

Two *Oedipus*: The Shamed Searcher-Hero and the Definition of Parenthood

Two leaders of the movement for adoptees' access to their records have made *Oedipus* a key figure in their books. Jean Paton begins the introduction to *Orphan Voyage* with these words: "In Greece, about twenty-four hundred years ago, there was written the first adoption life history."¹ She goes on to summarize the events of *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* as the "chance discovery of adoptive status, the reaction, first search, interval of maturation, second search, denouement, exile, and ultimately . . . return and completion." In *Twice Born: Memoirs of An Adopted Daughter* Betty Jean Lifton takes her first epigraph from *Oedipus*, Teiresias's question, "Do you know who your parents are?"² Very early in the book she calls *Oedipus* her "fellow adoptee," and she refers to him on many pages.³ In addition to these activists, H. J. Sants, a psychiatrist, quotes *Oedipus* in developing his concept of genealogical bewilderment among adoptees, which would become influential when publicized by Lifton and others: "I ask to be no other man than that I am, and I will know who I am."⁴

Reactions to *Oedipus* can be stunning examples of how positioning affects reading. Classical scholars are unlikely to refer to *Oedipus* as adopted, because ancient Greece had a different kind of adoption, which usually was a legal affiliation of a younger and older adult. But he was raised by different parents than those to whom he was born and, like the modern adoptee in a closed-record adoption, was kept in ignorance of his ancestry. Sophocles' play *Oedipus* begins late in the story. An oracle had predicted that *Oedipus* would kill his father and marry his mother, and as an infant he was abandoned by his birth parents, Laius and Jocasta, the rulers of Thebes, because of this curse. He was taken by a shepherd, and raised by the previously childless king and queen of Corinth, Polybus and Merope. Told by a drunken stranger that he was

“an invented, fabricated, fictitious son for [his] father,” Oedipus went to the oracle, which gave him the same prediction given to Laius and Jocasta, but did not tell him who his parents were.⁵ So he left Corinth to avoid fulfilling the oracle’s prediction. When he arrived in Thebes, he became king and married the queen, Jocasta. Years later, when Sophocles’ play begins, the city is devastated by a plague. Oedipus vows to find the cause of the plague and discovers that the man he killed at a crossroads on the way to Thebes was Laius, and that the woman he married was his mother. Thus his unintended incest is the cause of the plague. Jocasta kills herself, and Oedipus blinds himself and goes into exile.

Critics have often discussed *Oedipus* in relation to themes apparently unconnected with double parenthood. These themes may be abstract and apparently unfamiliar, such as the conflict between fate and free will. Alternatively, Bernard Knox’s influential book *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time* discusses the play in terms of the relation between human pride in achievement and religious belief, and relates Oedipus’s imperious character to the quality of the Athenian city-state for which the play was first performed.⁶ When family issues enter the interpretation, the specifics of Oedipus’s family life are still usually absent. The interpretation of the Oedipus story known to most people beyond classicists today is Freud’s reading of it as an allegory for a widespread unconscious human desire, originating in childhood. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he writes, “It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. . . . King Oedipus . . . merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes.”⁷ Furthermore, he likens the play’s action, “the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement,” to his own kind of searching, “the work of a psychoanalysis.”⁸

But what if we take seriously the fact that Oedipus was raised by a set of parents to whom he was not born? What, then, would the play have to do with our cultural mythology about adoption? What might it have to do with beliefs about what adoptees should know about birth parents and about what will happen if they meet?

When I was in college, and still keeping the secret of my adoption from everyone, I wrote—but never published or showed anyone—a tacitly autobiographical essay about loneliness, which discussed why lonely people might identify with Oedipus.⁹ I give three reasons. He “discovers his apparent heritage is not his true one,” he “has something

to hide, something which cuts him off from other people” (according to most readings of the play, of course, Oedipus did not consciously hide his secret, which was secret from himself as well—here my identification with him led me astray), and he is a “great but misunderstood” tragic hero (I use some irony about this line of identification). For the adoptee’s shame, isolation, and heroism, *Oedipus* is the key text in the literary canon of my education; but these themes depend to a large extent on how his double “heritage” is constructed, a question relevant to all representations of adoption.

What does parenthood mean? Is it a matter of begetting and birth, so that adoptive parenthood is always just a pretense? Or is it nurturing behavior? If so, adoptive parenthood can be just as much parenthood as any other kind. The plot of *Oedipus* is based on the assumption that parenthood is a matter of genetics, which determines identity. The play presents searching for biological family as dangerous. But it is also heroic. I shall return to Oedipus’s combination of pollution and heroism in relation to the adoptee later.

Most of those who have written about *Oedipus* over the years have taken for granted the assumption that identity and parenthood are based on birth connection. Critics almost always refer to Laius and Jocasta as Oedipus’s father and mother, without regard to the fact that they both wanted him killed as an infant, or that Jocasta spent only three days with the baby before giving him to the shepherd to expose. One critic, John Gould, does begin by referring to “Oedipus’s adoptive father, Polybus” and the discovery that he was not “Oedipus’s natural father.”¹⁰ But by the end of the essay, Gould has committed himself: “He is Laios’s son (not Polybus’s).”¹¹ And this, of course, is the way Oedipus, too, speaks of his parentage at the end.

Anagnorisis, recognition or discovery, is one of the key elements in tragedy, according to Aristotle, and *Oedipus* is the tragedy that he thinks has the best kind of recognition. While later plays and many critics consider a more abstract recognition tragic—for example, the hero recognizes that he is only human and has been too proud—for Aristotle the most important kind was recognition of persons of the kind that leads to reversal. According to Gerald Else, still one of the most influential translators, it is, in Oedipus’s case, a shift into “the objective state of being *philoï*, ‘dear ones’ by virtue of blood ties.”¹² Discovering that he was born to Laius and Jocasta literally changes his identity, and thus changes his condition from happiness to misery.¹³

There is a logic in associating with tragedy rather than comedy a plot in which heredity is both defining and dangerous. Both tragic plots and genetic ancestry are irrevocable. Parents by “blood” can be replaced in their capacity as nurturers, but not in their identity as parents by “blood.”¹⁴ Furthermore, *Oedipus*, even more than many other tragedies, emphasizes the force of destiny and of curses and connects them with heredity too.

But one recent critic, Pietro Pucci, sees something different in the play. He suggests that its “central question is, What is a father?”¹⁵ Pucci points out that the prediction that the oracle makes to Oedipus is not exactly that he is fated to kill his father, but, as Grene and Lattimore accurately translate, that he was “doomed / to be the murderer of the father that begot me” (ll. 794–95).¹⁶ He thinks that the oracle cryptically suggests that Oedipus had many different kinds of fathers.

Is this simply Pucci’s deconstructive ingenuity, or was another definition of fatherhood possible in Sophocles’ time? And, if so, does it make any difference to how we interpret *Oedipus*?

There were indeed circumstances in which “father” in Greek culture meant something other than “begetter.” Law formalized adoption by men so that they could plan their inheritance, preserve the *oikos* (usually defined roughly as household) and have someone to remember them in burial and tomb cult rituals. At least one orator assumed that this relationship also involved an emotional bond with the adopter: “for childless men the only escape from loneliness and the only consolation in life was to be able to adopt whomever they liked.”¹⁷ Adoption was usually of adult males but sometimes of women or, with the agreement of their birth fathers, of children. Most of these adoptions, but not all, were of relatives in the extended family.¹⁸ They were frequent enough that Sarah Pomeroy makes a point of saying that the *oikos* “refers to people related by blood, marriage, and adoption.”¹⁹ With this kind of adoption, the bonds were clearly more limited and inferior to those of the immediate biological family. Adopted sons could not make a will; they were easier to repudiate than biological sons.²⁰ Their loyalty was thought to be dubious,²¹ and the adoption never broke the bond with the birth mother.²² Officially it did divide the adopted son from the birth father, but this legal rule was “felt to be contrary to natural feeling and [was] often circumvented.”²³

But along with this legally formalized kind of adoption there was another, more secret, kind that involved infants. Precisely because it

was intended to be secret, remedying infertility or perhaps the birth of a child of the “wrong” sex, this kind of adoption is impossible to document from historical records. But it frequently appears in the literature of ancient Greece. When *Oedipus* was written, there already were many legends in which the hero was raised by foster parents and discovers his ancestry later in his life, happily.²⁴ This may have been a plot pattern developed in part from the custom of sending noble children to extended family members to raise.²⁵

But to investigate the historical possibilities of secret infant adoption, we must turn to the complicated issue of infant exposure. This clearly was practiced in ancient Greece. We don’t know how often it happened; the frequency was surely less than in its literature and in the frequent literary fantasy that wives might fake a pregnancy or switch children with someone else and thus introduce another’s child into the household.²⁶ As Nancy Demand writes, “At birth the guardian (*kyrios*) of a newborn infant, who was usually the father in the case of a child born to a citizen woman, had the right to decide whether to accept it into the *oikos* and raise it, or to expose it, but not to kill it outright. . . . A person taking in an exposed child could rear it as either free or slave, but the act of exposure did not break the legal tie between the child and its *kyrios*, and the child might later be reclaimed if it could be identified.”²⁷ The exposure might occur because the child was thought to have originated in adultery, because it was a girl, or had a deformity; it might be a response to the family’s economic difficulties, perhaps combined with one or more of the other circumstances.²⁸ Some believe that many exposed children were found and raised; others equate exposure with infanticide. In *The Kindness of Strangers*, John Boswell summarizes the arguments on this last point with regard to classical Greece, and devotes most of his book to similar issues in Rome and the Middle Ages, warning readers from the very beginning how difficult infant abandonment and informal adoption are to document from historical records.²⁹ Since this kind of adoption was done secretly, not legally, it does not show up in the history of laws; such adopted children were not known to be adopted and could therefore enjoy the rights they would have had if born to their parents—unless the secret was found out.

While this informal kind of adoption is close to the kind recently most common in the United States, because it takes place in infancy and leaves the adoptee and adoptive parents in the dark about who the birth parents are, in ancient Greek society it seems to have been sharply dis-

tinguished from legal adoption. Two different Greek words, coming from words meaning “making” with different connotations, were used for the two processes. The informally adopted child is termed *plastos*, which is translated as “invented, fabricated, supposititious.”³⁰ This is the accusation that the drunkard made against Oedipus. To refer to legal adoption, however, the Greeks used the words *poieisis* or *eispoieisis*, coming from a verb meaning “to make” without negative connotations, used for all crafts and the origin of our word *poetry*.³¹ The etymological connection between making and writing and adoption is also found in Latin-derived English in the similar link between *fictive*, as in fictive kin (for example, women called “aunt” by their close friends’ children), and *fiction*. Yet this word family can include some of the negative connotations of *plastos*, for example if someone’s claim to a child were referred to as fictitious.

Thus in ancient Greek culture there was a respected kind of fatherhood not defined by genetics—though this redefinition of parenthood apparently did not extend to mothers—and there was also a condition of “fabricated” parent-child relationship, which involved pretense (sometimes a wife’s deception of an innocent husband as well as the rest of the society). There were doubts about how strong the bond was even in the case of the respected adoptive fatherhood, because genetic kinship was valued so highly; nevertheless nongenetic kinship was imaginable.

The term Aristotle used for the relationship discovered in a tragic recognition—*philoï*—could be used of bonds that were not genetic. According to Humphreys, “The term *philos* overrides the distinctions we make between love, family, and friendship.”³² Furthermore, the parent-child relation was not just a matter of biology: “the idea that children were expected to repay their parents for rearing them, with care in old age, is quite common in Greek texts.”³³ Perhaps the fact that being born into a family did not in itself entitle a child to being raised by that family—exposure sometimes took place even when no doubt about the child’s heredity was expressed—might have encouraged at least some people to conceptualize the idea that nurture rather than birth makes kinship.

So while the idea that adoptive relationships are constructed in a sense suggesting fabrication was dominant in ancient Greek society, parental relationships known to be legally constructed, involving nurturing rather than heredity, were imaginable. And similarly in *Oedipus* itself the association of parenthood with nurturing is still present, even

if not the dominant theme. In the very line in which Oedipus speaks of the drunkard's accusation that he was *plastos*, "an invented, fabricated, supposititious son," he adds the phrase, "for my father."³⁴ The idea that Polybus is his father proves to be hard for Oedipus to give up. He goes to the oracle to find out who his father is, and when the oracle predicts the murder, he leaves his former uncertainty and assumes Polybus is the one he must avoid. Later, when the messenger tells Oedipus about Polybus's death, he speculates, "perhaps he died of longing for me / and thus I am his murderer" (ll. 969–70). When he hears that "Polybus was no kin to you in blood" (l. 1017), he wonders, "Did he love so much what he took from another's hand?" (l. 1023). This is the play's most positive—or only?—picture of Oedipus receiving parental love.³⁵

Strangely, Oedipus says little about Merope. He doesn't speak of her love for him as a child, nor of her reaction to Polybus's death, nor of her offering a haven for him when he leaves Thebes. She is present in his mind only as another possible temptation to violate taboo—if he went back to Corinth, even though Polybus is dead, he might somehow still fulfill the prophecy by marrying her. The old shepherd also fails to mention her—it is Polybus to whom he remembers giving the child Oedipus now is. Perhaps the reason for this neglect of Merope is a combination of the general male domination of Greek culture and the fact that legal adoption, basically an agreement between men, did not break the tie with the birth mother, so that the Greeks were less likely to think of loving adoptive mothers than of loving adoptive fathers.

But what if we do raise the question of what motherhood is in this play? One effect of the inattention to Merope is to make Jocasta's role even more important. Many critics see her attitude toward Oedipus as maternal. She enters the play trying to stop the conflict between him and Creon, and she often takes what seems to be a protective attitude toward Oedipus—which is of course also a way of protecting herself. But at the climax of the play we learn (while she is offstage killing herself) that it was she who gave the infant Oedipus away to the herdsman to kill it, to avoid the murder of Laius predicted by the prophecy. Oedipus's final attitude toward her seems to be anger; the messenger says that Oedipus burst in on her with a sword and found her dead. But his gesture of blinding himself with the brooches from her robe is also an acknowledgment of their inextricable tie.

What difference does it make if we speak of Oedipus as unknowingly committing incest with his birth mother, instead of his mother, now that

consciousness of the different situation of adoptees has developed this term? It emphasizes that the incest comes from what we might call Oedipus's cosmic bad luck as opposed to his guilt—and as we shall see in discussing *Oedipus at Colonus*, the concept that lack of knowledge makes a difference was thinkable at the time. On a rational level, incest is wrong because it violates a trust in a close family relationship. But Oedipus and Jocasta did not have a close family relationship when he arrived in Thebes. It was Merope with whom he had a mother-son relationship. Oedipus and Jocasta have done wrong not at the rational level but at the irrational level of taboo. Similarly, killing the father who raised you seems worse than ordinary murder—cross-culturally, I would expect—because it involves betrayal and ingratitude. Unknowingly killing the father who begot you but then wanted you dead involves no ingratitude. It is a kind of nemesis on Laius, as well as a sign of the danger of Oedipus's temper. Nevertheless, Sophocles' original audience is not the only culture to find this a specially horrible fate. It is as if, in killing Laius, Oedipus was killing part of himself. Regardless of whether he acted in self-defense, this act makes the world seem terrible.³⁶

The plot is full of ironies that work somewhat differently depending on how we define parenthood. When Oedipus, concerned enough about the question of his heredity to consult the oracle, assumes (without thinking that he might find his parents elsewhere) that the way to avoid the oracle's prophecy is to leave Polybus and Merope, we can see this as denial; he doesn't want to admit the bad news the drunkard has given him. On the other hand, we can see this as a sign of his great attachment to the only parents he knows, which paradoxically requires that he leave them. But most often the irony involves strong suggestions of Laius and Jocasta's parentage before Oedipus knows of it. Some critics have even hypothesized that Oedipus might have considered that Laius and Jocasta might have been his parents but decided to ignore that possibility.³⁷

There was already a tradition of presenting reunions between family members in tragedy. About thirty years before, Aeschylus's prize-winning *Libation Bearers* had shown the recognition between Orestes and Electra, and that scene would have been familiar to Sophocles' audience (just a few years later, Euripides rewrote it critically in his *Electra*). The conventional belief was that unknown relatives would be of like mind even before meeting each other.³⁸ *Oedipus* may allude to that convention ironically when we hear of the similar rage of Laius and Oedipus at

being challenged at the crossroads. Furthermore, Jocasta even makes a retrospective comment on their similar forms. All this irony continually impresses on the audience how blind—whether willfully or not—Oedipus is.

The image of Oedipus as a blind seeker is so similar to Freud's reading of the play, and so closely linked to the issues of Oedipus's shame and heroism, that I need to pause on Freud's approach before I consider the relation of Oedipus's shame and outcast status to the adoptee. The most remarkable thing about Freud's interpretation of the play and the myth in this context is that he foregrounds Oedipus's violence and sexual desire, and does not consider how Oedipus's relationship with his birth parents is different because he is adopted, but rather makes it an allegory of everyone's unconscious relationship with the parents they have always known, and the way it shapes their other relationships. (A Freudian, on the other hand, would consider it remarkable to foreground Oedipus's adoption rather than his crimes.) While adoptees focus on the fact that Oedipus does not know his genetic parents and in the course of the play finds out who they are, Freud focuses on the fact that he does not know that his murderous and lustful deeds were directed against his parents and in the course of the play finds out that they were. Both the adoptee reader and Freud are interested in Oedipus as a searcher. Betty Jean Lifton identifies with Oedipus not only as a searcher but also as someone in denial: "Perhaps Oedipus and I both knew through that middle knowledge one has when one knows and does not know at the same time. At first to survive, we do not know, then to survive, we know."³⁹ For Freud the denial and search of the play are allegories for denial and search for one's own desires. The adoptee searches outwardly, but the search has inward implications as well.

Many adoptees have feared finding out bad things about their biological parents, and this has been a reason that some social workers and parents have advised them not to search—but for an adoptee one of the real terrors of finding out anything bad about biological parents is the questions it raises about one's own possible behavior. That Oedipus himself has committed the crime he discovers dramatizes this fear.

On the other hand, Oedipus contains a kind of consolation for the adoptee. Here is the search, no matter how badly it turns out, considered heroic. Here is a play famous for thousands of years, and a quest like ours is at the center.

But Oedipus believes he was evil even before he committed this act:

and it is in saying this that he mentions his adoptive family for the first and only time since the revelation.

O Polybus and Corinth and the house,
 the old house that I used to call my father's—
 what fairness you were nurse to, and what foulness
 festered beneath!

(ll. 1394–97)

Something mysterious has been wrong with him all his life, then, connected with his birth: “Now I am found to be a sinner and a son of sinners” (ll. 1397–98).⁴⁰ His birth parents were sinners, perhaps, because they knew the oracle predicted a son would murder his father and went on to conceive him anyway, but that reference to their sin resonates with the transgressive sex outside of marriage that was my origin and that of most other adoptive children today.

Lifton focuses on the quest element in the Oedipus plot, rather than the tragic. But she is also interested in the social stigma in Oedipus's story. Oedipus discovered that he had violated taboos; she discovered that contrary to her adoptive mother's insistence, she was born out of wedlock. She parallels the curse of unwed motherhood with the curse foretold to Laius and Jocasta. “When I was born society prophesied that I would bring disgrace to my mother, kill her reputation, destroy her chances for a good bourgeois life. (It didn't raise an eyebrow for my father.) And so a kindly shepherdess who worked in an adoption agency put me out in the marketplace.”⁴¹ Lifton distances herself from this comparison by the joke about the shepherdess. In today's world, her comparison may seem like a trivialization to some, but if illegitimacy were not a stigma at least for the mother, would there be such resistance to opening adoption records? Jocasta is, in a sense, the extreme case of the figure invoked by the lobbyists for closed adoption records—the birth mother whose life is destroyed, not in this case by the return of her adopted-away adult child, but by his discovery and making public of their relation.

Oedipus envisions himself as an outsider even before he knows that he must be an outcast. For example, like many adoptees in life and literature, he develops his own fantasies about who his mother might be, and they take him far from his current position; at one moment she is a third-generation servant, at another, the goddess Chance. Analyzing the

point where he thinks of the months as his brothers, Gould says that now his image of himself “is as a being from another world of discourse than the now familiar political world of Thebes or of Corinth.” Gould concludes that Oedipus “is an alien; he does not belong and his not belonging is figured in the contradictions of his human relationships.”⁴² This resonates with the image of the adoptee as outside the ordinary ties of human nature, which appears in a number of other literary and mythic works, as well as with my college reading of the play quoted earlier.⁴³ But in this play, as Gould notes, it is the fact that he has those ordinary ties, and does not know with whom they connect him, that makes him an outsider.

Adoptee status is, in some ways, the most invisible minority status. There are no telltale gestures, skin colors, or identifiably shaped features that in themselves reveal a person is adopted, although in a family group physical contrasts between parents and child usually identify transracial adoptees. The lack of an original birth certificate, or of knowledge of genetic relatives, is an invisible deprivation—and to some adoptees it means little. The discovery, as an adult, of your illegitimacy before adoption, brings social shame if it means that your birth mother or father won’t acknowledge you, or won’t acknowledge you to others, but this, it would seem, is far from the outcast state that Oedipus experiences.

Yet many lawyers and lobbyists today are committed to keeping adoption records and information about birth parents unavailable to adoptees. In most states of the United States (unlike the situation in many other countries), adoptees lack rights other people take for granted. The more our society puts emphasis on heredity and ethnicity, the more this lack is noticeable. Why is this information thought to be so dangerous? Oedipus’s discovery of incest made apparent one kind of confused family structure; perhaps adoptees’ discovery of their genetic parents is dangerous partly because it makes apparent other kinds of confused family structures. We, as a society, still tend to believe that a person has only one set of parents; it’s confusing to imagine that there might be two sets, in spite of the increasing frequency of stepfamilies. Furthermore, identifying genetic and birth parents reveals that many people who now appear to be respectable citizens have what is considered sexual misbehavior or parental inadequacy in their past. This may confuse their moral authority in their family and community, if known. And on the other hand many adoptive parents are afraid that their rela-

tionship with their children will be damaged if possibly competing parents are identified. So the issue with which this chapter began, what parenthood is, returns.

Lifton, Paton, and I all took Oedipus's situation as a metaphor for our own, partly because both the taboo against the adoptee's raising questions about heredity and the stigma of illegitimacy were so great at the time. Oedipus—an adoptee, and a cultural hero looking for truth no matter how disastrous the outcome—was almost an inevitable model for search activists with literary interests. In order to violate so strong a taboo, they (I was not yet a search activist) needed a strong language of entitlement. To define your parentage as your identity, as Oedipus does in the Watling translation, saying "I will know who I am," is powerful in our culture. Though using different translations, Paton says that Oedipus is asking, "Who am I?" (*Orphan Voyage*, 16). Lifton refers to his journey and hers as "the call to self" (*Twice Born*, 5). Paton and especially Lifton wrote when identity/language was becoming increasingly influential, and the use of this language by them and others in the adoptee rights movement has helped to shift our culture's attitude about adoptees' heredity.⁴⁴

Much of the language of the search movement is drenched, to use Adrienne Rich's term, in the assumption that finding your birth parents is finding your identity: "who you are," or perhaps, with more qualifications, "the missing piece." Typical interpretations of *Oedipus* show how deeply rooted that assumption is; the practice of raising adoptees without telling them about their birth parents, which seems like a contradiction to this assumption, can also support it to the extent that it is based on the view that information about birth parents must be kept secret to prevent adoptees from identifying with them more than with their adoptive parents.

But at this point there are many adoptees who, like me, would testify that they did not find their identity when they found their birth parents. Glad as they were for the information, in many cases they were left with more questions to answer, and often realized that their identification with their adoptive parents remained and that their appreciation of them increased. The equation of identity with genetics found in *Oedipus* is not the inevitable way to imagine identity, but an ideology present in various societies in differing degrees. Even people who undertake the search having accepted this ideology may alter it in the light of their own experience. For example, Lifton and Paton revise the Oedipus story in their use of it. Lifton puts a visit to her elderly

adoptive mother near the end of her book, a few pages after she has stated that “the adoptive parents are the *real* parents in the most meaningful way.”⁴⁵ Paton, whose adoptive parents are dead, tries to straighten out her birth certificate, receives one that is made out as if she had been born to her adoptive parents, and, in spite of her strong belief in heredity, is “satisfied to recognize the social family” she has known.⁴⁶ And finally she takes her identification with Oedipus to the sequel, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which the former exile has a blessing for the city, using as the epigraph to her epilogue his line, “The words these lips will utter, shall be full of sight.”⁴⁷

In this play, Sophocles, in his last years, returned to Oedipus, imagining him in *his* last years. Oedipus, having lived for many years in exile, with the support of his daughter Antigone, returns to the place, close to Athens, where an oracle had predicted he would die. Thebes considers him still a dangerous source of pollution, but Athens, in the person of its king Theseus, welcomes him. In this play, unlike the first, Oedipus maintains his innocence:

If then I came into the world—as I did come—
 In wretchedness, and met my father in fight,
 And knocked him down, not knowing that I killed him
 Nor whom I killed—again, how could you find
 Guilt in that unmeditated act?⁴⁸

Oedipus and Theseus are convinced, at the end, that his special destiny brings favor to the place where he is buried; his mysterious disappearance at his death, as if taken away by the gods, seems to mark his vindication. Thus he argues in favor of discrimination in the way that acts against relatives are judged, saying that those done in ignorance should be considered differently. He also treats his own children differently according to their behavior toward him. Polyneices, his younger son, asks for help in overthrowing his brother, and Oedipus refuses, since both sons refused to help him, and curses them. Froma Zeitlin sees both of these positions as weakening the claims of blood ties. She argues that for Oedipus “the *genos* [family] . . . is first of all an ongoing relation among its members of shared reciprocities and obligations, so that entitlement to its privileges depends upon actions each individual knowingly and voluntarily undertakes. Oidipous [a transcription of Oedipus’s name in Greek, in place of the more familiar Latinized spelling]

therefore reserves his love for the daughters who have tended him in spite of the social conventions that would keep them stay safely at home and repudiates his sons who have intentionally behaved contrary to family rules in refusing the nurture they owe to their father.”⁴⁹ However, in this play Oedipus never mentions Polybus or Merope, or argues that Jocasta and Laius have lost their title to be his parents by their behavior in his infancy.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned that Greek culture did have an institution of legal adoption that took nongenetic parenthood seriously. Let me contrast with the *Oedipus* plays, which don't validate adoptive parenting, one by Euripides, which does. Indeed, here adoption seems to be the play's happy ending. In *Ion*, written probably just a few years before *Oedipus at Colonus*, the title character was born to Creusa and begotten by the god Apollo. Creusa abandoned him at the temple of Delphi, and he was raised there by the prophetess. When the play begins, Creusa and her husband Xuthus are childless; Apollo mystifyingly tells King Xuthus, who goes to the oracle to pray for children, that Ion is his son; Xuthus remembers a festival where, in his carousing, he might have begotten a child. Creusa meets Ion and hears his story of being abandoned and raised at the temple, but does not recognize him. Encouraged by the chorus (her serving women), she takes up the suggestion of her father's tutor that he should kill the boy, out of resentment that he lived and her child died. The gods prevent it, but Creusa is implicated. When she takes refuge in the temple, Ion tries to kill her, but the prophetess saves her and produces the basket in which Ion was abandoned, which identifies Creusa and Ion to each other as mother and son. Athena appears at the end to predict the future prosperity of Ion and the other children of Creusa and Xuthus, and to tell Creusa, “Disguise your knowledge of your son, that the king [Xuthus] may be / the happy prey of his sweet fantasy.”⁵⁰

This play has many of the elements of *Oedipus*: the foundling story, the unknowing meeting of mother and son, the speeches about their past that convince the audience of their relationship, and even the threat of murder between them before their final discovery. But here divine intervention stops the murder. And the play ends with the promise that Xuthus will never know of Ion's conception by Creusa and Apollo.

A strange ending indeed! Some critics have taken the play as a bitter attack on Apollo's intervention in mortal lives. However, Zeitlin, contrasting the play specifically to *Oedipus*, finds an admirable flexibility in

its imagined Athens, specifically because of its dramatization of Apollo as giving his son to Xuthus in adoption.⁵¹ In the Thebes of *Oedipus*, she writes,

characters are constrained by the limits of kinship that dominate their modes of action, and they remain forever trapped in the dilemmas (or tragedies) of identity. . . . Thebes . . . cannot resort to fiction of “as if” or, at another symbolic level, create new institutions in the face of new problems. Athens, however, does precisely this in using the mythic idea of fosterage to arrive at the civic idea of legal adoption. . . . Athens may have it all ways: a child of divine parentage, a certified product of autochthonous lineage, a legitimized son of the proper social standing.⁵²

Zeitlin points out that Athena makes specific reference to Athenian legal adoption when she says that Apollo gave his son as a gift “as sometimes happens when a friend gives another friend his son, that he may be master of a house.”⁵³ Legal adoption, of course, was not supposed to involve deception, as happens in this ending, but as Creusa says, “Attributed to him [Apollo] / you’d have no claim to property or race” (ll. 1524–25).⁵⁴ Although the play takes as proverbial the hostility of a stepmother, it emphasizes the importance of other adoptive or semiadoptive relationships: Ion has received his early nurturance from the prophetess at the oracle; he calls her mother in his early, unknowing conversation with Creusa, and later greets her as “my dear mother, although not in birth”; she says farewell to him calling herself “just like the one who bore you.”⁵⁵ The old tutor addresses Creusa as daughter. And Athena’s adoptive relationship to Erichthonios, Creusa’s father, is also glorified in the play.

Ironically, *Ion* takes a situation that seems to have been much feared by ancient Greeks, a man raising a son he thinks genetically his own who was actually begotten by another, and, by making the begetter a god, brings about the apparently triumphant ending that promises the successful alliance of the Athenians and the Ionians.⁵⁶ As Zeitlin says, “parentage itself may be a fictive category, an ‘as if,’ and ties of blood, although essential to one’s genetic identity, are not the only relations that count.”⁵⁷

But Euripides also gives full attention to the situation of the separated birth mother and son. Ion, like many of the literary adoptees we

will consider later in this book, longs to know his mother and thinks about her suffering: “her distress was equal: / her life was emptied of maternal joy” (ll. 1377–78).⁵⁸ Creusa has vivid memories of giving up her son, and the pain has clearly not gone away. Something of the ambiguity of the practice of exposure is seen when she claims to have thought Apollo would take care of his child but now assumes that he has died. If Jocasta is the exemplary birth mother for the closed-records side of the debate, Creusa is the birth mother on the open-records side—with, of course, the very significant qualification that she cannot tell her husband the truth about who begot their son.

What did these plays mean to the audience of their time? On one hand, they commented, no doubt, on Athenian religion and politics. But perhaps they were also responding to issues of domestic life. If it’s not clear how guilty Jocasta feels about exposing her child, by the time of *Ion*, at least, there is no doubt that abandonment has marked Creusa’s life. The idea that an important reason not to abandon your child is the possibility of unknowing incest appears in Roman literature of the second and third centuries, ranging from Plautus’s play *Epidicus* to early Christian theologians.⁵⁹ The Oedipus legend was in the air centuries before Sophocles, but it seems to have been Sophocles who added the plague and Oedipus’s search, first for the polluter and then for his father’s identity, perhaps making him more clearly the paradigm for anxiety about incest related to abandonment.⁶⁰

Although both of them deal with abandonment and substitute parents, with regard to their familial picture the two plays diverge. *Oedipus* puts its strongest emphasis on genetic relationship and on paternity, imagined simply as begetting, with a bit of concern for the adoptive father, King Polybus; *Ion*’s strongest relationship is maternity, presented not only as conceiving but also as other kinds of care. The ending either makes human begetting unimportant or attacks Apollo for treating it that way. It is not surprising that *Ion* was translated by the feminist poet H.D., who herself bore—and raised—a child out of wedlock, and that *Oedipus* is much the more canonical play.

There are many different ways to respond to *Oedipus*. I find quite moving many aspects of the play beyond adoption, such as the theme of self-knowledge, including the recognition that self-knowledge may bring responsibility and guilt. But the adoptee side of myself finds most salient the play’s rejection of adoptive parents and its emphasis on “blood kinship.” To other adoptees who, like me, identify with Oedi-

pus's search, I want to critique the play's ideology and say that tragedy and genetically determined identity are not inevitable. Consider the advantages of the emphasis on nurture in *Ion* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. After your search, consider revisiting or returning to your own Corinth. (As, indeed, most adoptees do.)

I taught *Oedipus* last in the early 1970s, as I was beginning my search. I don't think I ever mentioned adoption as such, and I don't remember considering dealing with it. Could I do it now? How might the play be taught in, let us say, a college level humanities course or survey of world drama, if adoption issues were foregrounded part of the time? Might a teacher make a point of calling Oedipus an adoptee? Maybe. Should a teacher then generalize about how being an adoptee explains *Oedipus*?

In a recent narrative of his experience returning to Columbia's Literature Humanities course after many years, David Denby describes James Shapiro's class on *Oedipus*. "Hacking away at the frozen adolescent sea," Shapiro begins with a series of questions:

Whose mother told her she was found? . . . Anyone found in a basket under a bridge? . . . If you discovered you were illegitimate, would you not be the person you thought you were? Would you rather meet your twin than your natural mother?⁶¹

One of the students responds, "To find out who you are is a struggle you have to go through all your life." Denby calls this "a fine remark, but an answer to a different set of questions." But if you are an adoptee, whether you find out who you are by meeting your birth mother or by struggling through your whole life is a question that you might very well consider.

In this class, Shapiro is invoking adoption as a fantasy—he is particularly interested in the fact that nonadoptive parents sometimes joke to their children about having adopted them.⁶² Indeed that fantasy of adoption is part of the appeal that *Oedipus* has had over the years. But just as feminist critics have pointed out the fantasies about women that literary works have appealed to in their readers, and have pointed out the discrepancy between the fantasies and women in real life, it might be worthwhile for teachers of *Oedipus* to demythologize adoption. Since adoptees in class may be slow to talk about this aspect of their lives, and may not represent much of the range of experiences (searchers

are, on the average, older than first-year college students), the instructor might tell students that adoptees vary in their relation to adoption: some put much effort into searching, some do not search; some have a close relationship with their adoptive parents, some do not; some have always known they are adopted and talk about it openly, some do not. We can then locate Oedipus within these possibilities: he comes from a family where adoption is a secret, he feels loved by his (adoptive) father, he is horrified by the idea of doing anything against his family, indeed leaves them to avoid it. But when investigation of the cause of the plague in the city leads him to the choice of searching or not searching for his own origin, he chooses to search. This locates him as a particular kind of adoptee, one for whom the news that he is adopted would be traumatic even if the discovery did not also involve the news that he has committed incest and parricide, but one who is brave enough to search at whatever risk—including the risk to others.

The teacher might tell students (briefly) about the laws preventing most American adoptees from learning the names of their original parents, and the political struggles against these laws. Different as our society is from that of the ancient Greeks, the class might raise the issue of how much the rationale for these laws share with the reasons Oedipus's (adoptive) parents don't tell him of his origin and the reason Jocasta tells him not to search. Class discussions might deal, among other things, with the implications of different definitions of parenthood and identity, issues arguably central to the play as well as to contemporary adoption law. Students might also contribute ideas they have gained from observing or experiencing other kinds of variant kinship.

What would this accomplish? Students might think more about what kinship means today, in their own lives as well as in lives of their peers, and might be able to connect such issues with a close reading of the play. Adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents in the class might be encouraged to find that their own experience gives them special ability to notice details as they read, although they should not of course be pressured to talk about private issues in their own lives, and they may gain perspective on their own lives by contrasting their situations with those of the characters in the play. In addition, students may gain a political perspective in realizing that laws affect people's lives and can be changed, and gain a historical and cross-cultural perspective if the class discusses differences in adoption procedures across countries and centuries. And if any of these students later in life consider adopt-

ing children or giving children up for adoption, or have adult children (of either kind) who search, they will have had some preparation for dealing with the issues involved. Classes reading any of the other works discussed in this book might take similar opportunities to contextualize them with regard to experiences of adoption and kinship in their own time and ours.

How utopian, you might think, to treat literature as equipment for living, in Kenneth Burke's phrase.⁶³ But many of us try to give students such wide-ranging perspectives by discussing gender or race in literature. Other teachers want to affect students' worldviews when dealing with religious issues in literature. In fact, it is not at all new to engage students in thinking about "family" when discussing portrayals of families in literature. What I am proposing simply adds other dimensions to the question of what "family" means—in the classroom as well as in criticism and scholarship.