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The Prologue of Euripides' Oedipus

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Abstract: The article reexamines the evidence for the prologue of Euripides' lost Oedipus (fr. 539a Kannicht) and makes some suggestions concerning the identity of the speaker and the train of thought of the prologue.

The opening line of Euripides' lost *Oedipus* (now fr. 539a = test. iii Kannicht) is twice quoted in a slightly adapted form by Plutarch in a quip he ascribes to Cicero without specifying the name of the author or the title of the play (*Life of Cicero* 27.2 = 874d; *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* Cicero 12 = *Moralia* 205c). Its attribution to the *Oedipus*, first conjectured by August Meineke,[1] was confirmed 120 years later when Bruno Snell identified it with the trimeter quoted as the ἀρχή of the play in the ὑπόθεcιc that had recently been published (*P.Oxy.* XXVII 2455 fr. 4 col. iv, dating to the early second century AD).[2] The combined text runs:

Φοί⌋βου ποτ᾽ ǫ̣ὐκ ⌊ἐῶντος ἔcπειρεν⌋ τένκ̣γ⌊ο⌋ν̣

τέκνα Plut.

Against Phoebus' will (Laius) once fathered a child

Neither Plutarch nor what survives of the ὑπόθεcιc indicate who the speaker is, and no other evidence regarding the prologue is known to have survived. Who spoke the prologue, and what he or she may have said after fr. 539a, remains unknown. The present article seeks to reassess the evidence, eliminate a long-lived but arguably erroneous solution, and suggest two possible alternatives.

That the speaker was Jocasta's brother, and interim ruler of Thebes, Creon was first hypothesised by Carl Robert.[3] Though this is not the only conjecture to have been proposed on the subject, it has been quite popular over the past century or so, both before and after the definitive recognition of fr. 539a as the beginning of the prologue.[4] But in view of the opening line itself and of what little we know about the play, this hypothesis faces significant problems which have not been generally realized so far. Evidently, the prologue speaker knows that Laius—the only possible subject of ἔcπειρεν—sired a child against Apollo's will. In and of itself, this does not necessarily restrict the field of potential

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for saving me from many a mistake and making me think more clearly about some aspects of the topic, and to Stefano Vecchiato for volunteering the suggestion cited at p. 31. Any remaining errors are my sole responsibility. Fragments of, and testimonia to, the *Oedipus* are cited with the numbers given by Kannicht 2004. All translations are mine.

1 Meineke 1843, 289.

2 Snell 1963, 120.

3 Robert 1915, I 329–30.

4 See Séchan 1926, 434–5; Webster 1967, 242; van Looy in Jouan & van Looy 2000, 442.

candidates: there is no suggestion in our other sources that Laius' transgression was a secret (even though equally nothing indicates that it was not). However, the fact that the speaker mentions it—and in such a prominent position—indicates not only that he or she knows of the fact, but also that he or she regards it as *significant.* This is what places the greatest strain on the Creon hypothesis, as we shall see.

The plot of the *Oedipus* is hard to pin down with certainty even in outline, given the scarcity of fragments (539a–557, most of which are gnomic) and the lack of assistance from the extremely fragmentary ὑπόθεσις.[5] The one identified papyrus of the play (*P.Oxy.* XXVII 2459, fourth century AD) is only relevant to a single scene.[6] Somewhat unhelpfully, and probably second-hand, John Malalas reports in his *Chronography* that the tragedy was "about Oedipus and Jocasta and the Sphinx", περὶ τοῦ Οἰδίποδος καὶ τῆς Ἰοκάστης καὶ τῆς Σφιγγός (2.17 p. 38 Thurn).[7] It has been suggested, perhaps rightly, that the *Oedipus* is behind two details in Hyginus' fables 66 (*Laius*) and 67 (*Oedipus*) which diverge from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Euripides' *Phoenician Women*: that Oedipus was discovered on the seashore by queen Periboea when she went to do her washing, and that it was she who revealed to him that king Polybus was not his biological father.[8] Likewise, it has been claimed that a relief cup from Tanagra (Paris, Louvre MNC 660) and an alabaster urn from Volterra (Florence, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 5707), both dating from the second century BC, also represent scenes from the *Oedipus*.[9] The coincidence between the Louvre cup, two scholia to the *Phonenician Women* (26 and 28 Schwartz), and by implication Hyginus 66.2 in one particular detail—Oedipus being thrown into the sea *à la* Perseus instead of exposed on the slopes of Cithaeron—does suggest an authoritative source which it is tempting to identify with our play,[10] but this hypothesis cannot be verified.[11]

All that we know from the fragments themselves is that someone, perhaps a messenger, described in some detail the meeting between a character, probably Oedipus, and the Sphinx (frr. 540, 540a, probably 540b);[12] that Oedipus was blinded by Laius' servants, who knew

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[5] On the ὑπόθεσις of the *Oedipus*, see van Rossum-Steenbeek 1998, 208–9; Meccariello 2014, 262. For a good overview of possible reconstructions of the plot see most recently van Looy in Jouan & van Looy 2000, 436–44 and in Collard, Cropp & Gibert 2004: 107–10.

[6] On the papyrus and its text see most recently Prodi 2011, with earlier bibliography. Turner 1962b, 86 suggests that the two largest fragments (frr. 1 and 2 = 540 and 540a Kannicht) may come from the same column; that they describe the same episode, at any rate, is clear.

[7] On Malalas and the *Oedipus* see D'Alfonso 2006, 25–31, examining other elements in his narrative of the Oedipus myth that may go back to our play. Malalas' source was probably a collection of ὑποθέσεις, perhaps accompanied by prologues or extracts from them (*ibid.* 3–5, 25; see already Carrara 1987, 21–3), combined of course with all sorts of material unrelated to Euripides.

[8] See the items cited in the next note and Huys 1997, 17–18.

[9] Louvre: Pottier 1885–8, 49–52. Florence: Zannoni 1812, 1–27. Images of the two artefacts can be found in *LIMC* s.vv. Hermes 390 and Iokaste 6 respectively.

[10] Beside Pottier see especially Robert 1915, I 325–7; Huys 1995, 182–5, 227–8.

[11] Rightly Aélion 1986, 44.

[12] The identity of the speaker is unknown, but the speech must have been a *rhesis angelike* of some sort, not a part of the prologue: against the view expressed by Webster 1967, 242 see already Turner 1962b, 82; Vaio 1964, 47–8 (but cf. 49–50); Dingel 1970, 92–3; Di Gregorio 1980, 57–61. Hose 1990, 12–13, cited with approval by Collard in Collard, Cropp & Gibert 2004, 108–9, suggests that the speaker is Oedipus himself, recounting his adventures to Periboea when (as she does in Hyg. 67.7) she joins him in Thebes. Whereas the amount of detail in the narrative distinctly suggests that the events belong in the immediate past (Di Gregorio 1980, 59), the attribution of such a detailed visual description to a blind man arguably contains enough dramatic irony to offset the problem; furthermore, Oedipus' self-narrative is paralleled in Sen. *Oed.* 92–102, which clearly allude

him as the son of Polybus, not of their master (fr. 541);[13] that at some point Athens may have been evoked, perhaps as the place of Oedipus' imminent exile (fr. 554b);[14] and that, as one expects, much wisdom was uttered on a variety of subjects (frr. 542–554a, **555). If *P.Oxy*. XXVII 2455 fr. 18 (part of test. iii) does represent the end of the ὑπόθεcιc to the *Oedipus*,[15] the hero's old age may have been mentioned (γήρωc, line 5). Oedipus' blinding at the hands of the unknowing servants has provoked considerable discussion, given the radical divergence from the version we now regard as canonical thanks to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, but how the rest of the plot worked remains obscure. Nevertheless, given the few things we do know, it is certain that our tragedy was not set later in the mythical time than Sophocles'; indeed, judging from frr. 540–540b, it seems likely to have started somewhat earlier. At all events, fr. 541 shows beyond question that the play began before Oedipus' identity as Laius' son was revealed to all.

This datum is hard to square with the hypothesis of a Creon προλογίζων, whether he was intent on "seinen Neid und seine Pläne entwickeln zu lassen" as argued by Robert (but this hypothesis sits very uneasily with fr. 539a, whose pertinence to the *Oedipus* was unknown to him) or on recounting "les antécédents" as suggested by Herman van Looy.[16] Unless Euripides brought to the stage an even more different version of the myth than has been imagined so far (and one struggles to think what it could have been), at the very beginning of the play Creon cannot plausibly have given such significance to Laius' transgression of Apollo's will as is intimated by fr. 539a. Presumably, Laius and Jocasta's child had been exposed and thought dead. He had certainly ended up in Corinth (or Sicyon, as reported by the scholion to *Phoenician Women* 26 Schwartz and ms. N of Hyginus 67.7). His origins were not generally known, as Oedipus' qualification as the son of Polybus in fr. 541 implies. As far as Creon could know at the beginning of the play, Laius' short-lived fatherhood had had no obvious consequences. Nothing connected it to the present time or to Thebes' present circumstances. How Creon could have proceeded in his narrative after mentioning the fact, or why it should have occurred to him to mention it at all, seems impossible to

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to our fragment (see Dingel 1970, 94–6; Töchterle 1994, 208–9; Prodi 2011, 72–4, 77). More problematic for this hypothesis, however, is ἐλίπομεν in fr. 540a.2 (on which see Prodi 2011, 75–6).

[13] The genuineness of fr. 541 and the other non-papyrological fragments has recently been called into question by Liapis 2014. While his argument about the gnomic fragments is not quite conclusive (many of the flaws of style and reasoning with which he charges them, although true, could apply to much genuine Euripides as well), the strange use of the prefix ἐξ- in ἐξομματῶ in fr. 541 does warrant some suspicion (322–3). On the other hand, his contention that a possibly incomplete, second-rate rhetorical exercise managed to displace Euripides' tragedy in the entirety of the non-papyrological tradition—but not in any of the papyri—as early as the second century BC (356–65) is quite extraordinary. I am glad to see that Finglass 2017 (brought to my attention by an anonymous reviewer and cited here with the author's permission) shares the same misgivings in a much more articulate form. The present discussion assumes that fr. 541 is genuine, but its conclusion does not strictly require this to be the case.

[14] Di Gregorio 1980, 88–91, as qualified by Aélion 1986, 52–3. But van Looy in Jouan & van Looy 2000, 444 and Liapis 2014, 315 may well be right to suggest that Menander's parody, thanks to which the fragment is known (*Samia* 325–6, transmitted by *P. Bodm*. XXV fol. 10), may have turned into an address to Athens what was originally an address to Thebes.

[15] The conjecture is due to Luppe 1983, 125–42; see also Meccariello 2014, 262. Turner 1962a, 69 suggests that fr. 108 too may belong to the *Oedipus*, but if so, its only recognisable word π]ατροκτο̣ν[tell us nothing that we did not already know.

[16] Robert 1915, I 330; van Looy in Jouan & van Looy 2000, 442, cf. Collard in Collard, Cropp & Gibert 2004, 108.

fathom. On the hypothesis of an expository prologue in the Euripidean manner, Creon cannot be our man. Not much likelier it is that the speaker is another "person ignorant of Oedipus' true identity" as suggested by Christopher Collard—with one exception, which will be discussed at the end of this article.[17] What person ignorant of Oedipus' true identity would have had a reason, or indeed the ability, to begin the prologue in this way?[18] The objection from relevance equally applies to Vayos Liapis' opposite suggestion of "one of the drama's minor characters, a person who was aware of Oedipus's true identity but whose private knowledge of the matter would not instantly lead to revelation when Oedipus finally appeared on stage".[19] Such a character could only have a partial knowledge of the facts, whichever part it is that they knew. No; in its position at the beginning of the play, fr. 539a requires a character who knows the secrets of the past—namely, that Laius' child did not die, but survived in another country unaware of his true origins—and can connect them to the present and the immediate future.

Before the *incipit* of the play was recognised in fr. 539a, Johann Adam Hartung had hypothesised that the prologue was spoken "aut a deo aliquo aut a Laii umbra sive manibus".[20] His reasoning was of an abstract kind: the events in the rest of the play, as he reconstructed them, necessitated that the audience be informed "de caussa rerum et nexu" from the very beginning. However, fr. 539a can be seen to confirm his intuition that the speaker of the prologue must have possessed supernatural knowledge. Although prologuising revenants are not unheard of in tragedy,[21] the idea that the speaker may have been Laius' ghost is excluded by fr. 539a itself: although the papyrus does not confirm Plutarch's ἔσπειρεν (which could in theory be his own adaptation, just as he adapted τέκνον into τέκνα), the form cannot be amended from the third person into the first without violating either metre (ἔσπειρα) or tense (ἔσπειρον). A god is therefore the best alternative. Divinities speak the prologues of Euripides' *Alcestis* (Apollo), *Hippolytus* (Aphrodite), *Trojan Women*

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[17] In Collard, Cropp & Gibert 2004, 108. The same applies to Vaio's hypothesis of "a servant of the king's house, one of Laius' θεράποντες, or some other minor figure" (1964, 50).

[18] A similar argument is made by Di Gregorio 1980, 62–3 on the basis of his conjecture that Oedipus' murder of Laius, which had taken place before the action of the play unbeknownst to the other characters, was mentioned in the prologue. As the present article attempts to show, this supposition is unnecessary for a similar conclusion to be drawn. See also Kannicht 2004, I 571: "ἔσπειρεν τέκνον scil. Laius Oedipum (id quod dramatis personae in initio fabulae nesciebant [cf. F 541])", though the point at issue really is Oedipus' survival rather than his birth per se.

[19] Liapis 2014, 313–14, cf. 355–6. The existence of such a knowledgeable minor character does not seem strikingly plausible: if someone in Thebes already knew all about Oedipus from the very beginning and (crucially) proceeded to tell everything to the audience straightaway, what was left to happen in the rest of the tragedy? Furthermore, on the stage no less than in life, one does not simply recognise an adult from a baby one has seen decades earlier: contrast on the one hand the tokens that are normally required for recognition scenes, and on the other hand Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, where the discovery of Oedipus' identity requires the concomitant intervention of three people in addition to himself.

[20] Hartung 1843–4, I 247. An apparition of Laius' ghost had already been conjectured by Welcker 1839, 539.

[21] Euripides' *Hecuba* opens with he ghost of Polydorus and Seneca conjures the ghost of Thyestes at the beginning of his *Agamemnon*; his *Oedipus* too includes a report of an evocation of Laius in the underworld (619–58), though the slain king steers very clear of mentioning his own disobediences. Sophocles is also said to have brought on stage Achilles' ghost in the *Polyxena* (fr. 523 Radt ap. Stob. 1.49.50), though it is only a conjecture that it spoke the prologue, and either way his involvement with the action will have been greater than in our other parallels: see Bardel 2005, 92–8.

(Poseidon, then Athena), and *Ion* (Hermes).[22] The closest parallel for our case would be the latter, with Hermes only thinly connected to the action, his divinity providing little more than a convenient excuse for his superior knowledge. Indeed, Hermes was put forward as the prologue speaker of the *Oedipus* by Edmond Pottier on the hypothesis that the scene depicted on the Louvre cup—where Hermes appears beside Periboea (both named) as she picks up the infant Oedipus from the seashore—may be an allusion to his role in the play.[23] This seems the most attractive solution.[24] Otherwise, as Stefano Vecchiato acutely suggests to me, the speaker could be Hera, whose ire at Laius' rape of Chrysippus caused her to unleash the Sphinx on Thebes according to Pisander, *FGrHist* 16 F 10.[25]

Liapis objects that "[d]ivine prologue-speakers in Euripides always identify themselves as gods in the first few lines".[26] The objection is correct, but need not be fatal. Firstly, if mortal prologue speakers can take some time before introducing themselves (but often do not), there is little reason why a god should not be able to do the same. This is especially true of a god like Hermes, whom an audience can easily recognise from his attributes; the parallel that springs to mind is Silenus in the *Cyclops*, who never explicitly identifies himself in the prologue at all. Secondly, the required self-identification need not have happened very long after fr. 539a at all: "Against Phoebus' will Laius fathered a child; fearing the god's oracle, he had him thrown into the sea; but I, Hermes, saved him…" can easily fit into half a dozen trimeters or less. And other alternatives appear distinctly less likely. Diviners, such as the ever-present Tiresias, also possess supernatural knowledge, but one would expect a character of this kind to intervene during the action of the play (as Tiresias may have done in the *Oedipus* too, if Hyginus 67.6 is following that play) rather than prophesise to the audience before its beginning, which would be decidedly bizarre.[27]

An alternative, following a different line of reasoning altogether, can perhaps be found if one abandons the supposition of an expository prologue that narrated the story of Oedipus, or of Thebes, from Laius' disobeyance of the oracle down to the dramatic time. This alternative requires the dramatic time to be very early in the myth, just after Laius' death. At that time, it is just about conceivable that a character who was aware of the slain king's past transgression could have said something along the lines of, "Laius fathered a child against Apollo's will; the oracle had said he would die at his son's hand, so the babe was

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[22] Dionysus speaking the prologue of *Bacchae* is a slightly different matter, in that he also appears as a character in the rest of the play. Nevertheless, Euripides may be playing with the commonplace of the θεὸς προλογίζων by having Dionysus manifest his true identity (and, by this very act, his superior knowledge) only in the prologue, unbeknownst to the other characters.

[23] Pottier 1885–8, 51.

[24] Pottier's suggestion is endorsed by Huys 1995, 323–4 and Collard 2005, 59 (who had been more doubtful in Collard, Cropp & Gibert 2004, 108); more cautiously Di Gregorio 1980, 63 ("recitato da una divinità […] forse da Ermes").

[25] Preserved by schol. E. *Ph*. 1760 Schwartz. The Sphinx is sent by Hera also in Apollod. 3.5.8 and D.C. 11.8, but no mention is made of her motivation. Deubner 1942 argued that Pisander's narrative actually relied on the plot of Euripides' lost *Chrysippus* and *Oedipus*, but his conclusions were disproved by de Kock 1962, see also Lloyd-Jones 2002, 3–12. This, however, does not preclude that Pisander and Euripides may have shared this or other details.

[26] Liapis 2014, 313.

[27] Likewise Di Gregorio 1980, 63.

exposed and died; yet the king has been slain nonetheless…".[28] How plausible this train of thought is, and if it is fitting stuff for beginning a prologue, I know not. If it is indeed plausible, then Creon becomes a possible candidate again, as one of very few people who will have known of the oracle and of what followed; once the need for a connection with Oedipus as known at this point in the dramatic time is removed, while still providing a plausible train of thought for the prologue as a whole, the minor character who materially exposed Oedipus may also be a possibility. A likelier candidate, however, is Jocasta, whose scepticism in matters oracular also plays a conspicuous role in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.[29] But the plausibility of such a reconstruction is far from certain; moreover, if Hyginus 67.4–5 does rely on the *Oedipus* here (which is not at all a given), there must have been a substantial interval between Laius' death and Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx, which makes this reconstruction even less likely. On the whole, the hypothesis of a straightforward expository prologue recited by a deity such as Hermes seems to remain the better option.

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[28] That the murder of Laius was mentioned is the opinion of Di Gregorio 1980, 62–3, although his reconstruction of the prologue is very different from the one proposed in his paragraph (he subscribes to the hypothesis of a god as προλογίζων, as mentioned above).

[29] Jocasta had been suggested as the speaker of the prologue, long before its opening verse was known, by Hermann 1837, 798. Robert 1915, I 330 excluded her on the rather dubious ground that she would duplicate the prologue of the *Phoenician Women*.

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