded ankles as smoothly as it does Tancred and Clorinda. Indeed Caruth proposes for Tancred something analogous to the 'Know-Foot'/'Swollen-Foot' relationship that exists within Oedipus. Despite the fact that her emphasis is on the voice of the other, she never closes off the possibility of understanding "the voice of Clorinda, within the parable of the example, to represent the other within the self that retains the memory of the 'unwitting' traumatic events of one's past" (Caruth 1996, p. 8). In this interpretation, the words that spill out of the wound represent Tancred's own voice rising up from the unconscious and taking the form of the positive, psychoneurotic, "compulsion to repeat."<sup>3</sup> For Oedipus, a similar and undeniable repetition compulsion forces to the surface the repressed voice within him. 'Swollen-Foot' speaks through his ankle wounds in order to warn 'Know-Foot' of the trauma at the core of his origin, a trauma that 'Know-Foot' does not fully know and which he therefore insists be raked up, heard, brought to light.

This means that Freud, if he desired, could easily have substituted the allusion to Tasso's poem by returning once again to the oedipal well for an illustration of his psychoanalytical theory. The wounds marking Oedipus' feet reveal an earlier manifestation of the psychological trouble

<sup>2</sup> Freud refers to the episode in books 12 and 13 of *Gerusalemme Liberata* in which "Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again" (Freud 1961, p. 24).

<sup>3</sup> Caruth eventually moves away from this reading of Tancred's voice because, as with Chase's reading of *Oedipus*, she is invested in demonstrating that Tancred's story is "the story of psychoanalytic writing itself" (Caruth 1996, pp. 8–9). Such a movement requires the voice of Clorinda to come from *outside* Tancred; nevertheless, Caruth never claims that these readings are mutually exclusive.

Tancred encounters in the forest outside Jerusalem. Both represent an event that is experienced without being fully understood and so Oedipus suffers from a trauma that exists not only in his past but also “in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 1996, p. 4). In the case of King Oedipus, however, it would be incorrect to say that the circumstances of the past are ‘not known.’ He perhaps lacks *full* comprehension, which Caruth hints at above, but something else is at work in the play that renders Oedipus simultaneously knowledgeable and ignorant. The experience of trauma creates an internal conflict that doubles Oedipus, both in wound and voice, and Sophocles represents the conflict by means of a doubled ironic mode. The first, most commonly identified form is the tragic irony of the play itself and the second, more hidden and obscured form is a modified type of Socratic irony exhibited within Oedipus.

One of the most remarkable effects of the irony Sophocles employs throughout *Oedipus the King* is the way it represents the division Oedipus endures on account of his traumatic neurosis. Irony acts, in a sense, as the language of trauma and so Oedipus’ doubled voice constitutes both a symptom and a cause of the neurosis. Jean-Pierre Vernant appears, in fact, to be working toward this effect of the play’s irony when he argues that, “the ambiguity of [Oedipus’] words translates not the duplicity of his character, which is all of a piece, but more profoundly the duality of his being. Oedipus is double . . . Oedipus does not hear the secret discourse which is established, without his knowing it, at the heart of his own discourse” (Vernant 1978, p. 477), except that, in my view, Oedipus *does know*, at least in part, the secret at the heart of the play because this knowledge is the consequence of traumatic neurosis and the repression of his experience.

To reiterate, we know that Freud recognized *Oedipus the King* to be “comparable to the work of psychoanalysis” primarily because of the delayed discovery of the king’s true identity (Freud 1940, p. 160). The correlation is made possible in part by the play’s tragic irony, which transforms the audience and certain characters (i.e., Tiresias and the shepherd) into the analyst who watches the analysand (Oedipus) come to terms with his past. Nevertheless, the fact that Oedipus represents both investigator and perpetrator complicates this analogy because it means that he also functions to some extent as both analyst and analysand. Consequently, in order for the Oedipus that we have been calling ‘Know-Foot’ to successfully draw the truth from the Oedipus known as ‘Swollen-Foot,’ he must employ a complex, altered form of Socratic irony in which he pretends that he does not know the truth.

The objection at this point is that Socratic irony cannot be present within Oedipus because he is not pretending when he behaves as though he is ignorant of his past. Such an interpretation of the play is defensible, of course, but Oedipus’ characteristic traumatic neurosis contributes another layer to the story that makes the opposite argument equally valid. Put another way, because we are dealing with trauma rather than run-of-the-mill ignorance or even fate, Oedipus as a doubled figure with a doubled voice exists on both planes; he both knows and does not know. It may be the case in fact that this separation and simultaneity is precisely what allows Oedipus and the play to reach their ultimate conclusion. *Oedipus the King* is like witnessing the psychoanalysis of a patient because, as Freud tells us, the treatment “must get him to re-experience some portion of his forgotten life, but must see to it, on the other hand, that the patient *retains some degree of aloofness*, which will enable him, in spite of everything, to recognize that what appears to be reality is in fact only a reflection of a forgotten past” (Freud 1961, p. 19, italics mine). The ‘aloofness’ necessary to the treatment represents a different term for what one might view as the irony of the play and its tragic hero. Oedipus is both ignorant of his past (Sophoclean irony) and unconsciously aware of it (Socratic irony) because of a faulty assimilation of its traumatic nature.

I recognize that an argument for Socratic irony in *Oedipus the King* might seem excessive and unnecessary considering the work that tragic irony does throughout, but my claim is that there is something extraordinary or idiosyncratic about the case of Oedipus that makes both types of irony necessary to cover the complexity of the play. There are several ways, in fact, that Oedipus acts as

an outlier that resist some of the most famous elements of the tragedy. For example, Chase points out that Oedipus is paradoxically the only human to lack an Oedipus complex because his motives are not based on desire: “The one person who actually enacts patricide and incest completely misses the experience—until after the fact, when the parrincest is inscribed as a palimpsest and becomes readable for the first time” (Chase 1979, p. 58). Additionally, the missed experience of this ‘parrincest’ is made possible in part by his solution of the Sphinx’s riddle, but the answer he gives does not fully apply to him. In its formulation from Apollodorus’ *Library*, the riddle asks, “What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?” (Rokem 1996, p. 257). And yet, as we have seen, Oedipus’ voice is doubled. He does not have ‘one voice,’ which means he does not conform neatly to the category of ‘mankind’ constituting the riddle’s solution. Oedipus’ exceptional identity often exceeds the categories existing in and produced by the play and so the general application of tragic irony to Sophocles’ protagonist encounters similar resistance because his traumatic neurosis complicates the type of knowledge differential consistent with the trope.

This is not at all to say that Oedipus does not participate in the tragic irony of Sophocles’ tragedy. In fact, if one thinks of Kenneth Burke’s definition of “true irony,” which “is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him” (Burke 1941, p. 435), then Oedipus epitomizes the trope since he embodies both ‘Know-Foot’ and ‘Swollen-Foot.’ The oppositional pair located within the king makes the tragic irony of the play possible, but it also calls attention to the traumatic neurosis, which, as Michael Lambek suggests, “might be redescribed as being sick in an ironic mode” (Lambek 2003, p. 14). In other words, there is a correlation between the trope and the neurosis that emerges most significantly in the character of Oedipus.

Paul Antze, who has investigated this connection from an anthropological perspective, confirms the link between the *Oedipus the King* and psychoanalysis by arguing that a patient suffering the throes of neurosis will, like the Theban king, seek out the answer through psychoanalytical treatment. When confronted, however, by the tragic irony that he is the source of his own trouble, “the patient’s behavior begins to take on the kind of ironic doubleness found in *Oedipus Rex*, in which the protagonist’s very denials somehow affirm what he denies” (Antze 2003, p. 117). Yet Antze’s use of the general term ‘somehow’ is not quite appropriate in this case. Because we are dealing with a king (and a patient) who suffers from traumatic neurosis, the source of the affirmations that refute his denials is neither mysterious nor unknown. In truth, the affirmations originate from the ‘Swollen-Foot’ figure who “knew it all along,” so to speak, and this internal knowledge creates resistance for interpreting Oedipus as ironic in a purely tragic or Sophoclean sense.

Because Oedipus is not strictly ignorant of his circumstances, the knowledge differential exhibited by the king breaks through the standard conception of tragic irony and crosses over into the modified form of Socratic irony that we have been progressing toward, in which he divides himself between one who knows and one who does not. Antze also explores the possible role of Socratic irony in neurotic behavior, writing that:

Because of their ambiguity, neurotic symptoms also lend themselves to the kind of covert commentary we associate with irony—allowing the sufferer to express feelings in a way that escapes repercussions . . . The one difference, albeit a crucial one, is that the neurotic doesn’t “know” what she is doing. The gap between knowledge and ignorance that makes irony possible appears here as a gap between conscious and unconscious knowledge.

(Antze 2003, p. 114)

Conscious and unconscious knowledge is precisely the complicating factor in the case of Oedipus. In psychoanalytical terms, the feigned ignorance of the *Eirôn* becomes the repressed knowledge of the neurotic; the internal conflict waged within Oedipus plays itself out like a singular dialectic or Blanchot’s ‘solitary dialogue.’ One voice speaks and another voice answers within the same identity.

It is the relationship between knowledge and ignorance that marks both Oedipus' neurosis and the play's irony, but the Theban king is not ignorant enough to participate fully in Sophoclean irony and he lacks the conscious knowledge to participate fully in Socratic irony. In each instance he is too large for the category and so he straddles the borders, standing with a foot in each. The tension of this position provides the tension of the play as the 'Know-Foot' and the 'Swollen-Foot' figures clash and corrupt each other. "To that wise, knowing master of Thebes, whom happy omen protects, is at every point opposed the cursed infant, the Swollen Foot cast out of his fatherland," writes Vernant, "But in order for Oedipus really to know who he is, the first of the two characters which he initially assumed must be inverted until it turns into the second" (Vernant 1978, p. 483). 'Know-Foot' must cede his power and position to 'Swollen-Foot,' which he does after [re]learning the truth of his identity from the herdsman: "O god— / all come true, all burst to light! / O light—now let me look my last on you! / I stand revealed at last— / cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage, / cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!" (ll. 1305–10).

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle believes that this moment of simultaneous recognition (*anagnorisis*) and reversal (*peripeteia*), in which the former leads directly to the latter, makes Oedipus' the best of all tragic recognitions (Aristotle 1997, p. 72). There is a sense, however, that this recognition and reversal resolves only half the story because, while the tragic irony dissipates as the truth comes to light, Oedipus retains much of the Socratic irony that had previously been overshadowed by its Sophoclean counterpart.

In the end, with Jocasta hanged and Oedipus blinded, Sophocles includes another figure of the disembodied or doubled voice, one that hints at a remainder left over after the convergence of 'Know-Foot' and 'Swollen-Foot.' Before the chorus, Oedipus cries out: "Oh, Ohh— / the agony! I am agony— / where am I going? where on earth? / where does all this agony hurl me? / where's my voice?— / winging, swept away on a dark tide—" (ll. 1442–47). The scene is remarkable because, at the very moment in the tragedy when Oedipus is supposed to have closed the gap in his knowledge and discovered the truth of his circumstances, he is left with nothing but questions and one of these questions is particularly puzzling: "Where is my voice? winging, swept away on a dark tide" (ll. 1446–47). Throughout the play, the 'Know-Foot' version of Oedipus felt confident that all the prophecies were incorrect because the shepherd, the only living witness to Laius's death, had testified that *several* highwaymen were responsible for the murder. "If he still holds to the same number," Oedipus remarks to Jocasta, "I cannot be the killer. One can't equal many" (ll. 933–34). Nevertheless, the effect of Oedipus' traumatic neurosis is that he *can* equal many and he does so in the doubled form of his name and voice. As a result, when he asks where his voice is "winging, swept away on a dark tide" (l. 1447), he is not only questioning where into the darkness before him his voice has gone. He is also recognizing the distance between the two voices that exist within him and he is left unable to decide which voice truly belongs to him, which voice he embodies and controls. This final scene of the play, Knox argues, contains a "renewed insistence on the heroic nature of Oedipus; the play ends as it began, with the greatness of the hero. But it is a different kind of greatness. It is now based on knowledge, not, as before, on ignorance, and this new knowledge is, like that of Socrates, a recognition of man's ignorance" (Knox 1968, p. 97).

Perhaps Oedipus will discover the answers he seeks at Colonus.

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