OEDIPUS POLITIKOS:

Tyranny, Liberation, and the Limit of Politics in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

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Though its technical meaning has long faded into obscurity, the concept of tyranny has always captivated the cultural and political imagination. Tyranny preoccupied the minds of Enlightenment thinkers,[1] revolutionaries,[2] reformers,[3] scholars,[4] and murderers. It offers an impactful means of conceptualizing the most grievous of abuses.[5] Culturally, tyranny does much heavy lifting as a word of hyperbole: *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, "king-tyrant of the lizards," was a fitting name, thought Henry Osborn, for the largest known therapod. In everyday usage, it can likewise be a means for hyperbolizing .[6] In any case, since the earliest days of Greek democracy tyranny has been a convenient other; a distant touchstone, the avoidance of which is intended to inform our political and social decisions. One need only consider the many utterances across history of *sic semper tyrannis* to recognize this. Oftentimes, however, it is folly to think of tyranny as so far removed from the modern political and social order.

Tyranny as it is known today emerged in the Archaic period of Ancient Greece as a widespread and oftentimes legitimate form of political organization. The first known usage of the term 'tyranny' (*tyrannis*) comes from a fragment of the poet Archilochus: "I have no interest in Gyges' gold…I have no great love of tyranny."[7] In this first sense, Gyges is a tyrant because he became king of Lydia without a legitimate claim to the throne; he was forced into a plot to kill and replace the existing king.[8] Even from its earliest appearance, however, tyranny coincides

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[1] C.f. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* 1.7, "[forcing the state to be free] is the key to the working of the political machine; it alone legitimizes civil commitments which would otherwise be absurd, tyrannical, and liable to frightful abuses."

[2] C.f. *The Declaration of Independence* (1776), "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States."

[3] C.f. Madison, Federalist 48.

[4] C.f. Snyder 2017.

[5] C.f. Douglass 1857, "the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress…if there is no struggle, there is no progress."

[6] As with the concept of "tyranny of the majority."

[7] Archilochus, Fragment 19W.

[8] Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.11.

with intrigue and violent usurpation. Most broadly, tyranny is associated with a liberty from traditional limitations.[9] Still, throughout its political history there was much consternation and contradiction over the nature of tyranny. Aristotle himself evinces this, disdaining the tyrant in the *Politics* while recognizing Pisistratus' benevolent rule in the *Constitution of the Athenians.*[10] One of the greatest contemporary explorations of this tension is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus as the tragic hero is an ostensibly benevolent ruler whose downfall mirrors that of the most grievous of tyrants. Throughout the play, he attempts to live independent of the oracular limitations imposed on him and free from the family ruin which they entail. In doing so, however, Oedipus only exacerbates his tyrannical tendencies and accelerates his fate.

In the tragedy of Oedipus, Sophocles ostensibly critiques tyranny as it was conventionally characterized. The term 'conventional' is meant to distinguish tyranny as commonly described in contemporary sources—violent, impulsive, etc.—from tyranny as a political circumstance. Like his contemporaries, Sophocles depicts Oedipus the conventional tyrant as the "slayer of distinctions,"[11] exceeding the traditional limitations of the household below politics and the gods above it. Oedipus resembles a conventional tyrant in collapsing the boundaries between public and private, heaven and earth. Still, this critique is hollow and incomplete. In his discussion of pure tyranny, Sophocles embeds a broader argument about Periclean democracy and idealized politics in general.

Oedipus represents a political ideal liberated from the restraints of household and religion. As a character and a statesman, he acts freely from the limits on traditional political life—family below, gods above. He does not break these boundaries like a conventional tyrant,

[9] Saxonhouse 1988: 1263.
[10] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 16.
[11] Euben 2020: 98.

but instead transcends them entirely. Acting like an ideal statesman, Oedipus exhibits indifference towards his lineage, basing his legitimacy on merit alone. At the same time, he behaves under the impression that pure reason is sufficient to save Thebes and her people where oracular prophecy falls short. In both of these, Oedipus coheres with an idealized vision of governance but departs entirely from the distinctions of household and city and of reason and revelation. The fallout of the play clearly reveals that Oedipus and the political dream he represents can never escape their traditional obligations. In attempting to do so, Oedipus collapses civic distinctions with just as destructive an effect as if he were a conventional tyrant. Sophocles thereby invites caution in radical political departures; sometimes to run from tyranny is to run into it. Oedipus cannot escape his fate, and politics cannot escape their dirty origins.

‘Conventional’ Tyranny

“Arrogance (*hubris*) breeds tyranny,” sings the famed line of Sophocles’ Chorus.[12] The centerpiece of the *Oedipus Rex*, this ode describes the causes of tyranny, laments its costs, and prescribes its punishments. At a very rudimental level, the action of the play mirrors this choral ode. Just as Oedipus the tyrant, “overfilled with prides, …has climbed to the greatest height,” he suddenly “rushes down to a fierce fate.”[13] On its face, the tragedy of Oedipus offers a critique of conventional tyranny as seen in sources contemporary to Sophocles. In this light, Oedipus is a figure guilty of outrages (*hubreis*) which dissolve and destroy the traditional distinctions in Greek political and cultural life: public and private, household and city, heaven and earth. In the absence of these distinctions, tyrants attempt to break free of the limitations which are typically imposed on political life. At the ‘lower’ bound of these limitations is the household, which

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[12] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 873.
[13] Ibid. 874-877.

underpins all politics. Conventional tyrants destroy the distinctions between the private household (*oikos*) and the public city (*polis*); they commit injustices in treating both *oikos* and *polis* the same. At the 'upper' bound, conventional tyrants fail to recognize the limits of the gods; they see no distinction between heaven and earth, and they attempt to exercise authority as much among gods as among men. At both ends, Sophocles depicts an Oedipus ostensibly guilty of defying those distinctions, and describes the ruin that accompanies it.

Plato, in general, describes the tyrant as a man of appetite, induced to "become drunken, lustful, and impulsive."[14] Herodotus provides that the tyrant is completely unrestrained by custom or law.[15] Without internal or external restraint, the tyrant is "freed from the laws that limit other humans."[16] As such, the tyrant attempts to overcome the "natural boundaries" which circumscribe human behavior; he "collapses what should be distinct and plural into a perverse singularity."[17] One such boundary common to Greek cultural thought was that between public and private, so we find the literature on tyranny rife with familial violations; the tyrant makes no distinction between his household and his city. Archelaus, tyrannical king of Macedon, is said to have murdered his uncle Perdiccas and father Alcetas as well as to have drowned his seven-year-old brother in a well.[18] Like all tyrants, Archelaus "had no claim on the throne which he now has,"[19] but it is in these acts of outrageous violence that Archelaus appears as a 'conventional' tyrant. He owes no piety to the members of his family, treating them instead with the same unbridled violence as he would any other political rival. By little fault of his own, Oedipus shares this guilt. In a fit of rage (*orge*), Oedipus slaughters "passers-by" at a crossroads.[20] Sophocles

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[14] Plato, *Republic* 9.573c.
[15] Herodotus, *Histories* 3.80.5.
[16] Saxonhouse 1988: 1264.
[17] Euben 2020: 98.
[18] Plato, *Gorgias* 471b-c.
[19] Ibid. 471a.
[20] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 807-808.

presents Oedipus as a figure at times unrestrained and impulsive. Unbeknownst to him, in this same episode Oedipus murders his father as if he were any traveler, and he thereby secures his accession to the throne of Thebes. Although unintentional, Oedipus' actions clearly mirror that of conventional tyrants like Archelaus. In an even greater act of outrage, Herodotus relates that Cambyses of Persia "murdered his sister…whom he married despite being his full sister."[21] In the first place, Cambyses wedded his sister on the authority of his royal judges; though they did not find a law which enabled sibling marriage, they "discovered another law by which the King (*basileus*) of Persia was allowed to do whatever he wished."[22] Herodotus makes explicit that neither legal constraint nor natural law hinders the conventional tyrant. In collapsing his family, country, and legal authority into one, the tyrant may wed his immediate family or kill his father with ease. In Oedipus' case, this collapse is generalized from the very outset of the play: all the Thebans are his "children" (*tekna*), as Oedipus has dissolved the boundary between *oikos* and *polis*.[23] Again, Oedipus the tyrant behaves like Cambyses, the paragon of excessive tyranny in the Greek sources.[24]

Just as conventional tyrants defy the household distinctions, so too do they operate independent from traditional obligations to the gods. Plato reports that those with a "tyrannical temper…attempt and hope to be able to rule not only men but also gods."[25] There is general consensus that Oedipus does not attempt to be god-like (*isotheos*).[26] Still, he rules with growing disregard for the oracles of Apollo.[27] In this, Oedipus resembles Polycrates, tyrant of Samos.

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[21] Herodotus, *Histories* 3.31.1
[22] Herodotus, *Histories* 3.31.4.
[23] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1.
[24] For further consideration of the similarities between Oedipus and the tyrannical Persian kings, see Francis (1992), 340-341. In essence, Francis draws striking parallels between Oedipus' suspicion of Creon and Teiresias and the scandal of the false Smerdis in the Persian court.
[25] Plato, *Republic* 9.573c.
[26] Saxonhouse 1988: 1264.
[27] For instance, at 1081, where Oedipus parrots Jocasta's godless belief in fortune alone.

Though warned by seers (*manteis*) and a prophetic dream of his daughter's, Polycrates insists on accompanying an embassy to Magnesia,[28] where he is "horribly murdered."[29] Like Oedipus—who ignores the prophecies of the seer (*mantis*) Tieresias—Polycrates the tyrant is a "magnificent" as opposed to sinister tyrant,[30] but in his neglect of prophecy he becomes a conventional tyrant. Oedipus' ruin, too, is directly linked to his conventional tyranny; by connecting Oedipus' downfall to his tyrant status, Sophocles offers a criticism of that form of government. By "destroying the boundaries between things that must be kept separate," tyrants like Oedipus bring ruin upon the self and the *polis*.[31]

While it is elucidative to understand Sophocles' overt critique, it is not a novel point, nor is it all of the picture. As we shall discuss shortly, Oedipus is *not* a conventional tyrant in more ways than he is one. Moreover, as Knox notes, this standalone critique of tyranny is a hollow criticism; in 5th century BCE Athens, "not only was *tyrannis* universally detested, it was also…a dead issue."[32] Indeed, the play "cannot have been intended as [only] an attack on *tyrannis* in terms of contemporary political ideas."[33] What, then, are we to make of a play so rich in tyrannical language? Knox takes the first step in recognizing the parallels between Oedipus *tyrannos* and Athens *tyrannos*,[34] but he falls short in relating that comparison back to the limit-breaking tendencies of conventional tyranny. The specific criticism which Sophocles makes is of the dream of ideal politics, liberated from traditional restraints of the household and the gods. The assumption that those restraints can be transcended is just as ruinous as the conventional tyrant's violent breach of custom; rather than dissolving boundaries, 'liberated' politics ignores

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[28] Herodotus, *Histories* 3.124.
[29] Ibid. 3.125.2.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Saxonhouse 1988: 1267.
[32] Knox 1957: 58.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid. 61.

them, to the same effect. The political career and downfall of Oedipus *tyrannos* is the vehicle for this larger criticism.

Household and City

From the introduction of the play, Oedipus looks more like an Athenian statesman than like a conventional, monarchical tyrant. Representing an ideal politics, free from traditional restraint, Oedipus operates as both a statesman and a king, without regard to the distinction between public and private. By the former claim, I mean to say that Oedipus attempts to behave like an idealized, non-hereditary ruler (a 'statesman') when in fact he is heir to the royal house (a 'king'). His politics cannot escape his household, and his struggle to do so culminates in his ruin. By the latter, I mean that Oedipus' individual political actions also dissolve the boundary between public and private life in Thebes. As the Theban public collapses into the private, royal household, Oedipus' personal ruin is generalized in the citywide fallout—no politician may transcend his lowly roots, nor may politics itself. In both cases, Oedipus' ruin results directly from his blind attempts to contravene that reality.

Contemporary political philosophy draws a clear connection between statesmanship and the public-private distinction. In the *Laws*, Plato's Athenian claims that in the "first law" of a city any "lawmaker will first regulate the origin of generativity," namely the "intercourse and community (*koinian*) of spouses."[35] Likewise, Aristotle claims that "all cities are some form of community (*koinian*),"[36] based in the union of man and woman "for the sake of generativity."[37] Nevertheless, for Aristotle the familial origin of politics is one of necessity (*ananke*) rather than

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[35] Plato, *Laws* 4.720e-4.721a.
[36] Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1252a1.
[37] Ibid. 1.1252a27.

choice (*prohairesis*); it is a trait held in common "with all other animals."[38] Instead, humans possess a unique "sense of good and bad, or just and unjust," which enables the creation of a state; in this regard, the state is prior (*proteron*) to the household in that it requires more than mere procreation.[39] Here, Aristotle recognizes but refutes the common conflation between statesman, king, and head of house, recognizing that "a great household differs from a small state."[40] He concedes that "the management of a household is a monarchy" but keeps it distinct from the ideal "civic rule" (*politike arche*) of free and equal men.[41] Just as this distinguishes monarchy from democracy, so too it distinguishes the "kingly" (*basilikon*) man from the "statesman" (*politikon*).[42] Such philosophy, on the one hand, corresponds to Sophocles' preoccupation with family and monarchy; however, it contrasts with Sophocles in assuming that, in an ideal condition, politics and political actors can be separated from their household origins. On the other hand, this provides a contemporary philosophical framework for understanding and bridging the *oikos-polis* distinction in *Oedipus Rex*. The ideal of the civic statesman is characterized by participation in a vibrant and public political life; it exists in direct contrast to monarchic kingship, in which the political community is characterized as the private household of the tyrant.

Sophocles creates in Oedipus the former—a political figure ostensibly liberated from traditional family restraints. Throughout the play's exposition, Oedipus treads the line between king and statesman. He certainly cuts a kingly figure: he first appears as the "lord" (*anax*)[43]

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[38] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1252a27-29.
[39] Ibid. 1.1253a15-20.
[40] Ibid. 1.1252a8-14.
[41] Ibid. 1.1255b19.
[42] Ibid. 1.1251a14.
[43] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 103.

above his "suppliant"[44] citizens, solely "managing the powers and thrones" of Thebes.[45] Still, in many ways Oedipus instead represents the paragon of statesmanship. He rules with care for the citizens of Thebes, sleepless in his anxiety and solicitude.[46] Oedipus eschews the arrogance associated with tyrannical figures in the Greek tradition; he is called "not equal to the gods…but rather the first among men."[47] Furthermore, like an Aristotelian statesman, Oedipus "rules and is ruled in his share;"[48] when establishing the penalty for Laius' murderers, he "pray[s] to suffer the same things which [he] vowed before these Thebans."[49] The title *tyrannos* should not cause great concern in this analysis; Euben gives the "neutral" meaning of tyrant as "one who came to power by his own devices rather than by normal hereditary succession."[50] Knox emphasizes the monarch-statesman dichotomy even more clearly in his definition of *tyrannos*: Oedipus is not "the hereditary successor to the throne of Thebes…but an outsider who, not belonging to the royal line…, has come to supreme power." Indeed, this distinction is "the one aspect of [Oedipus'] position" which "fully justifies" the title *tyrannos*.[51] If anything, then, Oedipus' status as *tyrannos* further bolsters his claim to statesmanship; a foreigner, he rules the city thanks to his wit, and is trusted insofar as he is knowledgeable (*empeiros*).[52] Thucydides' Pericles offers a strikingly similar view of the ideal democratic statesman: in his funeral oration, Pericles claims that, while democracy offers "an equal share before the law to all in their private disputes," it still "gives honor before the public not from privilege but for excellence (*arete*)."[53] Oedipus, too,

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[44] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 3.
[45] Ibid. 237.
[46] Ibid. 65-67.
[47] Ibid. 31-33. C.f. Saxonhouse 1988: 1264.
[48] Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1252a16.
[49] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 249-251.
[50] Euben 2020: 106.
[51] Knox 1967: 54.
[52] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 44.
[53] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.37.1

is regarded "most excellent (*aristos*) of men" for his capacity to save the city rather than for his (yet unknown) hereditary privilege.[54] Even as a *tyrannos* and king (*basileus*), then, Oedipus appears in the capacity of an ideal democratic statesman; for instance, Oedipus insists on discussing the oracle in the presence of the citizens rather than inside the palace,[55] despite Kreon's clear reticence.[56] Further parallels exist here between Oedipus and another statesman-tyrant—Pisistratus. Both achieved the tyranny through wit;[57] both are regarded as "most democratic;"[58] finally, both governed "more civically (*politikos*) than tyrannically,"[59] so much so that, Aristotle notes, Athenians "used to commonly say that the tyranny of Peisistratus was a golden age."[60]. Euben likewise claims that, still at the time of *Oedipus Rex's* debut, "there would be some who looked back at Pisistratus' tyranny as a golden age."[61]

Not only does Sophocles construe Oedipus as a Periclean statesman, but Oedipus himself simultaneously disavows a hereditary, monarchical legitimacy. Oedipus emphasizes twice that he is a "foreigner" (*xenos*) in Thebes. In context, Oedipus clearly uses this term to claim that he was a "*stranger* to the rumor and to the deed" of Laius' murder.[62] The double meaning, however, is clearly implied in Oedipus' immediate admission he "only thereafter ended up a citizen among citizens."[63] Furthermore, in subsequent lines the term *xenos* refers exclusively to the "foreign" perpetrators of the attack.[64] More specifically, Oedipus makes clear efforts to distance himself

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[54] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 46.
[55] Ibid., 91-93. C.f. Knox 1957: 60.
[56] Dawe 1982: 78.
[57] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 14.
[58] Ibid. 13.
[59] Ibid. 16.
[60] Ibid. 16. Literally "a life under Kronos," c.f. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109.
[61] Euben 2020: 106.
[62] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 219-220.
[63] Ibid. 222.
[64] See, e.g., Teiresias at 452, Jocasta at 715, Oedipus at 813. The only exception is in reference to the messenger from Corinth, particularly in the greeting exchanged between the Chorus and Messenger beginning at 924.

from familial associations with the house of Laius—he is not a hereditary monarch but a *tyrannos*:

> Now, since I rule and hold the powers which Laius formerly held, and since I share a bed and wife in common with him, and since a brood of shared children would have been born—had offspring not eluded him, for ill fortune leapt about his head—in their place I shall fight this battle as if it were my own father's. I shall go to all ends in seeking to catch the perpetrator of the murder, for the son of Labdacus, of Polydorus, of Cadmus before them, and of Agenor of old.[65]

In certain ways, much of this passage attempts to *align* Oedipus with the ancestral kings of Thebes rather than to distance him from them. Oedipus advances a legitimate political claim to his rule at Thebes; he does so both by imagining himself among the succession of its traditional kings[66] and assuming a personal duty of retribution. It should be noted, however, that Oedipus' claim to the royal lineage does not extend to the royal *genealogy*. He shares Laius' title, palace, and wife, but his mention of children and paternity are markedly counterfactual. That statement is further underscored by an intrusive parenthetical which re-emphasizes Laius' lack of children.[67] The lineage characterization is necessary for Oedipus to legitimize his rule, but he avoids claims to—and in fact explicitly denies—any hereditary relationship between Laius and himself: they share no blood in common, either in themselves or in their children. In this, again, Oedipus cuts a decidedly non-monarchic figure.

As for his own heritage, Oedipus claims to be the son of Polybus of Corinth and Merope the Dorian,[68] but he immediately casts doubt upon that parentage.[69] Even after consulting the

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[65] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 258-268.
[66] C.f. Knox 1957: 56.
[67] C.f. Saxonhouse 1988: 1268, that "Oedipus cannot, at least this early in the play, call himself kin to the murdered man. He must still introduce the *as if,* the simile that underlines the illegitimacy." See also Dawe 1982: 99, "in their place" (*ant' hon*) at 264 is a necessary "resumptive formula" because Oedipus' aside entirely interrupts and departs from the sense of his previous statement.
[68] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 774.
[69] Ibid. 780.

oracle at Delphi, Oedipus remains "deprived" or "unworthy" (*atimos*) of information regarding his heritage.[70] Before discovering the truth of his birth, then, Oedipus "considers [himself] a child of Fortune."[71] The context of this statement makes clear that it is hardly a metaphor. Oedipus insists that "I was born (*pephuka*) from this mother…and this being my nature (*ekphus*) I could not turn out any other way, such that I cannot know my heritage."[72] The close repetition of the verb *phuo* suggests that Oedipus is speaking nearly literally. He interprets the entire dialogue as an attack on his hereditary legitimacy and exhibits nonchalance thereabout. Oedipus cares not whether he is the son of slaves or shepherds.[73] No "low birth" can cast doubt on Oedipus' political legitimacy; in fact, he dismisses Jocasta's concerns on the assumption that she—a "greatly (*mega*) minded for a woman"—would be ashamed at his parentage.[74] Sophocles' use of mέγα may even be overtly political insofar as the term, as a personal epithet, had common associations with hereditary monarchy or tyranny.[75] Regardless, Oedipus' indifference towards his genealogy is indicative of his attitude towards the tyranny; the revelation of his parentage raises no issue of legitimacy because, in his own eyes, Oedipus attained the tyranny through merit and circumstance rather than through family. At least in the political sense, the family question is so insignificant that it is no question at all. Whether in reality he is the son of Polybus or a slave, in politics Oedipus is the "child of Fortune" alone.

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[70] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 789.
[71] Ibid.1080.
[72] Ibid. 1082-1085.
[73] Ibid. 1062-1063.
[74] Ibid. 1077-1079.
[75] The full quote reads: "perhaps she [Jocasta] is ashamed at my low birth, for she considers herself great for a woman." In the past, this term has been treated generally as "over-great; proud;" the line is cited as such in the LSJ entry for *megas*. By Sophocles' time, however, *megas* as a personal epithet had known associations with both kingship and tyranny. Herodotus, for instance, repeatedly refers to Cyrus of Persia as "the great king" (*basileus ho megas*) (*Histories* 1.188). Aeschylus, likewise, mentions service "to the great king" (*basileus megalou*) Xerxes (*Persians* 24). Plato, too, mentions an "Ardiaeus the Great" (*ho megas*), a tyrant (*tyrannos*) in Pamphylia (*Republic* 10.615c). In this case, Oedipus directly attributes Jocasta's shame to her concerns over his connection to the hereditary monarchy.

Thus far, Sophocles—and Oedipus—presents a figure entirely independent from his familial origins. On the one hand, Oedipus behaves far more like a civic ruler than like a "kingly" tyrant. A product of reason over inheritance, Oedipus' tyranny is unlike the monarchic form characterized in contemporary sources.[76] Insofar as monarchy is analogized to household management, Oedipus' benevolent, civic tyranny appears to transcend the *oikos*. On the other hand, throughout the play Oedipus insulates himself and his title from any associations to his family. In the first place, Oedipus comes to Thebes as he runs *away* from what he believes to be his true, royal family.[77] He evidently neglects his parentage so much that he is compelled to remind Jocasta of it.[78] Some have taken this address to be a monologue intended to provide context,[79] but Oedipus' second-person address to Jocasta rules out that possibility.[80] In both cases, Sophocles describes Oedipus the *tyrannos* as completely independent of his family. Still, there is something undeniably tyrannical about that independence. The extent of this tyranny manifests in the fallout of the tragedy. We have already discussed how this amounts to Sophocles' critique of conventional tyranny—tyrants destroy traditional limitations and dissolve traditional distinctions. Much of Oedipus' tyrannical behavior, however, results not as much from a sinister defiance of familial obligations as from a well-intentioned transcendence of them. No politics, including Oedipus', are ever free of their household underpinnings. To ignore those limitations in pursuit of ideal statesmanship is to stand 'against the law' (*paranomos*) like a conventional tyrant, and both the personal and citywide fallout of one is identical to that of the other.

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[76] *Supra* at 5-6.
[77] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 794-797.
[78] Ibid. 774-775.
[79] Aristotle, for instance, mistakenly claims that the line "my father way Polybus" (*emoi pater en Polybos*) (*sic*) is an exordium, equivalent to the opening lines of the Iliad (*Rhetoric* 1415a20).
[80] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 800. C.f. Dawe 1982: 138.

Though Oedipus is ostensibly a politician liberated from familial restraints, throughout the play he clearly cannot escape the reality of his birth; in attempting to ignore it, Oedipus collapses the traditional boundaries between public and private, *oikos* and *polis*, as if he were a conventional tyrant, and thereby he inflicts his personal outrages against the city. This is most immediately evident in the tragedy itself; as Saxonhouse puts it, "the revelation that his birth, not his reason, is the basis of his claim to rule underlies the tragic uncovering of the play."[81] This tragedy is perfectly summarized in the final choral ode of the play. The Chorus says of Oedipus:

> This man, oh Zeus, guessed with surpassing (*hyperbolan*) aim, won the bliss of all prosperity, destroyed the crooked-taloned beast, the riddling maiden [Sphinx]. He stood for our land like a tower against our deaths. From that deed you are called king (*basileus*) and given the greatest honors (*etimathes*), ruling as lord in great Thebes. But now who is more wretched to hear of? Who stands amidst the same savage ruin, who among the same toils, by this reversal of life? Alas, illustrious Oedipus! Was the same harbor of home sufficient for the son and the father to fall as bridegroom? How, wretched man, could the furrows of your father's fields bear you in silence for so long? Though you would not will it, all-seeing time has found you.[82]

The Chorus imitates exactly the trajectory of Oedipus' political tragedy. It begins optimistically, apparently attributing Oedipus' position to his merit. Moreover, it idealizes the "blissful" and "prosperous" state of Thebes under Oedipus benevolent tyranny. Despite this overt optimism, small ironies appear even in these opening lines. The first line, which translates more literally to "he hit the mark on a longshot," likens Oedipus' reason to an arrow; the transliteration of the latter term here is telling—*hyperbole*. In a citation under the entry for the verb here (*toxeuo*), Liddell, Scott, and Jones' (LSJ) *Greek-English Lexicon* translates this line to mean "shot too high."[83] As Dawes notes, overshooting "beyond the stars" is considered in Greek tragedy "just as

[81] Saxonhouse 1988: 1262.
[82] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1196-1213.
[83] Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1843: "*τοξεύω*."

ineffective" as shooting "short of the mark."[84] The same line, therefore, may be reliably construed as "he left too much to reason." That is, the expectation that reason alone liberates politics from its obligations is excessively optimistic.

A second irony appears in the line claiming that Oedipus is "called king (*basileus*)." This is in fact the first (and only) time that Oedipus is referred to as *basileus*. The term only occurs once more in the play, from Oedipus' own mouth as he describes the death of Laius.[85] His lineage revealed, Oedipus is no longer the civic statesman but the hereditary monarch in the "kingly" (*basilikon*) Aristotelian mold. Moreover, the sparing use of the title emphasizes its hereditary nature, connecting father to son by their title. By the end of the ode, as by the end of the play, Oedipus' lineage and crimes are explicit. He has attempted to rule the city without mind for the household, and now reaps the penalties. On the one hand, that ruin is deeply personal: there is no man more wretched, ruined, toilsome than Oedipus, thanks to the reversal of his singular life. Still Oedipus' tyrannical liberty inflicts the same ruin upon the city. In mentioning his "father's fields," the Chorus recalls the blight upon the "fruitful crops of the land."[86] This blight, first, arises from crimes which are deeply tyrannical in nature; Oedipus has committed incest and patricide. Even before his family is clear, the revelation of Laius' murder evidences the wonton violence characteristic of conventional tyrants: Oedipus admits that he "struck the first blow out of anger (*orges*)"[87] and concludes simply that he "killed them all."[88] These deeds are characteristic of the archetypal "tyrannical man," who "disturbs ancestral customs, forces himself on women, and kills indiscriminately."[89] Second, the blight constitutes the citywide

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[84] Dawe 1982: 175. C.f. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 365.
[85] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 257.
[86] Ibid. 25.
[87] Ibid. 807.
[88] Ibid. 813.
[89] Herodotus, *Histories* 3.80.4-5.

fallout of those personal crimes. The ideal statesman, Oedipus expresses to the Thebans that "there is not one of you who grieves as much as I…for my soul grieves for the city, for myself, and for you."[90] In his well-intentioned indifference to family, Oedipus collapses the boundaries between public and private, self and city. Now, we see Oedipus' personal ruin tyrannically superimposed onto the city. The blight in Thebes results from his deeply personal patricide, but, because Oedipus dissolves the boundary between household and city, it plagues the entire population.

Hints of this appear throughout the text, even before the revelation of Oedipus' parentage. An instructive instance of this is the so-called "Edict of Oedipus," when the tyrant prescribes the penalties for the murderers of Laius.[91] On its face, Oedipus seems like a traditional lawmaker. Oedipus charges that the guilty party must "leave this land, unharmed."[92] If no citizen confesses, he "forbid[s] any man of this land…from welcoming or addressing the killer, whoever he is, or from making him a partner in the prayers and rituals or the gods, or from giving him a share in the libations."[93] These measures satisfy the traditional expectations of Athenian law.[94] Indeed, Draco's law-code—the oldest law still effective at Athens (c. 622 BCE), predating Solon's reforms[95]—prescribes that "if someone should murder another not out of foresight, he shall be exiled."[96] Knowing that Laius' murder (at Oedipus' hands) was a product of impulse (*orge*)[97] rather than premeditation, exile seems the entirely appropriate punishment according to Athenian law. Even those who read this passage entirely personally recognize that "Oedipus

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[90] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 60-65.
[91] Carawan 1999: 187.
[92] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 229.
[93] Ibid. 236-240.
[94] C.f. Dawe 1982: 96.
[95] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 7.1
[96] IG I^3 104.
[97] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 807

might have dealt with it as…a crime against the state… by proclaiming the killer an outlaw."[98] In fact, Oedipus does just this at the outset of his speech. The characterization of Oedipus' exile likewise coheres with the nature of Athenian exile. In the Athenian courts, magistrates "proclaim [the guilty] the be shut off from customary rights (*nomimon*)."[99] More specifically, any man "having an indictment…is shut off from the shrines, nor even does the law allow him to enter the marketplace." Oedipus does depart from this paradigm in one notable way: where the Athenian laws are explicitly public—they exile killers from the city, keep suspects from the temples—the Edict of Oedipus is private. It frames exile as exclusion not only from the customs and rights (*nomoi*) of Thebes but also from the private homes (*oikoi*) of her citizens.[100] Here, again, Oedipus collapses the distinction between public and private in the interest of idealized politics; he attempts in his edict to transcend the family and instead imposes civic obligations onto the household.

Granted, Oedipus does so in pursuit of an ideally "just" (*endikos*) political scheme;[101] still, in his edict Oedipus cannot escape the consequences of his household. Though Oedipus attempts to act as an objective lawmaker, his edict bears striking resemblances to an Athenian law court. Nikolarea is inclined to read *Oedipus Rex* as a series of trials (*agones*) between Oedipus and his various interlocutors. In this, he argues that Sophocles should be interpreted as a logographer, Oedipus' legal "speechwriter."[102] Though this may be excessive, the parallels between the Edict of Oedipus and Athenian legal speechmaking cannot be overlooked; specifically, these parallels emphasize the inescapable familial underpinnings of Oedipus'

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[98] Carawan 1999: 204.
[99] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 57.
[100] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 240-241.
[101] Ibid. 135.
[102] Nikolarea 2021: 3.

political actions. In the Athenian courts, all cases of homicide were recognized as private cases (*dikai*), in contrast to public cases (*graphai*).[103] Whereas "any adult male citizen was permitted to initiate" a public case, standing in private *dikai* was restricted to the victim or the immediate family of the victim.[104] In initiating a private homicide case, as if under Draco's law, Oedipus appears before Thebes (and before the Athenian audience) as a direct family member seeking for retribution. Of course, Oedipus himself invites this comparison in treating Laius "like [his] own father."[105] Oedipus admits that he is "seeking vengeance (*timorounta*)," using language highly characteristic of family prosecutors in homicide cases.[106] In court speeches of Sophocles' day, the concept of vengeance was considered a deeply private affair; in his *First Tetralogy,* Antiphon's prosecutor famously concludes, "let us remember that vengeance (*timorian*) is a household affair (*oikeian*)...let us purify the city."[107] The *First Tetralogy* is an especially apt comparison to Oedipus' speech, as it is a case study for a trial of anonymous murder.[108] Thus, Oedipus deploys arguments strikingly similar to Antiphon's fictive prosecutors. In the *First Tetralogy*, the prosecutor claims that "since the entire pollution (*miasmatos*) falls upon [the city], we must try from the facts alone to make it as clear as possible who killed the man."[109] Oedipus, too, recognizes "that this pollution (*miasmatos*) is unto us [until] you all drive [the killer] from your homes."[110] In the same speech Oedipus deploys the style of "probability" (*eikos*) argument

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[103] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 57.1-2. Aristotle makes a distinction between *dikai*, which are exclusively described as trials "for murder" (*tou phonou*), and the *graphai*, to which are attributed a series of charges including impiety. For the public/private split of Athenian law cases, see generally *A.P.* 67.1, distinguishing between private matters (*ta idia*), in which only household members (*tous idious*) are called, and public cases (*ta demosia*) in which the citizens at large (*tous demosious*) may participate.
[104] Lanni 2015: 38.
[105] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 264.
[106] C.f. Antiphon, *Against the Stepmother for Poising* 1.2. Antiphon's prosecutor argues that the deceased's family "were most right to have come in vengeance (*timorous genesthai*) for the dead man."
[107] Antiphon, *First Tetralogy* 1.11.
[108] Gagarin 1997: 123.
[109] Antiphon, *First Tetralogy* 1.3.
[110] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 241.

so characteristic to Antiphon.[111] Across the ten pages of his *First Tetralogy*, Antiphon's litigants use thirty-six of such *eikos* arguments.[112] Finally, Oedipus concludes his speech with two curses common to Athenian lawcourts. The first is a personal oath of retribution against the killer[113] and the second an "oath of annihilation" (*diomosia*) against himself.[114] Both of these curses appear in Demosthenes, for instance, when arbitrators inform the prosecution that he must swear an oath in the Palladium and *also* call down curses upon his family and household.[115] As much as Oedipus tries to couch his edict in legal speech and logical reasoning, he cannot help but come across as a family member prosecuting in a private case. Even so, Oedipus is further culpable of dissolving the boundaries between public and private. Whereas Antiphon and his litigants recognize the personal, household (*oikeios*) nature of vengeance, Oedipus makes it the business and law (*nomos*) of the city at large. As a lawmaker, Oedipus cannot help but insert his personal agenda for retribution into the sacred and legal business of the city.[116] As an individual and a private litigant, he still performs his trial publicly before the assembled citizens and council.[117] When the "curse of annihilation" invites ruin upon his household, it is inflicted in turn upon the city.

In a final instance of irony, Oedipus fulfills his official hereditary role even in the proclamation of his edict. As already noted, during this passage Oedipus inserts himself into the lineage of Labdacus, claiming—albeit in simile—Laius as his father. To an even further extent, though, Oedipus acts as *basileus* in the contemporary Athenian capacity. In Athenian democracy, the *basileus* was one of the three archons, the primary and oldest civic magistrates in Athens,

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[111] Gagarin 1997: 124. Elsewhere, for instance at 404, the Chorus admits that they have been interpreting Oedipus' logic as an *eikos* argument (*hemin eikazousi*, "to use, as we look at the probability").
[112] Antiphon, *First Tetralogy* 1-4.
[113] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 246-248; Carawan 1999: 204.
[114] Ibid. 249; Carawan 1999: 206.
[115] Demosthenes, *Against Evergus and Mnesibulus,* 70.
[116] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 135-136.
[117] i.e. the Chorus

predating the time of Draco.[118] In addition to overseeing many rituals, the *archon basileus*—who was called simply *basileus* in democratic Athens—"has for his duty all cases of homicide," and he is responsible for "proclaiming [suspects] to be prohibited from public places."[119] In overseeing Laius' prosecution and proclaiming the exclusion of his murderers, Oedipus acts as an Athenian *basileus*. This association recalls ideas of kingship in legacy as well as in name. Aristotle asserts that the title of *archon basileus* was the first of all magistracies, originating from "the descendants of Codrus," from first historical—rather than semi-mythical—kings of Athens.[120] Even in the Athenian mindset, then, Oedipus lives up to his hereditary title—king over tyrant—from the very outset of the play.

The trends tracked here are perhaps best summarized in the recurrence of the term *atimos* throughout the tragedy. In different contexts, the word can mean "dishonored; unworthy," "disenfranchised," or "unavenged."[121] In each of its recurrences, the term takes on a new meaning. From the beginning, Oedipus characterizes his search for Laius' murderers—regicides, and therefore public criminals—as a quest for private vengeance (*timoria*) as defined in the law courts.[122] His boundary-breaking political aim, then, is justice for the unavenged Laius. At the same time, Oedipus insists that, unlike Jocasta, he "will not be dishonored (*atimasthesomai*)" by the reality of his parentage.[123] Finally, ironically, Oedipus has already described himself as *atimos* twice. In recounting his journey to Thebes, Oedipus claims that he left Delphi "unworthy (*atimon*) of the things which [he] came for."[124] Furthermore, suspecting Creon of a plot, Oedipus

[118] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 3.1
[119] Ibid. 57.1-2
[120] Ibid 3.3
[121] Liddell, Scott, & Jones 1843: "ἄτιμος."
[122] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 136.
[123] Ibid. 1081. Even Oedipus' language, however, belies his indifference. Dawe observes the "rough edge to Oedipus' tongue"
[124] Ibid. 788-789.

worries that he will "surely be killed or thrust forcefully from this land in dishonor (*atimon*)."[125] Translators here tend to read *atimos* here as "dishonored,"[126] but insofar as Oedipus is suspecting a coup it may be appropriate to translate it here as "disenfranchised." This is singularly significant given the political valence of the play; Athenian law on tyranny provided that "if any should rise to be tyrant…both he and his kin are to be disenfranchised (*atimon*)."[127] In this light, Creon seems a tyrannicide, and Oedipus' statement prefigures his voluntary exile following the revelation of his birth. He even uses the same term for "banish" (*otheo*) in this exchange as in the proclamation of his edict.[128] When read together, all three meanings are elucidative. Oedipus is indifferent to his family background, at least at it relates to his political ideal; he feels no shame before the traditional limitations of family. Accordingly, he attempts to save Thebes without regards to those limitations, pursuing the murderers of Laius with no regard for the boundary between public politics and private family conduct. In the end, Oedipus brings about his own *atimia*—his own dishonor and exile—by his failure to recognize that boundary. In ending with his disenfranchisement (*atimia*) and expulsion, we finally see that the transcendence of familial obligations in politics has made Oedipus a classical tyrant, and he has been treated as prescribed by law. Oedipus cannot escape his family, and in trying to do so he destroys the traditional boundaries of the private house and the public city. From the very start of the play, the citizens are his "offspring" (*tekna*)[129] and "children" (*paides*),[130] and he in turn is the "son" (*teknon*)[131] of the people. As Euben notes, this "paternal language…establishes a general link between the

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[125] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 669-670.
[126] C.f. Jebb 1887: 670.
[127] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 16.10. c.f. Gallia 2004: 458.
[128] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 670, 241.
[129] Ibid. 1.
[130] Ibid. 58.
[131] Ibid. 1030.

political situation and the family horror."[132] Oedipus' tyrannical domestic outrages are now forced onto the public by his "identif[ication] with the city as a whole…typical of tyrants."[133] There is no distinction between house and city, father and son, mother and wife. The erasure of those distinctions motivates Oedipus' deeply personal tyrannies. At the same time, it invites the tyrannical imposition of Oedipus' ruin upon the city at large.

Reason and Revelation

From his very introduction, Oedipus is a statesman liberated from the traditional constraints of religion. He is a man of reason, excellence, and decisive action—all virtues of Athenian democracy—believing these to be entirely sufficient for political life. In doing so, however, Oedipus exalts reason over the traditional functions of public religion; by supplanting those functions with human reason, Oedipus destroys the traditional limitations of religion. In this, he acts like a conventional tyrant and brings ruin upon himself and the city. From the outset of the play, Oedipus appears independent of religious obligation. He appears literally above the "seated" citizens, who are "wreathed in suppliant branches."[134] Oedipus notices that the city "is filled with incense and with paeans and groans."[135] He characterizes his own city like a temple to a god, a sentiment repeated when the Priest of Zeus speaks to Oedipus of "your altars."[136] As Dawe notes, this line introduces the notion that Oedipus is "the nearest thing to a god among Theban men."[137] When the Chorus invokes a litany of deities,[138] it is Oedipus who responds: "so you pray, and in response to your prayers you may receive strength and relief from your woes, if

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[132] Euben 2020: 111.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 2-3.
[135] Ibid. 4-5.
[136] Ibid. 16.
[137] Dawe 1982: 72.
[138] Zeus (151), Apollo (154), Hope (157), Fame (157), Athena (160), Artemis (162), Dionysus (210).

you are willing to heed my words."[139] Oedipus takes the place of the traditional gods, and his councils (*epe*) and "goodwill" (*prothumia*) replace divine goodwill as the city's "savior" (*soter*).[140] This is not to say that Oedipus intentionally eschews traditional piety. It is the Priest who makes the comparisons; Oedipus himself maintains that Apollo is the city's savior (*soter*),[141] and has already sent Creon to the oracle at Delphi. He goes to far as to call this the "only solution."[142] Even in the eyes of his citizens, Oedipus is "first among men" rather than "equal to the gods,"[143] a quality (*isotheos*) commonly associated with conventional tyranny.[144] Oedipus' tyranny does not shatter the boundaries between heaven and man, religious and rational. Nevertheless, Oedipus' reason-based leadership offers a novel alternative to traditional religion.

In this, Oedipus conforms with an idealized form of Athenian politics, entirely based in virtue and liberated from its obligations to the gods. Thucydides offers a vivid description of this ideal in Pericles' Funeral Oration. Pericles exalts the Athenians who "rely not on plots or tricks so much as on the virtue of our deeds,"[145] and who "give honor…not from privilege but for excellence."[146] Pericles makes no mention of the gods, revelation, or religion except in suggesting that public sacrifices are merely modes of "relaxation."[147] Thus, the Periclean ideal of politics is entirely reliant on virtue and reason, independent of religious *mores*. Likewise, in Book VI of the *Politics*—in which he considers the ideal democracy—Aristotle mentions the gods only in describing the necessary magistracies in the city, some of which include "matters

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139 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 216-218.
140 Ibid. 48.
141 Ibid. 81
142 Ibid. 68-69.
143 Ibid. 31-32.
144 Saxonhouse 1988: 1264.
145 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.39.1.
146 Ibid. 2.37.1
147 Ibid. 2.38.1

relating to the gods," such as temple repair.[148] Much like Oedipus, the Aristotelian and Periclean dream of politics are by no means hostile to traditional piety; post-Periclean Athens still exiled Alcibiades as a would-be tyrant for "acting impiously towards the mysteries and the Herms."[149] The idealized governments of Pericles, Aristotle, and Sophocles, then, are better conceived of as indifferent towards religious obligations. State religion is a political object given its public function, but it is no more than that, and it places no limitation on political behavior.

Oedipus is guilty of the same indifference. Though the oracles of Apollo are key plot devices throughout the play, they are perpetually subordinate to Oedipus' program of rational inquiry. This is most immediately evident in Oedipus' excessively sophistic language. Even when Oedipus arrives at Thebes he is both heeding and defying the Delphic oracle.[150] On the one hand, Oedipus leaves Corinth because he takes the oracle gravely seriously, claiming that "there is all necessity to fear" while Merope, his apparent mother, lives.[151] On the other hand, Oedipus acts on the belief that he can evade his fate;[152] in describing how he "calculates my distance [from Corinth] by the stars," Oedipus sounds like a geographer, indicating his belief that hyper-logical behavior can overcome the oracle.[153] Thus, Oedipus arrives at Thebes "sent away by Apollo, unworthy (*atimia*) of the things which [he] came for."[154] As before, the use of *atimia* here draws a clear line between piety and tyranny. As Oedipus leaves Delphi—a journey which will culminate in his arrival at Thebes—he believes that rational behavior can stay his fate. This indifference to the oracles, however, ignores religious limitations in the same way that

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[148] Aristotle, *Politics* 6.1322b19-23.
[149] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 6.53.1.
[150] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 794-796.
[151] Ibid. 985-986.
[152] Ibid. 997. C.f. Silberman 1986: 295.
[153] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 795.
[154] Ibid. 788-789.

conventional tyranny breaks them. Consequently, Oedipus is "sent away" (*epheugon*)[155] in "dishonor" (*atimon*)[156] just as a "disenfranchised" (*atimon*)[157] tyrant or patricide is "exiled" (*pheugen*)[158] from the city. Once in power at Thebes, Oedipus' political style continues to ignore the revelations of the gods in favor of sophistic reason. The decision to consult the Pythian oracle, for instance, is but one of the "many paths in the wandering of [his] thoughts."[159] In the preceding line, in which Oedipus claims to have spent the night "crying many tears,"[160] Dawe emends *dakrousanta* ("crying") to *diakrousanta* ("striking").[161] In Plato's *Theaetetus,* Socrates uses that same term, in dialogue with the mathematicians Theocratus and Theaetetus, to characterize the search for truth as "rapping (*diakrouonta*) on a thing's essence to see whether it rings clear or muddled."[162] Thus, Oedipus' "wanderings of thought" may not be emotional turmoil so much as rational thought—he is not "crying many tears" but "testing many theories." This interpretation harmonizes more closely with Dawe's characterization of Oedipus in this opening passage: "he is a man of action, trying everything and exploring every avenue of thought."[163]

When Creon, in turn, proclaims the new oracle, Oedipus' political response again constitutes a rational forensic program which ignores traditional obligations to religion. Oedipus

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[155] Ibid. 796.
[156] Ibid. 788.
[157] Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 16.10.
[158] IG I^3 104.13. Gallia (2004) notes that laws at Athens regarding the exile (*atimia)* of tyrants and the exiling (*pheugein*) of murders are closely related by the stele of 408/409 which re-inscribed Draco's Law Code. Gallia asserts that the exile law cited at *Athenaion Politeia* 16.10 must likewise predate Solon's reforms, and that therefore the two laws (that is, the "law against tyranny" from Aristotle and the "homicide law" from Draco) should be regarded in conjunction. Since Draco's homicide legalizes the killing of an aggressor, it exonerates tyrannicides. In this, the dead tyrant is just as *atimos* as the living, exiled tyrant, insofar as he, too, has been deprived of legal recourse against his murderers. Gallia 2004: 458-459.
[159] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 67.
[160] Ibid. 66.
[161] Dawe 1982: 76. Dawe suggests that this reading offers better contrast with Oedipus' assertion that he was "not asleep" in line 65, and that it more fitting prefigures his "eureka" (*heuriskon*) moment at 68.
[162] Plato, *Theaetetus* 179d.
[163] Dawe 1982: 76.

describes his search for the killer in sophistic terms, as he "seeks (*zeton*) to catch the perpetrator."[164] In Socratic philosophy, the *zetema* is the object of dialogic inquiry, as with Plato's "inquiry (*zetema*) towards the laws."[165] Aristotle, likewise, regularly refers to the chief good in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as "what is sought" (*ti zeteitai*).[166] Not only does Sophocles frame Oedipus' investigation as a sophistic inquiry, but his forensic argumentation also deploys sophistic logic. As has been noted, Oedipus repeatedly uses probability (*eikos*) arguments, and his logic is interpreted as such by other characters within the play.[167] As Gagarin notes, the sophist Gorgias' *Palamedes* offers the first known systematic treatment of the *eikos* argument as a rhetorical device.[168] Like Gorgias, Oedipus attempts to save Thebes through a type of political sophistry. The remainder of Oedipus' inquiry is marked by this "sophistic skepticism."[169] Immediately after Creon delivers the oracle, Oedipus demands tangible detail, beginning with three rapid interrogatives: where are the guilty? Where is the evidence (*ichnos,* "footprint")?[170] Where was the crime committed?[171] The entire inquiry is punctuated by repeated emphasis on the physical senses, particularly sight. Oedipus asks for a witness,[172] and despairs that "nobody has seen the witness."[173] For Oedipus, the secret to the oracle exists in the perceptible world, and can be found by the rational political procedures of a trial.

The clash of reason and revelation comes to a head in the exchange between Oedipus and Teiresias. For Oedipus, boundless knowledge is paramount to the salvation of the city; he begs

[164] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 266
[165] Plato, *Laws* 631a.
[166] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b.
[167] C.f. 404, *hemin eikazousi*.
[168] Gagarin 1997: 14.
[169] Euben 2020: 107.
[170] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 108-109.
[171] Ibid. 112.
[172] Ibid. 117.
[173] Ibid. 293.

Teiresias "not to turn away…if having some knowledge."[174] Not to share that knowledge, in Oedipus' eyes, would "betray and destroy the city."[175] Teiresias, however, has a different knowledge than the forensic information which Oedipus seeks. Teiresias' knowledge, unlike Oedipus', is of the limits ("*metra*") to human reason—Teiresias knows that "unfettered knowledge has its own dangers and that the answer Oedipus seeks is far more complex."[176] When Teiresias does reveal this knowledge, Oedipus, whose "abstract reason" is equipped for simplification rather than for division,[177] cannot accept limits which he cannot himself perceive. Confronted with the "strength of truth," Oedipus taunts Teiresias: "there is strength, but not in you. This cannot exist for you, since you are blind in your ears, in your mind, and in your eyes."[178] Insofar as Oedipus ignores the distinctions between prophecy and reason, he sees Teiresias' revelation as irrelevant in the absence of physical senses, and ridicules him accordingly. Oedipus goes on to contrast his capacity for rational thought with Teiresias' prophetic ability: it was "know-nothing Oedipus" who solved the Sphinx's riddle "through wit," while Teiresias offered neither oracle (*manteias*) nor knowledge (*gnoton*) to aid the city.[179] Again, Oedipus' capacity for abstraction enabled him to solve the riddle, but it blinds him to the divine limits which Teiresias understands. He cannot help but see Teiresias' prophecy as yet another "riddle" (*ainikta*), exactly like that of the Sphinx.[180] As before, Oedipus expects that he can save the city through rational thought alone; he cannot recognize that Teiresias 'riddle' is of the opposite character—an oracular prophecy, it is above human reason and in fact imposes limits thereupon.

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[174] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 326.
[175] Ibid. 331.
[176] Saxonhouse 1988: 1270.
[177] Ibid. 1262.
[178] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 369-371.
[179] Ibid. 394-398.
[180] Ibid. 439. C.f. 393.

In all these instances, Oedipus the sophist appears increasingly tyrannical. In the Teiresias exchange, for instance, Oedipus must be reminded that "even if [he is] tyrant, he must treat as equal [Teiresias'] ability to contradict him."[181] Here, we see Oedipus fulfilling the role of the conventional tyrant; he usurps the equality of his subjects and silences dissenting voices. As the play progresses, Oedipus' rationality increasingly bends the line between piety and tyranny. This shift from pious to conventional tyranny is perhaps most explicitly communicated by the Chorus' growing discomfort with Oedipus' rationalism.[182] As Oedipus' inquiry transcends the limitations imposed by the oracle, the Chorus worries that "if these [oracles] do not fit together in a way that is manifest to all mortals," then the reverences of the gods—the "sacred dance," the "inviolate shrine," the "Olympian temple") will become worthless.[183] Under those circumstances, the Chorus questions whether Zeus "would rightly be called ruler of all things."[184] In his idealized rule by logic and virtue, Oedipus upsets the balance between human reason and divine revelation. Doing so, he disturbs the boundary between earthly and divine, and he simultaneously presents a personal challenge to the authority of the gods, becoming the *tyrannos isotheos*.

Jocasta further blurs that boundary in attempting to convince Oedipus that "the vicissitudes of Fortune are supreme for man, and there is no clear foresight of anything;" accordingly, she encourages him to "live at random, to the degree that one is able to."[185] Though Oedipus initially dismisses this advice,[186] it is clear in his claim to be the "child of Fortune" that Oedipus takes this reasoning to heart. In the absence of apprehensible portents, both Oedipus and

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[181] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 408-409.
[182] C.f. Euben 2020: 117.
[183] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 897-904.
[184] Ibid. 905-906.
[185] Ibid. 977-979.
[186] Ibid. 984.

Jocasta revert to a godless sophistic skepticism. This reasoning bears strikingly similarities to political attitudes in post-Periclean Athens. In Thucydides, for example, the Athenians rebut a Melian religious appeal with the belief that "men, by force of nature, will rule (*kratei*) where they are strong enough to do so."[187] This sentiment almost perfectly translates into the political realm what Jocasta has claimed in general—that in the absence of perceptible divinity, it is "best" (*kratiston*) to live as one will to the extent of one's ability. Thus, Oedipus' indifference towards the gods breeds a deeply tyrannical skepticism. Palmer conceives of an "old Athens" yielding to a "new Athens" during the Peloponnesian War. Where the former is bound by piety, the latter is motivated by its imperial aims.[188] Knox regards this "new Athens" as the *polis tyrannos* and argues for its direct analogy to Oedipus *tyrannos*.[189] As Pericles tells the Athenians, "you hold this empire like a tyranny."[190] Oedipus' hyper-rational, new-Athenian political philosophy, in other words, transforms him at the same time into a tyrannical individual figure and reveals the tyrannical nature of his political dream.

Sophocles and the Law

At risk of anachronism, Sophocles is a conservative cultural and political critic. His figure of Oedipus reflects the contemporary dream of politics unrestrained by traditional obligations to the household and to the gods. Oedipus' tyranny is meant to represent the tyranny of a political system which disavows its limits and origins. As a statesman, Oedipus is independent from his own family and from the household underpinnings of politics. In his political affairs, Oedipus assumes that reason can triumph over all the troubles of the polis and

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[187] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.105.2.
[188] Palmer 1982: 123.
[189] Knox 1957: 61.
[190] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.63.2.

discounts the limitations imposed on him by piety. The tragedy of the play is that Oedipus, and the political dream he stands for, cannot escape the natural limitations of gods and household. To attempt to is to reach tyrannically beyond the limits of nature.

This is not to call Sophocles a staunch conservative; but he is skeptical of politics which profess to depart too radically from their inevitable limitations. In this, Oedipus at different times represents different political schemes—Athenian democracy, philosophical states, historical tyrannies. The Oedipus metaphor for politics can apply to contemporary government, as well. In the end, Aristotle gives the most timeless words to Sophocles' claim:

> Hence we infer that sometimes and in certain cases laws may be changed; but when we look at the matter from another point of view, great caution would seem to be required. For the habit of lightly changing the laws is an evil, and, when the advantage is small, some errors both of lawgivers and rulers had better be left; the citizen will not gain so much by making the change as he will lose by the habit of disobedience. The analogy of the arts is false; a change in a law is a very different thing from a change in an art. For the law has no power to command obedience except that of habit, which can only be given by time, so that a readiness to change from old to new laws enfeebles the power of the law.[191]

Aristotle, like Sophocles, recognizes that there are limits to the flexibility of the law. Aristotle sees these limits as habitual—liable to change over time—whereas Sophocles seems them as natural. Still, both recognize that there is something "evil" or tyrannical about changing the laws—something that violates the traditional restraints on the law, whether those be customary or natural. It would be conventionally tyrannical, in fact, to do so out of impulse instead of out of caution. In advising this caution, Sophocles' criticism remains useful into the modern political era, pulling aside illusive curtain of unrestrained politics and demonstrating that to run from tyranny is sometimes to move closer to it.

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[191] Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1269a13-29.

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