TWO THEME CHANGES IN THE OEDIPUS TYRANNUS

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After Tiresias' declaration that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius (350 ff.) and the ensuing quarrel between Oedipus and Creon (513 ff.), Oedipus tells Jocasta about Tiresias' accusation (703 ff.). Jocasta thereupon relates the story of the "Laius oracle" and the exposure of her child (711 ff.). Her motive is clearly stated at 708-710; it is to show how unreliable divination is. Since Apollo has, as she thinks, been proved false in the case of Laius, Tiresias may well be mistaken in his assertions concerning Oedipus. Her speech, however (and this is but one example of the "irony" that characterises the play as a whole), though intended to bring consolation and relief to her husband, has precisely the opposite effect, and by its mention of the "three ways" (716) causes him for the first time to suspect that Tiresias has indeed spoken the truth (726 ff.). These fears and suspicions he reveals to Jocasta and in a narrative parallel to her own describes his own part and his fateful journey from Corinth to Thebes (771 ff.). The Chorus then suggests that the one remaining witness of the three ways episode be sent for.

So far the central thought in Oedipus' and Jocasta's mind has been the accusation of Tiresias; the doubts of Jocasta concerning Apollo's oracle are only introduced by way of example, in order to throw a corresponding doubt on the seer's utterances. A marked shift, however, occurs in the following statement of Jocasta that "even if he [the witness] were to diverge at all from what he has already said, he will never make the murder of Laius true to prophecy" and that "for the future I would look neither this way nor that as regards divination" (851-858). This is not merely a repetition of her previous "anti-divination" speech. The content is
admittedly the same, but the application is different. That speech was concerned with discrediting Tiresias, this with discrediting Apollo 1). The question of Tiresias and his charges is being allowed to rest until the vital witness appears; it is now the Delphic oracle that is being attacked, not incidentally, but directly. Jebb is right in saying, on 852, that "Jocasta, bent on cheering Oedipus, merely alludes to the possibility [expressed, incidentally, as a very unlikely one] of his being indeed the slayer of Laius and turns to the comforting aspect of the case—viz., the undoubted failure of the oracle on any supposition". But his analysis of the argument seems slightly at fault: "the oracular art having failed in this instance, I refuse to heed Tiresias when he says you will yet be found guilty of slaying your father Polybus". The fact is, though Tiresias had alluded to the whole sorry story of Oedipus, not the murder of Laius alone (413 ff., 457 ff.), it was only the latter that Oedipus had mentioned to Jocasta. Very likely, in his anger and confusion, he had failed to understand the further revelations of Tiresias, which in any case were somewhat enigmatically pronounced; certainly he does not seem to have connected them with the oracle that had been delivered to him long before. Jocasta must therefore be thinking not of Tiresias, but of Apollo and of the oracle about which Oedipus had by now told her in his narrative. She is thus arguing from the failure of one Delphic oracle to the unreliability of another, and her attempts to encourage Oedipus on this quite separate issue are half-successful. The "you think well" (859), though uttered "almost mechanically" (Jebb), and certainly not marking the end of his apprehensions, may be regarded as a stage towards to the fuller, though merely temporary, release that later comes with the Corinthian messenger's announcement.

So begun, the Apollo theme is taken up by the Chorus (889 ff.), whose words are even more significant if they refer to Jocasta's doubts about both the "Laius" and the "Oedipus" prophecies, as well as Oedipus' own apparent assent, and is continued as Jocasta enters with incense offerings (911), declaring that "Oedipus is

1) A subtle change in Jocasta's terminology is to be noted: βρότειον οδὴν μαντικὴς ἐχον τέχνης (709) points to human art merely; ὥστε οὐχὶ μαντείας γὰρ ἄν (857) implies a more general doubt.