Corneille, Oedipus, Racine

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Anyone who inserts the name of Oedipus between Corneille and Racine can nowadays hardly help inserting a note of anxiety into what is otherwise a classic and indeed banal parallel. Opposition, even conflict, was of course always there, but in the form of a reassuring antithesis: Corneille Jesuit, Racine Jansenist; Corneille optimistic, Racine pessimistic; Corneille political, Racine psychological; Corneille heroic, Racine passionate; even Corneille boring, Racine interesting. The interference of Oedipus puts the twins, or the father and the son, in an uneasy relation with one another, a relation in which difference and identity are not easily disentangled. Both, in the texts I shall be considering, seem to grapple obscurely and anxiously with a complex topos of poetics, the topos jointly constructed by Aristotle and Sophocles. It is thus in the first instance on their authority—Sophocles' and Aristotle's—rather than Freud's that Oedipus appears in this paper; but by the very nature of the subject, the question of authority will remain an open one.

My point of departure is a simple chronological observation: Corneille's Oedipe, published in 1659, was immediately followed (in 1660) by his Examens and Discours, whereas Racine's first tragedy, La Thébaïde, was written only some three years later. The grouping may be accidental, but accidents of that kind invite interpretation. For example, Corneille in his reflections on tragedy writes against the Sophoclean Oedipus as a paradigm, dissociating himself sharply from Aristotle, yet at precisely the same time he writes his own version; Racine, who as a young playwright must have been acutely aware of the threat posed by Corneille's monumental reputation, chose as his first subject the sequel to the story of Oedipus. At the center of the configuration is the question of tragic recognition (Aristotle's anagnorisis) as a theme of poetics with which the story of Oedipus is deeply bound up, and the principal object of this paper is to approach from that angle the rather delicate issue of the relationship between neoclassical theory and practice.

One precautionary remark is needed about the definition of "recognition." In the course of the history of poetics, the term becomes extremely
elastici: in fact, the period in question is a crucial test of its elasticity. But it is important to emphasize that the authority of Oedipus as Aristotle's chief example as well as in its own right leads virtually all commentators of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries to restrict the use of the term primarily to instances where persons are recognized: other possibilities, such as the recognition of a state of affairs or of a hidden psychological truth, are only marginally admitted to the canon. It is necessary to make this point, as some of the more influential modern commentaries on the Poetics have adopted a far more catholic view, and one therefore risks begging an important historical question, the question of the apparent decline of recognition.

It is not difficult, in fact, to show that neoclassical poetics, in France at least, is uneasy about tragic anagnorisis. D'Aubignac, whose La Pratique du théâtre is after all the most substantial and complete treatise of the period, has little to say about the topic except in relation to the question of suspense; Boileau makes no specific reference to recognition in the Art poétique; and Dacier, writing in 1692, claims that "Nos Poètes Tragiques ont peu fait de dénouemens par la reconnaissance."

Yet the fact remains that spectacular recognitions could draw in the crowds until late in the seventeenth century, as is shown by the notorious success of Thomas Corneille's Timocrate, first performed not long before Oedipe was written; as another example, one might cite Claude Boyer's Le Fils supposé, published in 1672, when Racine was in mid-career. Dacier himself claims that Rotrou's Venceslas of 1647 continued to be popular because its recognition scene was technically an improvement on the Sophoclean model.

Such discrepancies and oscillations already suggest a pervasive tension between theory and practice, or indeed within theory and practice. The tension is certainly perceptible in Corneille; the case of Racine is slightly different, since his theoretical writings are marginal in comparison with Corneille's, but the underlying question remains the same: the question on the one hand of a recurrent anxiety about Oedipus as a model and, on the other, of the recognitions in which such anxiety seems most critically to be invested.

Corneille's attitude to anagnorisis ("agnition") in his theoretical writings appears to be consistently negative. The one instance in which he allows it as a possibility (a dénouement in which a character may discover that he is of noble birth) is mentioned in the context of comedy. As far as
tragedy is concerned, the key passage occurs in the second Discours. Having enumerated Aristotle's classes of tragic dénouement (from Poetics 14), he notoriously reverses the Aristotelian order of priority, placing the cases in which the character is fully conscious of his deeds and acts openly ("à visage découvert") above those in which he is in ignorance.\textsuperscript{8} The result is that recognition plots are relegated to an inferior status, and Corneille goes on to say: "Je sais que l'agnition est un grand ornement dans les tragédies: Aristote le dit; mais il est certain qu'elle a ses incommodes." For Corneille, sustained emotional dilemmas and conflict are preferable to the single outburst afforded by recognition scenes. Le Cid and Rodogune are far more moving than Oedipus.\textsuperscript{9}

The phrase "à visage découvert" is an interesting one in that it recalls the romance tradition of knights in disguise rather than the tradition of poetics. It certainly illustrates the extent to which Corneille's critical language attempts to excise what is covert or hidden, what is not the object of conscious knowledge. One could illustrate the same point in relation to his treatment of hamartia: he knows the word can mean "error," but he excludes this reading in favor of a moral one, which has the further effect of separating hamartia from anagnorisis.\textsuperscript{10} The question of tragic ignorance or knowledge seems to be marginal for Corneille, in his theoretical writings at least.

The consequence, when it comes to Oedipus, is that a good deal in the paradigm is rejected, treated abrasively, or suppressed. What is rejected first of all is contrivance: Sophocles' play is mentioned as an example of how the ancients, in their recognition scenes, made use of an extraneous character appearing fortuitously, an error which Corneille says he has corrected in his version; he also speaks of the way he has tidied up the story of Oedipus' killing of Laïus and other implausibilities. These are of course problems arising from the need to sustain and motivate Oedipus' ignorance. In more general terms, Corneille treats very gingerly the question of the horror of the play, its monstrous transgressions. In his discussion of catharsis, he points out that no spectator of Oedipus would "craindre de tuer son père ou d'épouser sa mère"; the play would be more likely to purge the desire to have recourse to predictions, since these may make us fall into the very misfortune we seek to avoid.\textsuperscript{11} This is the first time that Oedipus' patricide and incest are explicitly referred to in the Discours, and Corneille wraps them up in a kind of pre-Voltairean joke. In the Examen, he remarks that he has suppressed the horror of the subject:
Je tremblai quand je l’envisageai de près. Je reconnus que ce qui avait passé pour merveilleux en leurs siècles [sc. ceux de Sophocle et de Sé- nèque] pourrait sembler horrible au nôtre; que cette éloquente et sérieuse description de la manière dont ce malheureux prince se crève les yeux, qui occupe tout leur cinquième acte, ferait soulever la délicatesse de nos dames, dont le dégoût attire aisément celui du reste de l’auditoire; et qu’enfin, l’amour n’ayant point de part en cette tragédie, elle était dénuee des principaux agréments qui sont en possession de gagner la voix publique.12

What Corneille perceived when he looked at it closely, then, was that the horror of Oedipus’ recognition exceeded the bounds of contemporary taste. It is no doubt worth noting that, while claiming that the play is defective in love interest, Corneille succeeds in omitting any reference to Oedipus’ incest. The blinding, which Corneille treats as if it were (again) a kind of embarrassing joke, serves perhaps as a metaphorical substitute for sexual wounding. The other topic that is visibly missing is recognition itself:13 the plotting of monstrous ignorance and the threat of unspeakable transgressions are both relegated to the margins, hidden from the delicate view of the audience. In his theoretical writing, Corneille attempts to tackle Oedipus and his problems à visage découvert, but only at the cost of averting his gaze.

One might well ask why Corneille wrote Oedipe at all, given his strictures on both the form and the subject of the classical model. It seems likely that his preoccupation with poetics at this stage in his career led him to undertake an exercise which, like much of his theoretical writing, pays homage to Aristotelian authority while marking a critical difference from it: Nadal is I think right to point out that Oedipe is a critique of Oedipus.14 On the other hand, there was also a demand for the subject: Fouquet commissioned the play, giving Corneille a choice of three possible subjects, and the King subsequently rewarded him for his work. Given the status and stature of Corneille, the very existence of the play implies a desire on the part of contemporary audiences to see the monster paraded again on the stage, decked out in agréments which hide his bleeding eyes and his sexual misdemeanours.

This desire was both acknowledged and (predictably) deplored by d’Aubignac in his 1663 Dissertation on Oedipe.15 D’Aubignac returns almost obsessively to the impropriety of imposing on the audience an action reeking of incest and parricide, accompanying this with an equally predictable attack on the wholesale lack of plausibility in the plot (the
implausibility is of course once again located in the continued ignorance of Oedipus and other characters). He recognizes that Corneille has tried to "rectify" the errors of Sophocles in this respect, but takes the view (as Voltaire will also) that he has only tinkered with the surface, leaving all the main problems intact. What d'Aubignac in fact does in this polemical document is to magnify Corneille's own strictures and thus display more prominently a difficulty which is already inherent in the project of rewriting Oedipus in mid-seventeenth-century France. D'Aubignac's censorship is the sign of an anxiety which he shares with Corneille; their difference, in the sense of différend, is produced by a concealed identity.

Oedipe is in various ways an oddity in Corneille's dramatic output, almost a hapax. Written after a period of seven years in which Corneille had produced no writings for the theatre, Oedipe emerges from the silence, a circumstance which lends it a no doubt spurious air of mystery. Yet it is possible to discern a group of earlier experiments having something like a "recognition plot" and belonging to the phase of Corneille's career immediately preceding the silence. I am thinking here in particular of Héraclius and Don Sanche, in which both the recognition structure and the Oedipal themes of parricide and incest are used uneasily, critically, with embarrassment as it were: censorship and seduction alternate in their themes and presentation. They are also examples of generic uncertainty, mingling questions of classical poetics with materials from tragicomedy and romance.

A more detailed treatment of these plays is not possible within the compass of the present study. For reasons that will become apparent later, it is, however, necessary to make a brief excursion still further back in Corneille's career, to Rodogune. Corneille classed Rodogune as a play in which the tragic deed is undertaken consciously, no doubt because Cléopâtre knows perfectly well what she is doing. The classification, however, fails to account for certain central aspects of the play. Although its subject is nonclassical, it is distinctly reminiscent of the classical family plot: there are echoes, for example, of Medea and the Oresteia, and parricide is an ever-present possibility realized in the murder of Séleucus. More particularly, these elements are conjugated with a plotting dependent on uncertainties, on the withholding of knowledge: Rodogune refuses to say which twin she prefers; the death of Séleucus places Antiochus between two women either of whom may be guilty; and the issue of primogeniture—which of the twins has the marginally superior
right to the throne?—hovers unresolved over the whole plot. From the beginning of the play, these elements are explicitly placed in relation to a textual memory: Séleucus reminds his twin that, being rivals in both love and political ambition, they risk repeating the disasters of Thebes and Troy, tragedy and epic. More specifically, the allusion to Thebes recalls the story of the twin sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices; it thus provides the exact counterpart of the resolute friendship of the twins, which withstands their double rivalry and the attempts of Cléopâtre to make trouble between them. The memory of Thebes is a memory of Oedipus, and of *Oedipus Rex*, a memory which *Rodogune* is already trying to rectify.

D'Aubignac, in his *Dissertation*, was the first to make in public the perhaps all-too-obvious point on which most of the following discussion of *Oedipe* is based, namely, the splitting of the plot between the love-episode and the Oedipal episode. D'Aubignac goes so far as to say that what one would nowadays call the "romance" element—the ultimately happy love-affair between Thèseen and Dircé—supplies the main plot, with the story of Oedipus and his recognition serving only as a secondary episode. This duality or split epitomizes the problem of the play as an attempt to rectify or evade the monstrosities of the Sophoclean version. By regarding it as a simple error, which could have been overcome either by greater dramatic skill or—better—by complete censorship, d'Aubignac remains trapped in what one might call the politics of evasion. In repeating the analysis (and it is, in part at least, a repetition), I would hope to show that the error is a complex one, in the sense that Corneille's play itself draws on and thematizes a difficulty which Corneille explicitly recognized in his theoretical writings. The "confusion" which is produced by the generic and structural ambivalence of *Oedipe* is not an accidental but an intrinsic effect, and in this sense the play already goes beyond d'Aubignac's strictures.

The play opens, flamboyantly enough, with romance: Dircé, daughter of Laïus and Jocaste, exhorts her lover Thèseen to leave Thebes before he is struck down by the plague. The Oedipal question itself is not fully raised until I.5, where the oracle is reported to have refused to speak, thus giving rise to uncertainty and anxiety among the characters. From this point on, the plot is sustained by a series of false inferences and thus false recognitions. In II.3, the ambiguous reply of Laïus' ghost is at once taken by everyone to mean that Dircé will have to be sacrificed to lay the
ghost (i.e., the name of Dircé is recognized as the solution to the riddle posed by the metonym "mon sang" in the oracular speech of the ghost). In III.4, Oedipe reports a rumor that Jocaste’s exposed infant survived; Thésée now pronounces himself the son of Laïus and hence the brother of Dircé, much to Jocaste’s surprise (line 1183: “Quoi! vous seriez mon fils?”). In IV.4, Jocaste, then Oedipe, discover that Oedipe is the murderer of Laïus, the story of the robbers having been shown to be a fiction. The guilt is now divided, it seems, between Oedipe and Thésée (1546: “Je suis le parricide, et ce fils est l’inceste”), although Thésée has already admitted to Dircé, and thus to the audience, that he himself started the rumor as a ruse to prevent her from becoming the victim. Finally, in V.2—3, with the arrival of the messenger from Corinth, the various pieces of the story come together and full recognition is achieved.

The first thing to note here is that recognitions proliferate, initially at least, in order to imprint their mark on the love-intrigue. The balance only gradually swings from the note of heroic offers of self-sacrifice (from Dircé and Thésée) towards the blinding of Oedipe. Meanwhile, the relationship between these generically different elements remains an awkward one, and is marked as such when, in III.4, Oedipe first shows signs of serious anxiety: he remarks that, having previously wanted to prevent the lovers’ marriage, by force if necessary, he now—“sans savoir pourquoi”—would like them to go away and consummate their passion “loin de [s]a vue,” out of sight and out of mind. “J’admire,” he says, “un changement si confus que le mien” (1048), as well he might.

Such moments, where textual tensions are exhibited in the anxiety of characters, recur later in the play: the imperfect accommodation of dark desires and monstrous acts with fragments of a romance discourse is in an important sense what Oedipe is “about.” Around this central uncertainty may be grouped other signs of displacement and would-be rectification, beginning with the passages which remove or supplement Sophoclean “defects” such as the story of the several robbers who are said to have killed Laïus (see IV. 2). These passages are the direct echo within the play of Corneille’s theoretical strictures, functioning as a rectification of the logic of Sophocles’ version.

The term “rectification” in cases like this is however equivocal, since the trace of commentary designed to erase the play’s implausibilities creates new tensions, skewing the text in sometimes surprising ways. One of these is the move by which Oedipe’s title to the throne—his ability to solve the riddle of the Sphinx—is demoted by Dircé to the level of mere
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wit: “J'ai vu ce peuple ingrat que l'énigme surprit / Vous payer assez bien d'avoir eu de l'esprit” (451–52). Voltaire would have appreciated the joke; so, no doubt, would Freud. It might appear to be only a local instance, but the same satirical note is evident elsewhere, particularly in certain passages where the implied motivation of Oedipus Rex is called into question. Every time the possibility of a recognition—however spurious—comes into view, the character concerned hastens to motivate her or his “crime.” Dirce accuses herself of being the occasion for Laïus’ death (643–55). Thésée accepts the mild imputation of unwitting and un consummated incest with his “sister” but cannot swallow the monstrous allegation that he has killed his “father” (1198–1200); he also argues that anyone ought to be able to recognize a king, even one disguised as a peasant, so that ignorance is no excuse (1348–50).

In these ways, the problem of Oedipus’ error and punishment is scathingly explored by the characters in the play, much as if they were personifications of an issue in poetics. The most flamboyant instance is undoubtedly Thésée’s tirade at the end of Act III in favour of free will and moral responsibility as against arbitrary predestination: the kind of fatality normally associated with the case of Oedipus is repudiated, again with scorn (1167: “D’un tel aveuglement daignez me dispenser”). As a representative of romance and its habit of poetic justice, Thésée inevitably comes into conflict with the topoi of tragedy. Thésée, however, has a right to complain, since he is a character from another kind of fiction who suddenly finds himself without a passport in the troubled lands of tragedy. Oedipe is a displaced person in a rather different sense: however the play is rewritten, he cannot rid himself of his transgressions or of the expiation they require, so that the tension and the anxiety in his case are self-evidently greater.

One might first note that his culpability is established in advance by other characters in various ways—once again, the mania for motivation. Thésée’s argument about the obligation to recognize kings at all times whatever their guise clearly covers Oedipus’ case; Dirce, disapproving of his consultation of the dead, associates this “insolence” with his tyrannical behavior toward the whole family of Laïus, accuses him of usurping the throne, and predicts that the dead will punish him for his violence and the gods for his impetites (553–60).

Despite this evidence, Dacier was to claim that Corneille’s Oedipe failed to answer to the Aristotelian juste milieu because he is a virtuous man who falls into misfortune. This view is no doubt a consequence of
Oedipe's reaction to the recognition of his guilt, which closely corresponds to Thésée’s speech on free will (1820–40, 1988–94). When Oedipe finds out who he is and what he has done, he disowns his crime and thus turns recognition into a scandal, a meaningless error, to be faced out with stoic constancy and contempt: to put it in another way, hamartia reverts here to the sense of “error” (see for example 1919), and thus, according to Corneille’s own theory, loses all claim to meaning. There is in fact a major shift in the ethos of Oedipe in the course of the play: he begins by behaving like a standard Cornelian tyrant and usurper and ends by behaving like a standard Cornelian hero. In Héraclius, the tyrant Phocas can be done away with, leaving the characters to sort out the problem of identity to their own satisfaction. But Oedipe is another matter: he can’t simply be ejected from the plot. So Dirce in the end has to take back everything she had earlier said about his tyrannical behaviour and claim that she had said it à contre-coeur anyway (1799–1812). Indeed, it rather neatly proves to be the case that if Oedipe is the son of Laïus, he is the rightful king of Thebes, not a tyrant and usurper: he goes out complaining of the tyranny of the gods (1991–94), so the irony can hardly be overlooked.

Oedipe, then, loses a voluntary guilt and acquires an involuntary one for which he can therefore disclaim responsibility. What is recognized, in this sense, is that Oedipe is a hero like Thésée:

Mon souvenir n'est plein que d'exploits généreux,
Cependant je me trouve inceste et parricide,
Sans avoir fait un pas que sur les pas d'Alcide,
Ni recherché partout que lois à maintenir
Que monstres à détruire et méchants à punir.

(1820–24)

By a curious twist in this notoriously twisting plot, Oedipe shows himself to be entitled to cross the boundary into tragicomedy and romance, the land of heroic monster-killers. The moment at which he begins to cross it can be exactly pinpointed: it is the moment referred to earlier when he mysteriously changes his mind about Thésée and Dirce and wishes them safe and sound from the contamination of Thebes. He begins at that moment to feel a nostalgia for romance.

All this could be stated in terms not only of Corneille’s hesitations and defensiveness but also of the way the audience might be expected to react
to textual memories. To speak of the characters as if they personally had feelings on the matter is of course simply a convenient fiction (although it's true that the best fictions are usually the convenient ones). The play engineers an accommodation between the romance plot and the Oedipal plot: the unacceptable face of the Oedipal recognition has to be disguised or repudiated, compensation being provided by the éclat of heroic discourse, the appeal of admiration.

Despite the showy Cornelian "miracle" of the last scene, the mixture remains an uneasy one, the sign of a profound difficulty in the rewriting of the master-text. Knowledge may be re-established through recognition and a schema for its interpretation may be imposed; yet the question of knowledge remains problematic as the curtain falls. After Thésée's confident pronouncement that there can no longer be any doubt about the choice of a victim by the gods, Dirce gloomily adds: "Un autre ordre demain peut nous être donné" (2007). Consequently, an element of doubt hovers over the ending, a doubt which seems to point prophetically toward the story of Oedipus' progeny, toward the yet unwritten La Thébaïde. It is also not difficult to show that the criteria which characters use to determine the truth in the course of the action are all uncertain or fallible. Nature speaks through "le sang," and may retrospectively be seen to be right, but it doesn't speak clearly enough to prevent Oedipe from killing Laïus or marrying Jocaste, or to enable Jocaste to be quite certain Thésée isn't her son. Raison allows some distinctions to be made and some positions secured, but it is constantly undermined by states of confusion, passion and desire, and all too easily ramifies into spurious logic and false inference. Corneille makes virtually no use of the themes of blindness and insight characteristic of Oedipus Rex, but "obscurité," "confusion" and other vocabulary of this kind circulates throughout the play. Dirce herself, despite her commitment to uncontaminated romance values, is seduced by the sexual ambiguities of the Oedipal plot:

L'amour pour les sens est un si doux poison,
Qu'on ne peut pas toujours écouter la raison.
Moi-même, en qui l'honneur n'accepte aucune grâce,
J'aime en ce douteux sort tout ce qui m'embarrasse,
Je ne sais quoi m'y plaît qui n'ose s'exprimer,
Et ce confus mélange a de quoi me charmer.

(1255–60)
The ‘confus mélange’ is in fact a temptation that all the characters—and surely the audience—find hard to resist, shocking as that no doubt seemed to d’Aubignac.

In these ways, the play seeks constantly but unsuccessfully to disguise its own transgressions. Generic transgressions: the mingling of romance and tragedy; transgressions of ethos: the figure of the usurper first becomes confused and then turns into a hero; transgressions of bienséance: Corneille’s decision to unveil the monster before a polite but distinctly interested audience. In the end, the naturalization of the acceptable yet seductive master-plot actually draws attention to the means by which it is naturalized, creating an unease which can’t be erased (as the so-called errors of Sophocles might be erased) from the tragic recognition. *Oedipe* betrays the anxiety of a text confused about its title and origins, a text groping for an identity and finding only difference.

In several senses, Racine’s first tragedy was composed in the shadow of Oedipus. Its subject is the fatal enmity of the twin sons of Oedipus and Jocasta; its action, like that of *Andromaque*, is the reverberation of a disaster which has already become notorious. The play is preceded, *extra fabulam*, by the paradigm of all recognitions: its action is saturated, thematically and diegetically, with knowledge of Oedipus’ transgressions. The presence of Jocasta alone, resurrected from the noose of *Oedipus Rex*, would be enough to ensure this effect, since Jocasta is herself knowledge incarnate. All the transgressions have passed through her body, and in Racine’s version she is not inclined to let the other characters (or the audience) forget it. References to her womb and breast are insistent to a degree matched by neither Euripides nor Rotrou—Racine’s principal models. So, for example, the mutual hatred of Eteocles and Polynices is in Racine’s version exclusively congenital: in Euripides’ version, it was at least in part brought on by Oedipus’ curse, to which there is no reference in *La Thébaïde*. More strikingly still, for the first time in Racine’s play the brothers are twins, already fighting before they left their mother’s womb. Or at least they become twins in a late variant (four lines added in 1697): Racine brings out in retrospect a symmetry or identity which can be regarded as latent in the first version. Despite what Jules Brody says about the moral superiority of Polynice, it seems to me in fact that Racine has made the brothers much less different than they are in either Euripides or Rotrou. They appear, especially with the endorsement of the
variant, as identical twins, and like other identical twins, they perfectly and absolutely know one another, except that their likeness is manifest in hatred, in their différend: they reach agreement only on the decision to fight to the death in single combat.  

In the face of this flood-tide of knowledge, there seems little room for the uncertainties and enigmas that compose the recognition plot. Certainly no contemporary critic or theorist would have dreamt of using the term anagnorisis in connection with this play. Corneille himself could not have complained that Racine's characters act any less à visage découvert than the characters of his own plays. Yet knowledge is still a question in La Thébaïde, and the question is raised already by the decision in I. 3 to consult the gods, which leads to the quotation of an ambiguous oracle in II. 2. Predictable as this oracle and its ambiguity may be, the device is exploited structurally by Racine in a way that is much closer to Oedipus Rex (or Oedipe) than to The Phoenician Women or Rotrou's Antigone, in both of which the function of the oracle is local and episodic. The characters—in particular Jocaste and Antigone—are led at a crucial point (Act III) to believe erroneously that the oracle has been fulfilled by the voluntary, heroic death of Ménéée, who seems to have paid the price of all sins and all crimes; it also gives Créon the chance to pretend that he has been converted by the death of his son, and thus to foster Jocaste's illusion that the meeting of her sons will heal the rift.

In this way, the play is plotted towards a climactic and decisive scene (IV. 3) which Russell Pfohl has confidently (rather over-confidently for my taste) called a “magnificent recognition scene.” It begins with Jocaste triumphantly proposing a reconciliation and ends with her renouncing natural maternal affection. The twins meet not in order to recognize one another, to discover that they are twins (as in the Comedy of Errors), but to disclose irrevocably their enmity. Jocaste nevertheless, in her opening speech, invites them to recognize one another as brothers, as if they had forgotten or were ignorant of the fact. This gesture shows that the lapse in her knowledge is due not only to oracular indirection but also to a nostalgia—even in this context—for the natural and the plausible.

The Oedipal plot, then, is not present in La Thébaïde as an inquisition or a guessing-game or a perpetual riddle-solving narrative. It appears as the last delusive glimmer of the possibility that the monstrous might be staved off; or, more accurately perhaps, of the constant desire to avert one's gaze from an intolerable breakdown of the conventions that make
the world comprehensible. Oedipus, master and victim of the inquisitorial plot, had similarly averted his gaze from the evidence presented to him by Tiresias and others, as Racine in his notes on Sophocles' play had himself observed.  

*La Thébaïde* is in this sense the inversion of a recognition play; the meeting of Eteocles and Polynices is the identical yet opposite twin of anagnorisis. The difference between the brothers is, as Rotrou if not Racine keeps reminding one, a *différend*, a conflict which cannot be resolved by appeal to a higher authority. There are no higher authorities in the post-Oedipal world, only predators like Créon who wait for their adversaries to destroy one another. Indeed, one might well be tempted to accept Poulet’s view that Créon is the central figure in *La Thébaïde*, the figure who attempts to efface the past (the story of Oedipus, the death of his own sons) in order to become an absolute and arbitrary authority in the present: in this sense, he repeats the ethos of Oedipe as tyrant and usurper, but sustains it throughout the play. His ambition, too, will collapse (it is after all the kind of ambition for which collapse is an ever-present possibility), so that anomy prevails both politically and epistemologically; the question of knowledge is fractured and scattered throughout the action. The Oedipal plot, which in Aristotle and Sophocles is phrased as an ignorance ultimately supplanted by knowledge, operates in reverse. The monstrous is already known, and its presence can now only be called into question again in the form of a fitful nostalgia for ignorance.

One may at this point revert to the Corneille—Racine parallel by citing Bénichou’s rather curious contention that *La Thébaïde* is written predominantly in the Cornelian mode. It is certainly true that Racine tackles Corneille on his own ground, but it looks rather as if the similarity is chosen expressly in order to bring about a difference. Indeed, the intertextual *lice* provided by *Oedipus* and its aftermath could hardly be more precisely circumscribed. So, for example, in her attempts to persuade Polynice to hold off, Jocaste—desperately averting her gaze—urges him to go and prove his status as a hero elsewhere:

*Soyez, mon Fils, soyez l'ouvrage de vos mains.*
*Par d'illustres exploitcs couronnez vous vous-mesme,*
*Qu'un superbe laurier soit vostre Diadéme;*
Don Sanche might have taken the point, but not Polynice, who dismisses Jocaste’s suggestion as “chimères.” The irrelevance of heroism is in fact one of the principal things the play seems to be about: it is instructive and even diverting to watch Racine demolishing heroes so efficiently in 1663. Ménécée goes first, a paragon of innocence and virtue, sacrificing himself uselessly to a misreading of the oracle (in Euripides, his suicide did in fact guarantee the peace of Thebes; in Racine, the gods meant something else, although of course they were after Ménécée, too). He is followed in due course by his brother Hémon, who on the instructions of Antigone tries to separate the twins in their final combat: if one were to pursue the game of personifications, he could be said to represent gaze aversion, the unwillingness to accept that hereditary kinks can never be straightened out by a normal clean-living youth. The good brothers destroy themselves like the bad brothers, only a bit sooner.

So much for heroes. In a preface written some twelve years after the play, Racine expressed regret at having allowed love-interest to intervene in such a bloody story. The remark sounds like a delayed riposte to Corneille’s claim that Oedipus was a subject sadly deficient in love-interest; likewise, if the Antigone-Hémon episode “imitates” the Dircé-Thésée episode, it does so à contre-coeur, reversing its sense. In La Thébaïde, love and heroism go under hand in hand, whereas in Oedipe they survive the contamination of knowledge.

A further feature of the parallel is the presence in both plays of passages embodying critical reflection on the themes and motivation of Oedipus Rex. Alongside the examples I have already given from Corneille, one might place Jocaste’s speech in III. 2 on the scandal of divine injustice, which works in much the same way as a defensive preface. Racine, like Corneille, is aware of the difficulties of the paradigm, and the embarrassment shows. But whereas in Oedipe the defensive move alters the whole course of the dénouement, in La Thébaïde the questions raised by such passages remain suspended as the action progressively and ruthlessly eliminates all the characters. The scandal, in Racine, is allowed to run its course.

Finally, in drafting the “twin” motif into La Thébaïde, Racine neatly
inverts the terms of *Rodogune*: the textual memory of Thebes which Corneille’s play evokes and then attempts to rectify is resurrected in its most anxiety-ridden form, and will be rehearsed by Racine in *Britannicus, Bajazet* and *Mithridate*, all plays concerning murderous rivalry between brothers.30

In such ways, the textual engagement of *La Thébaïde* with *Oedipe* already displays a mythical symmetry which will recur in later phases of the combat between Corneille and Racine: *Britannicus* exactly inverts the imperial theme of *Cinna*, while the story of the twin versions of *Bérénice* is too well known to need repeating here (except to note that there too the question of primogeniture is unresolved). The elaboration of “parallels” between Corneille and Racine, from La Bruyère to Barnwell, has enshrined the symmetry—or at least the antithesis—as a critical commonplace, so that it becomes easy to rephrase it. One could say, for example, without too great a risk of hyperbole, that the rivalry and enmity of the two dramatists are already figured in the story of Eteocles and Polynices as Racine rewrites it; or that, in removing representatives of effective authority, Racine’s play attempts to erase Corneille’s monumental reputation; or again, conversely, that Racine himself renewed for Corneille the threat of *Oedipus*. However one puts it, Oedipus always seems to intrude between Corneille and Racine, turning the parallel into an episode and its indeterminate sequels. These critical myths represent no immediate historical reality, although one could no doubt construct a historical context for them.31 Nor can the somewhat asymmetrical parallel I have been drawing be said to lay bare the psyches of the playwrights—Corneille and Racine are here always used as labels for groups of plays and other writings. The mythical parallel in this case has what is primarily a heuristic value in sketching out the figure of a complex intertextual relation: the relation between *Oedipe* and *La Thébaïde*; between Racinian tragedy and Cornelian tragedy; between instances of poetics and instances of dramatic practice; and between the modern corpus and the ancient corpus.

At the center of this construction, what is at issue is the articulation in tragedy of something called knowledge. Something called knowledge because it attracts the rhetoric and the vocabulary of inquiry, uncertainty and recognition, but leaves the object of knowledge always in some measure in abeyance. Tragedy doesn’t and can’t answer questions; but in Sophocles’ *Oedipus* it presents the mirage of an answer to a question so
persistent that it can't be avoided. Ever since Aristotle framed *Oedipus* as the paradigm of tragedy, and thus made recognition itself a central question in poetics, the mirage has continued to be reflected and refracted in the rival discourses of tragedy and poetics. One of the consequences is that *Oedipus* has become impossible to rewrite. Later versions already know too much, whether directly or through poetics (those two routes being barely distinguishable). Racine and Corneille, like Eteocles and Polynices, know all too well, in one sense, what they are doing; they agree in advance on the impossibility of recognition tragedy, so that their fight to the death with each other and with the master-text takes place à visage découvert.

On the other hand, the intervention of Oedipus or of *Oedipus Rex* always casts a shadow, the shadow of what cannot, despite all repetitions and reformulations, quite be said. In this sense, the aftermath of *Oedipus*—Euripides, Rotrou, Corneille, Racine, et bien d'autres encore—may be imagined as a series of ricochets, or as the ever-increasing débris of a chain reaction. Or again, it could be described as the interminable retelling of a story which will always retain a margin of secrecy, despite the apparent answering of the Oedipal question in the authorized version of Sophocles.

What I mean in this context by saying that the story always retains a margin of secrecy, or by speaking of the shadow of something that can't quite be said, is that it is impossible to assign a definitive content to the knowledge such plays seek unsuccessfully to conceal and to reveal. The truth brought to light by Oedipus and his progeny is not an ethical or a metaphysical scandal, though themes of that kind may surface in the plays; it is not an authentic self, stripped at last of its masks and self-deceptions; it is not a transcendent Hegelian synthesis; nor is it a repressed desire to kill the father and have sex with the mother. These predicates are all pretexts invented plausibly by and for each cultural milieu in which the question is posed. I am tempted to suggest that, in the current cultural milieu, the predicate might best be described as a hoax: Oedipus discovering that he's been taken for a ride, though a very long and absorbingly interesting one.

There seems in any event to be little point in trying retrospectively to lay down the law for the "true" paradigm of recognition. I have been using the word "paradigm" all along in connection with *Oedipus Rex*, for reasons that are self-evident, but it is now time—high time, at the last
moment—to question that assumption. The trick worked by Sophocles could perhaps only work once, despite Aristotle's inveterate habit of moving to the universal from the particular; *Oedipus Rex* would then not be a paradigm but a *hapax*. If that view is accepted, all of its progeny are doomed to endless particularity and to endlessly unresolved conflict. Oedipal tragedy and Oedipal poetics become the joint search for a recognition which always comes too soon (Oedipus got there first) or too late (we've added it ourselves).

**Notes**

1. Other dates, in a more detailed analysis, would rapidly present themselves: Thomas Corneille's *Timocrate* (1656–57); d'Aubignac's *La Pratique du théâtre* (1657) and—in particular—his *Dissertation sur Oedipe* (1663) (see below).


3. An interesting exception is J.-F. Sarasin's *Discours de la tragédie* (1639). Sarasin claims that the moral illumination of Tyridate in Scudéry's *L'Amour tyrannique* meets the requirements of Aristotelian anagnorisis.

4. A striking and influential example is provided by F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy: serious drama in relation to Aristotle's 'Poetics'* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) (first published 1928), p. 113, note 1: “We associate the word too closely with the narrow sense of discovering a person's identity, whereas anagnorisis may equally well signify the discovery of things unknown before.” The point becomes crucial in relation to E. Vinaver's widely accepted hypothesis that Racine consciously shifts the sense of anagnorisis from a material to a psychological level (*Racine et la poésie tragique*, 2nd ed. [Paris: Nizet, 1963], chaps. 6 and 7). For a general account of “peripety and discovery” in the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, see Barnwell, *Tragic Drama*, chap. VI. John A. Stone, *Sophocles and Racine* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), stresses the importance for Racine of the Sophoclean intertext, and in particular of Sophoclean “scenes of revelation”; the relationship between these and Aristotelian anagnorisis is however not elucidated.


7. Ibid., p. 226.


9. Ibid., p. 834(b). Corneille actually says that Chimène and Antiochus
arouse stronger feelings than the character Oedipe in his own version of Oedipus: Oedipe as a whole may be more moving, but only because of the pathos of Dircé's situation. It may be inferred from this analysis that Sophocles' Oedipus, having no character equivalent to Dircé, cannot compete with Le Cid and Rodogune in this respect.

10. Ibid., p. 831(b). The exclusion of the reading “error” (“une simple erreur de méconnaissance”), which throws doubt on Oedipus as a tragic paradigm, flows from Corneille's moral interpretation of catharsis.

11. Ibid., p. 832(b).

12. Ibid., p. 567.

13. Unless one sees it displaced into Corneille's own “recognition” of the horror of the subject (“je reconnus que . . .”).


15. The Dissertation may be found in vol. 2 of F. Granet, Recueil de dissertations sur plusieurs tragédies de Corneille et de Racine (Paris: Gissey and Bordelet, 1739).


17. On the classical intertext of Rodogune and Nicomède, and the constraints imposed by the bienséances on the representation of parricide, see Corneille's second Discours (Oeuvres complètes, pp. 836–37).


19. See Dissertation, pp. 40ff. The point is also made by Nadal and Barnwell. The notion of “rectification,” to which I revert below, is insistent in d'Aubignac's discussion of Corneille's adaptation of the Oedipus story (see for example Dissertation, pp. 17, 21).


25. The vocabulary of recognition is indeed insistent here: “que chacun de vous reconnoisse son Frère” (1080); “Sur tout que le Sang parle & fasse son office” (1083). The same unwillingness to accept parricide and incest as natural or vraisemblable is evident in other characters, particularly Antigone: see for example II. 3, where Antigone accuses Polynice of failing to “recognize” her: “La nature pour luy n'est plus qu'une chimère; / Il méconnoist sa Soeur, il mesprise sa Mere”; Polynice ripostes: “Je vous connois tousjours & suis tousjours le mesme” (ed. cit., p. 139, ll. 591–92, 607). In the first edition, Antigone’s speech ends with the following lines, later deleted: “Je ne vois point mon Frere, en voyant Polynice; / En vain il se presente a mes yeux eperdus, / Je ne le connois point, il ne me connoist plus” (596–98).


29. See Barnwell, *Tragic Drama*, p. 139.

30. For Barnwell (Tragic Drama, p. 135), the closest parallel for *La Thébaïde* among Corneille’s plays is *Horace*. The symmetry of the conflict between the Horaces and the Curiaces, with messengers appearing breathlessly on the scene to report the progress of the battle, is indeed countered by the still more deadly and intimate symmetry of the duel between Étéclole and Polynice.

31. For example, it is evident that the chronological configuration I began with falls precisely in the aftermath of the Fronde, in the period when Louis XIV began to establish absolutism on a hitherto unprecedented scale and when the influence of Port-Royal on secular literature was just beginning to be felt.