

KARAKANTZA (E.D.) **Who Am I? (Mis)identity and the Polis in *Oedipus Tyrannus***. Washington DC: Centre for Hellenic Studies and Harvard University Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 178. £17.95. 9780674237940.
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How is it possible to say something new and substantial about Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*? Efimia Karakantza makes her bold choice explicit: 'No matter how important all the other issues are, it is the omnipresent question of identity that dominates the entire Sophoclean tragedy' (43). She brings out the complexity of Oedipus' self-discovery by skilfully combining elements from a range of thinkers that includes Cornelius Castoriadis (on the polis), Claude Lévi-Strauss (on lameness), Michel Foucault (on power-knowledge), Charles Taylor (on the self) and Jean-Pierre Vernant (on the will).

From Lévi-Strauss Karakantza takes the *lameness* implicit in the names of the successive kings Labdacus, Laius and Oedipus. Oedipus' deformity, caused by Laius yoking together the baby's feet, both integrates him into the family tree and marks him as an outcast. Reminded of it, Oedipus calls it an 'ancient' (ἀρχαῖος, 1033) evil, to which Karakantza compares Deianeira's reference to the centaur Nessus as ἀρχαῖος (*Trachiniai* 555): in both instances the word marks the re-emergence of primitive violence into a life from its remote past. I mention this to exemplify the sensitivity of Karakantza's comments on the text, which often supplement P.J. Finglass' commentary (Cambridge 2018). She also connects the episode to her fundamental theme, the relationship of individual identity to the polis, by interpreting Laius' mutilation of his baby son as a perversion of the ceremony of naming: Oedipus is never admitted into his father's *oikos*, 'crippling any later capacity for acting properly as a citizen' (50).

For Castoriadis, in creating democracy the Athenian polis *reimagined* itself as autonomous in the sense of being subject only to the laws that it had itself passed. Accordingly, explains Karakantza, 'the perception of oneself as an Athenian involved the imaginary signification of a citizen attached to his polis' (20) and subject to its laws, rather than as, for example, a client attached to his individual lord. The identity of Oedipus (and of some other Sophoclean individuals), be it ὑπίπολις or ἄπολις (*Antigone* 370), can be understood only in this historical context of accountability to the polis. The self is historically constructed, and the ancient Greek self is 'essentially public' (26). This requires Karakantza to demolish Bernard Knox's influential exaggeration of the self-sufficiency of the Sophoclean 'hero' ('to the hero himself the opinion of others is irrelevant': *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley 1964), 31). In this she succeeds, not least by pointing out how relevant the opinion of others is even to the suicidal Ajax.

Another influential reading of Athenian tragedy to which Karakantza opposes her Castoriadean perspective is Vernant's essay 'Intimations of the will in Greek tragedy' (in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet (eds), *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York 1988), 49–84). Who is the source of Oedipus' actions, the gods or Oedipus himself? If it is the gods, then how can Oedipus be guilty? To these obvious and famous questions there are various kinds of answers. One is to remove the incompatibility between divine control and human autonomy by integrating them into a whole, by, for instance, adopting David Kovacs' analogy of a chess game between an ordinary player (Oedipus) and a grandmaster (Apollo): Oedipus acts autonomously (and reasonably) but must lose ('The Role of Apollo in *Oedipus Tyrannus*', in J.C.R. Cousland and J. Hume (eds), *The Play of Texts and Fragments: Essays in Honour of Martin Cropp* (Leiden 2009), 357–68, analogy at 359–60). Another is to retain the incompatibility but explain it historically (Vernant): tragedy inherits the traditional idea of the gods imposing madness, transgression and pollution on successive generations of a family and combines it with the new idea of the accountability of the free individual agent to the laws of the polis. But this

new commitment of the individual to his actions is, says Vernant, ‘still limited, indecisive, and vaguely defined’ (82): tragedy expresses the ‘internal inadequacy of the agent’ (83) by retaining overall control by the gods.

Karakantza’s own answer is also historical, but she rejects the idea of transition: ‘when we come to classical Athens and the tragic genre, we can understand the co-existence of the divine and the human, not as an incomplete transition, but as a new “creation” in the sense that Castoriades defines it’ (142–43). From this perspective, she claims to see in the *Oedipus* ‘no fatalistic or divinely bound action’, but rather ‘the transcendent ability of mortals to rise in stature above all external constraints’ (145); in other words, she sees the opposite of the ‘weakness inherent in action’ (83) ascribed to tragedy by Vernant.

The appeal of this view, one-sided though it may seem, is that the drama does indeed provide a unified, compelling vision, not a juxtaposition of historically successive outlooks. But in what does the unity consist? Here I differ from Karakantza (and from Kovacs and Vernant), but that is because her book has helped me to expand my thinking on this issue. I share her view of *Ajax* 394, σκότος, ἐμὸν φῶς (‘darkness, my light’), as ‘one of the most beautiful lines of poetry ever written’ (6). For Sophocles the unity of opposites is, as for Heraclitus, a pervasive conception, through which he perceives and shapes what others call a historical transition: the action of *Oedipus* is simply both autonomous and pre-determined by the gods.

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The ‘Oxford Greek and Latin College Commentaries’ series is designed for intermediate and advanced students. Several volumes have already appeared, including Aristophanes’ *Wasps* edited by Kenneth Rothwell (2019). The format of this commentary is to give an average of eight lines of the Greek text, taken from the Oxford Classical Text of Hugh Lloyd-Jones and Nigel Wilson, at the top of each page, with notes underneath which mostly explain vocabulary, grammar and syntax. It seems to be assumed that the reader will start with almost no Greek, as the most basic vocabulary and constructions are explained. On the other hand, the explanations can go into considerable detail. Take, for example, the note on Agamemnon’s fatal boast after killing a stag in the sacred grove of Artemis, οὐ κατὰ σφάγας | ἐκκομπάσας ἔπος τι τυγχάνει βαλῶν (568–69): ‘+* τυγχάνει historical present for vividness, standing mostly for narrative aorist (with supplem. ptc. ἐκκομπάσας; S#1883; SS 186§5; GMT#33. When an aorist ptc. is used with τυγχάνω, λαγχάνω or φθάνω in present or imperfect indicative, it is *not* coincidental with the finite verb but retains its own reference to past time: S#2096b, GMT#146; SS 261§12f); > “about whose killing (οὐ κατὰ σφάγας) he (happened to have slipped) slipped some boastful word after hitting (βαλῶν) it”’. The symbol + before τυγχάνει indicates that its meaning will not be given again in the notes as it should be learned by the student at this point, and that it appears in the glossary after the commentary. Words which appear only once or twice are translated in the commentary but do not appear in the glossary. The asterisk before τυγχάνει indicates that τυγχάνω appears in the list of ‘Irregular (and Unpredictable) Principal Parts’ at the end. The abbreviations refer to the standard reference works H.W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (rev. G.M. Messing, Harvard 1956), W.W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the*