OEDIPUS AND HIS PARENTS:
THE BIOLOGICAL FAMILY
FROM SOPHOCLES TO DRYDEN\(^1\)

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Abstract. Oedipus’ parricide and incest are defined in respect to his biological parents who exposed and crippled him, as opposed to the adoptive parents who cherished him. Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus insists upon the priority of the biological tie. By contrast, adaptations of the story by Seneca, Corneille, and Dryden displace the emphasis from biological kinship to themes of regicide and revenge.

On 29 July 1993 the Zimbabwean newspaper The Herald reported the following story from Sarasota, Florida:

‘Through a veil of tears, a 14-year-old girl switched at birth with another child said she wanted nothing to do with her biological parents.

‘The definition of a dad to me is somebody that loves me, somebody who’s been there for me,’ Kimberly Mays told Barbara Walters in an ABC-TV special scheduled to air on Tuesday night. ‘Biology doesn’t make a family.’\(^2\)

On 13 July The New York Times ran an opinion piece by Elizabeth Bartholet, a professor at the Harvard Law School, under the heading ‘Blood Parents Vs. Real Parents.’\(^3\) Taking as her point of departure a recent case

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\(^1\) This paper was originally presented as a talk to the Student Classical Association at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg on 18 August 1993 and at the University of Natal in Durban on 23 August 1993; it was subsequently delivered as the Constantine lecture at the University of Virginia in October 1993. I am grateful to colleagues and students at these several campuses for their kind reception.

\(^2\) The Herald (29 July 1993) 3; Ziana-AP news services. A caption under the picture of a pensive girl in The Natal Witness (19 August 1993) stated: ‘A Sarasota, Florida court ruled yesterday that the parents of Kimberly Mays (14), above, should have no contact with her.’ ‘Parents’ here is evidently to be taken as blood parents. To bring matters further up to date: on 10 March 1994 The New York Times reported that Kimberly Mays has decided to move in with her biological parents, where, at the time of this writing (March 1994), she continues to dwell.

in which a two-and-a-half-year-old child was returned to her biological parents after having been raised by foster parents since her birth, Professor Bartholet writes:

Children are paying a high price for the priority we place on blood ties. The foster care system is crowded with children who live in limbo because we are unwilling to cut their ties to inadequate birth parents and free them for adoption. Today's politically correct programs promote family reunification and preservation. They count their successes in intact biological families, without regard to whether staying with birth parents helps children or subjects them to ongoing abuse.

Professor Bartholet recommends: 'The law should stop defining parenting in terms of procreation and recognize that true family ties have little to do with blood.'

The view defended by the Harvard professor and the 14-year-old girl from Florida is not irrelevant to the situation in which Oedipus finds himself in the most famous of all Greek tragedies, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus discovers that he has slain his father, King Laius of Thebes, and married Jocasta, Laius' widow and Oedipus' mother; the revelation is unendurable, and Oedipus blinds himself lest he gaze in this world or the next upon those he violated (1371-77). Now, Laius and Jocasta are indeed Oedipus' biological parents, but he was raised since birth not by them but by Polybus and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth. For Laius, warned by the oracle at Delphi that he must abstain from producing a child or else die at the hands of his own son, hobbled and exposed the infant Oedipus. Oedipus was saved because the slave ordered to abandon him delivered him instead to a Corinthian herdsman, who gave him in turn to the childless Polybus and Merope.

As a young man in Corinth, Oedipus suffered a taunt that he was not in truth the offspring of the king and queen who raised him, and he sought confirmation of his identity at Delphi. As is well known, the oracle announced that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother, upon which Oedipus resolved to desert Corinth forever and made his way to Thebes, thereby fulfilling the prophecy he had sought to evade. Now, had Oedipus reasoned, as did Kimberly Mays, that 'The definition of a dad to me is somebody that loves me, somebody who's been there for me,' he might have experienced less regret, or at least less agonizing horror, at the thought that he had unknowingly slain the man who at the moment of his birth had crippled him and cast him out to die, and he might have offered a prayer of gratitude that he had not by some grim accident murdered Polybus instead,
who had raised him lovingly. ‘Biology,’ as Ms. Mays put it, ‘doesn’t make a family.’ Professor Bartholet’s observation that ‘Children are paying a high price for the priority we place on blood ties’ seems curiously apt. Similarly, had Oedipus discovered that he had slept with the woman who had nurtured him, he might have had genuine cause for revulsion. Sex with Merope would have been incest; Jocasta, who consented to his death in infancy, might be counted a mere stranger.

I am aware that in proffering this advice to Oedipus I may seem to be missing the point of Sophocles’ harrowing drama. The play is about ironies of fate and deep anxieties over parricide and incest. The audience is not expected to disarm such weighty issues with the rationalizations of a Florida teenager about dads or moms who have been there for their children, excusing Oedipus’ offense on the grounds that Laius and Jocasta were unfit parents and thus no parents at all. The tragic effect of Oedipus the King, a critic might exclaim, depends on the premise that the blood parents are the real parents, and to challenge that premise is to refuse to enter into the world of the play.

While there is a certain truth to this objection, it is possible also to turn it on its head. It is not that Sophocles’ tragedy depends upon the prior conviction that biology does make a family, or at least upon the willing suspension of any contrary belief. Rather, the plot of Oedipus the King is constructed in such a way that it demands the biological view of the family as a condition for the intelligibility of the action. While the audience meditates on issues of determinism and freedom, guilt and pollution, it silently accepts the terms in which these problems are cast, which rest upon the unique claims of blood kinship. The play works by tacitly putting over its most controversial thesis while we are busy attending to the conundrums on the surface.

This kind of ideological displacement is a pervasive feature of literature: some critics might claim it is universal.4 To illustrate the

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Paraphrasing a comment in the Autobiography of the cultural theorist and archaeologist R. G. Collingwood, Hans Georg Gadamer, in G. Barden and J. Cumming (edd.), Truth and Method (New York 1975) 33 (citing Collingwood, An Autobiography [Oxford 1970] 70), writes: ‘One can understand a text only when one has understood the question to which it is an answer.’ With a view to the operations of displacement in a text, I would add that there is always a slippage between the question and the answer, so that the answer is the answer to a different question.
phenomenon, we may digress for a brief consideration of Molière’s Tartuffe, perhaps his best-known comedy. Tartuffe is a religious hypocrite who exploits an image of ascetic piety to cozen Orgon, a well-do-to head of household, into signing over his entire fortune. Tartuffe’s real nature is revealed in his attempts to seduce Orgon’s wife. In the end, it is only the intervention of the king of France himself that upsets Tartuffe’s scheme and restores Orgon to his fortunes. Molière’s comedy is read as a brilliant exposé of pietistic hypocrisy, and audiences delight in the discomfiture of the scoundrel. But the attention to Tartuffe’s chicanery distracts the reader from the fact that figures like Tartuffe represent as much of a danger if they are sincere as they do when they are manifest parasites. Honest or not, religious fanatics who gain control of citizen wealth are a threat to the bourgeois economy which was nascent in Molière’s time. The case is analogous to that of media preachers in the United States, who collect huge sums through appeals on television to support their fundamentalist Christian denominations. Recently, several of these pulpit pounders have been caught in sexually compromising situations, and this has been taken as evidence that the ministers are corrupt and their parishioners gullible. But the danger these preachers represent is independent of their private perversions. Attention to the issue of hypocrisy conceals the underlying tension between two economies, that of the church and that of secular capitalism. Like the issue of biological versus foster families in Oedipus the King, this problem is latent in the text.

As in psychological repression, the text of Sophocles’ Oedipus betrays symptoms of the displacement of its underlying theme. Thus, when Oedipus learns from the Corinthian messenger who bears the news of Polybus’ death that Polybus did not beget him (ἐξήνυεν 1017, ἔγειρον 1020), he exclaims: ‘And did he cherish me, received from someone else’s hand, so much?’ (1023), to which the messenger prosaically responds: ‘His earlier childlessness induced him to.’ The verb that Oedipus employs is ἐστερέξεω, which refers typically to familial affection. But there is no need to exercise

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5 For the idea of a symptomatic reading of a text, see S. B. Smith, Reading Althusser: An Essay on Structural Marxism (Ithaca 1984).

6 This is a traditional Athenian view. L. Rubinstein, Adoption in IVth Century Athens (Copenhagen 1993) 13 writes: ‘Athenian adoption differed fundamentally from the institution of adoption in modern, western society. We tend to think of adoption as an institution primarily intended for the benefit of the adoptee, a child in need of parental care. . . . Not so in Athens. There, the institution was primarily construed as benefitting the adopter, providing for his need of a descendant.’ The messenger’s response does not, however, cancel Oedipus’ recognition of the love and care his foster parents bestowed upon him.
philological subtlety: the drunken insult to Oedipus’ lineage back at Corinth; the ambiguous reply of the oracle to the question he poses at Delphi; the choice that Oedipus makes to abandon his putative parents, which he undertakes without inquiring more precisely into the nature of their relationship to him though that is what drove him to consult the oracle in the first place (a move that critics since Dacier and Voltaire have deemed to be inconsistent with Oedipus’ vaunted cleverness)—all these circumstances introduced by Sophocles into the narrative, together with Oedipus’ momentary suspicion that Polybus may have died of longing for his absent son (969ff.), are indices of a preoccupation with the quality of paternity and parentage within the play. It is not that Oedipus was uncharacteristically foolish when he fled Corinth for fear of parricide and incest without considering the question of his true lineage. His response, together with the role of Polybus and Merope in general in Sophocles’ play, serves to authorize an intuition that in leaving Corinth, Oedipus left home.  

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7 Critics have long expressed surprise that Oedipus, renowned for his intelligence, should have failed to interrogate the oracle on the identity of his parents before deciding to abandon Corinth; see especially L. Moland (ed.), Voltaire: Oeuvres complètes 2 (Paris 1883) 21-24 and the discussion in M. Mueller, Children of Oedipus and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy 1550-1800 (Toronto 1980) 109-11. M. Scott, ‘Psychoanalysis and Sophoclean Tragedy,’ Acta Academica 24.2 (1992) 55-66, esp. 63ff., has interpreted this lapse psychoanalytically as a sign of Oedipus’ inner tension. I am suggesting that it is a symptom rather of a conflict within the text over who the true parents of Oedipus really are.  

8 Sophocles himself insists on the primacy of nurture in his version of the Electra, where the portrait of Clytemnestra as an unnatural mother, devoid of maternal feelings, contributes importantly to the justification of her death at the hands of Orestes. After the pedagogue has delivered the false report of Orestes’ death, Clytemnestra exclaims (tr. D. Grene, Sophocles 2 [Chicago 1957]):

Clyt. Zeus, what shall I say? Shall I say ‘good luck’ or ‘terrible, but for the best’? Indeed, my state is terrible if I must save my life by the misfortunes of myself.

Paed. My lady, why does this story make you dejected?

Clyt. Mother and child! It is a strange relation. A mother cannot hate the child she bore even when injured by it.

Paed. Our coming here, it seems, then is to no purpose.

Clyt. Not to no purpose. How can you say ‘no purpose’?—if you have come with certain proofs of death of one who from my soul was sprung, but severed himself from my breast, from my nurture, who became an exile and a foreigner;
Against the pressure of this subliminal perception, the chorus holds out for a rigorous defense of the oracle's literal truth, even when it threatens to destroy their beloved king: 'No longer shall I go in worship to the untouch-

who when he quitted this land, never saw me again;
who charged me with his father's murder, threatened terrors against me.

(El. 766-79)

'Became an exile and a foreigner' translates φυγάς ἀπεξέβουτο (776f.), literally 'estranged himself from me as an exile'; R. Jebb, in his commentary on Sophocles' Electra (Cambridge 1907), cites as a parallel Euripides Hipp. 1085, where Theseus disowns his son. In Sophocles' Electra, Clytemnestra's joy at the reputed death of her son disqualifies her as a mother; Orestes may thus be exonerated for killing her in requital for the murder of his father, and Sophocles accordingly eliminates the role of the Furies who torment Orestes in Aeschylus' Oresteia. Oedipus is not granted such leniency. (There is no suggestion in Sophocles' Electra, as there is in Aeschylus' Eumenides, that a mother is not a blood relation to her children; accordingly, the ingenious reconstruction of a Greek 'patrilineal ideology' by R. Fox, Reproduction and Succession: Studies in Anthropology, Law, and Society [New Brunswick 1993] 165-81, will not explain the difference in the treatments of matricide and parricide.)

Why the change on Sophocles' part in respect to the legitimacy of parricide? I offer a suggestion. J. M. Bremer has recently restated the arguments for dating Sophocles' Electra later than Euripides', and more specifically to the year 409 B.C. (‘Exit Electa,’ Gymnasion 98 [1991] 328f. n. 9, with brief bibliography; Bremer's view has been endorsed by Suzanne Saïd, 'Couples fraternels chez Sophocle,' in A. Machin and L. Pernée (edd.), Sophocle: Le texte, les personnages [Aix-en-Provence 1993] 299f.). This puts the production of the play in the immediate aftermath of the oligarchic revolution of 411 B.C. and the subsequent restoration of the democracy. The plot of the Electra centers on the return of an exile who overthrows a haughty and violent usurper and reasserts his legitimate title to rule. Is it far-fetched to see in this story an allegory of the political events in Athens? Sophocles accords the usurpers no mercy and no pity; their murder, despite ties of kinship, is, extraordinarily, accomplished without the stain of pollution or an appearance on the part of the Furies, as had been authorized by the versions by Aeschylus and Euripides. Sophocles seems to have gone out of his way to affirm the legitimacy of Orestes' and Electra's actions. Again, the political context may help to explain why. Responsibility for the take-over of 411 lay, or could be seen to lie, with a special board of ten commissioners or probouloi, who were appointed with emergency powers in the aftermath of the defeat of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 413 B.C. (for details and discussion, see W. M. Calder III, 'The Political and Literary Sources of Sophocles' Oedipus Coloneus,' in W. M. Calder III, U. K. Goldsmith and P. B. Kenevan (edd.), Hypatia: Essays in Classics, Comparative Literature, and Philosophy Presented to Hazel E. Barnes on her Seventieth Birthday [Boulder 1985] 2-4; Calder interprets Sophocles' Philoctetes of 409 B.C. as an apologia for his role as proboulos). By endorsing unreservedly the murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Sophocles indicated, I believe, his support of the restored democracy. At the same time, he abandoned a conservative defense of the priority of blood ties in favor of recognizing that parentage, like rulership, depends for its legitimacy not just on status but on actions.
able navel of the earth, nor to the temple in Abae, nor to Olympia, if these [i.e., 'the prophecy that Laius should be slain by his son']\(^9\) will not square openly before all men' (897-902). Thomas Gould comments here that 'The Chorus hopes that all the oracles were right, though it would probably have been glad to accept some tricky but harmless interpretation.'\(^10\) But Oedipus and Jocasta both conclude that the failure of the literal meaning of the prophecy exposes the oracle itself as vain (964-72, 977-83). In Sophocles' treatment, belief in the cosmic order stands or falls with the truth of both oracles, to Laius and to Oedipus, and these, taken together, entail that Oedipus slay his natural father. Religion itself is implicated in the primacy of the biological family.\(^11\)

In identifying the question of the biological family as the sub-text or displaced tension behind _Oedipus the King_, I am indebted to a brilliant Stanford University dissertation by Kirk Ormand.\(^{12}\) Ormand writes: 'The play suggests that, contrary to general expectations about parentage, biological identity is an unstable category, confirmed by processes of displacement.' He explains further:

I do not mean by this that Sophocles intends us to see Oedipus' identity as Laius and Jocasta's son as invalid, culturally produced, and therefore a sham. Oedipus really is who the play says he is. In this play, however, Oedipus' biological identity asserts itself as natural only insofar as it forcibly displaces other forms of identity.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{10}\) T. Gould (ed. and tr.), _Oedipus the King by Sophocles_ (Englewood Cliffs 1970) ad 902.

\(^{11}\) Herodotus, who is said to have been a friend of Sophocles and to have inspired several passages in his tragedies, reports a belief of the Persians as follows: 'The Persians maintain that never yet did any one kill his own father or mother; but in all such cases they are quite sure that, if matters were sifted to the bottom, it would be found that the child was either a changeling or else the fruit of adultery; for it is not likely they say that the real father should perish by the hands of his child' (1.138; tr. G. Rawlinson, ed. E. H. Blakeney, _The History of Herodotus_ [London 1910]). The issue of biological versus foster parentage was plainly in the air.

\(^{12}\) K. W. B. Ormand, _The Representation of Marriage in Sophoclean Drama_ (diss. Stanford 1992); the reader is referred to this work for full discussion and bibliography. See also the perceptive discussion in P. Pucci, _Oedipus and the Fabrication of the Father: Oedipus Tyrannus in Modern Criticism and Philosophy_ (Baltimore 1992), esp. 119 on fatherhood as a culturally created relation; cf. also 108-12 on Corinth as the home of Oedipus and 127 on the chorus' wish that the oracles prove true.

\(^{13}\) Ormand [12] 163.
I have reduced Ormand’s elegant analysis to the single opposition between what Professor Bartholet calls blood parents and real parents because it is the practice of adoption that represents the immediate cultural alternative to biological identity. Pericles’ law of 451 B.C., which stipulated that only the offspring of citizens on both the paternal and maternal side could inherit, brought about an intense focus on the status of children, and this may have provided the context in which anxiety over foster families flourished.  

Ormand notes that Oedipus is heir to the throne of Corinth, although Polybus and Merope are aware of his foreign origins. In just this period, as Alan Shapiro has remarked, there is a new emphasis on Theseus’ children as the legitimate heirs to the kingship in Athens. Simultaneously, the sophists were popularly regarded as undermining the respect owed to parents and cultural taboos generally by their reduction of social relations to an ostensibly anarchic state of nature. Thus in the Clouds, produced (423 B.C.) perhaps a half dozen years after the Oedipus, Aristophanes has Pheidippides, who has come under the influence of Socrates, argue that beating one’s father is perfectly natural since chickens do it (the father describes this behavior as parricide, 1327). This corrosive critique of kinship, combined with a new emphasis, encouraged by Pericles’ law, on consanguinity as the basis of Athenian identity, may plausibly have generated the anxiety over biological relations to which Sophocles’ Oedipus appears to respond.

When Sophocles returned to the riddle of Oedipus at the end of his career in the tragedy Oedipus at Colonus, he removed the focus from the problem of Oedipus’ genetic identity to that of the conflict between guilt and pollution, a topic that does not concern us here. But later dramatists who adapted the plot of Oedipus the King seem increasingly to have displaced or marginalized the emphasis on biology in relation to the crimes of incest and parricide. In contrast to Sophocles’ version, the question of blood versus adoptive ties seems to lose its privileged place as the central issue of the tragedy, as concerns with royal succession and legitimacy crowd it to the edges. In the balance of this paper, I shall consider three successive

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16 See H. A. Shapiro, ‘Theseus in Kimonian Athens: The Iconography of Empire,’ Mediterranean Historical Review 7 (1992) 46; Shapiro connects Theseus’ children with Athenian imperial aspirations, since they are mentioned as founders of foreign cities.
adaptations of the Oedipus story by Seneca, Corneille, and Dryden, who are the sole playwrights who explicitly produced surviving versions of the Oedipus drama before the year 1700.\textsuperscript{18} In my interpretations of these texts, I shall attempt to indicate how the repressed or latent meaning of Sophocles’ tragedy is progressively defused until, with Dryden, the love between Oedipus and Jocasta can be seen, if only momentarily, as innocent and natural.\textsuperscript{19} These subsequent reworkings of the Oedipus story suggest that the implicit affirmation of blood relations is not inherent in the myth itself but is specific to Sophocles’ particular adaptation.\textsuperscript{20}

Seneca’s Oedipus at the beginning of the play broods darkly on his own guilt as the cause of the plague that is ravaging Thebes. Apollo’s oracle proves as opaque as ever, and Teiresias is brought in as a consultant. After some spooky hocus-pocus with a sacrificed bull, Tiresias decides that the only way to solve the riddle of the plague is to summon up the ghost of Laius himself to reveal the truth about his murder. The scene, as reported by Creon, has all the horror-movie effects one expects of Seneca, but the ghost is not content to identify his murderer and disappear in fumes of sulphur. Instead, he launches into a bitter invective against his son. Here are Laius’ words, in the elegant translation by E. F. Watling.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{quote}
O Thebes,
By sin, not by the anger of the gods,
You are destroyed. Your plague has not been brought
By the dry breath of the rain-thirsty earth,
Nor by the south wind’s scourge; but by a king
With blood upon his hands, who claimed a throne
As his reward for murder and defiled
His father’s marriage-bed: unnatural son,
And yet more infamous a father he,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} For variations on the Oedipal theme, as opposed to treatments of Oedipus himself, see Mueller [7] 105-52; R. A. McCabe, Incest, Drama and Nature’s Law 1550-1700 (Cambridge 1993) 96-126; but see pp. 120-21 on the Jocasta of Gascoigne and Kinwelmash (1566), modelled on Lodovico Dolce’s Giocasta.

\textsuperscript{19} My account of the successive narratives of the Oedipus theme is different from the approach of Lévi-Strauss, who has affirmed that the core meaning of a myth remains invariant in all retellings. For an application of Lévi-Strauss’ method to a topic in the history of drama, see R. Whitaker, ‘Dimoetes to Dimetos: The Evolution of a Myth,’ English Studies in Africa 21.1 (1981) 45-59, with references to Lévi-Strauss’ theory in n. 6.

\textsuperscript{20} On the constructed quality of the ostensibly ‘natural’ horror of incest, see McCabe [18] 7f., 67-74.

\textsuperscript{21} E. F. Watling (tr.) Seneca: Four Tragedies and Octavia (Harmondsworth 1966) 233f.
Who by incestuous rape did violate
The womb which gave him birth, against all law—
A thing scarce any animal will do—
Begat from his own mother sons of shame,
Children to be his brothers! Vile confusion,
Monstrous complexity of sin, more subtle
Than that shrewd Sphinx he boasts of. Murderer!
Whose blood-stained hand now grasps the sceptre, thee
I shall pursue, thy father unavenged;
I and all Thebes shall hunt thee, and shall bring
The Fury who attended on thy marriage
With whips to scourge thy guilt; shall overthrow
Thy house of shame, destroy with civil war
Thy hearth and home. People, expel your king!
Drive him immediately from your land;
Soon as your soil is rid of his curs’d feet,
Its springtime will return, its grass be green,
The beauty of the woods will bloom again,
And pure air fill you with the breath of life.
With him, as his fit company, shall go
Death and Corruption, Sickness, Suffering,
Plague, and Despair. Nay, it shall even be
That he himself would gladly quit our land
As fast as feet can carry him; but I
Shall halt those feet; I shall retard his flight;
He shall go creeping, groping, stick in hand,
Feeling his way like one infirm with age.
While you deprive him of your earth, his father
Will banish him for ever from the sky.

(630-59)

While Laius reproaches Oedipus with parricide and incest, his anger is motivated chiefly by the attack upon himself as king of Thebes, and it is this insult to his dignity and position that he wishes to avenge. Laius' rage is personal. His anger is not directed against Oedipus' pollution as such; that his assassin should be sitting on his throne inspires his frenzy. Correspondingly, it is not the salvation of Thebes that is uppermost in Laius' mind, but rather the punishment of Oedipus. Thus, he threatens, somewhat illogically, to retard Oedipus' flight from the city, even though his departure will, one supposes, accelerate relief from the plague. He speaks tactlessly of 'adding heavy delays to his feet' (655f.; Watling translates: 'but I shall halt those feet'), having forgotten, in his fury, that he has already crippled Oedipus in his infancy.

The role of Laius shifts the focus of the play from pollution to revenge, from fate to dynastic politics. While Oedipus is certainly guilty of horren-
dous acts, Laius casts him as a paragon of evil rather than as a victim of circumstances. The real crime is lèse-majesté, not parricide as such. We are firmly in the world of imperial Rome. When Oedipus, upon hearing Creon’s report, accuses Creon and Tiresias of treachery, he acts the part of a Tacitean tyrant. To Creon’s self-defense he replies:

He that once accused
Escapes conviction, harbours hate thereafter.
Better be rid of doubts.

(701f.)

And again:

No king can rule who is afraid of hatred.
Fear is the sovereign’s shield.

(703f.)

Seneca is not concerned solely to portray the consequences of an involuntary violation of fundamental taboos. His interest is as much in the abuse of power, and with the scene of necromancy he succeeds in superimposing on Sophocles’ narrative of familial sin a tale of violent usurpation and vengeance. That Laius happens to be Oedipus’ biological parent heightens the enormity of his crime, but is at bottom just an embellishment on his seizure of power. In a sense, it does not matter that the two are blood relations: Laius has not the least tenderness for his offspring, and would have demanded the same harsh treatment of anyone who had taken his life and his throne. That the imperial succession in Seneca’s time was through foster sons rather than biological children may have facilitated the change in emphasis in his Oedipus.

In Seneca’s version of the story, then, there is the suggestion—it is no more than that, an implication in the text—that parricide and incest are tokens of a corrupt character on a par with other violations of law and decency. Parricide stands for any assault upon the king. If an attack against the king is like an assault against one’s father, then the issue of biology is necessarily sublated into the general question of lawless violence. In this way, Seneca begins the process of dissipating the valorization of biological kinship that

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22 J. P. Poe, ‘The Sinful Nature of the Protagonist of Seneca’s Oedipus,’ in A. J. Boyle (ed.), *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama* (Berwick 1983) 150, observes that Oedipus ‘is not, then, ultimately the cause of nature’s perversity, but he is its expression. It is in this sense that Oedipus is guilty: that he is part of a guilty universe.’

had subtended Sophocles' tragedy.

For Corneille, no tragedy was complete without a romantic sub-plot, and he did not hesitate to provide one in his adaptation of the Oedipus story (1659), which he based on the versions of Sophocles and Seneca.\(^{24}\) Theseus, it turns out, is in love with Dirce, the daughter of Laius and Jocasta and thus Oedipus' step-daughter and, unknowingly to him, his sister. But Oedipus has already betrothed Dirce to Haemon, Creon's son. He offers to give Theseus Antigone or Ismene as wife, but Dirce is out of the question: 'The word of kings must be inviolable' (I.ii.185). Dirce, however, is proud. She is conscious that she is the proper heir to the throne of Thebes, as the sole surviving offspring of Laius; while she has consented to delegate this right to Oedipus, she insists on her privilege of choosing a king—not Haemon—as her spouse (II.i.468-78).\(^{25}\) Oedipus is adamant: 'I am king, I can do what I like' ('Je suis roi, je puis tout,' 493)—the absolute French monarch speaks here. Dirce declares that she'll have Theseus, or death (504).

In the following scene, Dirce's maid, Mégare, informs her mistress almost casually that Tiresias has been busy evoking the ghost of Laius for a clue to the evils that are afflicting Thebes, but Dirce replies that she has had problems enough of her own (II.ii.546-52). It seems that heaven demands a victor pure and noble (571), and one of Laius' race must pay the penalty for an unpunished crime (605f.); but Laius has refused to name names. Dirce immediately volunteers, on the grounds that Laius made his fatal trip to consult the oracle in her behalf. Hence, she is guilty (655). Theseus, Jocasta, and Oedipus all remonstrate with her. 'Do you doubt,' she asks Oedipus, 'that I'm entirely ready to die when the gods, through my father, have asked for my head?' (III.iv.953f.). Oedipus reassures her of his confidence in her generous spirit, but reminds her that Laius has spoken less than perspicuously. At this point, Oedipus suddenly recalls the infant that Laius and Jocasta exposed in fear of dire predictions by the oracle.


\(^{25}\) With Dirce's interest in the succession to the throne one may compare the analogous preoccupation of Phèdre in Racine's tragedy, where a mere hint in Euripides' Hippolytus is expanded into a major theme.
(III.iv.989-93), and begins the process of tracking down the child’s history. But Theseus turns up and declares that the abandoned infant is none other than he, and he is prepared to die forthwith and spare his beloved Dirce: ‘I loved her as a lover and love her still as a brother’ (III.v.1118), he announces. ‘Okay,’ Jocasta replies, ‘be my son, since you wish it, but give a sign by which I may know it’ (1125f.). Corneille could not refuse Dirce and Theseus a scene in which they vie for the privilege of self-sacrifice (IV.i). Phorbas, an old retainer of Laius, who was with him when he was slain, is brought in to identify Theseus as the assassin, but Oedipus recognizes Phorbas as one of the band he attacked years before (1431f.). Theseus perks up at this news: ‘Sire, I am the brother or the lover of Dirce, and her father or mine, stabbed by your hand . . .’; ‘Prince,’ replies Oedipus, ‘I understand you, you must avenge this father, and my destruction seems necessary to the State’ (1487-90). Thus everyone gets the chance to offer himself or herself for the higher good. Only Jocasta is disconsolate: ‘I must see either my daughter or my son self-immolated, the blood of my son run by your hand or his blood pour by yours’ (IV.v.1507-09).

The stand-off at the beginning of Act V, then, is between Theseus, who is still imagined to be the exposed child of Laius and Jocasta, and Oedipus, who is Laius’ murderer. In this impasse, the Corinthian messenger arrives and reveals that Oedipus is not the son of Polybus and Merope. On these grounds, moreover, Polybus has denied Oedipus the throne of Corinth (V.ii.1687-1704). When the messenger, here called Iphicate, explains that he received the infant Oedipus on Mount Cithaeron, Oedipus first suspects the secret of his identity (1740-43). With this revelation, as Oedipus declares, the obstacle to Dirce’s love for Theseus is removed (V.v.1792). Dirce is not content to yield the honor of dying for her country so easily; she points out that Oedipus knew neither that Laius was king nor that he was his father, and she continues to insist on her own guilt (1841-56). But Oedipus’ case is stronger, and he begs a brief interval to console Jocasta (V.vi.1878) before meeting his fate. The play ends, like Seneca’s, with Jocasta’s suicide and Oedipus’ self-blinding.

Corneille has defused the culpability of Oedipus by representing him as simply one candidate among several for the role of scapegoat so that the plague may be lifted from Thebes. Dirce contends with Oedipus for the distinction of having killed Laius, and puts her indirect guilt on the same level as Oedipus’ physical assault upon his father. It is as though Sophocles’ Oedipus should have equated the grief he caused Polybus with Laius’ death at his hands. The blinding of Oedipus, and his fall from power in Thebes, seem as much a consequence of his stubborn opposition to the love of
Theseus and Dirce as a function of incest and parricide, which are universally regarded as a wretched accident. As the blocking figure in a comic romance, he must be removed from the scene. Besides, the city requires a sacrifice to be rid of the plague: the emphasis is on the need for a noble scapegoat rather than on pollution and purification, and Oedipus’ guilt serves primarily to pick him out as the appropriate victim, as opposed to Theseus and Dirce who are equally ready to offer themselves. Corneille tells us in a preface that he deliberately transformed Seneca’s vengeful ghost into a cryptic riddler no less obscure than the oracle itself. Since the nature of the crime is hidden, Corneille can exhibit the mettle of the several leading characters, all of whom imagine that they are summoned to atonement and prove equal to the sacrifice demanded of them.

Corneille’s addition of the subplot involving Theseus and Dirce threatens to take over the central action of the play, and thus displaces the focus on incest and parricide per se. Sophocles’ preoccupation with fate and ignorance foregrounds the horror in the discovery that perfect strangers may turn out to be the closest kin and thus leave a person vulnerable to the worst kind of miasma despite the best of intentions; Corneille, however, amalgamates the subject of incest and parricide with the role of paternal obstacle to a love relation, and, in addition, intimates an equivalence between Oedipus’ offense and those of Dirce and Theseus. The particular nature of the crime is of less moment than the virtue and honor of the protagonists, exhibited in their response to the crisis.

In Corneille’s version, unlike Sophocles’, Polybus denies Oedipus the succession in Corinth because he is not his biological heir, and this may seem to suggest that biology is even more important a consideration in the French play than it is in the Greek. But perhaps this detail works the other way around. Sophocles’ Polybus is a father in everything but blood, while Laius is a parent by blood alone. This is the irony that underlies the text. Corneille disarms this tension by having Polybus cast out the adult Oedipus just as Laius had done to the infant. In turn, Corneille plays down the violence at the beginning of Oedipus’ life: the mournful shade of Laius has none of the viciousness of Seneca’s vengeful ghost. The opposition between blood parents and adoptive parents is elided in the French tragedy, and gives way to issues of personal nobility and royal authority as they crystallized in the age of Louis XIV.

Dryden was not much pleased with Corneille’s adaptation, with the hero, as he puts it in the preface to his own Oedipus (1679), ‘scarce
maintaining a second part in his own Tragedie." Gone is Theseus from this new version, since he cannot help but outshine, says Dryden, the hapless protagonist. Instead, Dryden gives us a full-blown conspiracy against the king, who at the beginning of the play is leading a campaign against the city of Argos. The chief plotter is Creon; his fellows, men who resent a foreign ruler:

Alcander:   O that our Thebes might once again behold  
           A Monarch Theban born!  
Diocles:     We might have had one.  
Pyracmon:    Yes, had the people pleas’d.  
Creon:       Come, y’are my Friends:  
           The Queen my Sister, after Laius’s death,  
           Fear’d to lye single; and supply’d his place  
           With a young Successour.  
Diocles:     He much resembles  
           Her former Husband too.  
Alcander:    I always thought so.  
Pyracmon:    When twenty Winters more have grizzl’d his black Locks  
           He will be very Laius.  
Creon:       So he will:  
           Mean time she stands provided of a Laius,  
           More young and vigorous too, by twenty Springs.  
           These Women are such cunning Purveyors!  
           (I.i.55-66)

Dryden is not subtle, but he has limned in several themes here: native versus foreign rulers; the wilfulness of the people; women’s passionate natures; and, of course, the connection between Oedipus and Laius. Creon had set his hopes of succession to the throne upon his claim to Laius’ daughter, Eurydice, to whom he was betrothed when she was still a minor. But he has found a rival in Adrastus, the prince of Argos and thus an enemy of Thebes, ‘But is not so to her,’ as Creon complains (97). Creon is thus in the position of Corneille’s Haemon, while Adrastus assumes the role of Theseus. Eurydice’s rejection of Creon has less to do with pride and more with

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fastidiousness; Creon is deformed:

Love from thee!
Why love renoun'd thee e're thou saw'st the light:
Nature her self start back when thou wert born;
And cry'd, The work's not mine—
The Midwife stood aghast. . . .

(I.i.133-37)

Creon and his henchmen attempt to stir up the masses against Oedipus, but Tiresias, loyal to Oedipus, reins them in again. At this point, Oedipus returns triumphant from the war, leading Adrastus as his captive. But so virtuous are the pair that they embrace in friendship. Oedipus, ever gallant, commands the prince, 'To love, and to Eurydice, go free' (397). Oedipus then notices the grief of his subjects, and learns of the plague and the oracle concerning the murderer of Laius.

Enter Jocasta, and then the touching scene of reunion. She remarks on Oedipus' resemblance to Laius. He replies:

Oedipus: I love thee more.
So well I love, words cannot speak how well.
No pious Son e're lov'd his Mother more
Than I my dear Jocasta.

Jocasta: I love you too
The self-same way.

(I.i.526-30)

Jocasta puts in a plea for Creon's claim to Eurydice, but Oedipus objects:

Uncle and Neece! they are too near, my Love;
'Tis too like Incest: 'tis offence to Kind.

(I.i.546f.)

This is the moment for some fireworks, and Dryden opens the second act with wild celestial phenomena. Oedipus begs the heavens for an explanation of the troubles afflicting Thebes, and they oblige. Here are Dryden's stage directions: The Cloud draws that veil'd the heads of the Figures in the Skie, and shews 'em Crown'd, with the names of Oedipus and Jocasta written above in great Characters of Gold.

Tiresias, summoning up all his mantic powers, discovers a further clue: that the slayer of Laius was the first offspring of his blood. Creon, nourishing his jealousy, accuses Eurydice. Adrastus stabs Creon, and Oedipus orders that he and Eurydice be kept under guard. Tiresias
undertakes to watch them, and to raise ghosts in order to clarify the question of their guilt. At last, Oedipus and Jocasta are ready to retire, but Oedipus, in a soliloquy, reveals a strange compunction:

Thou softest, sweetest of the World! good night.
Nay, she is beauteous too; yet, mighty Love!
I never offer’d to obey thy Laws,
But an unusual chillness came upon me;
An unknown hand still check’d my forward joy,
Dash’d me with blushes, tho’ no light was near:
That ev’n the Act became a violation.

(II.i.289-95)

No sooner does he withdraw to Jocasta, than Oedipus emerges again, walking in his sleep and muttering of horrid visions. Jocasta comes to him, and Oedipus explains his dreams:

None e’re in Dreams was tortur’d so before.
Yet what most shocks the niceness of my temper,
Ev’n far beyond the killing of my Father,
And my own death, is, that this horrid sleep
Dash’d my sick fancy with an act of Incest:
I dreamt, Jocasta, that thou wert my Mother.

(II.i.383-88)

Laius’ ghost, in Dryden’s version, is every bit as venomous as Seneca’s. He exculpates Eurydice and Adrastus (the latter had sought to take the blame upon himself to spare Eurydice), and, in a flourish straight out of Seneca, points the finger squarely at Oedipus:

From Thebes, my throne, my Bed, let him be driv’n;
Do you forbid him Earth, and I’ll forbid him Heav’n.

(III.i.376f.)

Tiresias is bullied into revealing Laius’ charges to Oedipus, who, upon a hint from Creon, concludes that the prophet is in league with Adrastus and Eurydice. Reverting here to Sophocles’ model, Dryden exploits a dialogue between Oedipus and Jocasta to reveal the Corinthian’s taunt concerning Oedipus’ parentage, the oracle he received at Delphi, and the details of Laius’ death at the crossroads, where only the discrepancy in the number of assailants gives Oedipus some hope of being innocent. As in Sophocles, the question of the murderer’s identity and that of Oedipus’ own lineage are collapsed into one another, so that the problem of violence is transformed
imperceptibly into one of an offense against biological kinship. Oedipus, however, holds on to his consciousness of innocence: ‘My hands are guilty, but my heart is free’ (593).

While Creon stirs up the mob against Oedipus, a ghost keeps up the pressure on the king by calling out his name. Oedipus rallies his energies and, with Adrastus at his side, puts down the rebellion. At this point, the Corinthian messenger arrives with news of Polybus’ death, and simultaneously reveals that Oedipus was not the true son of the Corinthian king and queen: ‘My Lord, Queen Merope is not your Mother . . . Nor was Polybus your Father’ (IV.i.317-19). The full truth of Oedipus’ birth is soon out, along with his guilt for the death of Laius, and only the swift intervention of Adrastus prevents him from taking his life.

In the fifth act, Oedipus blinds himself, and Creon assumes power in the state. He attempts to seize Eurydice, but Adrastus fends him off. And here, Dryden stages his masterstroke. Enter Jocasta to the sightless Oedipus. She says:

Jocasta: In spight of all those Crimes the cruel Gods
Can charge me with, I know my Innocence;
Know yours: ’tis Fate alone that makes us wretched,
For you are still my Husband.

Oedipus: Swear I am,
And I’ll believe thee; steal into thy Arms,
Renew endearments, think ’em no pollutions,
But chaste as Spirit’s joys: gently I’ll come,
Thus weeping blind, like dewy Night, upon thee,
And fold thee softly in my Arms to slumber.

(V.i.217-25)27

This tender scene is interrupted by another manifestation of Laius’ ghost, pointing at Jocasta (only she, of course, can see him). As he vanishes in thunder (stage direction), he calls out both their names. Jocasta, now mad, vows to die and seek out Laius, ‘My dear, my murder’d Lord. O Laius! Laius! Laius!’ (273).

27 G. S. Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex,’ in H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, and D. M. Halperin (edd.), The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader (New York 1993) 31, reports: ‘In 1979, a 19-year-old Marine met his 42-year-old mother, from whom he had been separated at birth. The two fell in love and got married. They were charged and found guilty of incest, which under Virginia law carries a maximum ten-year sentence. During their trial, the Marine testified, ’I love her very much. I feel that two people who love each other should be able to live together.’’ The story appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle (16 November 1979) 16 under the title ‘Marine and Mom Guilty of Incest.’
But all is not over. The battle still rages between Adrastus and Creon’s men, while Creon holds Eurydice prisoner. By threatening Eurydice, he compels Adrastus to surrender his sword, then runs Eurydice through when she comes between him and her beloved. But Adrastus still has a dagger in his hand, with which he slays Creon; Creon’s men kill Adrastus; faithful Haemon arrives a moment too late, and like Fortinbras surveys the carnage. Jocasta stabs herself, and for good measure kills her sons and daughters as well, taking a leaf from Medea’s script. Oedipus, taken to the tower for his own security, finds an open window. Jocasta, in her dying moments (the scene is operatic), spies Oedipus about to jump, and cries:

What hoa, my Oedipus! see, where he stands!
His groping Ghost is lodg’d upon a Tow’r,
Nor can it find the Road. Mount, mount, my soul;
I’ll wrap thy shivering Spirit in Lambent Flames!
And so we’ll sail.
But see! we’re landed on the happy Coast;
And all the Golden Strands are cover’d o’er
With glorious Gods, that come to try our Cause:
Jove, Jove, whose Majesty now sinks me down,
He who himself burns in unlawful fires,
Shall judge, and shall acquit us. O, ’tis done;
’Tis fixt by Fate, upon Record Divine:
And Oedipus shall now be ever mine.

(V.i.426-38)

‘Jocasta!’ cries Oedipus, ‘lo, I come’ (450). The tragedy is ended.

Like Corneille, Dryden has embellished Oedipus’ story with a romantic subplot. However, instead of casting Oedipus as the obstacle to the lovers, he has made him the friend of Adrastus. Adrastus, in turn, gains no advantage in the death of Oedipus, as does Theseus in Corneille’s version. Where Corneille provided his audience with a comic conclusion to the romantic theme, Dryden has the innocent pair perish immediately before the suicides of Jocasta and Oedipus. The parallel destinies of the two couples suggest a double tragedy of fate, which envelops noble spirits and brings them down without regard to their virtue. Despite the ghoulish tricks with ghosts and stellar displays, the fall of Oedipus is not simply a sign that the cosmos will rid itself of pollution, but one more example, complementary to the case of Adrastus, of a great man brought low by accident. The antagonist of Oedipus and Adrastus alike is not just some mysterious fatality, but the machinations of the demagogue Creon, whose appeal to the masses
brands him a scoundrel, in the Restoration ideology of Dryden. The question of incest and parricide, and the affirmation of the biological family which they presupposed in Sophocles’ play, are partly neutralized in Dryden’s version because they are embedded in a wider drama of sedition and the danger it poses to a virtuous ruler.  

And this, I believe, is why Dryden’s Oedipus insists to the very end that his conscience is clear, and can affirm his love for Jocasta even after he knows the nature of his relationship to her. Their love is not evil. She may have been his mother by blood, but she really is his wife. Thus, with Dryden, who of the three successors to Sophocles comes closest to preserving the spirit of the original tragedy, the biological family is most consciously displaced from primacy in the context of incest and parricide. Though Oedipus and Jocasta are sufficiently appalled by their deeds to take their lives, the bond of nature is subtly overridden by the law of love, which unites them just as it did Adrastus and Eurydice. When Oedipus refused to marry Eurydice to Creon because the connection in blood was too close, it was the open knowledge of their kinship that offended him. As the play makes clear, his own case is different. Blood parents, in the formula of Professor Bartholet, are not necessarily real parents.

What all three adaptations of Sophocles’ Oedipus have in common is a shift of emphasis from parricide to regicide, from an offense against the family to an offense against the state. It may be relevant to note that

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28 F. Ahl, Sophocles’ Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction (Ithaca 1991) makes a case for a similar conspiracy against the throne in Sophocles’ version. I believe that Ahl’s interpretation, while ingenious, pertains better, as Charles Segal notes in his review of Ahl’s book (CW 86 [1992] 155) to ‘a play of which traces can be found in the versions of Dryden, Voltaire, and Gide but which Sophocles, alas, did not write.’ The theme of Sophocles’ tragedy is parricide, not regicide.

29 Contrast Voltaire’s Oedipe (1718), where Philoctetes, who had been in love with Jocasta even before she was betrothed to Laius, returns to Thebes (after the death of Heracles) to find Jocasta married to Oedipus; in her heart, however, Jocasta continued to love Philoctetes, and never gave herself wholly either to Laius or to Oedipus. Text in Théâtre de Voltaire (Paris 1923); for discussion, see C. Biet, Les transcriptions théâtrales d’Oedipe-Roi au dix-huitième siècle (PhD Thesis Sorbonne Nouvelle 1980) 298-300. Biet treats the 18th-century versions of the Oedipus tragedy by Voltaire, Biancolelli, Folard, La Motte, Legrand, La Tournelle, Lauraguais, Buffardin, Bernard d’Héry, Duprat de La Toulouse, Léonard, Chénier (table of French translations and adaptations on pp. 12f.). I am grateful to Suzanne Saïd for bringing Biet’s thesis to my attention.

30 Cf. Biet [29] 297: ‘Durant l’évolution du mythe dans la tragédie au XVIIIe siècle, on passe en effet de la question de la culpabilité de l’homme et de son libre arbitre à celle du père puis à celle du roi—le roi raisonnant devenant parallèlement le père/fils d’une famille
Seneca, Corneille and Dryden were all writing in a period of autocracy: the reign of Nero, the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV, and the restoration of the English crown after the interregnum of Oliver Cromwell. In the tragedies of these court poets, the slaying of the father comes progressively to stand as a symbol for the disruption of the political order, which is analogized to patriarchy. Speaking of the conspirators who slew Julius Caesar, Cicero asserts: 'I concede that, if they are not the liberators of the Roman people and the preservers of the republic, then they are worse than assassins, worse than murderers, worse even than parricides, since indeed it is more outrageous to kill the parent of the country [patriae parentem] than one's own' (Phil. 2.13.31). Cicero is playing here on the title awarded to Caesar, but he captures the inclination under an autocracy to subordinate an offense against blood to an offense against the supreme authority. Analogously, the subversion of the social order in Dryden's tragedy is represented more by Creon's rebellion than by Oedipus' incest or parricide. In the context of the autocratic state, the meaning of the murder of Laius shifts subtly from an offense against the biological foundation of paternity to an assault on the royal institution. On these terms, Creon, as Dryden portrays him, is guiltier than Oedipus. Oedipus' pollution may thus be stripped of the symbolic freight it had carried since Seneca as a sign of his violent accession to the throne, and his involuntary parricide and incest may at last be revealed as innocent.

et d'un pays meurtris—.' Biet cites A. Green, Un oeil en trop: le complexe d'Oedipe dans la tragédie (Paris 1969) 260: 'Si le parricide est le plus affreux des crimes, on ne saurait nier que la sévérité avec laquelle il est puni est liée au régicide qu'il implique.' Cf. also McCabe [18] 77f. on Seneca and Nero and 272-77 on the political context of Dryden's version.

31 In Eth. Nic. 8.10 (1160b24f.), Aristotle notes the analogy between monarchy and paternal rule over sons. J.-J. Goux (tr. C. Porter), Oedipus, Philosopher (Stanford 1993) 11-15 et passim regards Oedipus' slaying of his father and marriage with his mother as a deformation of what he calls the monomyth of the hero's battle with the monstrous feminine (displaced by Oedipus' murder of Laius though residually present in the form of the sphinx) and his conquest of a marriageable maiden; Goux claims that this new myth, characteristic of Greek culture, inaugurates the modern rational and democratic subject.