

Author(s): John Peradotto

Reviewed work(s): The Identity of Oedipus the King by Alister Cameron

Source: *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 3, (Feb. - Mar., 1972), pp. 282-285

Published by: The Classical Association of the Middle West and South, Inc.

BOOK REVIEWS

editor H. JAMES SHEY

The identity of Oedipus the king, by ALISTER CAMERON. New York: New York University Press 1968. Pp.xxiii,165. \$6.95.

IN HIS PREFACE Cameron warns us that readers interested in interpretations of a purely Freudian, historical or anthropological kind had best look elsewhere. He distinguishes the Freudian, historical and anthropological *content* from Sophocles' play itself, or from what he refers to as the *form* of the play. As he puts it, "how the thing is done, this process of the play itself and of our own thinking about it, is always of the first importance." And in view of the central position this play has always held in the history and theory of tragedy, Cameron is also concerned to determine if and to what extent "it contains the shape of tragedy as no other does."

Cameron's distinction between pre- or non-Sophoclean content and Sophoclean form implies a considerable measure of independence from tradition. Accordingly, in his first chapter he argues that the conventional nature of Greek tragedy has been largely overestimated, and that what Aristotle calls the "unbreakable" elements of a traditional story (*Poetics* 1453b.22) are so elemental as to allow the Greek poet a virtually free hand in constructing his plot. The point here is that there is no canonical version, no ur-myth, no privileged account which allows one to distinguish (as so many critics do) between "the myth" and the play. The play, insofar as it is a *made story*, is itself a myth, and the poet is literally a maker, no less of stories than of speeches, verses, lyric songs, dance patterns, visual effects, etc., as Aristotle himself insists (1451b.27) and Cameron reminds us. Here he scrutinizes the history of Oedipus before Sophocles. What emerges from this reconstruction is the uniqueness of Sophocles' artistic choices, all calculated to centralize an element not hitherto prominent even where present—ignorance and self-discovery, or, if you will, self-recognition and its consequences. Teiresias, not as Theban seer only, but as

representative of Apollo and riddler; the sphinx, not as cannibal bogey only, but as intellectual monster and riddler (in Cameron's words, "Apollo's creature"); the Delphic oracles to Laius and Oedipus; Oedipus himself, not so much as Bronze-age warrior hero or slayer of monsters, but as intellectual hero, solver of riddles, seeker of his identity, self-blinded when the truth is known: all conspire to build and bond between the Delphic god of discoveries and the Theban hero a line of connection as sure as the road between Thebes and Delphi, where Sophocles, in another apparent innovation, locates the fatal encounter of father and son (Aeschylus, contriving an *essentially* different *mythos*, set the event south of Thebes on the road to Plataea near Potniae, thus reinforcing the theme of the curse-laden Erinyes that is "a binding formal principle of his plot" [Cameron], the source of its "essential unity" [Jebb]).

Only after all the pre-Sophoclean Oedipuses have been laid to one side and the Sophoclean Oedipus seen in the light of Delphic and fifth-century ideas of self-discovery does Cameron begin, in chapter 2, his analysis of the play. He starts with a distinction between the Aristotelian term *mythos*, meaning primarily "the plotted sequence," and what Cameron chooses to call theme, "a more comprehensive structure . . . as dictated by what the dramatist has to say in the given subject." This primary structure is found to be tripartite, each division corresponding to a different kind of question posed by Oedipus: the first, down to where Jocasta gives her account of Laius' murder—"Who is the murderer?"; the second, down to the entrance of the Corinthian herdsman—"Am I the murderer?"; the third, to the recognition—"Who am I?" These three are seen as successive stages in the inevitable discovery of Oedipus of his identity. If the business of tragedy is to show us how what starts as a fearful and fascinating prospect *becomes inevitable*, then the first and second of these three stages represent the relentless exploration and elimination of alternatives: namely,

the possible identification of Oedipus not by himself but by Teiresias, either alone or along with Creon (as presumably occurred in other versions), and the possible abandonment of the search, as both Teiresias and Jocasta urge and Oedipus himself comes near doing at 669-672. What aborts these possible alternatives, and also what drives the action on when in the first two stages events seem to have played themselves out to a standstill, is the character of Sophocles' Oedipus. He explicitly guarantees the inevitability of the sequence when, in answer to Jocasta's desperate plea to stop the search, he replies that that would make him some other sort of man (*οὐκ ἂν ἐξέλοιμ' ἔτι / ποτ' ἄλλος, ὅστε μὴ κμαθεῖν τοῦμόν γένος* 1084 f.). This unique identification between the action (=the question "Who am I?") and the character of Oedipus is what accounts for this play's special purchase on the essence of the tragic experience.

But Cameron sees the first two divisions, not only as stages of a continuous action, but also as different, nearly self-contained *contexts* of action in which the discovery could be accomplished, each with a separate situation, a development, a climax, but with an aborted resolution or catastrophe. The first is *political*, with Oedipus engaged in a misconceived struggle to maintain power, cast very like Creon in the *Antigone*. The second is *divine*, with Oedipus as victim of a ruthless god, like the hero of the *Ajax*. The third division ("Who am I?"), into which the other two finally turn, has no proper parallel as a context of action, for while there may be plays in which unknown identity is discovered, none except the *Ot* contains the self-discovery of an identity unknown even to the self, a self-discovery that is, not merely a product of the action, but the whole of the action, and this in such a way that the tragic is identified with the whole being of the protagonist. The structured effect here is of three tragedies set down next to one another, the first two leading inevitably into the tragedy of the self, which, in Cameron's words, "makes explicit and articulate what is implicit in the others."

The stress in chapter 2 is on the character of Oedipus—the compulsion within that makes the action inevitable. Chapter 3 takes up the more complicated matter of the outer compulsion, the gods, more particularly Apollo and his part in the action. Here Cameron vigorously opposes Knox, Kirkwood, Kitto, Whitman, et al., in the relative unimportance which they assign the role of Apollo. Against variations on what he calls the "extreme humanist" view (e.g., Whitman, *Sophocles*,

p. 142: "The gods as personages are not in the plays; they do nothing that life could not do."), Cameron maintains that Apollo is an abiding "condition of the movement of events" (p. 64); "wherever we touch the play we find the gods" (p. 79). His first body of evidence consists of key-statements made by characters within the play, e.g., Teiresias at 376 f., Oedipus at 1329. Secondly, the choral odes: the *parodos* as a prayer for deliverance answered by the appearance of Oedipus; the first *stasimon* describing Apollo's pursuit of the murderer; the second *stasimon* in its expression of despair lest Apollo's honor perish and all religion with it, followed immediately by Jocasta's prayer to Apollo and, as if in answer, the arrival of the Corinthian herdsman. More convincingly, Cameron examines the action itself, which he plays through as if the gods were absent, to demonstrate how it must collapse without them. His basic contention (a sorely debatable one) is that coincidence argues to divine activity, especially the heavy occurrence of it, without which the purposes and characters of the *dramatis personae* are insufficient to sustain the action of this play and its prior assumptions: the timely arrival of the Corinthian herdsman when, in Corneille's words, "the actors wouldn't know where to take hold, nor what attitude to strike if he had arrived an hour later" (Cameron: "There were other days for Polybus to die."); the Theban survivor-herdsman-exposer, brought on so shortly after the Corinthian's arrival as witness to the murder of Laius, then suddenly and quite unexpectedly identified as the child-exposer by the Coryphaeus ("It cannot be seen how he could know that," says Cameron). Such events belong in a class with the death of the murderer of Mityls (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a). They imply design, Cameron insists, and design implies a designer. He argues against the application to this play of that principle of criticism which sees tragedy as a set of parallel actions, one human and one divine, operating on separate levels. This he sees as just another version of the humanist position, allowing for intervention, but confining it to prior events. He insists that the gods are not "out there" somewhere, but *inside* the events, as "a constant 'supernatural soliciting' of the action." In Cameron's opinion, it is precisely this dense, unanalyzed confusion of divine and human responsibility that lies behind Plato's objection to tragedy.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the dénouement, especially the self-blinding and the *kommos*, sections of the play usually given less than adequate treatment in much criticism which

wrongly assumes that the action is complete with the recognition of Oedipus' identity, as if action were the equivalent of intrigue. For Cameron, the recognition is not in itself an act; it is the acquisition of knowledge from which act must follow. *The act* of the play in Cameron's eyes is the self-blinding. It truly catches the actor in the act, "grasping the whole tragedy in the crucial act." But what is more important, the self-blinding, though it seems to introduce choice and will into the action (κακὰ ἐκόντα καὶκ ἄκοντα 1229 f.), should not be considered essentially different from the prior actions of the play—actions, namely, committed against the self, compounded of human and divine agency. It is not, Cameron argues, any more or less voluntary than Oedipus' other actions, nor is it the product of deliberation and reflection (Knox's view). The *daimon* that haunts the *kommos* is still less Heraclitean *ethos* than external force. What is new about the self-blinding, Cameron claims, is not the character of the action but the statement about it (1329-1331): the crucial discovery by Oedipus that he is something more than mere victim, that he acts on his own fate.

In the last chapter, Cameron takes up a striking characteristic of the *Ot*: the manner in which critical events of the past are not introduced merely to fill the audience in on the story or to get the action under way, but thoroughly taken into the action of the play. Past actions are in a sense re-enacted in the present, as, for example, when the killing of Laius comes just short of being repeated in the nearly homicidal outburst of Oedipus against another kinsman, Creon, or when Oedipus confronting the enigmatic Teiresias conjures up the young Oedipus faced with Delphi's obscurity and the riddle of the sphinx. Where the past is so thoroughly re-created, and where the impression of time is that of a continuous present, without past or future, the guilt or innocence of Oedipus in the patricide and incest can and must be judged by his present actions. And here, Cameron argues, his character impresses us as almost exactly the opposite of the injured innocent; "on the contrary, he seizes his fate and throws the whole force of his personality into it." To the built-in ignorance of the situation, Oedipus adds an inner blindness, "a condition of the soul," which makes him fit for his fate. "However monstrous the things given," Cameron says, "the man has a capacity for them" (p. 141). But, out of the merciless and hopeless built-in fatality of the world, tragedy discovers two positive elements: honor, even from the gods,

and the capacity for action which declares the self.

There are a few scattered points where Cameron's argument could perhaps have been strengthened. In citing Pindaric Oedipus-material, he might have referred to the hero's apparently legendary skill at solving riddles evident in *Pyth.* 4.263 (γνώθι νῦν τὰν Οἰδιπόδα σοφίαν). Marie Delcourt's convincing reconstruction of the sphinx in archaic tradition as a female erotic demon who assaults and rapes young men (in her otherwise uneven *Oedipe ou la légende du conquérant* [Paris 1944]) would have rounded out his survey of its part in the tradition before Sophocles. On the self-blinding, Cameron (p. 27, n. 25) misquotes the fragment from Euripides' *Oedipus* (541N²), writing "son of Laius" instead of "son of Polybus," and thus overlooks an important fact: the blinding was, not only done by others in that play, but also occurred before the discovery of Oedipus' identity. Again on the self-blinding, Cameron's contention that it is not essentially different from Oedipus' prior actions could be further supported by the fact that it is prophesied by Teiresias (419, 454). In discussing the parallelism between the murder of Laius and the murderous threats made to Creon, Cameron's argument (that Creon is a kinsman, "by marriage to be sure, but . . .," p. 130) misses more obvious and remarkably stronger evidence: Creon is a kinsman *by blood*, in fact Oedipus' maternal uncle—a *second father!*

It appears somewhat odd that a book on Oedipus, published in 1968, should bear no reference, even in passing, to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, especially his widely cited article "The structural study of myth," in which the Oedipus myth serves as a methodological model. As an interpretation, to be sure, it is in many ways deficient, as Lévi-Strauss himself declares, but the structural methodology is one which might have added more muscle to Cameron's analysis, especially what he has to say on myth in chapter 1, and would have made him perhaps more hesitant in his dismissal of Freud, whose interpretation is simply *another version* of the myth for Lévi-Strauss. Cameron's notion of form seems to come very close to Lévi-Strauss on structure: "If there is any meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined." If (as another structuralist, Roland Barthes, maintains) a science of literature depends upon the possibility of construing literary works as myth, then classicists

must surely come to terms with such an influential methodology, if only to dismiss it.

Misprints abound in Cameron's book, especially where Greek is quoted. *Errata* were noticed on p. 27, 34, 92 (3), 93, 130, 134, 141, 143, 151, 153, 156, 162, 164.

JOHN PERADOTTO

State University of New York at Buffalo

Latin literature: from the beginnings to the close of the second century A.D., by FRANK O. COPLEY. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1969. Pp.372. \$12.50.

ACCORDING TO THE JACKET, "this . . . comprehensive history offers a critical account of five centuries of Latin literature" and indeed this is what the austere and inclusive title and subtitle of the book and the format of the contents page ("I. The Beginnings . . . II. Andronicus, Naevius, and Ennius . . . III. Plautus . . . IV. Terence . . . V. Lucilius . . .," and so on) lead one to expect. But Copley himself makes no such grand claims. That his intentions were more modest and more personal can be assumed from his statement in a prefatory note that the book "was written from the heart, in every sense of the word." That he had a different sort of book in mind is also implied in the disarming remark in the same note that "most of the factual information in this book came from J. Wight Duff's two volumes on the history of Latin literature" and in the fact that in case of the "interpretive material" Duff is the only named scholar among many whose influence he acknowledges (presumably Duff most often came in handy with those Latin authors whom Copley finds uncongenial, but who had to be included in a "comprehensive history").

We do not have here a simple case of misunderstanding between publisher and author. In fact, there is a fundamental split running throughout the work, as Copley tries to write two kinds of book at the same time. One is a comprehensive survey, a reference work in which something has to be said about almost every author who has survived or about whom anything is known. (Whether or not such a genre is any longer viable is a moot question; perhaps only if it sticks to the facts and leaves interpretation and evaluation alone.) The other, the fruit of years of

intimacy with Latin literature, is a critical study of only those parts of it which have actively engaged the sensibility and enthusiasm of the critic. Copley's "heart" clearly inclined him to write the latter and doubtless he could have produced a much better book if he had done so. (There is a third option that might be mentioned: a survey written from a completely new perspective, radically reinterpreting and reevaluating Latin literature.)

Judged as personal, but informed, criticism, the book is open to objection for large sections included only out of a sense of duty or a desire for completeness. Judged as a comprehensive history, it is open to criticism for its proportions, both within a single author's works and within the history of Latin literature as a whole. For example, there are eleven pages on Cicero's philosophical works, but only three on all the rest; there are four pages on the *Eclogues*, nine on the *Georgics*, and fifty-three on the *Aeneid*; the *Metamorphoses* receives only five pages, despite the high esteem in which Copley seems to hold it. As for relative emphasis on different authors, Sallust fares in the text only slightly better than Cornelius Nepos (two or three lines plus a few incidental citations elsewhere) and does not appear at all in the bibliography of translations and supplemental reading. (I am not necessarily quarreling with Copley's preferences: the point is that one cannot indulge them in a comprehensive history.) Ennius, Lucilius, and Cato each receive more space than Caesar, Sallust, Tibullus, Lucan, Martial, Juvenal, and several others one would expect to come in for fuller treatment. Cato in fact gets almost as much space as Livy and Tacitus, whose *Histories* is barely noticed and whose *Annals* is very skimpily treated. In the case of too many authors, Copley's skimpy coverage fails to provide the basic information about theme, contents, etc., that one looks for in a handbook.

It is after Vergil that Copley really runs out of steam. For his views on the relative value of pre- and post-Vergilian literature, see p. 117, 275, and 357. Copley is not among those who find an uncomfortable but real relevance to the 1960's and 1970's in such post-Vergilian literature as Seneca's tragedies, Lucan, Petronius, and Juvenal.

Of course this selectivity does have its good side. Far from having the uncritical reverence for all things ancient that still afflicts some classicists and which the standard histories with "equal time" for all tend to reflect and to foster, Copley is always ready to warn the reader that an author or a part of an author