

- Bones*, in *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, ed. Sharon R. Wilson (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2003), pp. 18-41.
- 20 See Reingard M. Nischik, 'Margaret Atwood's short stories and shorter fictions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), pp. 145-60.
- 21 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 289. In the Salvaging episode the Handmaids had to pull on the rope to signify their complicity in these hangings, which raises a suggestive parallel with the maids' accusations of Penelope's involvement in their deaths.
- 22 Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4.1.149-50.

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The Riddle of the Text: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

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In an essay written in the 1930s, Bertolt Brecht referred to the dangers of accepting too readily received ideas of the 'eternal truths' concerning ancient tragedies. As an example, he argued that most productions of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* perpetuate highly questionable assumptions about the nature of 'the tragic hero':

The individual whose innermost being is thus driven into the open then of course comes to stand for Man with a capital M. Everyone (including every spectator) is then carried away by the momentum of the events portrayed, so that in a performance of *Oedipus* one has for all practical purposes an auditorium of little Oedipuses.¹

This comment reflects the distinctive ideas about theatre that Brecht was then developing, both in direct theoretical discussions and in his own theatrical practices. In the period that saw the rise of Fascism in Germany, his project was to create a political theatre. Among other things, the historical materialist basis of Brecht's politics encouraged him to replace universal statements about the nature of 'Man' with direct engagements with historical specificities both past and present.² In this instance, his scepticism is directed towards the supposedly universal and unchanging truths about human life that are enshrined in the figure of Sophocles' Oedipus. Both as writer and director, Brecht sought to replace the idea that an ineluctable fate determines the tragic hero's destiny with more 'progressive' concepts. To do this, he felt it necessary to re-align the relationship between stage and auditorium by changing the passively receptive spectator of current and traditional theatre (which he labelled 'Aristotelian') for one who was politically and intellectually alert.³ Brecht refused what he considered to be the pacifying agency of Aristotle's *catharsis*—whereby the audience's pity and fear in the face of the tragic spectacle are somehow calmed—and wanted to produce instead a theatre-going public that would debate the rights and wrongs of what was

presented on the stage. That is why he objected to productions of Sophocles' *Oedipus* that encourage audiences simply to acquiesce in Oedipus' acceptance of his guilt and predetermined fate as foretold by priests and oracles.

Since Brecht's time much has changed both in the field of theatre practice and literary interpretation. But because many of the underlying assumptions derived from neoclassical concepts of tragedy and the generally accepted meaning of this play in particular die hard, this essay seeks to continue the work of developing more flexible readings of *Oedipus the King*. Brecht's comment points to that moment in the drama when Oedipus is finally brought to accept that the words of the various oracles were right all along and that the terrible fate laid down for him before his birth could never have been evaded. This article will start there, and explore the possibility that the audience in the theatre need not make the same assumptions as Oedipus, which would be impossible for an audience of 'little Oedipuses'. Most traditional readings of this Athenian tragedy assume that the spectators probably reach the conclusion of Oedipus' double guilt long before he does; indeed the most common assumption that persists regarding the relationship between Greek tragedies and their sources is the idea that the spectators came into the theatre possessed of certain knowledge of the narrative outcome. Despite that, Sophocles' *Oedipus* is often said to work like a detective story: if that is true, then it is surely an unimpressive detective story whose final revelations are clearly anticipated early in the play. The peculiar pleasure this is meant to afford the audience must derive from their superior knowledge over that of the hapless Oedipus.

The possibility of reading *Oedipus* differently or of producing a plausible 'Brechtian moment' for this revered work received impetus from the 'theoretical revolution' in the Humanities in the 1970s.⁴ Probing analyses of the structures of narrative led to a radical reconsideration of the assumption of Oedipal guilt, especially in relation to his (alleged) killing of his father Laius, the former King of Thebes.⁵ Potentialities in the text were revealed that had not emerged over the previous two and a half thousand years.⁶ Their subsequent reverberations were felt particularly in the fields of narratology, hermeneutics and—given the centrality of Sophocles' *Oedipus* in Sigmund Freud's theories—psychoanalysis. This outcome was produced firstly by

turning a sharper analytical spotlight on the alternative narrative of Laius' death at the hands of robbers. This in turn led to greater attention being paid to gaps and discrepancies in the text as opposed to simply admiring its perfection of form and clarity of meaning. Certainly, some readers across the ages had never accepted that the play was clearly constructed. Most famously, Voltaire had noted its inconsistencies,⁷ and saw these simply as the result of poor workmanship and a sign that Sophocles had been greatly overpraised; he even wrote his own version of the Oedipus story to demonstrate how the wrinkles could be ironed out! But Voltaire, for all his famed iconoclasm, was trapped in neo-classical theories of art and literature, and as a child of the Enlightenment was not drawn to non-rational elements in the ways complex texts work. More recent readings have found in those very wrinkles sources of new insights and dramatic power in the play.

The story of the robbers

Some scholars tried to eradicate what they must have taken to be errors. In his much-used translation of the play, E. F. Watling⁸ removes an apparent textual inconsistency from Oedipus' response to Creon's report of the eyewitness who stated that King Laius had been murdered by many 'robbers':

CREON: His story was that robbers—not one but many—
Fell in with the King's party and put them to death.

OEDIPUS: Robbers would hardly commit such a daring outrage—
Unless they were paid to do it by someone here. (122-25)

This moment in the play marks the beginning of Oedipus' conspiracy theory, that the former King had been the victim of a political assassination that had been covered up.⁹ It starts him down the road of suspicion that leads to his fierce accusations against both Teiresias and Creon. His scepticism regarding this 'official' story of what happened to Laius provides both a clue to the ways his mind works and an indication of the rational basis of his accusations against Teiresias and Creon in the charged scenes that follow.

But the Greek text (like most translations) does not support the translation quoted above; instead, it reveals a different kind of error. Despite the

heavy emphasis Creon places on the plurality of the ‘robbers’, Oedipus’ reply turns the witness’s testimony into a single ‘robber’.¹⁰ Because this is an important turning point in the action, I will now quote the exchange more fully, this time from the translation of Robert Fagles:¹¹

OEDIPUS:

No messenger, no fellow-traveler saw what happened?
Someone to cross-examine?

CREON:

No,
they were all killed but one. He escaped,
terrified, he could tell us nothing clearly,
nothing of what he saw—just one thing.

OEDIPUS:

What’s that?

One thing could hold the key to it all,
a small beginning gives us grounds for hope.

CREON:

He said thieves attacked them—a whole band,
not single-handed, cut King Laius down.

OEDIPUS:

A thief
so daring, so wild, he’d kill a king? Impossible,
unless conspirators paid him off in Thebes. (132-42)

Strangely, Oedipus does not seem to hear what Creon has just told him. Later in the play he will insist more than once that if the witness’s claim that Laius was killed by ‘many robbers’ were true then he, Oedipus, was not the murderer. But at the point when he first hears this important testimony he modifies Creon’s account by turning ‘many robbers’ into one. If it is a reasonable assumption that the Athenian spectators at the drama—as potential jurors, and living in what was still largely an oral culture—were accustomed to discriminating precisely between conflicting accounts presented in a trial, it is also likely that they would be attentive to such crucial details regarding the murder scene itself. We might also note that while this opening scene of

the play began with a solemn religious supplication, by the time of this exchange the dialogue has taken on a distinctly forensic tone.

What does this curious discrepancy over ‘many’ or ‘one’ signify? Is it a sign that Oedipus has (unconsciously?) already identified himself as the murderer—the *single* murderer? Or could it indicate that Oedipus is starting on the trail of an idea that a conspiracy in Thebes had led to the political assassination of his predecessor—a conspiracy masterminded by none other than Creon, the individual who stands in front of him at this very moment, and who will moreover eventually claim the throne? Or is it there simply to unsettle the audience by demonstrating the maddening capacity there is for all reportage to produce slippages and errors? Or should we take it as a revealing slip of the tongue, remembering Freud’s great insight that a parapraxis reveals truths beyond its simple surface meaning—repressed truths indeed? Or is Voltaire right, that Sophocles just wasn’t always a careful writer?

Whose words to trust?

The forensic tone of Oedipus’ cross-examination of Creon about his visit to the Delphic oracle has further structural significance in the drama. To discover why the city of Thebes is beset by a ‘plague’, Oedipus, as a king who acts for the welfare of his people, has sent Creon to Delphi to discover whether the oracle of Apollo can shed light on their affliction. The answer he receives re-opens questions about the mysterious death of Laius many years before: the murder of a king has gone unrequited, and the murderer is still living in the city of Thebes. Oedipus’ first move to discover the truth, then, is to seek divine intervention through the agency of an oracle—a religious and traditional act that befits the older world order represented in the epics and still a common (though declining) practice in the Greek world of Sophocles.¹² His second move, as is revealed in the passage of dialogue with Creon quoted above, is more ‘modern’. His appraisal of the testimony of the witness, however slight it might appear, is that it constitutes *evidence*: ‘One thing could hold the key to it all, / A small beginning gives us grounds for hope’ (137-38). This is the language of rational inquiry, of the courts and of those new sciences that were already displacing the theologically based sciences of the Greeks of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE.¹³ Oedipus’

eclectic and ‘transactional’ approach to discovering truth, along with his openness to more than one mode of inquiry, define him precisely as a representative contemporary Athenian.¹⁴

Despite his respectful acknowledgement of the Delphic Apollo, the language Oedipus uses throughout his interrogation of Creon has a focus that derives not from the sacred (and notoriously *imprecise*) discourses of religion and oracles but from the new institutions of the Athenian democracy. The wider historical narrative this invokes matches that of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, which traces the trajectory of Greek culture from the earlier forms of retributive justice of a priest- and god-governed world to the Athenian law courts. Like Aeschylus, Sophocles represents that narrative in terms of dramatic conflict. In the tragic competitions of the Festival of Dionysus, both dramas played the cultural role of staging problems inherent in the seismic shift that was the democratic revolution of Athens. In the new world order they were creating, where should the Athenians turn in order to discover truth? Oedipus’ second approach is to put his faith in the power of rational deduction. Both science and jurisprudence are concerned with the weighing and interpretation of evidence: ‘One thing could hold the key to it all’.

While most dramatic texts can be staged in more than one way,¹⁵ the stage setting for *Oedipus the King* can certainly be used to indicate a structural division between new and old. There are indications in the text that suggest that there are two main edifices on the stage: the palace of Oedipus, human king of the city, and a shrine or altar to the god Apollo. The first is the dwelling from which Oedipus and others emerge and to which he will eventually return at the play’s end; the second is that altar to which Jocasta in a moment of religious anxiety brings an offering. When the Priest enters with a group of citizens it is not clear from the text whether they are there to visit their king’s palace or the shrine. Is their appeal to be made to a man or a god? The Priest’s language in addressing Oedipus betrays considerable concern that, even though the group of citizens appear to have come to seek Oedipus’ intervention, they should not approach him as a god but only as the first of men. While he is insistent on this point (39-49), in a significant theatrical gesture both he and the citizen-suppliants go down on their knees to Oedipus (49-51).

The Priest’s pious hesitancy about what degree of honour is due to Oedipus has political implications that become explicit in the note of warning he strikes at the end of his speech: the honour due to Oedipus—unlike the gods or even the Homeric heroes who retain their epithets regardless of circumstances—is qualified and conditional. Unlike those older patriarchs, Oedipus’ power depends on his achievements and will survive only as long as it is supported by achievement. The crisis of the plague at Thebes threatens Oedipus’ political power; as he himself recognizes, he is the king of a diseased city and is firmly locked into the city’s ailment:

Well I know
You are sick to death, all of you.
But sick as you are, not one is sick as I. (71-73)

Just as this moment is richer in meaning than its simple irony that exposes Oedipus’ ignorance of his ‘true’ predicament, the intriguing uncertainties of the opening scene of the play should not be taken to reveal some character defect in Oedipus himself—as they often are by critics who look for a supposed arrogance in Oedipus to account for and (more bizarrely) justify his fate.¹⁶ In his very opening speech, for example, when Oedipus declares himself to be ‘world-famous’ (‘you all know me, the world knows my fame: / I am Oedipus’) he is not indulging a personal arrogance. As the great nineteenth-century editor of Sophocles, Sir Richard Jebb, crisply notes: ‘The tone is Homeric’.¹⁷ That is, the opening speech declares that this play, like other Greek tragedies, is a representation of the story of a hero derived from the world of the epics. But this hero will be a tragic and not a Homeric hero, a man who exists in a very different world from that of the epics. The tragic hero is an epic hero rendered problematical; or, as Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet put it:

As we have seen, as long as it remains alive tragedy derives its themes from the legends of the heroes. The fact that it is rooted in a tradition of myths explains why it is that in many respects one finds more religious archaisms in the great tragedians than in Homer. At the same time, tragedy establishes a distance between itself and the myths of the heroes that inspire it and that it transposes with great freedom. It scrutinizes them. It confronts heroic values and ancient

religious representations with the new modes of thought that characterize the advent of law within the city-state.¹⁸

Within the text's emerging patterns of incommensurate political and religious discourses, linguistic and dramatic ironies take on a wider significance than simply to discredit Oedipus: they create an equivalent (and modern) recognition of the arbitrariness of the signs of language. It is not just Oedipus' world that is threatened, but those bonds of kinship, religion, politics, and language that enable the community to cohere. In the opening words of the play, when Oedipus addresses the citizens as 'My children, newest descendants of Cadmus of old',¹⁹ his assertion of genuine care and the concern of a good patriarch for his people are instantly undermined by his unconscious naming of his own progenitor, which reveals the darker kinship he shares with these citizens. It foreshadows the dissolution of the discrete categories of family relationships that forms the final tableau and the play's nightmarish conclusion. When he implicates himself in their 'sickness', the treachery of language's autonomy subverts his simple attempt to affirm the mutual concern he shares with his people.

In establishing a play of ironies right from the opening scene, the text introduces an unsuspected third dimension that shadows Oedipus' speech and actions throughout. As Vernant and Vidal-Naquet argue:

The equivocal character of Oedipus' words reflects the ambiguous status that the drama confers upon him and on which the entire tragedy rests. When Oedipus speaks he sometimes says something other than or even the opposite of what he thinks he is saying. The ambiguity of what he says does not reflect a duplicity in his character, which is perfectly consistent, but, more profoundly, the duality of his being.²⁰

What needs to be added to this succinct statement is that the ontological question posed by the play and confronting the spectator is not one that attaches to Oedipus alone. That would make him everyone's scapegoat and thereby let us all off the hook. It includes the whole world of the play as well as the spectators. Far from placing the spectators of the drama in a position of comfortable superiority and removal from Oedipus' plight, it engages

them in its restless and searching uncertainties. Oedipus' 'ambiguous status' is not set in a context that is itself unambiguous or transparent in meaning, just as dramatic ironies (in *Oedipus* any more than in *Macbeth* or *King Lear*) do not allow the audience to rest in comfortable control of the truth. As language itself came to be understood as a social phenomenon, and in Sophocles' own Athens seen to play new and distinct roles in democratic processes,²¹ the linguistic ambiguities of this play relate to the ambiguities of social being itself. If Oedipus is a special case, he is no less a representative case. The Theban plague becomes a composite metaphor of infection and threat, not only on the physical plane (though it is that too), but also as a material/spiritual disease that infects man's psychic existence.

As Vernant and Vidal-Naquet have demonstrated, the 'tragic moment' at Athens that took place over a rapidly changing century and witnessed an extraordinary flowering of dramatic work derived at least partly from the fact that Athens at that time experienced the excitement as well as the threats of revolutionary change. The Athenians (and other intellectuals who made Athens their home) began asking on what terms humans might conduct their lives in the absence of the received concepts of earlier, theocratic societies—the traditional cultures of the Hellenic world.²² But this feeling of newness was experienced at a time when the discourses of that older world still had power over the Athenian imagination, living on in memory and popular cultural practices. Tragedies capture the tense complexities of that moment, and its contradictions, without finally leaning to one side or the other.²³ This is a further way of grasping how Oedipus, more than any other individual on the Greek tragic stage, represents the two faces of the new democracy. The tensions between the two—on the one hand, oracles and prophets, gods and their shrines, ritualistic curses and scape-goat expulsion; on the other hand, the efforts of men to remain true to a belief in their capacity to understand the seeming impossibility of the human predicament without recourse to the divine—finally tear the hero apart. But that is a long way from saying that the drama is reducible to a warning to the Athenians to turn back from the human quest for truth and return to the certainties of religious faith.

The reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* I am proposing starts from a basic Brechtian tenet: the purpose of the drama should not simply be to place

on stage the terrible and tragic story of Oedipus' doom, but to put into question the assumption that that doom was always inevitable. Brecht was less concerned with the individual destiny of the tragic hero than with the social processes that determined that destiny, and less interested in unavoidable fate than the necessity of changing a society that renders individual experience tragic. Such a move entails not only adjusting the terms on which Sophocles' most famous tragedy has been absorbed into world culture, but also relocating him within Greek literary and cultural history itself. Put starkly, the difference is between a conservative understanding of Sophocles and a progressive one. This challenge is not a new one: a much-respected classical scholar of an earlier era, E. R. Dodds, once called Sophocles 'the last great exponent of the archaic world-view', and a poet who affirmed the values of an older theocratic and aristocratic society at the moment it had entered its final, tragic stage.²⁴ Dodds argued that the values of the heroic age, touched by the 'new accent of despair' of the so-called 'Archaic age' that lay between Homer and the fifth century BCE, persist as historical vestiges in Sophocles. If true, this would seriously damage claims for Sophocles' modernity, and justify Dodds' placement of the tragedian in a direct line from Theognis, a poet who bemoaned the lost privileges of his class with the onset of social change. It is against these still prevalent assumptions of an austere aristocratic and backward-looking Sophocles that I wish to place a more questionable and questioning *Oedipus*. This involves a fundamental re-thinking of the relationship between tragedy and myth.

Who killed Laius?

To consider Sophocles' Oedipus as a representative figure of democratic Athens, we need to ask how much potential for truth the play grants to the forensic mode of inquiry. This is partly what Sandor Goodhart did in the 1970s when he proposed a 'positive' interpretation of Sophocles' play that begins by trusting the forensic evidence presented in the play. One way of describing the changed position of the spectators that this implies is to regard them not as 'little Oedipuses' but as astute jurors who are attentive to the evidence presented.²⁵ Goodhart's radical reading—which challenges the interpretations both of traditional classicists and of Freudian psychoanalysis—begins by taking seriously the much-circulated eyewitness

account of how Laius died (i.e., that he was killed by 'many robbers'). He dwells on the reasons why that key witness, when finally brought on stage, is not even asked the direct question: Was this the man who killed Laius? Nor does this witness give any indication that Oedipus was Laius' killer. As Goodhart notes, criticism has often recognized the confusions in the narrative between one murderer and many, but these are usually taken as part of Sophocles' technique for heightening suspense or thickening the pattern of dramatic ironies that enmesh Oedipus. In contrast, Goodhart proposes the scandalous possibility that Oedipus may not have killed Laius—or at least that his guilt for the crime is not forensically proven in the play. He argues that the assumption of Oedipus' guilt is made in the face of contrary evidence and represents a reversion to a myth-bound and oracular acceptance of Oedipus' destiny. In this reading the question of Oedipus' guilt remains indeterminate at the end of the play; from a purely forensic perspective, Goodhart even appears to be arguing that Oedipus was *not* guilty of Laius' murder. Traditional interpretations of the play rest on the assumption of Oedipus' double guilt: that is, the truth of the play is commensurate with the prophecies told by the oracles. The question mark Goodhart places over the ending of the play is to ask whether faith should be placed in oracular authority or in the careful interpretation of evidence presented, the two now being felt as incompatible.

Traditional readings, ones that simply accept as a given that Oedipus was guilty of parricide and incest, leave many reasonable questions unanswered. They unwittingly assume, for example, that Sophocles held a more primitive belief in oracles (and not just gods) than did his most enlightened contemporaries, and that his views are represented perfectly in the religious anxieties of the Chorus. At a significant turning point of the action, the Chorus balks at the irreligious sentiments of Oedipus and particularly Jocasta (954-97). At the level of construction—and here criticism has been troubled—we may wonder why Sophocles introduced the complicated alternative narrative of Laius' death only to resort to the awkward option of the Corinthian messenger, who comes unannounced like a *deus ex machina* to unravel the self-imposed complications of his plot. Finally, if the conclusion to the play is neat and unequivocal, then Sophocles has run the serious risk of jeopardizing both the suspense that drives the narrative and our respect

for Oedipus' intelligence by foreshadowing a conclusion of Oedipal guilt at least as early as the Teiresias scene. As Brecht recognizes, the result of repressing such doubts is to leave us with an *Oedipus* that is more like a Medieval Morality play than a Shakespearean tragedy, with Oedipus presented as a kind of Greek Everyman. Goodhart's *Oedipus* points to a more fascinating and dynamic drama than that.

His central perception is that the inclusion of a complex and sustained sub-narrative that casts doubt on Oedipus' identification as the murderer of Laius reveals a basic equivocation in the way Sophocles presents the mythic material. Far from being a simple representation of the myth, in his reading the play's action produces a critical assault on the mythopoeic habit of mind. What the play dramatizes is not the way Oedipus comes to recognize the truth of his foretold guilt but the genesis of the myth itself; its detail is directed towards anatomizing the mental distortions that lead Oedipus and everyone on stage to accept the truth presented by the oracle and obliquely reiterated by Teiresias. Mythic consciousness is thus shown to depend on an original act of denial.

One response to the question of why Sophocles does not have his Herdsman-witness finally confirm that his early story was untrue is that the unexpected arrival of the Corinthian messenger alters the direction of the dramatic narrative so sharply that the final, legalistic proof of Oedipus' guilt of the murder is unnecessary. The murder inquiry has been overtaken by a broader search for Oedipus' identity, so that once it is revealed that he is the child of Laius and Jocasta, and consequently guilty of the greater abomination of incestuous marriage with his mother, the technical detail of spelling out the fact that he also happens to be his father's murderer would seem to be almost redundant, a clumsiness that Sophocles had the artistic tact to avoid. The audience, following the powerful logic established through the play's complex narrative patterns, assumes with Oedipus that he must be the murderer, and that the oracles given to Laius and Oedipus have been vindicated. But the textual details that encourage such acceptance are open to multiple interpretations. The suggestive puns and verbal coincidences (e.g., that Oedipus will seek out the murderer with the same zeal that he would on behalf of his own father, or the physical resemblance of the man killed to

Oedipus himself) all work to deflect the audience's attention away from the thought that Oedipus may not be the guilty one; at the same time, they fall short of clinching the verdict of Oedipus' guilt. Then there are other well-placed suggestions, such as the witness's discomfort on returning to Thebes when he found Oedipus installed on the throne. Oedipus asks Jocasta who was that witness 'at the place where three roads meet':

JOCASTA:

A servant who reached home, the lone survivor.

OEDIPUS:

So, could he still be in the palace—even now?

JOCASTA:

No indeed. Soon as he returned from the scene

And saw you on the throne with Laius dead and gone

He knelt and clutched my hand, pleading with me

To send him into the hinterlands, to pasture,

Far as possible, out of sight of Thebes. I sent him away. Slave

that he was,

he'd earned that favour—and much more.

(832-40)

Jocasta's last allusion is to the role that same servant had played in removing the baby Oedipus from Thebes. The details she provides concerning his departure from Thebes suggest a possible explanation of the man's prevarications over what happened at the cross-roads: he recognized the new king as the killer of Laius and was afraid. But this raises further problems that I shall soon address. At this stage it is enough to note that, in terms of the good faith or not of this witness, they are suggestive but not conclusive. The effect produced by this play of half-truths against the too ready availability of a narrative conclusion that vindicates the oracle's prophecies is uncanny. For that reason, it should disturb rather than consolidate the audience's sense of certitude.

A clear-cut narrative conclusion, on the other hand, should also raise doubts over the traditional high evaluation of the play and its nature as tragedy. A neatly rounded conclusion with no loose ends contrasts sharply

with the final effect of most of the great tragedies: in *Macbeth*, for example, Malcolm's summary of the Macbeths as 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen' is manifestly inadequate; likewise, the delicate hopefulness of the last scene of *Eumenides* is hedged around with uncertainties. But there are more loose ends in Sophocles' drama than at first meet the eye: the 'slipperiness' of the text is not confined to one or two gaps of detail or failures to wrap up every unexplained contradiction in the narrative.

Narratology to the rescue

Shortly after Goodhart published his account of *Oedipus*, Jonathan Culler harnessed that interpretation for the purpose of re-directing the agenda for narrative theory.²⁶ Culler's discussion begins by questioning the exclusive assumption that the central distinction narratology should address was that between the narrative content (the real or fictitious 'events') and narrative perspective. Most studies of narrative were preoccupied with the position of the narrator in the telling: the narrative 'point of view'. Culler sought to break down the assumptions of such an ordering by re-introducing categories first used by Russian Formalists in the 1920s that put into question this reasonable distinction. He adopts their distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet* as the dual components of narrative and examines three narratives in which the assumption of the priority of *fabula* (the events that 'happened', thought of in chronological order) over *sjuzhet* (the specific ways a particular retrospective narrative organizes the telling of these events). The differences between 'story' and 'plot' turn on a similar distinction, even though many of the associated terms are used in different and contradictory ways. The classic form of the detective story illustrates Culler's distinction. The narrative we read is the story of the revelation of the truth about the murder mystery: the hero of this narrative (*sjuzhet*) is the master detective; the 'story' is propelled by the discovery of a body accompanied by signs of violence. The *fabula* to which this narrative alludes is the story of the murder itself, which is gradually put together in the second-stage narrative—the story of bringing the truth to light (in this respect, Sophocles' play certainly follows the lines of a classical detective story). This distinction parallels the two meanings of the word 'history': the 'primary' meaning is that 'history' signifies the events that happened (*res gestae*); the second meaning is that

'history' refers to the narration of those events (*historia rerum gestarum*). Freud's famous description of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* makes a similar distinction: he compares the play to the progression of psychoanalytic treatment, as 'a process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement' what in fact Oedipus had done. In the classical detective story the climactic moment is reached when the detective announces the solution to the mystery in the same way that Oedipus at the climax of the play becomes both accuser and accused and declares his own double guilt. At such a moment *fabula* and *sjuzhet* are meant to come together, the mystery solved and the gap closed. In the alternative reading I am proposing the gap is not closed, not quite. Freud too knows that the 'successful' conclusion of psychoanalysis is unlikely ever to take the form of a simple 'Eureka-effect'.

In this reading the pivotal scene is not the one involving the Corinthian messenger who brings news of the death of Oedipus' supposed father, King Polybus of Corinth, followed by the Herdsman who turns out to be both the servant who years earlier had taken the infant Oedipus and exposed him on the slopes of Mount Cithaeron and later witnessed Laius' murder. Rather, the more important turning point occurs in the earlier scene between Oedipus and Jocasta. This great scene is one of the most intimate and domestic in ancient literature (767-953). Within its warmth and atmosphere of mutual concern and trust, Oedipus' life and deeds are placed under intense scrutiny. From the spectator's point of view, it also has the feeling of an accused under cross-examination, put in the witness seat. In forensic terms, this is the moment when Oedipus presents his major testimony. In its quiet solemnity the scene has the ring of truth. Oedipus holds back nothing; there is no indication that he is prevaricating in any way. Its most important disclosures come involuntarily, as it were, and even accidentally, against the intentions of both parties in the dialogue.

Jocasta has interrupted the angry exchange between her brother Creon and her husband in which Oedipus accused Creon as well as the prophet Teiresias of conspiracy against him. This elicits Jocasta's contempt for prophecy: she cites the Delphic oracle's prophecy regarding the child of herself and Laius and how they thwarted its horrible prediction by exposing the child to die on the mountainside. In this she repeats a central ambiva-

lence of the play, paradoxically evincing a belief in the power of the oracle even as she expresses contempt for such practices (a true disbeliever would have no need to take such drastic steps). A similar equivocation occurs at the end of the scene: having shocked the Chorus with her blasphemous mockery of the power of priests and oracles, she returns soon after to make a propitiatory offering at the shrine of Apollo. But as she tells the story of the exposure of her child she includes a circumstantial detail that propels the narrative in an entirely different direction. She argues that her child could not have killed the king, because Laius was murdered by robbers 'at a place where three roads meet' (790). Listening with the attention of a good analyst (or great detective), Oedipus looks beyond her controlling narrative and latches onto this apparently insignificant detail. The 'crossroads' turns out to be the very place where Oedipus himself had killed a man bearing a close resemblance to Laius and around the very time the King was reported killed.

Anxious now about that coincidence of place, Oedipus presents to Jocasta another narrative—Homeric in tone—of his own life up until his encounter with a group of strangers at the crossroads. Like Odysseus at the court of the King of the Phaeacians, he begins his story: 'My father was Polybus, king of Corinth. / My mother, a Dorian, Merope' (852-53). He tells how a drunken man at a banquet claimed that he was not the child of those parents he lived with; that this disturbed him so much that he went to Delphi in search of the truth; there he received an oracle concerning his own destiny that partly corresponds with that given to Laius; but this time the prophecy included the crime of incest as well as parricide. Horrified, Oedipus determines to avoid that ghastly fate by distancing himself forever from his (supposed) parents. His journey away from both Delphi and Corinth brings him to the fatal encounter at the place 'where three roads meet'.

Next he gives Jocasta a very precise account of what took place there. This statement represents the most salient testimony on which a jury might condemn or acquit Oedipus of the murder of Laius. Having told a story that predisposes him to believe in his own guilt, Oedipus clings to the detail that the witness had referred to a group of robbers, not just one man. He seizes on this account of Laius' death in the desperate belief that the discrepancy will establish his innocence. But this speech, like so much else in this play's

treacherous text, contains more slippages than the one to which Oedipus clings. Because these elements of conflicting narrative detail are not recognized by him, but are available to the attentive spectator/juror, their weight as truthful testimony is increased.

One such detail prefigures the Freudian unconscious. When Oedipus flees Delphi to evade the fate spelt out for him by the oracle, he simply forgets that it was a doubt about his parentage that drove him to Delphi in the first place. Another is the extraordinary and casual mention of his killing the whole party of strangers at the crossroads. This massacre and Oedipus' telling of it are so shocking that most commentators fail to notice its greater value as evidence, which is a further source of its uncanny power. If his account is true—and we are given no reason to doubt that it is so—then Oedipus must be describing a different event from the one reported by the witness: as he tells it, he has left no witnesses to relate the story.²⁷ His failure to notice, let alone capitalize on, this fact further adds to its truth-value as evidence. Once the story of the robbers is taken seriously, that is, then other elements that appear to confirm the assumption of Oedipus' guilt begin to unravel. One of these can be noted in terms of the *fabula/sjuzhet* distinction. If the purpose of the play's narrative is to reconstruct the real life events of many years before, there is one question that is hard to answer on the basis of what is presented: Who reached Thebes first, Oedipus or the witness? If it were Oedipus, how was it that Thebes could make him their king as a reward for solving the riddle of the Sphinx before they had heard of the news that King Laius was dead, thus leaving the throne vacant? When and to whom did this witness tell his story? These and other confusing discrepancies may not finally prove anything one way or another, but they contribute to a pattern of uncertainty that blurs the apparently clear-cut conclusion that Oedipus is Laius' killer. Nietzsche may have this kind of effect in mind when he talks of the deceptive clarity that is the very essence of Sophocles' poetic power:

The language of the Sophoclean heroes surprises us by its Apollonian determinacy and lucidity. It seems to us that we can fathom their innermost being, and we are somewhat surprised that we had such a short way to go. However, once we abstract

from the character of the hero as it rises to the surface and becomes visible ... and instead penetrate to the myth which is projected in these luminous reflections, we suddenly come up against a phenomenon which is the exact opposite of a familiar optical one. After the energetic attempt to focus on the sun, we have, by way of remedy almost, dark spots before our eyes.²⁸

A conclusion in which nothing is concluded

One of the few literary works to match Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in terms of the plenitude of interpretations it has spawned is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Like Conrad's novella, Sophocles' tragedy has produced an interpretative 'chain' that is seemingly inexhaustible.²⁹ No single interpretation ever seems adequate to stabilize the meaning of such texts. *Oedipus the King* remains an open text, which continues to baffle even as it mesmerizes the attention of readers and theatregoers. Having addressed a range of somewhat surprising and even eccentric possibilities in the play (Oedipus did not kill his father! Sophocles did not after all produce a play that is perfect in form!), I will therefore conclude in an appropriately open-ended way by considering just four different conclusions as to what the play might plausibly mean.

Firstly, there is Friedrich Nietzsche's rich and suggestive discussion of Sophocles, from which the passage quoted above is taken. Nietzsche calls Oedipus 'the greatest sufferer of the Greek stage' and frames the problem of the play's meaning as a somewhat 'Delphic' question: 'Oedipus, his father's murderer, his mother's lover, solver of the Sphinx's riddle! What is the meaning of this triple fate?'³⁰ He goes on to meditate on an ancient Persian idea that a true magus must be incestuously begotten, for insight into the secrets of nature is only granted to those that transgress 'the consecrated tables of the natural order'. This conclusion links Oedipus to the prophet Teiresias, whose knowledge transcends the bounds of time and derives similarly from the 'queerness' of the blind prophet's experience. Teiresias too had transgressed the 'natural categories' of sex: having once been turned into a woman and then back again into a man, he was positioned to know the answer to one of the unanswerable conundrums, whether it is the man or the woman who has the greater pleasure in heterosexual intercourse.

The second interpretation is the most famous and influential reading of the play, that of Sigmund Freud. Freud follows Nietzsche to the extent that he locates the meaning of the drama in the profundity of its mythic content. For Freud the power of the play derives from the fact that the myth reminds every member of the audience of their own earliest desires. It awakens the buried truth that each person in their infancy once experienced what Oedipus did: the twin desires to be their mother's lover and their father's killer, thus revealing the parents as the first objects of their undeveloped sexual desire and aggression. The repression of those desires opens a way (as if by compensation) for the human subject to develop within the powerful structures of Language and the Law, or what Jacques Lacan would designate the Symbolic Order. If for Freud that proper resolution of the 'Oedipus conflict' marks the subject's entry into culture and knowledge, this is at best an ambivalent gain that can also lead to the formation of extreme psychic disorders. Oedipus fails to understand the nature of the malaise that afflicts both himself and Thebes; in a similar way, the Freudian analysand must struggle to reach that knowledge through a process of analysis that Freud likens to the 'cunning delays and ever mounting excitement' of Sophocles' drama. Like Nietzsche, Freud sees the profound meaning of the drama as deriving from its mythic content; but it is in the text of the play that he discovers the very structure of psychoanalytic analysis. Many classicists have dismissed Freud's linking of his Oedipal theory to Sophocles on the grounds that Oedipus did not really manifest 'Oedipal' symptoms because he was entirely unaware of the nature of his relationships to his parents.³¹ But that is to take the theory too literally. For one thing, Freud is talking of the resonances of the myth in its most basic structure and not a realist representation. Then, at the level of the text, Freud is clearly struck by the similarity between his own emergent theories derived from his earliest treatment of neurotic patients and the narrative processes of Sophocles' drama. To discover these similarities, Freud needed to read the play and its central character as subjects available for analysis, and to bring the analyst's attention to bear on the emerging narrative.

The third interpretation, of Jonathan Culler, while not entirely separable from psychoanalytic interests, directs attention more exclusively to the text and away from its mythic underpinnings or antecedents. He accepts Good-

hart's insights into the text's narrative ambiguities and then links the narrative conundrum exposed by Goodhart to Freud's case history of 'the Wolfman'.³² In his narrative of that case, Freud determines that this patient's suffering is related to the shocking early-life experience of witnessing his parents copulating. But this 'primary' scene is presented at several removes. With the more advanced knowledge than the young child had at the time of that imagined event, some set of circumstances, perhaps only obliquely connected, has re-triggered the original trauma. After the process of analysis has led the patient back through layers of 'repressed memory', in an extraordinary final comment Freud states that it does not matter whether the primary event actually happened. The important thing is that the effect was there, whether it was based on an actual event or not. Culler concludes that the dénouement of the Sophoclean drama need not be based absolutely on the (prior) fact of Oedipus killing his father; rather, it is the necessary and only viable conclusion because *the narrative demands* that it be so. For that reason, he concludes, the real or fictitious events in a particular narrative only have to assume a prior reality for the narrative to proceed; to put it another way, it is the narrative that determines the 'facts' of the case, not the other way around. As in the contentious legal area of appealing to repressed memories to unearth evidence of a heinous crime, transposing the 'evidence' of narrative necessity into a forensic field whose purpose is veridical might involve a fundamental category confusion.

The fourth interpretation is that of Sandor Goodhart himself, which has greatly influenced this discussion. In his highly original article, Goodhart draws very different conclusions from the three I have summarized above. Relying on René Girard's anthropological work on the social significance of scape-goat rituals (*pharmakos*),³³ Goodhart interprets Sophocles' play as dramatizing not the mythic material of Oedipus slaying his father and wedding his mother but the process whereby Oedipus came to believe that such was the case. When he finally assumes his own guilt and abandons his resistance to the prophecies of priests, prophets, and oracles, he accepts the position of the scapegoat: he takes on the burden of guilt for the accumulated violence of the city. Goodhart (with Girard) thus sees the play as structured in terms of the primitive ritual in which first a human citizen and in later versions an animal was cruelly slain on behalf (as it were) of the whole community.

One of the striking things about the history of this ritual and its relevance to Sophocles' drama was that the one unfortunately chosen for sacrifice could be the very highest person in the land (the king) or the lowest (a criminal).

By the time of Sophocles, these rituals had either been completely eradicated or transformed into a merely symbolic version of the violent sacrifice. On the other hand, the older ritual is echoed in one of the strange aspects of the Athenian democracy: the practice of ostracism. The purpose of ostracism was to enable the state to resolve an unresolvable dispute. The procedure involved first taking a vote in the assembly as to whether there should be a process of ostracism in any given year. If the vote were positive, the next thing would be to determine who was to be ostracized. The last time ostracism was practiced in Athens was in 416 BCE, when it failed to resolve an impasse over policy for conducting the Peloponnesian War. The two leaders who were at odds were Nicias and Alcibiades; but when the vote produced a different candidate altogether for ostracizing, the failure of the process to resolve that political deadlock led to its abandonment. In terms of other contemporary reference points for Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the likely date of its production in the early stages of the War also saw Athens decide not to consult Delphi any more, in the belief that the oracle was under the influence of their enemies. In the end such historical facts cannot prove anything one way or another; but they can certainly remind us that the Athenian tragedies were played to an audience that was caught up in major social changes involving life and death issues, and that the theatre was one of the prime cultural spaces, shared by the stage performers and an audience of their fellow citizens, where the city's anxieties were played out.

If the appeal to historical and cultural context cannot resolve questions of interpretation, they nevertheless offer some illumination of the conditions for interpretation. The discussion of the *pharmakos* ritual, for example, throws some light on otherwise puzzling or obscure moments in the play. One of these is the *kommos* that follows the altercation between Oedipus and Creon.³⁴ The abrupt change of direction this produces is effected by Sophocles' use of one of the formal dramaturgical modes available to the poet. It is interesting to speculate whether in this case the *kommos* could produce an effect akin to Brechtian 'estrangement'. The quasi-realistic speech rhythms

of the dialogue between the two Theban leaders who are the husband and brother of Jocasta are broken by the *kommos*, a sequence of lyrical verses performed in music and dance between Oedipus and the Chorus. The effect such a formal break might have had in the Greek theatre is irrecoverable; but even in translation the words retain something of that strangeness:

CHORUS:

Believe it, be sensible
Give way, my king, I beg you!

OEDIPUS:

What do you want from me, concessions?

CHORUS:

Respect him—he's been no fool in the past
And now he's strong with the oath he swears to god.

OEDIPUS:

You know what you're asking?

CHORUS:

I do.

OEDIPUS:

Then out with it!

CHORUS:

The man's your friend, your kin, he's under oath—
Don't cast him out, disgraced
Branded with guilt on the strength of hearsay only.

OEDIPUS:

Know full well, if that is what you want
You want me dead or banished from the land. (725-35)

After this exchange Oedipus' anger does not completely abate but the dramatic narrative is re-directed. The most intriguing moment in the dialogue is his final statement, that the Chorus's demand that he drop his accusations against Creon is tantamount to asking him to become himself the guilty party. In terms of the requirements of the *pharmakos* ritual, this seems to imply that one of these two must occupy the place of the scapegoat. Oedipus' statement

repeats the terms both of his curse on whoever is found guilty of Laius' murder (death or banishment) and the treatment meted out to the *pharmakos* victim. Later in the play, the possibility of death is dropped and replaced by banishment alone, thus bringing the play closer to the contemporary procedure of ostracism. But the final outcome of the drama remains uncertain: the closing scene, far from demonstrating the efficacy of ritual for cleansing the city of Thebes of its pollution by banishing Oedipus, presents the new leader Creon in a state of uncertainty as to what action to take regarding Oedipus. The devastated family simply go back inside the Palace. On the evidence of Sophocles' other Theban plays alone, this is not the moment when the woes that beset Thebes were resolved once and for all.

The only conclusion about *Oedipus the King* that can be drawn with confidence is that it instantiates the truth that when religious faith is giving way to rational inquiry, as long as there remains a tension between these two mutually exclusive discourses, conclusions regarding the most fundamental questions of life and death are impossible. The particular new consensus that is yet to come into being may depend on accepting the insight that henceforth the interpretative process will know no closure. *Oedipus the King* tantalizes its audience with such a prospect. That is one reason why it is hard to categorize the play itself in terms of its being either 'conservative' or 'progressive'.

NOTES

- 1 John Willett, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 87.
- 2 Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 37.
- 3 Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (1965; London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), pp. 101-2.
- 4 The theoretical output of the 1970s that I am most concerned with in this essay is the one that follows from the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and his fellow researchers in Paris, coupled with certain interventions in the field of narratology that came shortly after. This is not to minimize the important work of Anglophone scholars that built on the work of French structuralists and considerably enriched the hermeneutic methods applied to ancient tragedies. See especially, Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Inter-*

- pretation of *Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- 5 The various threads of this line of analysis are brought together in Frederick Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- 6 I am passing over the question of whether a later interpretative discourse brings out meanings that are already there in the 'original' text, or anachronistically generates meanings that don't properly belong to that original text. Here I am relying somewhat on Slavoj Žižek, who in turn was relying on Hans-Georg Gadamer, when he rejected the supposition inherent in the notion of an original true meaning. He argued that there never is a moment when the text is transparently available for interpretation, but that from the start it will generate a diversity of readings that will only be unravelled through the chain of interpretations that it generates. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 214.
- 7 For a discussion of Voltaire's negative critique of the play, see Sandor Goodhart, 'Leistas Ephaske: Oedipus and Laius' Many Murderers', *Diacritics* 8.1 (1978), 63. (The transliterated Greek words simply mean 'He said robbers').
- 8 Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947).
- 9 For a persuasive elaboration of Oedipus' delusional 'conspiracy theory' see Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).
- 10 Segal is very clear on the importance of this confusion of numbers by Oedipus: *Tragedy and Civilization*, pp. 214-16.
- 11 Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). All further quotations from the play are taken from this translation and indicated in the text by line numbers.
- 12 See H. W. Parke, *Greek Oracles* (London: Hutchinson, 1967).
- 13 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, rev. edn (New York: Zone Books, 1990), pp. 23-28.
- 14 One case for seeing Oedipus as embodying the essence of Thebes itself (and by extension, Athens) is made in Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).
- 15 For a very different and also persuasive suggestion for the staging of the play, see David Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982).
- 16 For an extreme version of this reading, see Philip Vellacott, *Sophocles and Oedipus* (London: Macmillan, 1971).
- 17 Richard C. Jebb, ed., *Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914).
- 18 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 49-84.
- 19 Fagles omits Cadmus' name from his translation although it is included in the Greek text.
- 20 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 116.
- 21 Plato's *Gorgias*, named after the famous sophist and rhetorician, records the growing scepticism surrounding the ethical implications of language's capacity to mask truth.
- 22 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 23-28.
- 23 Timothy J. Reiss develops ideas of Michel Foucault in advancing a hypothesis that the abrupt appearance of tragedy in Athens in the fifth Century BCE (as well as its equally sudden disappearance in terms of original creativity) were related to its cultural role of containing a moment of 'epistemic crisis' in Athens: *Tragedy and Truth* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 1-39.
- 24 E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 29-30.
- 25 Goodhart's interpretation of the play implies some such modification in assumptions concerning the kind of attention the audience might give to the stage action.
- 26 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 169-87.
- 27 A movie of Sophocles' play, directed by Philip Saville, with Christopher Plummer as Oedipus and Orson Welles as a memorable Teiresias, noticing the problem of the single witness who escaped the massacre, resolved it in this way. Each time the play touched on the 'place where three roads meet' and what happened there, the actor playing Oedipus would drift into a semi-daze and a flashback would bring back the events with ever-increasing clarity. In Oedipus' final recollection, one man amidst all the turmoil is shown running into hiding but unnoticed by Oedipus. This 'resolution' is only achieved by introducing a detail not present in the text in order to paper over what seems an accidental discrepancy.

- 28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 59.
- 29 See Slavoj Zizek, *Sublime Object*, pp. 213-15. Reversing the commonly held view that the meaning of a complex text is immanent in an imaginary 'original' moment of response that has been lost through the process of interpretation, Zizek argues for the importance of the 'interpretative tradition' in establishing the 'meaning' in the fullness of its possibilities.
- 30 Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 61.
- 31 For a powerful anti-Freudian case, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 85-112.
- 32 See Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1956).
- 33 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
- 34 A *kommos* is described in the Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon as 'a dirge or lamentation sung in turn by one of the actors and the Chorus'. The inclusion of a *kommos* was not a formal requirement for the tragedian, but a variation available for composition. It was thus a recognizable feature of tragedies. That does not exclude the 'estranging' effect I am claiming for this moment in *Oedipus the King*.

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Prime-time Drama: *Canterbury Tales* for the Small Screen

MARGARET ROGERSON

What Chaucer needs is intelligent popularization and a good television adaptation.¹

There have been many attempts to popularize Chaucer in modern times. In his informative study entitled *Chaucer at Large*, Steve Ellis has provided a detailed account of the progress of such efforts over roughly a hundred years to the end of the twentieth century.² But despite his claim that 'Chaucer has not really taken hold of the public in any sustained manner',³ interest in reinventing the poet and, in particular, appropriating his most famous literary undertaking, *The Canterbury Tales*, is so great that further important developments have already occurred in the few years since the publication of Ellis's book, especially in the area of performance.⁴ The Chaucer industry continues to offer its wares in the public market place and within the walls of the academy, but there remains a consensus of opinion, both general and academic, that Chaucer is 'very under-read'.⁵ Peter Mack, reviewing no less than four new books of Chaucerian scholarship in 1996, lamented that the medieval poet 'has the misfortune to be read today mainly by professionals' and called for a 'good television adaptation' to redress the situation.⁶

By the turn of the century the British Broadcasting Corporation had produced no less than three major television versions of Chaucer's best known work, two of these long before Mack was writing (in 1969 and 1975) and the third, shortly afterwards, an educational series of animated *Canterbury Tales* completed over a two year period (1998-2000) that was distinguished by being nominated for an Academy Award in 1999.⁷ Mack may not have been satisfied by this cartoon-style pilgrimage because it was aimed at 'family viewing'⁸ and was, perhaps, somewhat too narrowly focussed to achieve the kind of 'popularization' he had in mind. Not all of the critics were charmed by it, with one feeling he 'ought to be kind to ... a lovingly