

VOLTAIRE'S OEDIPE: A CRITICAL STUDY

VOLTAIRE'S OEDIPE: A CRITICAL STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Oedipe was not only the first play of Voltaire's to be performed, it was also the first work of any kind which he had published. It is of interest as it is the first literary milestone in the career of this author whom many believe to be the embodiment of the spirit of his century, and whose output was both copious and varied. Furthermore Oedipe was the most successful first play of any French playwright and its first run brought Voltaire more money than any previous French playwright had ever received for the first run of any tragedy. Therefore the play is of interest as an example of its genre, and in it can be seen some faults the accentuation of which was to lead to the death of classical French tragedy. The following is an examination of some of the more interesting aspects of Voltaire's Oedipe. Considerations of time, space and available material preclude any attempt at an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but it is hoped that the general outline has been sketched.

Throughout this work "Oedipus" is used to refer to the play's main character in general and when dealing with the Greek and Latin versions of the legend; "Oedipe" is used to refer to the main character in French plays. The text used is that of the Moland edition of Voltaire's Oeuvres complètes; arabic numbers in references to this text refer

to the number of the lines concerned, the lines having been numbered from 1 to 1408.¹ Frequent reference has been made to the Lettres sur "Oedipe" which precede, and the "Variantes" which follow the text in the Moland edition. References to Voltaire's correspondence are also numerous and refer to the Besterman edition. The editor's name is abbreviated to Best. in footnotes.

¹The play is divided into scenes as follows:

Act I scene i	lines 1-142	Act II scene i	lines 279-319
scene ii	143-160	scene ii	319-408
scene iii	161-278	scene iii	409-482
		scene iv	483-566
		scene v	567-608
Act III scene i	lines 609-670		
scene ii	670-718		
scene iii	719-750		
scene iv	751-851		
scene v	851-894		
Act IV scene i	lines 895-1086	Act V scene i	lines 1175-1194
scene ii	1087-1122	scene ii	1194-1294
scene iii	1123-1163	scene iii	1295-1330
scene iv	1164-1174	scene iv	1331-1357
		scene v	1357-1374
		scene vi	1375-1408

I

COMPOSITION

1. Possible Reasons for Choice of Subject

Oedipe was not the first play written by Voltaire.

He showed from an early age a desire for public acclaim, due perhaps in part to the psychological effect of the lack of love he found at home. His mother died when he was seven years old; his father, who seems to have had reason to suspect that François-Marie was not his own son,¹ rarely showed any affection for the youngest and physically weakest member of his family; Voltaire never spoke of his brother with anything but distaste. While there is certainly no conclusive proof, it seems to have been a mixture of arrogance, ambition and a desire for applause which led him to begin his literary career by writing tragedies and an epic poem -- the most highly esteemed forms of literary art in France at the time.

Voltaire's first tragedy was entitled Amulius et Numitor and was written while he was still at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, probably in 1706 when he was twelve years old! When in later life he came upon this tragedy in his papers, he threw it on the fire.² Two fragments were found

¹Desnoiresterres, I, 10-2.

²Ibid., I, 29.

among the papers of Thieriot and published in 1820.³ They are short passages, and generally declamatory and inflated. One line may be said to throw light on the early political views of Voltaire: "Je sers les rois, mon fils, et non pas les tyrans." The idea was not new but the expression, especially in the closing years of the reign of Louis XIV, was noble. There is also a notable enjambement:

Seigneur, si jeune encor, je sais mal imiter
Vos vertus, qu'aujourd'hui l'envie ose insulter.

If these fragments were the best in the play, its loss should not be mourned. The next tragedy was better.

In the Épître à la Duchesse du Maine, written in 1749 and published with Oreste in 1750,⁴ Voltaire gives the following account of the genesis of Oedipe:

Vous engageâtes, madame, cet homme d'un esprit presque universel [Malézieu] à traduire, avec une fidélité pleine d'élégance et de force, l'Iphigénie en Tauride d'Euripide. On la représenta dans une fête qu'il eut l'honneur de donner à Votre Altesse Sérénissime . . . Je fus témoin de ce spectacle: je n'avais alors nulle habitude de notre théâtre français: il ne m'entra pas dans la tête qu'on pût mêler de la galanterie dans ce sujet tragique . . . j'admire l'antique dans toute sa noble simplicité. Ce fut là ce qui me donna la première idée de faire la tragédie d'Oedipe, sans même avoir lu celle de Corneille.

This performance of Iphigénie en Tauride took place on August 5, 1713.⁵ However, while it is possible that this performance did have some influence on Voltaire, it is unlikely

³Moland, XXXII, 380-2.

⁴Ibid., V, 81.

⁵Lancaster, Sunset, p. 7, note.

that it constituted the sole, or even the most important, cause of Voltaire's interest in Oedipus. There is no obvious connection between Iphigénie en Tauride and the Oedipus legend. The whole of this Épître, written thirty-one years after the first production of Oedipe, must, for reasons which will be dealt with later, be considered as untrustworthy: it is at least an embellishment of the truth, and possibly a complete falsehood, prompted by a desire to justify a play which sometimes caused Voltaire embarrassment in later years.

The Discours Préliminaire to Alzire, published in 1736, tells another story: "Il est impossible à mon coeur d'être envieux. J'en appelle à l'auteur de Rhadamiste et d'Electre, qui, par ces deux ouvrages, m'inspira le premier le désir d'entrer quelque temps dans la même carrière." This Discours, which Voltaire wrote to refute the accusation of envy and to justify himself against those who were accusing him of being irreligious,⁶ is polemic in nature and as such must be considered unreliable. Crébillon had been appointed dramatic censor in 1735 and Voltaire wanted and needed to remain in his favour. It is doubtful whether Crébillon's plays had any great influence on Voltaire.

A third possible reason for Voltaire's choice presents itself. It is almost certain that Voltaire chose his subject with a view to rivalling the great Corneille, even if, as he says, he had not already read the latter's play.

⁶Moland, III, 382.

He may also have known of Racine's interest in the Oedipus legend. Patin quotes, without precise references, a letter of Valincour about Racine contained in d'Olivet's Histoire de l'Académie Française de 1652 à 1700, published in 1729:

La haute idée qu'il [Racine] avait de Sophocle lui persuadait qu'on ne pouvait l'imiter sans le gêner: et, effectivement, il n'a jamais osé toucher à aucune de ses pièces, quoiqu'il n'ait pas craint de jouter contre Euripide, qu'il a souvent égalé et quelquefois surpassé. Je me souviens, à ce sujet, qu'étant un jour à Auteuil, chez Despréaux . . . nous mimes Racine sur l'Oedipe de Sophocle. Il nous le récita en entier, le traduisant sur-le-champ . . . J'ai vu nos meilleurs acteurs sur le théâtre, j'ai entendu nos meilleures pièces: mais jamais rien n'approcha du trouble où me jeta ce récit.⁷

Voltaire almost certainly read the Histoire of his "ancien préfet"⁸ though obviously not before he wrote Oedipe, and had been to Auteuil.⁹ Even if he had no knowledge of Valincour's letter (probably first printed in d'Olivet's Histoire), it is possible that he had heard some account of the event described in it. In any case he disagreed with Racine's judgement of the Greeks: in the Lettre III sur Oedipe he speaks of: "Euripide . . . qui me paraît si supérieur à Sophocle."¹⁰

Patin further quotes Fénelon's Lettre à l'Académie Française published in 1714, which contains the following

⁷Patin, Sophocle, p. 159, note.

⁸Best., II, 86.

⁹Moland, X, 398, note 1.

¹⁰Ibid., II, 27.

words:

M. Racine, qui avait fort étudié les grands modèles de l'antiquité, avait formé le plan d'une tragédie française d'Oedipe, suivant le goût de Sophocle, sans y mêler aucune intrigue postiche d'amour et suivant la simplicité grecque. Un tel spectacle pourrait être très-curieux, très-vif, très-rapide, très-intéressant: il ne serait point applaudi.

There may be some doubt as to the truth of this statement:

Patin¹¹ corrects the statement of Voltaire in the Epître à la Duchesse du Maine: ". . . [Racine] avait commencé l'Iphigénie en Tauride et la galanterie n'entraît point dans son plan."¹² Again, there is no reason why Voltaire should not know of this letter; but if he really did intend to rival Racine as well as Corneille and Sophocles, it is most unlikely that in his youthful arrogance he would not have made about Racine disparaging remarks similar to those he made about Corneille and Sophocles.

Pomeau notes: "Le mythe d'Oedipe se prête à l'exploitation philosophique", and goes on to point out that Corneille had inserted in his version of the legend some comments on free will (Oedipe III, v), and that the Jesuits found "des traits de pur molinisme touchant l'influence du ciel sur les penchants et les vertus des hommes",¹³ in La Motte's Oedipe. While this may be true, the Oedipus

¹¹Patin, Euripide, II, 123-4.

¹²Moland, V, 81.

¹³Pomeau, La religion de Voltaire, p. 84.

legend probably lends itself less to philosophical exploitation than, for example, the story of Iphigenia at Aulis. Pomeau thinks that Voltaire made his choice of subject following the letter on tragedy published by "le P. Souciet, scriptor au collège de Louis-le-Grand" in 1709. This contained a reiteration of the Aristotelian idea of a hero who is not too criminal to be sympathetic and goes on:

S'agit-il de corriger la Grèce des incestes, des impudicités énormes qui l'inondaient? Ils produisent sur la scène un Oedipe. Qui jamais en ce genre fut moins coupable? Qui peut le moins être?¹⁴

It is a most unusual and illogical interpretation of the legend to say that its purpose in the dramatic form was to correct the vice of incest. This was not true of the Greek originals, of Seneca, of Corneille, or of Voltaire, despite the contemporary idea that the play alluded to the unwholesome relationship between the Duc d'Orléans and his daughter Mme. du Berry. It is equally erroneous to consider the Greek Oedipus as innocent, though, as Pomeau points out, in Voltaire's version he was innocent. The most probable interpretations of both versions will be considered in due course, but certainly Souciet and apparently Pomeau, too, were mistaken. Père Souciet gives a list of four good subjects for tragedy, "Alcméon, Oedipe, Oreste, Thyeste."¹⁵ If indeed Voltaire did choose from this list, as Pomeau suggests, there still seems no good reason why he should choose Oedipus. In

¹⁴ Mémoires de Trévoux, juillet 1709, p. 1250-1.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 1256.

fact it is most improbable that Voltaire read back numbers of periodicals. At most one could say that Voltaire may have been aware of Souciet's opinion only because Souciet reflects the general views of the Jesuit Collège where Voltaire was.

As usual in such cases, it is impossible to give more than tentative suggestions as to why Voltaire chose to treat the Oedipus legend. None of the reasons listed above is by itself adequate. Taken together they are still not conclusive: Voltaire's life at this time is not well documented and his letters are few. Other influences may well have been at work. What is certain is that once Voltaire had decided on his subject, he never seems to have doubted its suitability.

2. Date of Composition

Voltaire probably began writing his Oedipe in 1712 or 1713. The Commentaire Historique sur sa vie says: "Il avait commencé dès l'âge de 18 ans la tragédie d'Oedipe dans laquelle il voulut mettre des chœurs à la manière des anciens."¹⁶ The Commentaire has a "Note de Voltaire" which reads: "Nous avons une lettre du savant Dacier de 1713 dans laquelle il exhorte l'auteur, qui avait déjà fait sa pièce, à y joindre des chœurs chantants à l'exemple des Grecs." In a letter to the Abbé d'Olivet of 20 August 1761 Voltaire says of the Oedipus legend: "Vous savez que j'osai traiter ce sujet il y a quarante-sept ans. J'ai encore la lettre de

¹⁶Moland, I, 72.

M. Dacier à qui je montrai le troisième acte imité de Sophocle. Il m'exhorte dans cette lettre de 1714 à introduire des chœurs."¹⁷ Unfortunately the letter of Dacier is lost and the actual year in which it was written is therefore unknown. It is uncertain how much of the play Voltaire had written when he showed it to Dacier. He said, as will be shown later, that he began by translating the great scene between Jocasta and Oedipus at the end of the Second Episode of Sophocles' version. This became scene 1 of Act IV in Voltaire's published play, but from the letter to d'Olivet just quoted it seems possible that this scene originally formed a part of Act III. Certainly the first three scenes of Act III as the play stands are in no way imitated from Sophocles. If the present Act IV scene 1 did originally form part of Act III Voltaire could have had no firm plan or he would have realized that it would be impossible to draw out the action for a further two acts.

In the oft-quoted letter to Père Porée of January 7, 1731, Voltaire simply states: "J'étais extrêmement jeune."¹⁸ On the other hand, in the first Lettre sur Oedipe, published in 1719, he writes: "Vous savez que j'ai commencé cette pièce à dix-neuf ans" -- that is to say, towards 1713, a date which it seems reasonable to accept.

It can be said, moreover, that the play was the product

¹⁷Best., XLVI, 264.

¹⁸Ibid., II, 130.

of a long gestation. On June 25, 1715, Voltaire wrote to the Marquise de Mimeure: "Je vous apporterais ce que j'ai fait d'Oedipe: je vous demanderais vos conseils sur ce qui est déjà fait et sur ce qui n'est pas travaillé et j'aurais à M. de Mimeure et à vous l'obligation de faire une bonne pièce."¹⁹ Later during his exile at Sully he wrote on June 20, 1716, to the Abbé de Chaulieu: "Je sens qu'on ne peut guère réussir dans les grands ouvrages sans un peu de conseils et beaucoup de docilité. Je me souviens bien des critiques que m. le grand-prieur et vous, vous me fîtes dans un certain souper chez m. l'abbé de Bussy. Ce souper-là fit beaucoup de bien à ma tragédie."²⁰

Voltaire sought advice not only from those whose views he valued, but also from those whose help and protection he thought he might need. The Epître à la Duchesse du Maine says: "Votre Altesse Sérénissime se souvient que j'eus l'honneur de lire Oedipe devant elle."²¹ Here he had the views of "M. le cardinal de Polignac, M. de Malézieu et tout ce qui composait votre cour." Desnoiresterres quotes a letter of April 20, 1717, in which Brossette writes to J-B Rousseau: "On attend avec impatience la tragédie par M. Arouet, dont on dit par avance beaucoup de bien. Pour moi,

¹⁹Ibid., I, 40.

²⁰Ibid., I, 53.

²¹Moland, V, 81.

j'ai peine à croire qu'une excellente ou même une bonne tragédie puisse être l'ouvrage d'un jeune homme."²² Rousseau replied in these terms on May 18, 1717: "Il y a longtemps que j'entends dire merveille de l'Oedipe du petit Arouet. J'ai fort bonne opinion de ce jeune homme: mais je meurs de peur qu'il n'ait affaibli le terrible de ce grand sujet en y mêlant de l'amour."²³

This exchange indicates that there was an immediate prospect of the play being performed. Desnoiresterres, without giving a source, says: "Les comédiens s'étaient décidés à jouer Oedipe. Ils étaient sur le point de la représenter lors de l'arrestation d'Arouet."²⁴ Voltaire was arrested on May 17, 1717, and it was only on October 12, 1718, almost eighteen months later, that he was given permission to return to Paris whenever he wished to do so.²⁵ The fact that Oedipe was performed five weeks after this permission was given, implies that it was not a new decision of the actors. Lancaster says that the actors Beauborg and Ponteuil refused to accept the play, adding: "It was not till the first of them had retired and the other had died that the tragedy could be given."²⁶ He, too, gives no source for his

²²Desnoiresterres, I, 138.

²³Lettres de Rousseau, II, 165, 170.

²⁴Desnoiresterres, I, 137-8.

²⁵Best., I, 94.

²⁶Lancaster, French Tragedy 1715-1774, I, 50-1.

statement but it is true that Beauborg retired on April 31, 1718,²⁷ and Ponteuil, who made his début at the Comédie Française in the title rôle of Corneille's Oedipe in 1701, died in 1718.²⁸ In any case, statements of Voltaire at various times in his life all agree that the actors were opposed to his play and it was only performed because of his influential friends. In his letter of 1731 to Père Porée Voltaire states: "Je tins bon, je dis mes raisons, j'employai mes amis. Enfin ce ne fut qu'à force de protections que j'obtins qu'on jouerait Oedipe."²⁹ He adds: "En un mot, les acteurs . . . refusèrent de représenter la pièce." In the Commentaire Historique sur sa vie he says: "Les comédiens eurent beaucoup de répugnance à jouer une tragédie traitée par Corneille, en possession du théâtre; ils ne la représentèrent qu'en 1718, et encore fallut-il de la protection."³⁰ Neither of the writings from which these quotations are taken is strictly accurate in all respects, but in this case Voltaire does not seem to be justifying himself or his play, and there is a good degree of conformity between the statements: it seems reasonable, therefore, to accept them.

It is obvious that during the five or six years which separated the choice of subject from the performance of the

²⁷Dictionnaire de Biographie Française.

²⁸Larousse du XIX^e siècle.

²⁹Best., II, 153-4.

³⁰Moland, I, 72.

play, Voltaire spent a great deal of time on his play, submitted it for comment to many different people, and made every effort to ensure its success when it finally appeared.

3. Influence of the Actors on the Content of the Play

On several occasions Voltaire claims that the actors influenced his plot. In the letter to Père Porée (1731), he says: "Les comédiennes se moquèrent de moi quand elles virent qu'il n'y avait point de rôle pour l'amoureuse . . . J'étais extrêmement jeune; je crus qu'ils [les comédiens] avaient raison: je gâtai ma pièce pour leur plaire en affaiblissant par des sentiments de tendresse un sujet qui les comporte si peu."³¹ By the time he came to write this letter, over twelve years after the first performance of Oedipe, Voltaire had already changed his mind about some of his early ideas. The letter is nothing more than an apologia, written by a pupil to his former prefect about a work of art of which he was now somewhat ashamed. This fact is made clear at the start. "Je veux d'abord que vous sachiez pour ma justification que, tout jeune que j'étais quand je fis l'Oedipe, je le composai à peu près tel que vous le voyez aujourd'hui."³² As such the letter is not a reliable source of information.

In the Epître à la Duchesse du Maine (1749) he repeats:

³¹Best., II, 153.

³²Ibid.

Je n'avais alors nulle habitude de notre théâtre français: il ne m'entra pas dans la tête qu'on pût mêler de la galanterie dans ce sujet tragique . . . j'admirai l'antique dans toute sa noble simplicité. . . . Je commençai par m'essayer, en traduisant la fameuse scène de Sophocle qui contient la double confidence de Jocaste et d'Oedipe. Je la lus à quelques-uns de mes amis qui fréquentaient les spectacles, et à quelques acteurs; ils m'assurèrent que ce morceau ne pourrait jamais réussir en France: ils m'exhortèrent à lire Corneille, qui l'avait soigneusement évité, et me dirent tous que si je ne mettais, à son exemple, une intrigue amoureuse dans Oedipe, les comédiens mêmes ne pourraient pas se charger de mon ouvrage . . . il fallut céder à l'exemple et à la mauvaise coutume. J'introduisis, au milieu de la terreur de ce chef d'oeuvre de l'antiquité, non pas une intrigue d'amour, l'idée m'en paraissait trop choquante, mais au moins le souvenir d'une passion éteinte . . . Vous me blâmâtes universellement, et avec très-grande raison, d'avoir prononcé le mot d'amour dans un ouvrage où Sophocle avait si bien réussi sans ce malheureux ornement étranger; et ce qui seul avait fait recevoir ma pièce fut précisément le seul défaut que vous condamnâtes. Les comédiens jouèrent à regret Oedipe dont ils n'espéraient rien."³³

This Epître, written twenty-one years after the production of Oedipe, has two purposes. It is a dedication to "Son Altesse Sérénissime",³⁴ whom it is intended to flatter, and it is a protest against the predominance of love themes in tragedy. Obviously, before he could safely criticise other writers, he had to justify himself, and in doing so he turned a compliment to his protector. Such statements are not entirely worthy of trust.

Later again, in 1761, in a letter to the abbé d'Olivet Voltaire says:

³³Moland, V, 81.

³⁴Ibid., V, 79.

Corneille a mis de l'amour dans ce sujet terrible d'Oedipe . . . J'ai encore la lettre de M. Dacier . . . Il m'exhorte à introduire les chœurs et à ne point parler d'amour dans un sujet où cette passion est si impertinente. Je suivis son conseil, je lus l'esquisse de la pièce aux Comédiens. Ils me forcèrent à retrancher une partie des chœurs, et à mettre au moins quelque souvenir d'amour dans Philoctète, afin, disaient-ils, qu'on pardonnât l'insipidité de Jocaste et d'Oedipe, en faveur des tendres sentiments de Philoctète. Le peu de chœurs même que je laissai ne furent point exécutés.³⁵

As Voltaire grew older, his language became stronger and the justification of self at the expense of the actors was more virulent. This is most noticeable in the Remarques sur "Oedipe" in the Commentaires sur Corneille of 1764:

C'est le comble du ridicule de parler d'amour dans Oedipe, dans Electre, dans Mérope. Lorsqu'en 1718 il fut question de représenter le seul Oedipe qui soit resté depuis au théâtre, les comédiens exigèrent quelques scènes où l'amour ne fût pas oublié, et l'auteur gâta et avilit ce beau sujet par le froid ressouvenir d'un amour insipide entre Philoctète et Jocaste. L'actrice qui représentait Dircé dans l'Oedipe de Corneille dit au nouvel auteur: "C'est moi qui joue l'amoureuse, et si on ne me donne un rôle, la pièce ne sera pas jouée." À ces paroles: "Je joue l'amoureuse dans Oedipe", deux étrangers de bon sens éclatèrent de rire; mais il fallut s'asservir à l'abus le plus méprisable, et si l'auteur, indigné de cet abus auquel il cédait, n'avait pas mis dans sa tragédie le moins de conversation amoureuse qu'il put, s'il avait prononcé le mot d'amour dans les trois derniers actes, la pièce ne mériterait pas d'être représentée.³⁶

Voltaire wrote his Remarques sur "Oedipe" when he was seventy years old. It is well known that with age comes wisdom, and he must have regretted some of the statements he made in his

³⁵Best., XLVI, 264.

³⁶Moland, XXXII, 170-1.

Lettres sur "Oedipe" published with the first edition of the play in 1719. These letters show that his understanding of drama was restricted to certain well-defined notions -- in general the theatre of France in the seventeenth century. Voltaire wrote the letters in reply to criticisms of his play, but since at this stage he believed he had written a good play, he does not attempt to lay responsibility for the plot on the actors, and freely admits some faults. However, nothing can excuse his treatment of his illustrious predecessors, especially Sophocles. The Lettre III contenant la critique de l'"Oedipe" de Sophocle was so unfair that it caused the abbé Capperonier to write a pamphlet defending Sophocles.³⁷ Dacier himself would have replied had his wife not prevented him.³⁸ One example will suffice to show the tone of this Lettre III: "Sophocle touchait au temps où la tragédie fut inventée . . . il est à croire que s'ils [the Greek dramatists] étaient nés de nos jours, ils auraient perfectionné l'art qu'ils ont presque inventé de leur temps . . . Leurs ouvrages méritent d'être lus, sans doute: et, s'ils sont trop défectueux pour qu'on les approuve, ils sont trop pleins de beautés pour qu'on les méprise entièrement." Such was Voltaire's conception of the world's greatest dramatists. Faced with such incomprehension the reader cannot but acknowledge the fact that this was not the writing of a

³⁷Ibid., I, 9, note.

³⁸Best., I, 105-6.

mature dramatist. These letters are much more likely to express the real sentiments of Voltaire at the time of writing his Oedipe than are the reflections of his maturity quoted above. One brief comparison will serve to show the change in outlook of the old Voltaire as compared with the young one. In the Lettres sur "Oedipe" (1719) he says: "J'ai reconnu qu'on peut sans péril louer tant qu'on veut les poètes grecs, mais qu'il est dangereux de les imiter."³⁹ In the Remarques sur "Oedipe" (1764) he says: "Tout ce qui a été imité de Sophocle, quoique très faiblement dans l'Oedipe, a toujours réussi parmi nous."⁴⁰

Looking, then, in the Lettres sur "Oedipe", for Voltaire's real reason for including the love intrigue in Oedipe, one finds that he is quite categorical. "Corneille sentit bien que la simplicité ou plutôt la sécheresse de la tragédie de Sophocle ne pouvait fournir toute l'étendue qu'exigent nos pièces de théâtre."⁴¹ The Greek legends are, he says, "des sujets d'une ou de deux scènes tout au plus, et non pas d'une tragédie . . . Il faut joindre à ces événements des passions qui les préparent . . . Il fallut que Corneille . . . suppléât, par la fécondité de son génie, à l'aridité de la matière."⁴² In his criticism of his own Oedipe he says

³⁹Moland, II, 25.

⁴⁰Ibid., XXXII, 170.

⁴¹Ibid., II, 29.

⁴²Ibid.

this:

À l'égard de l'amour de Jocaste et de Philoctète,⁴³
 j'ose encore dire que c'est un défaut nécessaire.
 Le sujet ne me fournissait rien par lui-même pour
 remplir les trois premiers actes: à peine avais-je
 de la matière pour les deux derniers. Ceux qui
 connaissent le théâtre, c'est-à-dire ceux qui sentent
 les difficultés de la composition aussi bien que les
 fautes, conviendront de ce que je dis. Il faut tou-
 jours donner des passions aux principaux personnages.
 Eh! quel rôle insipide aurait joué Jocaste, si elle
 n'avait eu du moins le souvenir d'un amour légitime,
 et si elle n'avait craint pour les jours d'un homme
 qu'elle avait autrefois aimé?⁴⁴

It is interesting to compare the use of "insipide" here and
 in the Remarques sur "Oedipe" of 1764, quoted above.

Voltaire is here correct. The subject matter of
Oedipe without love, could not be made to fill out five acts
 of a classical French tragedy. As the play stands now, with
 1408 lines, it is 600 lines shorter than Corneille's Oedipe,
 and 100 lines shorter than Racine's Bérénice, which is the
 shortest classical tragedy of note. It is probable that
 when Voltaire realised that he would have to add to the
 legend, he asked some actors about possible solutions to his
 problem, and was advised to add a love intrigue. Possibly
 he did not need this advice. His love affair in the Nether-
 lands in 1713 shows him to have been a man of passion.
 Furthermore, despite his claim to be without knowledge of the
 theatre,⁴⁵ a claim whose validity is challenged by the number

⁴³This was the reading in all editions to the Kehl
 edition. See Moland's note.

⁴⁴Moland, II, 39.

⁴⁵Ibid., V, 81.

of lines of Oedipe imitated from his predecessors, he must have known that plays which had no love interest were not performed at the Comédie Française.⁴⁶ Fénelon's Lettre à l'Académie Française of 1714, quoted above, states that even a play by Racine without love would not be applauded. The simplest and most obvious solution would have been to have introduced a passionate love between Jocaste and Oedipe. However, general good taste and the conventions of the period precluded this possibility. It is quite possible that some erudite critics like Brossette and Rousseau,⁴⁷ and even the Duchesse du Maine⁴⁸ deplored the introduction of a love intrigue; but the financial success of a play depended on its appeal to a much wider audience which was less well educated. The advice of the actors was, in this context, good.

To sum up, one can say that the influence of the actors on the plot insofar as the inclusion of the love interest was concerned, was probably small. It appears to have been more in the nature of helpful advice to a novice aspiring to success, rather than pressure to conform.

As regards scene 1 of Act IV with which Voltaire said he began his work,⁴⁹ it is quite likely that the actors were

⁴⁶ Athalie was not performed at the Comédie Française until 1716 and its lack of love on the human plane was the main reason for the mixed reception it received.

⁴⁷ See pages 11-12 above.

⁴⁸ See page 15 above.

⁴⁹ Moland, V, 81.

opposed to it, if for no other reason, simply because it was not in the version by Corneille. It was fortunate that Voltaire persevered and kept the scene as it is one of the best tragic scenes written in the century. Even then the vehemence of Voltaire's language is suspect when he says in the letter to père Porée of 1731: "On trouva la scène de la double confidence entre Oedipe et Jocaste, tirée en partie de Sophocle, tout à fait insipide . . . Il y avait un acteur nommé Quinault, qui dit tout haut que pour me punir de mon opiniâtreté il fallait jouer la pièce telle qu'elle était avec ce mauvais quatrième acte tiré du grec."⁵⁰ If this anecdote is based on fact, it must be remembered that Quinault was only one member of the troupe and possibly not an influential one. If all the actors had been of his opinion the play would not have been performed despite all Voltaire's protectors.

There remains the question of the chorus. Once again references to the chorus in the letter to père Porée, in the Commentaire Historique sur sa vie, and in the letter to the abbé d'Olivet already mentioned, differ from those in the Lettres sur "Oedipe". The letter to père Porée runs as follows: "Je travaillai comme si j'avais été à Athènes. Je consultai M. Dacier qui était du pays. Il me conseilla de mettre un chœur dans toutes les scènes à la manière des Grecs . . . J'eus de la peine seulement à obtenir que les comédiens de Paris voulussent exécuter les chœurs qui paraissent trois ou

⁵⁰Best., II, 153.

quatre fois dans la piece."⁵¹ The references in the Commentaire Historique of 1764 and the letter to the abbé d'Olivet have already been quoted.⁵² It is not unlikely that Voltaire did consult Dacier, but he may have misunderstood the advice he received. Dacier said in the preface to his translation of Aristotle's Poetics in 1692 that he considered the chorus to be a good means of introducing a moralising element into tragedy.⁵³ The chorus had this purpose in Aeschylus, to some extent in Sophocles, and not at all in Euripedes. Each poet used the chorus in a different way and to a different purpose; the only thing that was really similar in all three was the fact that the chorus was always on the stage. This in itself was due to the different conception of tragedy and the different staging methods. Dacier should have been a good enough scholar to have realised this. It is, therefore, a pity that his letter to Voltaire is lost, as it might have given some indication of the extent to which the scholars of the time shared Voltaire's misunderstanding of the nature of the Greek chorus.

In the Lettre VI sur "Oedipe" Voltaire gives a number of reasons for using the chorus. Dacier is not mentioned and the Lettre, which is partly in the nature of a justification,

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²See pages 9 and 16 above.

⁵³Quoted by Bergerhoff, Evolution of Liberal Theory and Practice in the French Theatre 1680-1757, p. 72.

throws some light on what were probably the ideas on the chorus prevailing at the time. Voltaire says his chorus is: "Seulement pour jeter plus d'intérêt dans la scène, et pour ajouter plus de pompe au spectacle."⁵⁴ He goes on: "Chez les anciens, le chœur remplissait l'intervalle des actes et paraissait toujours sur la scène." This is carrying simplification beyond the point where it ceases to be truth. At this point in his life Voltaire simply did not understand Greek tragedy. He goes on to prove to his own satisfaction that the Greek chorus was useless, ridiculous, and a hindrance. "M. Racine qui a introduit des chœurs dans Athalie et dans Esther, s'y est pris avec plus de précaution que les Grecs: il ne les a guère fait paraître que dans les entr'actes: encore a-t-il eu bien de la peine à le faire avec la vraisemblance qu'exige toujours l'art du théâtre."⁵⁵ Borgerhoff has this to say:

Esther was written in 1689 and produced at St. Cyr in that year, but it did not receive a public performance until 1721 . . . Athalie was written in 1691 but was only given a reading at Court at the time, not receiving a full production until 1702 when members of the Court put it on at Versailles complete with music and chorus. However it was not until 1716 that it was produced at the Comédie Française, the choruses having been suppressed.⁵⁶

So Voltaire never saw either of these plays performed with a chorus. The suppression by the actors of the choruses of

⁵⁴ See chapter on Technique.

⁵⁵ Moland, II, 42-3.

⁵⁶ Borgerhoff, op. cit., p. 34.

Athalie was probably wise; the chorus in Voltaire's Oedipe was laughed at. It was not meant to sing as this would offend against the doctrine of the separation of genres. "Je ne parle pas du bizarre assortissement du chant et de la déclamation dans une même scène", he says in the Lettres sur "Oedipe." But in the Discours sur la tragédie which preceded Brutus he says: "Je me souvenais que lorsque j'introduisis autrefois dans Oedipe un chœur de Thébains . . . le parterre, au lieu d'être frappé du pathétique qui pouvait être en cet endroit, ne sentit d'abord que le prétendu ridicule d'avoir mis ces vers dans la bouche d'acteurs peu accoutumés, et il fit un éclat de rire."⁵⁷ It may have been the poorness of the actors which caused the audience to laugh, but it may well have been the lines they had to speak.

Voltaire's attitude to the use of the chorus by the Greeks probably reflects the French classical tradition -- the inacceptability of the chorus to contemporary taste is shown by the way Esther and Athalie were treated. If he failed to understand the Greek chorus he was probably no worse than his contemporaries with a similar background. In any case his introduction of a chorus into his first play was singularly enterprising.

The composition of Oedipe was a matter of great importance to the young Arouet and one on which he lavished much time and effort. His frequent recourse to experts in

⁵⁷Moland, II, 321.

classical Greek and the modern theatre are also praiseworthy. The play has faults, some of which are due to the youth of the author, but they are to some extent the faults of the traditional ideas of the period.

II

PLOT

1. Summary of the Plot

The myth of Oedipus was not an invention of Sophocles. It was well established before he based his play on it, and one of the lost plays of Aeschylus treated the same subject. The outline of the legend is so well known it should need no comment. Many and various have been the changes wrought on the original theme by a succession of writers up to the present day. Voltaire introduced a character from another myth, Philoctète, whose recollections of past affection for Jocaste provided the love interest that Voltaire considered necessary. In constructing his play in this way Voltaire was following the example set by Corneille. Before dealing with the extent and nature of Voltaire's borrowings from his predecessors, it is necessary to have a detailed knowledge of his version of the legend.

The action takes place in the city of Thebes, and the play opens with a meeting between Dimas and his old friend, Philoctète. Dimas wonders what could bring Philoctète to Thebes which is in a terrible plight, and tells him of the misfortunes the city has suffered since the death of its former king, Laius, -- the ravages of the sphinx, Oedipe's

killing of it, and the plague which followed Oedipe's winning of the throne. Philoctète in his turn tells him that since the recent death of Hercules has released him from his duty, he has returned to Thebes to seek news of his lover, Jocaste, from whom he has been long separated. He is disappointed that Jocaste has entered into marriage with Oedipe after the death of Laius. Setting aside his personal grief he invokes Hercules to help the Thebans in their misfortunes.

The temple doors open and the High Priest appears amidst the people. The Chorus in despair asks for release in death, but the priest tells them that the gods are going to speak to Oedipe that day. Oedipe arrives and sympathises with the people. The priest recounts the visit of the shade of Laius during the night, and gives its message that the salvation of Thebes depends on the discovery of the murderer of Laius. Oedipe immediately starts investigations, excusing his tardiness by saying he did not want to upset Jocaste. Jocaste retells the tale told by Phorbas, Laius' counsellor, when he returned with Laius' body. He had said Laius met his death at the hands of unknown men; the coming of the sphinx had distracted attention from this episode and a preliminary investigation had come to naught. Phorbas, she adds, was still confined in a castle to protect him from the wrath of the people. Oedipe orders him to be brought before his king and calls down a curse on Laius' killer.

Act II starts with Araspe, the confidant of Oedipe,

telling Jocaste that the people suspect Philoctète of the murder despite his reputation for honour and valour, because of his obvious hatred of Laius and because he was in Thebes when the murder was committed. Jocaste offers her own blood to placate the gods, and tells Égine, her confidant, that she is still in love with Philoctète despite all her efforts to forget him. Her affection for Oedipe is of a different nature, "une amitié sévère", as she says. Philoctète arrives and bemoans the fact that he was absent when the sphinx needed killing. Jocaste tells him that her marriage to Oedipe was necessary and adds that he is now suspected of murder. She advises him to flee and take the vacant place of Hercules as defender of the weak. Oedipe then enters and tells Philoctète he will have to defend himself against the charge of murder, but Philoctète argues that this would be dishonourable. He leaves, but promises to remain in the city. Oedipe confesses to Araspe that he is convinced of Philoctète's innocence. He hopes for information from Phorbas which the gods refuse to give. Araspe tells him that the gods sometimes sleep and that priests are untrustworthy, and he should trust only himself. Oedipe replies that the gods would not put the Thebans into untrustworthy hands.

At the start of Act III Jocaste waits to see Philoctète for the last time. She tells Égine she is determined to defend him against the charges brought by the people, though she fears her motive may be love as much as equity. She fears

she has not been able to conceal her love from her court and that her reputation will suffer. Philoctète arrives and refuses to forfeit his honour by fleeing: he says his blood may satisfy the gods and is prepared to sacrifice it. Oedipe enters and tells Philoctète he has calmed the populace, and the gods are about to name their victim. Philoctète still insists that it is dishonourable for him to have to defend himself. The High Priest then comes in, distressed that he knows the truth. He is forced to speak and name Oedipe as murderer of Laius. Jocaste, Philoctète and Oedipe all accuse him of treachery and Oedipe threatens him with death. The priest foretells disaster and mentions the father of Oedipe, a reference which disturbs Oedipe. Philoctète tries to comfort him by accusing priests in general of being disturbers of the peace, Jocaste offers again to die. Oedipe asks her for an audience alone, where he can clear his mind of a suspicion that has gradually forced itself upon him.

Act IV begins with a scene between Oedipe and Jocaste. Oedipe says he is worried by the words of the priest, and asks for further details about Laius as he appeared at the time of his death. What he learns disturbs him more, but Jocaste attempts to reassure him by telling him that oracles and priests are unreliable: she quotes the example of her own son. This baby was destined according to the Delphic oracle to kill its father and marry its mother. In order to prevent this happening, Jocaste, after much hesitation, had had the

child killed; but her husband had been murdered despite this precaution. Oedipe then tells his life-story, how he was born to the throne of Corinth but left that city because one day in the temple his offerings to the gods were refused and he was told he would kill his father and marry his mother. After leaving Corinth with a single companion, he had wandered far and wide until he came to a narrow path where his mistaken sense of honour had brought him to blows with two men in a chariot over the right of passage. This incident, he says, he had forgotten until this instant, but now the hand of the gods was removing the blindfold from his eyes. He killed the two men, one of whom wept while dying. At this point Phorbas arrives. He recognises Oedipe as the man who killed Laius. Oedipe orders him to depart again as he cannot bear to see the innocent victim of his crime. He begs Jocaste to kill him with the sword which slew her husband. She refuses on the grounds that his parricide was involuntary. Oedipe resolves to leave Thebes and is wondering where to go when a stranger from Corinth is announced.

In the first scene of Act V Oedipe tells the people of his decision to leave the city and recommends that Philoctète be king. He wishes to see Phorbas again to recompense him for the wrong he has suffered, and asks that the stranger be shown in. The stranger he recognises as Icare, a favourite of his father, Polybe. Icare tells him that Polybe has died of old age. Oedipe rejoices that the oracles

have been proved wrong, but regrets that the gods make the death of his father seem a cause for rejoicing. Icare ends Oedipe's happiness by telling him that he has been exiled from Corinth, that the throne is occupied by the son-in-law of Polybe, that this was done by order of Polybe, and, finally, that Polybe was not the father of Oedipe. This fact Polybe had admitted on his death-bed. Icare further relates how a Theban had given the infant Oedipe to him in a deserted spot in the hills. Icare had taken him to Polybe who had adopted the baby as his own child for political reasons. Oedipe has a premonition of further horrors but despite himself he must continue to seek the truth. Phorbas now enters again and is recognised by Icare as the Theban who gave the baby Oedipe to him. Phorbas denies he is the father of Oedipe and under pressure admits that Oedipe is the son of Jocaste and Laius. Oedipe bids them leave him and in a monologue he lays on the gods the responsibility for his crime. Jocaste enters and Oedipe tells her what he knows, and leaves. Jocaste in a state of collapse asks Égine to take her away. The High Priest then arrives and says that the curse of the gods has been lifted now that Oedipe's blood has been spilled. He says that Oedipe is not dead but has put his eyes out. Jocaste invokes Laius and kills herself, proclaiming her own innocence and the gods' guilt.

2. Structure

Schérer defines the exposition in these terms: "Partie de la pièce de théâtre qui fait connaître tous les faits nécessaires à l'intelligence de la situation initiale".¹ To some extent it is true that the initial situation in this play cannot be understood until all the facts are made clear at the end of the play. Oedipe is the story of a man who discovers himself, and the real action consists simply of the accumulation of facts that enable him to realise what he is. But granted the exceptional nature of the plot, it can be seen that the background to the story of Oedipe is given to a large extent in the first eighty lines of the play, in the conversation between Philoctète and Dimas. Voltaire in the fifth Lettre sur "Oedipe" explains that Philoctète's ignorance of events in Thebes is no more pardonable than that of Oedipe about the death of Laius:

Heureusement, cette ignorance vicieuse de Philoctète m'a fourni une exposition du sujet qui m'a paru assez bien reçu: et c'est ce qui me persuade que les beautés d'un ouvrage naissent quelquefois d'un défaut . . . L'exposition du sujet se fait ordinairement à un personnage qui en est aussi bien informé que celui qui lui parle . . . Le point de perfection serait de combiner tellement les événements que l'acteur qui parle n'eût jamais dû dire ce qu'on met dans sa bouche que dans le temps même où il le dit.²

He adds that the subject of Oedipe is too bizarre for a perfect exposition such as Racine gave in Bajazet. He ends by

¹Schérer, La Dramaturgie classique en France, p.437.

²Moland, II, 37.

stating that: "Lorsqu'on se trouve si peu maître du terrain, il faut toujours songer à être intéressant plutôt qu'exact." His attempt to be interesting is successful and he can rightly be proud of this part of the exposition. It was a commonplace to justify the ignorance of Philoctète by making him return from a long journey; but Voltaire's use of the idea here is more happily introduced, shorter, clearer and more interesting than that of, for example, Corneille's Médée or Scudéry's Prince déguisé where the same stratagem is employed. Patin calls the exposition "une conversation presque entre indifférents",³ and feels it is therefore much less moving than the crowd scene at the beginning of Sophocles' tragedy. He is right, but Sophocles did not have to account for the presence of Philoctète and try to attach him to the plot.

In his attempt to do this, Voltaire was not very successful. The death of Hercules is first recounted; its relevance to the plot is minimal, though it is supposed to throw light on Philoctète's character. His love for Jocaste, which received a passing mention earlier in the scene, is now elaborated. Here Voltaire commits the common fault of making a character tell another what both knew already, for the information of the audience. Of the love of Philoctète and Jocaste Dimas says:

Il naquit dans l'enfance, il croissait avec vous.
 Jocaste par un père à son hymen forcée
 Au trône de Laius à regret fut placée. (I.1.102-4)

³Patin, Sophocle, pp. 160-1.

This gives enough information, when combined with the speech which precedes it, to explain the presence of Philoctète in Thebes, and so it serves as the exposition of the minor plot. After another long speech, irrelevant to the exposition but relevant to Philoctète's character, Dimas tells Philoctète what he should have told him before, namely, that Oedipe married Jocaste. This is the only information relevant to the main plot which was not mentioned in the first eighty lines. At this point the High Priest announces that the gods are going to speak. The status quo is going to be changed and the action is about to begin.

It may be said that at this point the exposition is complete, within the strict limits of Schérer's definition; enough facts are known for the initial situation to be understood. It is, as has been suggested, the unusual nature of the plot which is responsible for the fact that all the characters have not been introduced. Similarly Jocaste's account of the events which immediately followed the death of Laius⁴ and her marriage to Oedipe,⁵ must be considered as part of the action and not of the exposition. The exposition is, then, by any standards short, being completed in 132 lines. Were it not for the introduction of the details necessary for the comprehension of the minor plot and Philoctète's place in it, the exposition could have been even shorter.

⁴Oedipe, I, 111, 209-50.

⁵Ibid., II, 11, 385-504.

However, since one of Voltaire's main difficulties was the lack of material, a too tightly knit exposition, though it might have drawn praise from the critics, would have made his task even more difficult. This fact probably accounts in part for the inclusion of the story of Hercules' death. It is still an exposition a budding dramatist could be proud of, and one which is in parts quite moving, though inferior to that of Sophocles.

The action of the main plot consists in the accumulation of facts and the reactions of the characters to these facts. After the High Priest has announced the message of the gods to the assembled citizens,⁶ Oedipe's questions to Jocaste elicit information concerning the death of Laius and the fate of Phorbas; this leads Oedipe to lay a curse on the murderer.⁷ The major plot is then kept in the background until scene iv of Act III. It is recalled briefly by the dream of Jocaste⁸ and the two references of Oedipe in scene v of Act III to the delayed arrival of Phorbas,⁹ but otherwise the minor plot constitutes the subject matter of the whole of Act II and the first three scenes of Act III. The existence of two plots, almost entirely separate, was admitted by Voltaire in the

⁶Ibid., I, iii, 175-80.

⁷A curse much less impressive than the one in Sophocles' play from which it was imitated.

⁸Oedipe, II, ii, 385-404.

⁹Ibid., II, v, 579, 606.

Lettres sur "Oedipe" of 1719 where he says: "Aussi il paraît que ce sont deux tragédies dont l'une roule sur Philoctète et l'autre sur Oedipe."¹⁰ It is as well to trace the development of the two plots separately.

As has been shown, the action of the main plot begins in Act I, scene iii. The action of the minor plot which is concerned with Philoctète is simpler and shorter, and begins in Act II scene i. Here Araspe tells Jocaste that the people accuse Philoctète of the murder of Laius, and goes on to give an account of Philoctète's life which is substantially different from that given by Dimas in Act I, scene i. This contradiction was apparent only in editions from 1738 onwards. Previous to that date, Philoctète had given in a long speech in Act I, scene i, an impression of his youth similar to that given by Araspe in Act II, scene i.¹¹ Voltaire's reasons for changing are not obvious. Perhaps he did not want to make the audience suspicious of Philoctète and divert its attention from Oedipe too early in the play. Probably he realised that Philoctète's original speech was too long, but he could have shortened it without changing it to such a degree.

Act II, scene ii, is little more than an elaboration of part of what had been explained by Dimas and Philoctète in Act I, scene i. It is poorly constructed since again the characters tell each other what both know already in order to

¹⁰Moland, II, 36.

¹¹Ibid., II, 112-3.

inform the audience. In this scene Jocaste distinguishes between her passionate love for Laius and her feelings for Oedipe which she defines as an "amitié sévère" (II,ii,383). However, later in the play¹² Jocaste reveals feelings for Oedipe which seem very different from those specified here.

The attitude of Philoctète throughout his appearance in the play from the moment he hears the charge against him,¹³ remains unchanged; it can be summed up in a line from one of his speeches: "La vertu s'avilit à se justifier" (II,iv, 558). This sentiment might have been acceptable to a generation which could accept the action of Horace, but it was unacceptable to a generation whose actions and ideas resembled those of Turcaret rather than those of Horace. The scene between Philoctète and Oedipe¹⁴ is interesting from a political point of view but it has no bearing on the main plot. The attitudes of both Jocaste and Philoctète remain the same, and scenes i and ii of Act III are not very different in content from scenes ii and iii of Act II. By the end of Act III, scene iii, the minor plot has reached a stage where some major development must take place if it is to be kept alive. Voltaire chooses to let it die. Philoctète is to all intents and purposes forgotten when Oedipe is named

¹²Oedipe, IV, iii, for example.

¹³Ibid., II, iii, 454.

¹⁴Ibid., II, iv.

as the murderer by the High Priest,¹⁵ though he does make one speech in support of Oedipe in this scene,¹⁶ and another in the next scene.¹⁷ This latter speech was not in the original edition, in which Philoctète left after his speech in scene iv. From 1738 onwards, when Voltaire made some attempt to integrate Philoctète into the play, he stays until the end of Act III and Oedipe later recommends that Philoctète be made king.¹⁸ It can be seen that the development of the minor plot is limited to the accusation against Philoctète and the various reactions to it, and an elaboration of Jocaste's feelings for him. Even in its present form the dénouement is not explicit; the audience can only suppose that Philoctète was made king, though this is contrary to the legend, the law, and probability. The accusation against Philoctète serves no purpose except to divert attention from Oedipe.

Sophocles has Oedipus attack Creon and accuse him of the murder of Laius. Voltaire called this "une extravagance dont il n'y a guère d'exemple parmi les modernes, ni même parmi les anciens."¹⁹ It is probable that Voltaire realised the dramatic value of having an accusation made against someone besides Oedipe, without understanding the nuances of

¹⁵Ibid., III, iv, 786.

¹⁶Ibid., III, iv, 795-804.

¹⁷Ibid., III, v, 857-68.

¹⁸Ibid., V, i, 1187-9.

¹⁹Moland, II, 22.

Sophocles' tragedy. In the latter play the accusation by Oedipus against Creon shows a character which Voltaire did not wish to give his Oedipe. This is probably the main reason why he had the people make the accusation through Araspe; Voltaire's known political and dramatic ideas indicate that he had no intention of implying that the populace as a whole had any right on the stage or in politics. In the Lettres sur "Oedipe" he makes an admission: "J'avoue qu'en substituant . . . Créon à Philoctète, j'aurais peut-être donné plus d'exactitude à mon ouvrage; mais Créon aurait été un personnage bien froid, et j'aurais trouvé par là le secret d'être à la fois ennuyeux et irrépréhensible."²⁰ The substitution of Créon for Philoctète would have necessitated the invention of a different love interest. Voltaire's elimination of Sophocles' Epilogue and his change in the character of Oedipe would probably have meant that Créon would have been an uninteresting character. However it is unlikely that he would have been less interesting than Philoctète.

The love of Jocaste and Philoctète was mentioned in Act I, scene i. It is discussed and delineated, but it does not develop, and after Act III, scene iii, it is never heard of again.

Neither the accusation against Philoctète nor the love of Jocaste and Philoctète influences the main plot. The minor plot serves to divert attention from Oedipe for a time

²⁰Ibid., II, 44.

and give occasion for the expression of some of Voltaire's political ideas.²¹ It takes up about 450 lines in a play which is only 1408 lines long; up to the start of Act III, scene iv, the minor plot is dealt with almost to the exclusion of the main plot. It has virtually no influence on the outcome of the major plot, and so it destroys the unity of action. The change of emphasis in the second part of the play and the change in the character of Jocaste destroy the unity of interest. This proves beyond reasonable doubt that it was mainly his inability to spread the original legend over five full acts which made Voltaire add the character of Philoctète to the play. In later life Voltaire often reproached himself for making Jocaste love Philoctète. Even if Philoctète had not loved Jocaste, he would still have been the subject of a smaller minor plot, and the accusation against him would presumably be unprepared, unlike that of Oedipus against Creon in Sophocles' tragedy. The play would still, therefore, lack unity of action.

The main plot becomes important from the start of Act III, scene iv. In the play of Sophocles the corresponding scene is in the first episode and only Tiresias, the seer, and Oedipus speak, if one excepts one interjection from the chorus. The scene resolves into a bitter quarrel between a bully and a man secure in his knowledge of the truth but who is eventually moved by anger to tell what he

²¹See below, chapter on politics.

wished to keep secret. Patin rightly says: "On ne peut se dissimuler qu'en remplaçant Tirésias par le personnage commun et vague d'un grand prêtre, Voltaire a retiré à la scène toute son originalité."²² He might also have noted the lessening of tension brought about by the active presence of Philoctète and Jocaste. Each speech made by Voltaire's High Priest is imitated from a speech of Sophocles' Tiresias,²³ but so much is omitted that what in Sophocles was a clash of characters becomes with Voltaire a discussion of the place of the church in the state. While the scene is still powerful in the French version, especially the imprecations of the priest in the last thirty lines, it is inferior in every way to the Greek scene.

The scene of the "double confidence"²⁴ was the most successful of all, according to its author.²⁵ He reproaches himself for not having made the couple discuss the matter before. This is an insuperable fault in the legend for which Voltaire can take no blame. It is in this scene, if anywhere, that Voltaire improves upon Sophocles. He avoids the reference to the drunkard in his cups casting doubts on the legitimacy of Oedipus' birth as being too obvious a hint to

²²Patin, Sophocle, p. 170.

²³Sophocles, Oedipus tyrannus, ll. 316-462.

²⁴Oedipe, IV, 1.

²⁵Moland, II, 39.

Oedipus.²⁶ In his version there is no human hint, only oracular pronouncement and visions. The gods also force Oedipe to forget the killing of Laius. Oedipe is not led to inquire about the past by a chance reference to the place of death, but by his own suspicions, prompted by the words of the priest. Jocaste tells him that Laius resembled him. In Sophocles only the audience was moved, in Voltaire Oedipe is also troubled; he says: "J'entrevois des malheurs que je ne puis comprendre." (IV,1,936)

By the end of the scene Jocaste, too, is shuddering from some kind of presentiment (IV,1,1084). The parallel between the two oracles is more marked in Voltaire than in Sophocles, where Jocaste makes no mention of incest. At the end of the scene of Sophocles, Oedipus suspects, despite Jocaste's speech, that he killed Laius. At the same point in Voltaire, Oedipe must suspect that somehow he killed his father; in his version there is more terror and more pathos. Corneille avoided the scene.

Voltaire points out in his Lettres sur "Oedipe"²⁷ some of Corneille's faults: how Oedipe accuses Phorbas without reason, that it is illogical to think a man a thief who merely disputes the right of passage, that Oedipe should be able to describe in detail the appearance of people he met in a fight twenty years before, and the fact of Phorbas saying Laius had

²⁶ Ibid., II, 21.

²⁷ Ibid., II, 33.

been killed by thieves. It was to enable Phorbas to speak of "des inconnus" (I,iii,221) that Voltaire gave Oedipe on his travels a companion who is never mentioned again. Writing of his own Oedipe²⁸ Voltaire says that Phorbas merely confirms the suspicions of Oedipe and the audience while in Corneille Oedipe is convinced that he is the avenger and not the killer of Laius. He implies that Corneille's scene is better. Again he is being too harsh with himself. As he points out earlier,²⁹ Oedipe admits he fought three men at the place and the time corresponding to the death of Laius, yet Jocaste does not suspect that Oedipe was the killer of Laius. It is thus impossible to agree with Voltaire that this scene is "bien moins intéressante chez moi que dans Corneille"³⁰ especially as in the latter version Jocaste already knows the truth.

Schérer defines the dénouement in these terms: "Partie ✓ de la pièce qui comprend l'élimination du dernier obstacle ou de la dernière péripétie et les événements qui peuvent en résulter."³¹ When this is applied to Voltaire's Oedipe, it is obvious that the dénouement of Voltaire's Oedipe begins with the arrival of Phorbas. In Sophocles the messenger from Corinth appears before the Theban shepherd. It was probably a change in the character of Oedipe and a different conception

²⁸Ibid., II, 39.

²⁹Ibid., II, 32.

³⁰Ibid., II, 39.

³¹Schérer, p. 437.

of drama which led Corneille to change the order of arrival, a change imitated by Voltaire. Both make Phorbas appear twice, as they must, but both end their plays as quickly as possible after Oedipe discovers the truth. This also was necessary, because a rapid conclusion was one of the most important conventions of the classical theatre in France. Sophocles has another 350 lines after Oedipe discovers the truth. Catharsis is achieved in different ways. In Sophocles, the reversal of fortune is more abrupt and the new state of Oedipus is described in detail, while his pride is shown to be somewhat bowed, but not broken. In Voltaire, Oedipe is told first that he killed Laius, then that Laius was his father. After this he commiserates with himself and then goes off. The reversal of fortune is slower and its effects are dealt with quickly.

The end of the play Voltaire imitated largely from Corneille. Both authors have a scene between Jocaste and Oedipe after it becomes known that Oedipe killed Laius. Voltaire said of this in his Commentaires sur Corneille (1764): "Oedipe, au lieu de se livrer à sa douleur et à l'horreur de son état, prodigue des antithèses sur le 'vivant' et sur 'le mort'; Jocaste raisonne au lieu d'être accablée."³² Even in his youth, Voltaire, realising that this scene of Corneille was bad, made his own Oedipe and Jocaste act as though overcome by remorse; it might even be said that the parts were

³²Moland, XXXII, 168.

over-written. When Icare is introduced he is immediately recognised as the favourite of Polybe; Corneille's Oedipe calls his Corinthian "chef de conseil". The speech of Oedipe in Voltaire is reminiscent of Sophocles,³³ but Voltaire avoided the rejoicing of Jocaste which preceded this in the Greek and which would have appeared tasteless to his French audience. Corneille's Oedipe makes no mention of the defeat of the oracle, but, apart from this, the scene in Voltaire follows Corneille closely, -- the request that the suite leave the Corinthian and Oedipe alone, the tortuous way in which Oedipe learns that Polybe was not his father, and the reason why Polybe adopted Oedipe (Corneille himself imitated this from Seneca's Oedipus rex line 804), and finally Oedipe's presentiment of danger.

When Phorbas re-enters he is immediately recognised by the Corinthian in all versions. In no version does he mention the purpose for which he was summoned. In Seneca and Sophocles it was to give details of Laius' death, in Corneille it was to discuss politics, and in Voltaire it was to be rewarded. When the truth is finally revealed, Voltaire's Oedipe in a long monologue accuses the gods of causing him to be a criminal. This is Voltaire's invention. Sophocles had Jocaste realize the truth before Oedipe, while Voltaire has her enter after the monologue, summoned by his cries. This change entails a repetition which would have been better

³³Sophocles, ll. 964-72.

avoided. The words of the High Priest in the final scene resemble those of Sophocles' chorus in their selfish disregard for Oedipe. Corneille has the death of Jocaste and the blinding of Oedipe reported. Patin sums up this final scene well. Of the High Priest he says: "Tout entier à sa sainte mission, c'est en passant et comme pour mémoire qu'il fait connaître ce qu'Oedipe est devenu. Le coup de poignard soudain dont se frappe Jocaste à cette nouvelle semble lui-même une sorte de 'post-scriptum' consacré. Une pareille conclusion, pour se produire en beaux vers, n'en est pas moins banale et moins sèche."³⁴ Voltaire justified himself as follows:

J'avais pris dans Sophocle une partie du récit de la mort de Jocaste et de la catastrophe d'Oedipe. J'ai senti que l'attention du spectateur diminuait avec son plaisir au récit de cette catastrophe: les esprits, remplis de terreur au moment de la reconnaissance n'écoutaient plus qu'avec dégoût la fin de la pièce. . . . Je me suis cru obligé de retrancher ce récit, qui n'était pas de plus de quarante vers: et dans Sophocle, il tient tout le cinquième acte. Il y a grande apparence qu'on ne doit point passer à un ancien deux ou trois cents vers inutiles, lorsqu'on n'en passe pas quarante à un moderne.³⁵

His lack of understanding of the meaning of the Epilogue of Sophocles was shared by others (though not by Dacier), but it must be granted that the weakness of the final scene stems from the fact that Voltaire had to follow the conventions of French classical tragedy.

³⁴ Patin, *Sophocle*, p. 188.

³⁵ Moland, II, 25.

The dénouement is not entirely explicit. The final fate of Oedipe is not known, nor is it certain that Philoctète will be king. Voltaire wisely did not bother with giving details of the fate of minor characters as Racine, for example, did in the much-criticised final act of Britannicus. Otherwise the dénouement is quite satisfactory, though not brilliant.

It has been shown that the play lacks unity of action or of interest. Voltaire was most successful in those scenes where he imitated Sophocles the most closely, notably in Act IV, scene 1. His misunderstanding of Sophocles' intentions and the different character he wished to give his own Oedipe prevented him from imitating Sophocles more fully, even had he wanted to. Voltaire was least successful where he imitated Corneille, especially as regards the dénouement. The final scene in its present form is probably less satisfactory to the modern reader than in its original form; the reaction of the audience indicated to Voltaire that this scene had to be shortened. The changes made by Voltaire in the action were not generally for the better. The exceptions to this rule are the changes of detail in Act IV, scene 1. The introduction of Philoctète, and the addition of Oedipe's monologue and his scene with Jocaste after his discovery of the truth,³⁶ are unfortunate. In short, the action of Voltaire's play is inferior to that of Sophocles but superior to that of Corneille.

³⁶Oedipe, V, iv-v.

III

TECHNIQUE

Voltaire was writing at a time when the trends and traditions of the previous century had hardened into what was the most stringent set of conventions in recent dramatic history. A young writer had to follow these conventions or his play would not be performed. It is interesting to note how successfully Voltaire did this in Oedipe without obvious difficulty.

One of the most important of these conventions, that requiring unity of action, he did not follow, but for this he was not criticised. Criticism at that time tended to be most violent when concerned with abstruse and unimportant points of detail. Corneille's Oedipe, in which the story of Oedipe is little more than an episode in the love story of Dircé and Thesée, was a successful play and never criticised for its most blatant faults, at least not until the Lettres sur "Oedipe" of Voltaire.

As the unity of time is a less important concept but easier to understand, infractions of the rule often aroused violent criticism. Voltaire respects this unity. The tragedy is enhanced by the briefness of the time elapsing between the start of the investigation and the end. In Sophocles, the

duration of the action need not be longer than the duration of the play. Voltaire makes it somewhat longer than this but the events fit without difficulty into one day. To emphasize this he has the High Priest say in Act I scene ii:

. . . cette grande journée
Va du peuple et du roi changer la destinée. (I,ii,159-60)

The idea is borrowed from the first episode of Sophocles' Oedipus tyrannus. It can be said that it is unlikely that the gods would appear twice the same day after they had so often refused help before, but this is by no means impossible. According to Lancaster, the Mercure of 1719 said there was "a contradiction between the priest's assertion that the fate of the king and the people will be settled on the day represented and his insistence that the murderer of Laius must be discovered."¹ It is not clear why there is a contradiction and this comment can be disregarded.

The unity of place is also respected. Voltaire was to become one of the leaders of the movement which led to the wearing of costumes by the actors and the introduction of more local colour. The opening of the temple doors at the start of Act I, scene ii, cannot be said to break the rule of the unity of place: the use of a curtain which could be drawn back, the "tapisserie", was an accepted part of stagecraft in the seventeenth century.² At the start of the play

¹Lancaster, French Tragedy 1715-1774, I, 54.

²Schéerer, p. 175 et seqq.

Voltaire merely writes cryptically: "La scène est à Thèbes." No other directions are given, so it is not known whether the temple doors remained open, or if they were closed at the end of the first act. They were presumably open again for the re-entry of the priest in Act III; but if they remained open the whole time it must have seemed strange for Jocaste, Égine and Philoctète to speak as they did in Acts II and III in front of an open temple. The only other unusual points were the introduction of a chorus and the use of crowds on stage, but in both cases Voltaire was probably influenced by Athalie.

The play has five acts, the longest of which is the second with 330 lines and the shortest of which is the fifth with 223 lines. The other acts have approximately 280 lines each. The acts of classical tragedies could not last more than approximately half an hour, as the candles used to light the theatre began to smoke if not trimmed every twenty minutes or so. To be performed successfully any classical tragedy at this time had to have the conventional five acts and Voltaire, when writing his first play, had to follow this convention.

Each act in a classical tragedy was supposed to be a whole in itself. Voltaire's theatrical technique was not at this stage sufficiently developed to enable him properly to obey this rule, though there are signs that he tried. The first act has one important scene (scene iii), but it is not closely connected with the long first scene. There is no

consistent build-up to a climax of tension and a following relaxation of tension. The second act is somewhat better constructed. Tension is built up in the first two scenes to reach a climax in the third when Jocaste tells Philoctète of the accusation against him. After this tension relaxes until in the final scene of the act Oedipe tells Araspe that he believes Philoctète is innocent. The third act is virtually in two parts. Scenes i and ii really belong with Act II and are very similar in content to scenes ii and iii of Act II. Scenes iii, iv and v of Act III belong with Act IV. There is a complete change of emphasis between the end of Act III, scene ii, and the start of scene iv. Scene iv contains the climax of the act with the accusation of the priest against Oedipe, and scene v has the required relaxation of tension. However, the first two scenes cannot be said to build up tension for the fourth scene as they should. The splitting of the act which reason would indicate would make Acts II and IV longer than the others and reduce the play to four acts. Neither change would be acceptable in 1718, so verisimilitude gives way to convention and the demands of the wick-trimmers. Act IV as it stands has two climaxes both of which are well prepared. The first is towards the end of scene i where both Jocaste and Oedipe realise that Oedipe must have killed Laius. The confirmation of this fact by Phorbas is something of an anti-climax, but tension rises again in scene iii when Oedipe begs Jocaste to kill him, and

it relaxes again in the final scene. Act V again was supposed to have two climaxes. The first, at the end of scene iii, is the well-prepared realisation of Oedipe that he is an incestuous patricide. Tension lessens during the monologue which follows but the entry of Jocaste is supposed to start another build-up leading to the suicide of Jocaste at the end of the play. This particular attempt to build up the tension fails, but the plan is obvious.

This overall plan resembles that of Phèdre with one climax in each of the first three acts and two in each of the final two acts. In Acts I and III the technique leaves much to be desired, but that of the final two acts, if it does compare unfavourably with Racine's tragedy, is to be admired in the first play of one so young.

It was usual to have some action take place in the intervals between the acts: this served to isolate the acts from each other and to give an impression of time passing. Between Acts I and II Araspe has heard the complaints of the people and come to tell them to Jocaste. As there was no curtain, custom demanded that the action in the interval be assumed to happen in some place other than that represented on stage. As the chorus is on the stage at the end of Act I and at the start of Act II, it is perhaps unreasonable to suppose that Araspe consulted it elsewhere, but this is a technicality of minimal importance. Between Acts II and III little happens. Jocaste has arranged to meet Philoctète

again, Oedipe has gone to the temple to pray and the complaints of the people have grown bolder. Slight as it is, there has been some development in the interval. Act III starts, as does Act II, with "Oui" to indicate that what the audience is hearing is a continuation of a conversation begun off stage. Voltaire himself recognised that there was no real justification for the interval between Acts III and IV. In the Lettres sur "Oedipe" he writes: "Il n'y a pas de raison pour qu'Oedipe éclaircisse son doute plutôt derrière le théâtre que sur la scène: aussi, après avoir dit à Jocaste de le suivre, revient-il avec elle le moment d'après, et il n'y a aucune distinction entre le troisième et le quatrième acte que le coup d'archet qui les sépare."³ He makes no attempt to justify his omission, nor does he point out that, despite the "non" which starts Act IV, the enlightenment takes place entirely in Act IV and not at all in the interval. Little happens in the interval between Acts IV and V. Oedipe must have summoned his suite and told them of his plan to abdicate: again the first line of the new act⁴ implies that action has taken place in the interval. Except for his one admitted 'fault', Voltaire's technique of construction is good. Voltaire's first play is as least as well constructed in this respect as Corneille's Oedipe which was his twenty-second play and which has a false interval between Acts II

³Moland, II, 39.

⁴"Finissez vos regrets".

and III.

Classical tragedians in France had varied techniques for preparing for the end of an act. By some means or other the audience had to be kept thinking of the play while the violins played in the interval, food was eaten, and the young bloods exchanged shouts of greeting and abuse. Corneille tended either to leave the audience in suspense⁵ or give a partial explanation which whets the curiosity.⁶ Racine tended to end his acts with decisions and the spectator is left to ponder on the consequences of them.⁷ Voltaire here follows Racine rather than Corneille, possibly considering his technique more refined and more intellectually satisfying. Act I ends with a plea to the gods for further action -- a weak ending because nothing comes of it and the plea is repeated at the end of Act II. This plea is heard and results in the accusation against Oedipe. Act III ends with a decision of momentous consequence to examine the past. Act IV ends with a decision to abdicate, a decision which has

⁵For example, at the end of the acts of Le Cid the spectator will ask himself: Will Rodrigue avenge his father? Will the king punish him? Will he conquer the Moors? Will he overcome Don Sanche? and even, unusually, at the end of the play: Will he marry Chimène?

⁶For example: "Avant la fin du jour vous saurez qui je suis", at the end of Act IV of Héraclius.

⁷For example, in Andromaque the first act ends when Pyrrhus decides to spare Astyanax; the second when he decides to go and see Hermione; the third when Andromaque decides to seek inspiration at Hector's tomb; and the fourth when Pyrrhus decides to give his guard to Astyanax.

no bearing on the rest of the plot at all. The technique here, though recognisable, is weak. A glance at Mahomet of 1742 will show the same technique more forcefully used.

The number of scenes is by classical standards small. The total of twenty-three (3-5-5-4-6) scenes is less than the total in all but three of Corneille's plays, and is only once equalled by Racine. This must be ascribed partly to the fact that the play was abnormally short, partly to good technique: a large number of scenes was regarded as the mark of a poorly-constructed play. The fact that the last act has more scenes than any of the others is probably due to the fact that Voltaire wished to avoid a long dénouement, but it follows a trend started in the previous century⁸ and helps to give an impression of speed to the dénouement.

Voltaire followed the tradition of having a new scene ✓ every time a character comes onto or leaves the stage. There are only two exceptions to this, both of them in Act V. The first is when Oedipe orders his suite to leave him in scene ii; the second is when Oedipe himself leaves the stage in scene v. In the first instance Voltaire was imitating Corneille and the suite was in any case purely passive. But the exit of Oedipe is of great importance, though the tone of the scene does not change. It was probably for the sake of appearance that Voltaire did not call this a new scene. The new scene would have been short and weak, and the whole of the end of

⁸Schéerer, p. 199.

the act would have seemed piecemeal with four scenes in less than eighty lines.

Another tradition which had almost the force of a rule ✓ was that no character should re-appear in an act once he had left the stage. Voltaire offends against this once, in Act II where Araspe leaves after the first scene but reappears at the start of scene iv. Araspe was only a minor character and he appears here in two different rôles -- in the first place as spokesman for the people and in the second place as Oedipe's confidant -- so the 'fault' is not important.

There are no liaison scenes in Voltaire's Oedipe ✓ such as Act V, scene iv, of Corneille's Oedipe. This scene of fifteen lines has to be inserted so that Dircé can enter and say: "Phorbas m'a tout dit en deux mots" at the start of the next scene, thus avoiding a repetition of the story of incest and patricide. Voltaire does not bother to avoid this repetition which is unfortunate as it comes as an anti-climax. There is some need of a liaison scene between the last two scenes of the play (V, v and vi). Oedipe makes his exit eight lines before the High Priest enters with the account of his putting his eyes out. Such speed is possible but unlikely.

All the scenes in the play are linked in what is ✓ technically the correct manner, that is to say, by the presence of at least one actor. Only once is this a little strained: Dimas is the link between scenes i and iii of Act I

and must be assumed to be present during scene ii. But after the end of scene i he is silent. If he is not present in scene ii then scenes i and ii of this act are not linked. It is quite possible that Voltaire willingly sacrificed the strict interpretation of the rules to his desire to please the audience with the spectacle of the doors opening.

Exits and entries of characters in classical tragedy ✓ should be justified, a matter that Voltaire insisted on. The exit of Philoctète, and possibly Dimas, at the end of Act I, scene i, in no way is justified: presumably this rule was broken for the sake of the spectacle, but Philoctète, instead of his useless invocation of Hercules, could have said he was leaving because he did not wish to see Oedipe. The only other unjustified exit is that of Égine at the end of Act II, scene ii. In classical tragedy confidants could be ignored at will; it was even possible for a character to discuss his problems in a monologue with the confidant present. So this point is not important. It is interesting to note the way in which Voltaire justifies exits and entries and at the same time shows his knowledge of the physical limitations of the stage where his play was to be acted. One example will suffice. At the end of Act IV, scene ii, Oedipe orders Phorbas to leave him. This was necessary so that Icare could tell Oedipe he was not Polybe's son before he saw Phorbas. Oedipe is made to give two reasons for his order to Phorbas -- a desire for privacy to decide his own fate, and a wish not to

have before him an innocent man whom his crime has caused to suffer. The order to leave is given three times: if Phorbas [✓] began to leave the stage after the first order he would have time to negotiate the seven metres from the front of the stage at the Hôtel de Bourgogne to the back, thread his way through those members of the audience who were on the stage, and disappear through the gap between the backcloth and the sides of the stage before Oedipe turned to address his wife.

Another sign of a well-developed dramatic technique in the author is the fact that scenes between major charac- [✓]ters and their confidants or others serving the same purpose are relatively few. There is one in Act I (I,i), there are two in Act II (II,ii and II,v), there is one in Act III (III,i), and there are none in the last two acts. Even in those scenes, Oedipe, the main character, appears only once.

Voltaire is careful within each scene to keep to a reasonable length the tirades of his characters. The longest speech in the play (forty-seven lines), is in the first scene where Dimas describes the misfortunes of Thebes. Up to the 1738 edition Philoctète countered with a speech of forty-two lines, but Voltaire wisely reduced the length of this speech. Apart from this there are only three speeches of more than thirty lines in the play, and two of these are in Act IV, scene i, where Oedipe is telling his story. The third is Jocaste's account of her feelings for Oedipe and her dream, in Act II, scene ii. For the rest, Voltaire liked to break

up long tirades by having other characters make short interjections, often questions. This technique is most obvious in the first scene of Act IV. According to D'Aubignac the tirade and the monologue were the only means of capturing the attention of the audiences of the seventeenth century. As for the interjections, nobody listened to them: "C'est le temps que les spectateurs prennent pour s'entretenir de ce qui s'est passé, pour reposer leur attention ou pour manger leurs confitures."⁹ But the interjections made the dialogue much more lifelike and dramatic, and Voltaire's use of them shows once more that he had learned from his predecessors.

The only "récit" in the play is that describing the blinding of Oedipe which is of ten lines only: the recollections of the past by Jocaste and Oedipe do not come into this category. That Voltaire was not afraid to use "récits" where circumstances required is obvious, as for example in the first two acts of Zaire. But with a few exceptions the "récits" were considered poor substitutes for action, and Voltaire did well to avoid them. Corneille's Oedipe has five "récits".

The only monologue is that of Oedipe when he discovers the truth about himself (V,iv). The monologue is important as it contains Voltaire's views on the innocence of Oedipe. There is no dilemma and no solution; apart from lyrically expressing Oedipe's sentiments it is useless. Voltaire probably put it in partly to please the audience and the actor,

⁹Ibid., p. 227.

all of whom had come to expect monologues in the dénouement where the actor could indulge his taste for histrionics. The "aparté" Voltaire does not stoop to using.

He makes only a very restricted use of stichomythia: the only example is in Act V, scene iii, where the technique is used as it should be. It takes the form of half-line speeches by Jocaste and Oedipe at a time of great tension when they are in violent disagreement. Even then it extends over only six lines.

Some sententiae are used, but always correctly. The most famous is in Act I, scene i, where Philoctète says: "L'amitié d'un grand homme est un bienfait des dieux." The least apposite is that of Oedipe near the beginning of Act IV, scene i: "On est plus criminel quelquefois qu'on ne pense." Corneille has many sententiae in his works, Racine relatively few. Voltaire was following the trend which was to lead to the abandoning of sententiae towards the end of the eighteenth century.

A final technical device of which Voltaire makes sparing use is repetition. Two examples will suffice. In Act III, scene iii (line 743), Philoctète says: "C'était, c'était assez d'examiner ma vie." This type of repetition was used to give some movement to the line, the particle repeated being of no importance. The other example is Oedipe's dismissal of Phorbas at the end of Act IV, scene ii. Here he repeats "Va" in successive lines: the purpose of this

was, as explained earlier, to give Phorbias time to leave the stage. It has no other effect as it cannot be said to reinforce the power of the imperative. Other, more affected uses of repetition Voltaire avoids.

When the author of a French classical tragedy decided on a subject, there were often actions or descriptions that he could not insert in his play because they seemed improbable or they were considered improper. Voltaire's later works show clearly that he wished to put new life into French classical tragedy and that one of the ways he hoped to do this was by the introduction of a spectacle into his plays. A study of Oedipe reveals that he used this technique from the start of his career. One simple example in this play is the opening of the temple gates at the beginning of Act I, scene ii.¹⁰ This was neither improper nor improbable and was probably very effective. But Voltaire also evoked the supernatural and he set himself the difficult task of doing this without it appearing "invraisemblable." Schérier states: "Dans la seconde moitié du [17^e] siècle les progrès de l'unité de lieu ainsi que les exigences de la vraisemblance rendent plus difficile l'emploi du merveilleux."¹¹ Voltaire is in one sense more conventional than Racine in Athalie. Racine portrays Joas and Joad speaking under divine

¹⁰Almost certainly inspired by Athalie, publicly performed in 1716.

¹¹Schérier, p. 165.

inspiration:¹² in Voltaire's Oedipe the manifestations of the supernatural are only reported, though in emotive language.

There is no ghost or apparition in Sophocles' play, and though Seneca devotes 130 lines of his tragedy¹³ to Créon's description of the unpleasant rites of necromancy and the message of Laius, there is no reason to suppose that this influenced Voltaire. There is in Corneille's Oedipe a description of the appearance of Laius' ghost,¹⁴ and of this Schéerer says: "Une telle évocation vaut un spectacle."¹⁵ Voltaire realised this. The language used by Corneille is such as would provoke fear or terror, or both, in the audience. Voltaire's language is similar, though there is no direct imitation, and the effect on the audience is intended to be the same. The first of the three evocations of the supernatural in Oedipe, that of the High Priest,¹⁶ is almost banal. The shade of Laius is said to be simply "Terrible et respirant la haine et le courroux" (I,iii,174). The next evocation occurs in Act II, scene ii,¹⁷ where Jocaste describes to Égine the vision she had on her second wedding

¹² Racine, Athalie, II, vii, and III, vii.

¹³ Seneca, Oedipus rex, ll. 530-658.

¹⁴ Corneille, Oedipe, II, iii.

¹⁵ Schéerer, p. 164.

¹⁶ Oedipe, I, iii, 171-80.

¹⁷ Ibid., II, ii, 392-402.

night. She describes the shade of Laius as "pâle et sanglante . . . menaçante" (II,ii,395,396), and says it seemed to summon her to Tartarus. This recollection of Jocaste is artificially introduced and serves no purpose except to induce the cathartic emotions in the audience. The third description of a supernatural occurrence is the most lengthy, the most detailed and the most effective.¹⁸ Oedipe describes the incident which led him to exile himself from Corinth, an incident invented by Voltaire.¹⁹ The physical signs of the gods' displeasure are described in horrifying detail and the language of the ghost is extremely powerful. The general effect is to increase the tension of this excellent scene and deepen its atmosphere of horror. Though it might be thought that by using the same spectacular element three times in the same play Voltaire would ruin its effect, he avoids this pitfall by skilful graduation and by putting each evocation in the mouth of a different character who is under different circumstances. Once again technical mastery in one so young is to be admired. He even manages to make these evocations seem not improbable; this would have been impossible had he made the ghost actually appear on stage.

Voltaire's appreciation of the "invraisemblance" of the original legend is obvious from the Lettres sur "Oedipe".²⁰

¹⁸Ibid., IV,1,1015-33.

¹⁹For his reasons see chapter on Structure.

²⁰Moland, II,19,24,29.

So as to minimise this element of the improbable, Voltaire has recourse to a miracle:

La main des dieux sur moi si longtemps suspendue,
Semble ôter le bandeau qu'ils mettaient sur ma vue.
(IV,1,1259-60)

In fact he only succeeds in drawing attention to a fault which, if left unexplained as in Sophocles' play, might have escaped attention. The introduction of Philoctète and his love for Jocaste forced Voltaire to say that Jocaste need not be more than thirty-five years of age, but fortunately he made no reference to her age in the text. His failure to mention her age in the tragedy was criticised and it was partly to answer such comment that Voltaire wrote the Lettres sur "Oedipe".

It might be thought that the incest between Oedipe and Jocaste would be considered improper, but Schérer says: "Les sentiments incestueux sont fréquents à toutes les époques du théâtre classique".²¹ Corneille in his Oedipe avoids wherever possible making references to actual incest between Oedipe and Jocaste, but he introduces a suspicion that the lovers Thésée and Dircé are in fact brother and sister, and dwells upon this for a whole scene.²² Voltaire is careful to make Jocaste distinguish between her passion for Philoctète and what she calls her "amitié sévère" (II,ii,383) towards Oedipe. This was, no doubt, an attempt to make the incest

²¹Schérer, p.395.

²²Corneille, Oedipe, IV,1.

less offensive to the audience. However in Act IV, scene 1, Voltaire insists that the incest was consummated. This may be explained by the fact that in this scene Voltaire copied Sophocles quite closely and Sophocles was dealing with different conventions. In any case, Voltaire in this scene builds up a definite atmosphere of horror which might have prevented the situation seeming really improper. When Oedipe knows the truth he makes one reference to "Inceste et parricide"²³ but otherwise is content with paraphrases, as when he tells Jocaste: "Laius était mon père, et je suis votre fils" (V,v,1366). He avoids the insistence on incest and the horror of it found in the Epilogue of Sophocles' version of the legend,²⁴ though one reason for this is the different emphasis of the tragedy, and another Voltaire's idea that these repetitions weaken the play.²⁵

Another aspect of the "bienséances" was that a woman should never confess directly her love for a man. For this reason Voltaire had to have Jocaste discuss love with Égine before the arrival of Philoctète.²⁶

There could not be any mention of the sensual pleasures of marriage in the play. Furthermore there are only passing references to the children of this incestuous marriage.

²³Oedipe, V, iv, 1334. The phrase is also found in Corneille, Oedipe, V, vi.

²⁴Sophocles, ll. 1208-10, 1249-50, 1484-5.

²⁵See Moland, II, 26.

²⁶Oedipe, II, ii.

The High Priest says: "Je vois naître une race impie, infortunée" (III,iv,84-8), Jocaste mentions that the oracle warned that not only would she marry her son but that: "Je donnerais des fils à mon fils malheureux" (IV,1,982).²⁷ Oedipe never mentions the oracular warnings about children but he does say: "Je quitte mes enfants, mon trône, ma patrie" (V,1,1184). Voltaire is obviously influenced by a desire not to offend his audience, and by a recollection of the original legend. Corneille, in 1660, made Oedipe boast of his daughters by Jocaste²⁸ but without ever mentioning their mother. Nothing else in Voltaire's play comes close to being offensive. Corneille had remarked in his Examen of Oedipe that the blinding of Oedipe on stage would "soulever la délicatesse de nos dames." It was for this reason that Voltaire, too, does not make Oedipe return after his blinding. Times were already changing and Crébillon in particular was introducing similar elements of horror in his plays. When Voltaire came to write his Commentaires sur Corneille in 1764 he observed: "Je ne sais même si, aujourd'hui que la scène est dégagée de tout ce qui la défigurait, on ne pourrait pas faire Oedipe tout sanglant, comme il parut sur le théâtre d'Athènes. La disposition des lumières, Oedipe ne paraissant que dans l'enfoncement, pour

²⁷This is, of course, imitated from Sophocles.

²⁸Corneille, Oedipe, I,11.

ne pas trop offenser les yeux, beaucoup de pathétique dans l'auteur, les cris de Jocaste et les douleurs de tous les Thébains, pourraient former un spectacle admirable."²⁹ His spectacle would not have been appreciated in 1718.

In general, then, Voltaire's technique is very good. He breaks few of the accepted conventions and traditions, and when he does it is knowingly and for a purpose. He had learned the lessons of his predecessors well and improved, technically, on several points in both Racine and Corneille. His technique is sometimes rudimentary and sometimes the required effect is not attained, but this he corrects in his later works. A tendency to revert to an early seventeenth-century idea of interesting the audience with the spectacular can be discerned: this was to lead to the destruction of the classical tragic ideal. If Voltaire's poetic genius had equalled his technical proficiency he would indeed have been great.

²⁹Moland, XXXII, 154.

IV

CHARACTERS

The political and religious implications of the character of Oedipe are dealt with in later chapters. As a man he is throughout the play shown in a sympathetic light. He first appears in scene iii of Act I and immediately gains the sympathy of the audience by his obviously sincere wish to help his people by any means possible:

Que ne puis-je, sur moi détournant leurs [the gods']
vengeances,
De la mort qui vous suit étouffer les semences!
(I,iii,163-4)

As soon as the High Priest tells him that the murderer of Laius must be found, he starts his investigation and explains that it was only consideration for Jocaste's feelings which prevented his doing this before.¹ As soon as Jocaste tells him the fate of Phorbas, Oedipe orders Phorbas to be brought before him, curses the murderer of Laius, and orders the High Priest to pray once more for illumination.² By the end of this scene Oedipe has been shown to be a man of immediate and vigourous action. Oedipe next appears in Act II, scene iv, and here he is shown as a good king trying to

¹Oedipe, I,iii,205-8.

²Ibid., I,iii,251-78.

eliminate prejudice from his mind and dispense justice. His admiration for Philoctète as a warrior and a prince does not sway him. He tells Philoctète: "Vous êtes accusé, songez à vous défendre" (II,iv,512). Even his anger is sympathetic as it is caused by Philoctète's refusal to put justice above personal honour. Voltaire ensures that Oedipe keeps the sympathy of the audience by making the anger of short duration and having Oedipe confess to Araspe in the next scene:

. . . je rougissais dans l'âme
De me voir obligé d'accuser ce grand âme (II,v,572-3)

His nobility of mind also prevents him from accepting Araspe's contention that the gods and the priests might be untrustworthy.³ In Act III, scene iii, Oedipe returns to tell Philoctète that the gods have agreed to say who is guilty of the crime of which Philoctète is accused. His love of justice is such that he is prepared to support Philoctète against his own people in order to see justice done.⁴ Up to this point Oedipe has shown no faults of character at all. This is an important indication of the character Voltaire wished to give his hero, as the actions and characteristics of Oedipe up to this point are only slightly influenced by Sophocles and Corneille. From the beginning of Act III, scene iv, to the end of Act V, scene iii, Voltaire's characterisation of Oedipe broadly follows that of Sophocles, but

³ Ibid., II,v,585-98.

⁴ Ibid., III,iii,719-22.

the harsher side of the character of Sophocles is softened by Voltaire.

Oedipe's anger at the High Priest's accusation against him⁵ is understandably violent, but it is calmed by the mention of his father.⁶ By the start of the next scene he can say: "Ma fureur est tranquille" (III,v,852) and again he attempts to apply his reason to the meaning of the priest's words. His reaction to Jocaste's suggestion that she kill herself is somewhat selfish:

. . . Ah! n'est-ce point assez
De tant de maux affreux sur ma tête amassés?
(III,v,885-6)

For all that, he would obviously be heart-broken at her loss. Good taste probably prevented the expression of more passionate sentiments.

Voltaire's Oedipe realises that he was wrong to kill a man for what he calls "Des vains honneurs du pas le frivole avantage" (IV,i,1064) and Voltaire makes it plain in his account of the fight that after the initial encounter Oedipe was fighting for his life. Sophocles' Oedipus never doubts the rightness of his arrogant action, indeed he is proud of it. His only regret is that he married the dead man's wife. Similarly it is the human pity of Voltaire's Oedipe which makes him address Phorbas as "malheureux vieillard" (IV,ii, 1087). When Sophocles' Oedipus wants the shepherd to speak,

⁵Ibid., III,iv,805-14, 831-7.

⁶Ibid., III,iv,839.

he starts to torture him;⁷ Voltaire's Oedipe pleads: "Phorbas, au nom des dieux, ne me déguisez rien " (V,iii,1314). In every case where Sophocles' Oedipus reveals imperfections in his character, Voltaire's Oedipe acts differently. When Phorbas makes it plain that Oedipe killed Laius, Oedipe, in a speech reminiscent of le Cid,⁸ offers his sword to Jocaste and begs her to avenge her husband. Throughout this scene⁹ Oedipe shows what seems to be deep affection and consideration for his wife. It is only at the arrival of Icare¹⁰ that Oedipe shows any pride or arrogance and even then his reaction is typical of a hero of French classical tragedy, and cannot be considered excessive. He wishes to die with honour and without injustice. When he finally realises the truth about himself¹¹ his first reaction is hostility to the gods and then he begs the ghost of Laius to punish him. His nobility in defeat shown here and in the next scene cannot really be compared to the arrogance of Sophocles' Oedipus for which Creon chides him in his last speech.¹²

Voltaire's Oedipe is primarily just and noble, devoted to his people and his wife, a prey to anxiety about

⁷Sophocles, 1.1154.

⁸Corneille, Le Cid, III, iv, 857.

⁹Oedipe, IV, iii.

¹⁰Ibid., V, ii.

¹¹Ibid., V, iv.

¹²Sophocles, 11.1522-3.

many matters, never unduly arrogant or prejudiced for more than a very brief period, and, being almost entirely innocent, he is much more sympathetic than the arrogant despot portrayed by Sophocles.

Jocaste has two characters. In the minor plot she is a queen who remembers with lingering affection her former lover:

On ne se cache point ces secrets mouvements,
De la nature en nous indomptables enfants. (II,ii,337-8)

She claims to have been forced into two marriages and regrets both:

Deux fois de mon destin subissant l'injustice
J'ai changé d'esclavage, ou plutôt de supplice.
(II,ii,347-8)

As a typical heroine of the French classical theatre she is worried about her reputation and her virtue:

. . . On dira que je lui sacrifie
Ma gloire, mes époux, mes dieux et ma patrie.
(III,i,628-9)

She also says: "Et c'est cette vertu qui me trouble aujourd'hui" (III,i,650). Her speech and actions in the minor plot are banal, uninteresting and never really moving. However, in the major plot she is a sympathetic, if tragic, mother:

. . . Saintement cruelle,
J'étouffai pour mon fils mon amour maternelle.
(IV,i,987-8)

She seems quite happy with her husband and there seems to be a bond of affection between them. She calls him "cher prince" (IV,i,1038) and stands by him even when it is known that it

was he who killed Laius:

Oedipe: . . . Ô feux jadis si doux!

Jocaste: Ils ne sont point éteints: vous êtes mon époux
(IV,iii,1137-8)

She hates oracles, calling them these "Oracles que j'abhorre!" (IV,1,959) and finally rebels against the gods: "La mort est le seul bien, le seul dieu qui me reste" (V,vi,1400). On two occasions, one in each plot, she makes a wish for death which is unnecessary, unlikely, unprepared and irrelevant to the circumstances, but which was expected by the audience as a "noble" gesture. The two occasions are the end of Act II, scene 1,¹³ and in Act III, scene v.¹⁴ This latter death wish is couched in similar terms to those of Dircé in Corneille's Oedipe¹⁵ and may have been imitated from them. Further similarity lies in the fact that in neither case is there any indication that the death will be of any value to anyone, and in Voltaire this fact is emphasised. What was required was the death of the murderer of Laius and this Jocaste definitely was not.

Patin¹⁶ draws a distinction between the "emportement de la douleur maternelle" of the Greek Jocasta and the "scepticisme dogmatique" of Voltaire's Jocaste. This distinction does not stand up to close examination. Any

¹³Oedipe, II,1,315-8.

¹⁴Ibid., III,v,876-8.

¹⁵Corneille, Oedipe, II,iii, and III,ii.

¹⁶Patin, Sophocle, p.158.

scepticism Jocaste shows is due to her grief as a mother at what she considers the useless sacrifice of her son. This is obvious from a careful reading of Act IV, scene 1.

Voltaire said that in his version of the legend Jocaste is no more than thirty-five years old, and this fact renders reasonable Philoctète's love for her. However, in this case, Oedipe could hardly be more than twenty. It is somewhat unlikely that he could have killed Laius and wounded Phorbas at the age of sixteen or less, even with the help of his mysterious companion. Whatever her age, Jocaste, when talking to Philoctète, shows a character very different from that she shows when talking to Oedipe after Philoctète leaves the scene.

Voltaire's reservations about the introduction of the character of Philoctète are noted in the chapter on the Composition of Oedipe. In the Letters sur "Oedipe",¹⁷ Voltaire accepts full responsibility for the character and his own strictures here and in the Epître à la Duchesse du Maine¹⁸ are harsh and comprehensive enough to need little comment. Voltaire found it necessary to point out that Philoctète was a prince in his own right even if he did act as squire to Hercules. He had been accused of putting a man of humble birth on stage. A note to the Kehl edition of his works states: "L'auteur d'Oedipe a cru devoir adoucir ces espèces

¹⁷Moland, II, 36-7.

¹⁸Ibid., V, 82, 87.

de rodomontades si fréquentes dans Corneille, mais que M. de Voltaire ne s'est jamais permises que dans ce rôle de Philoctète."¹⁹ The greatest criticism of this character, besides his uselessness, is that these "rodomontades" were not eliminated. Philoctète talks of little but honour and glory but shows neither. Voltaire said that he imitated Corneille's style in Nicomède and Nicomède does indeed justify his actions in Act IV, scene ii, of the play which bears his name. The scene even contains the hemistich "un homme tel que moi" which was in the original edition of Voltaire's play. The language of Nicomède is not as pompous and inflated as that of Philoctète, and the former had a more acceptable reason to justify himself than the latter. Nicomède fitted in with the general tone of the play while Philoctète is the only character in Oedipe who talks and acts as he does and hence his manner of speech disturbs the harmony of the tone. Contemporary opinion may be summed up in the remark of J.-B. Rousseau in 1719: "On se moquerait aujourd'hui d'un guerrier qui n'aurait que ses louanges à la bouche."²⁰ Philoctète is therefore an anachronism, and a type of man mocked by Corneille as Matamore in l'Illusion Comique in 1635.

The High Priest has little character in this play. In the last scene he is made to seem most unsympathetic because he is cheerful and almost unconcerned about the fate of

¹⁹ Ibid., II, 115.

²⁰ Best., 75.

Oedipe and Jocaste. He is but a shadow of Tiresias the seer of Sophocles, though his speeches in Act III, scene v, are imitated from those of Tiresias. Voltaire's reasons for this change are not clear. It could hardly have been to avoid criticism from the clergy as the High Priest himself is the subject of much abuse.

Araspe is the name of a captain of the guard in Nicomède. Moland notes²¹ that the 1748 edition was the first which had this character called Araspe: previous editions had called him Hidaspe. La Grange Chancel had said in his Épître à M. Arouet de Voltaire sur sa tragédie d'Oedipe:

Je vois avec dépit, et pour ne produire rien
Chez le Thébain Oedipe, Hidaspe Indien.²²

There is no obvious reason why Voltaire took so long to make this correction. Araspe was supposed to be the confidant of Oedipe, but at the start of Act II he calls himself the interpreter of the people. He would be placed in a most unusual position if he really held both offices. Their attribution to him seems to have been dictated by the necessity of having someone recount in detail the rivalry of Philoctète and Laius. It would have been better to have had another character do this, but such a course would have entailed the use of a further episodic character like Dimas, and the need for such characters is

²¹Moland, II, 60.

²²Ibid., XXI, 189.

the mark of a poorly constructed play. A further inconsistency in Araspe's character is revealed in Act II where, having made a virulent attack on the character of Philoctète in scene i, he makes no reply in scene v when Oedipe praises the nobility of Philoctète's character.²³ The violent outburst of Araspe against priests in Act II, scene v, reminiscent of that of Thésée in Corneille's Oedipe,²⁴ and his treatment of Oedipe as an equal, rather than as a master²⁵ are other points of interest in this character. In fact none of them seems to have any explanation except the whim of the author.

Dimas is the name of one of Oedipe's confidants in Corneille's tragedy. Voltaire borrows the name and makes the character the confidant and friend of Philoctète. He appears only in the first act and his function is to facilitate the exposition. He is called "ami" once by Philoctète in the first scene, the only one where he takes an active rôle, and he always addresses Philoctète as "vous". Philoctète generally addresses him as "tu" but on one occasion as "vous". Dimas has no character, being entirely effaced by Philoctète.

Phorbas was the name given by Seneca to the unnamed shepherd of Sophocles. Corneille made him a "vieillard thétain", a description used by Voltaire, and had him called

²³Oedipe, II, v, 567-74.

²⁴Corneille, Oedipe, III, v.

²⁵"Ne nous fions qu'à nous" (II, v, 597).

"digne favori",²⁶ an expression which Voltaire applied to Icare. Voltaire insists on the political importance of Phorbas as Laius' counsellor but it would be idle to see in this any reference to the contemporary political scene. When he appears, Phorbas is like an old man resigned to his fate, perhaps too resigned. He says: "Eh bien, est-ce aujourd'hui qu'il faut que je périsse?" (IV,ii,1091) and later adds: "Achève de m'ôter une importune vie " (IV,ii,1104). This resignation is the one characteristic he has. His speeches to Oedipe in the presence of Icare are similar to those of the messenger in Sophocles, not like Phorbas in Corneille. He finally tells Oedipe the truth without the torture necessary in Sophocles.

Icare is a name Voltaire seems to have invented for there can be no connection between this name and the mythological birdman. Like Corneille's Iphicrate, he is described as a "vieillard de Corinthe" and Voltaire insists on his fitness to appear among noble company by having Oedipe call him "digne favori de Polybe, mon père" (V,ii,1196). He is a bringer of bad tidings and is conscious of this, like Iphicrate whom he resembles quite closely. No explanation is given of why he and Phorbas, two nobles, should be in a deserted mountain region, each without suite or escort and one with a baby. It is probable that this was not criticised when the play was first performed, since Voltaire makes no

²⁶Corneille, Oedipe, III,iv.

reference to it in his Lettres sur "Oedipe".

Égine is a more harmonious character. Her only speech of importance is the one in which she suggests to Jocaste that Oedipe "a paru vous toucher" (II,ii,366). This leads Jocaste to reveal her feelings for Oedipe. Égine has no love for the people as she shows in II,ii and III,i, but this is usual in a confidant. Apart from this, she has no real character and no influence on the plot or on Jocaste.

The "suite" appears in five scenes. It serves no purpose except to emphasise that Oedipe was a king. It is not present in any of the private scenes between Oedipe and Jocaste, while in Corneille the suite is present in two such scenes -- Act III, scene iv, and Act IV, scene v. The chorus, which was distinct from the suite, has no personality and its function has been discussed in the chapter on the Composition of Oedipe.

Jocaste is the only character who seems psychologically false. The others seem real, except perhaps Philoctète whose part is over-written. But there is little psychological depth in any of them, nothing to compare with the character of a Phèdre, an Auguste, even a Mahomet. At this point in his life Voltaire, though precocious, was too young to portray successfully a profound character on stage.

VERSIFICATION

That Voltaire's rime in Oedipe was the subject of considerable contemporary criticism is obvious from the fact that in the Lettres sur "Oedipe" he felt obliged to deal at length with the subject. As he spent five years writing and correcting his play it is reasonable to assume that generally speaking the rimes were intentional and not the result of haste or lack of invention. His comments probably represent his sincere beliefs and are not an attempt to avoid criticism. He writes:

Je ne défends point ces rimes, parce que je les ai employées: mais je ne m'en suis servi que parce que je les ai crues bonnes. Je ne puis souffrir qu'on sacrifie à la richesse de la rime toutes les autres beautés de la poésie, et qu'on cherche plutôt à plaire à l'oreille qu'au coeur et à l'esprit. On pousse même la tyrannie jusqu'à exiger qu'on rime pour les yeux encore plus que pour les oreilles. . . . L'assujettissement à la rime fait que souvent on ne trouve dans la langue qu'un seul mot qui puisse finir un vers: on ne dit presque jamais ce qu'on voulait dire: on ne peut se servir du mot propre: on est obligé de chercher une pensée pour la rime, parce qu'on ne peut trouver de rime pour exprimer ce que l'on pense. . . . J'ai tâché de regagner un peu de liberté: et si la poésie occupe encore mon loisir, je préférerai toujours les choses aux mots, et la pensée à la rime.¹

¹Moland, II, 41-2.

This shows that Voltaire was attempting to renew the rules of rime to be used in tragedy. Approximately one rime in six in this play is weak, usually a simple assonance: the proportion is even higher in the first scene. The three rimes mentioned in the Lettres sur "Oedipe", frein, rien; héros, tombeaux; contagion, poison; are all in this scene. While it is understandable that Voltaire should feel that the need for richness of rime was secondary compared to "toutes les autres beautés de la poésie", it is difficult to see what beauty there is in some of the lines where the rime is weak.

Je rapporte sa cendre, et viens à ce héros,
Attendant des autels, élever des tombeaux. (I,i,11.93-4)

These lines would be acceptable if they were pleasing to the ear, to the mind or to the heart, but the rhythm is not unusual, there is no striking harmony, the idea is banal, merely explaining why Philoctète should come to Thebes, and the expression is confused.

Lines 25-32 of the same scene have the following rimes: doux, vous; vie, Béotie; pas, états; Asie, ennerie. All are weak, yet the passage concerned is of no especial importance. Philoctète has already been told that Laius is dead; Dimas here tells when it happened and notes that the king was assassinated. There is no appeal to the heart, the mind, the ear or the eye. Voltaire, like Hugo with Hernani, seems determined that the audience shall understand his new ideas on versification from the first scene. Unfortunately his verse is not justified by the theory. The theory implied

that Voltaire wanted greater freedom for rime on occasions when an author wished to enhance the appeal of his verse to the mind or to the ear of the spectator by some other means. The weakening of the rime without the addition of some other beauty, and these lines are an example of this, is not justified by the theory. It is strange that Voltaire did not see that even if the theory were correctly put into practice, the logical development of his idea that rime is of secondary importance, would result in an alexandrine which did not rime at all. This Voltaire definitely did not want, but trends once established are often difficult to check until the logical conclusion has been reached.

About one in eleven of the rimes in the play are rich, and there is a smattering of "rimes léonines". On some occasions at least the rich rimes are used for a purpose. In the first twelve lines of Act III, scene iv, five couplets have rich or leonine rimes. This must have been to emphasise the importance of the scene. In the first scene of Act IV there are proportionally more rich rimes than elsewhere in the play and this concentration may indicate that Voltaire worked over the most important scenes more carefully than the others.

On no fewer than thirty-six occasions a masculine rime succeeds a feminine rime with the same vowel sound, or vice versa. On thirteen occasions the vowel is closed [e] sound and thus the final syllables of the four successive lines are pronounced identically. On nine occasions the vowel is [i], on five it is [ā], and on six [a]. In all these cases the

final consonant of the feminine rime is usually pronounced and some difference in pronunciation can be detected. This was not considered a great weakness, but, equally, it was not considered good technique. One of the few places where there is any obvious reason for this practice is in Oedipe's monologue.² Here Oedipe is describing a vision and the succession of [i] sounds adds to the horror. The successive rimes "nuit" and "luit", and "Eumenides" and "parricides" help to portray the anguish of Oedipe. However, in Act IV, scene i (ll.1033-54), in a passage of twenty-two lines, sixteen lines are in groups of four. The vowel sounds concerned are [i], [ɛ̃], [e], and [ɑ̃]. Voltaire is here definitely concentrating on meaning, but it is doubtful whether the appeal to the mind of the spectator could fully compensate for the awkwardness felt by his ear. Similarly, in Act I, scene iii (ll.249-60), the riming sequence in successive couplets is [e], [ɛ̃], [e], [ɛ̃], [e], [ɛ̃]; this sequence, too, spreads over two speeches. The last two couplets are the start of the curse of Oedipe against the murderer of Laius, and had the sequence been continued over the rest of the curse it might have had some poetic value. As it stands it serves no obvious purpose.

Some rimes are difficult to defend. That Voltaire should rime "Laius" with "plus" on five occasions is acceptable, since some licence is allowed with proper names. But on three occasions he rimes the [o:] of "trône" with the [ɔ]

²Oedipe, V,iv,1345-8.

of "couronne", "environne" and "ordonne".³ On two occasions he rimes the [a:] of "âme" with the [a] of "madame".⁴ This particular rime, occurring three times in the last hundred lines of the play, seems to be an intentional attempt to indicate the extent to which he believed the rules of rime should be relaxed, but the only result is to disturb the hearer. Another licence which Voltaire allowed himself but which pronounced only jarring results is the riming of "dieux", pronounced as one syllable, with "odieux" pronounced as a three-syllable word.⁵

Several rimes are repeated in the course of the play for no apparent dramatic reason, except, perhaps, to show the excessive stringency of the existing rules and to reinforce Voltaire's claim that reform was necessary. Chief among these rimes is "courroux" with "vous" or "nous". The fact that Voltaire rimes "courroux" with "nous" twice in the first eighteen lines of the play seems to indicate an attempt to impress his point of view on the audience.

In general, then, Voltaire's versification as shown in this play is weak rather than strong. This was intentional

³Ibid., I,ii,155-6; I,iii,203-4; V,1,1179-80.

⁴Ibid., IV, 1,1031-2, 1083-4.

⁵Ibid., V,ii,1213-4.

and due mainly to a desire to liberate poetry from its excessively strict rules.

The alexandrines are almost all of regular construction. Taking Grammont's definitions as guides⁶ there is only one pure ternary line in the play. This is in Act III, scene iv (l.792): "Votre vertu dément la voix qui vous accuse." Several others may be ternary or classical alexandrines, depending on the reader's interpretation. A few examples will suffice: "Eh bien! les dieux, touchés des vœux qu'on leur adresse " (III,iv,751); "Je le sais: mais, malgré les maux que je prévoi " (V,ii,1289); "Moi votre époux! Quittez ce titre abominable " (V,v,1363). There are few "rejets" or enjambements. Some of these are well used, some are poor. When Oedipe says in his monologue:

Quelle nuit
Couvre d'un voile affreux la clarté qui nous luit,"
(V,iv,1345-6)

the enjambement serves to strengthen the image and improve the poetry. But when Philoctète says:

J'ai vécu, j'ai rempli ma triste destinée,
Madame: (III,ii,695-6)

no poetic or emotional effect is produced. The word "Madame" is unimportant.

In general Voltaire is not forced by requirements of rhythm or rime into tortuous inversions and interpolations which obscure the sense. Examples can be found such as the

⁶ Grammont, Le vers français, pp.59-77.

line: "Que vos vœux parmi nous les forcent à descendre " (I,iii,275), but such cases are quite exceptional. There are numerous examples of the use of phrases or even whole lines of negligible importance to throw into stronger relief a more important line. Jocaste says to Oedipe:

Et si j'ose, seigneur, dire ce que j'en pense,
Laius eut avec vous assez de ressemblance. (IV,1,931-2)

The first line leaves a near-vacuum in the mind of the listener which amplifies the effect of the telling second line. Voltaire uses this technique to good effect but does not abuse it.

Some lines are well-balanced, others are not. An example of the first is: "L'intérêt vous y mit, le remords vous en chasse " (V,iii,1272). An example of the second is: "Et suspect à moi-même, à moi-même odieux" (IV,1,1045), where the same effect is tried for but where the result is simply clumsy.

The line just quoted is also an example of the pure anapestic line which, intentionally or by chance, occurs often in the play and especially in Act V, scene iv. It may be intended to have ominous overtones: Act V, scene iv, is the monologue where Oedipe charges the gods with responsibility for his crimes. Similarly, other places where the anapests occur are often important. Near the start of Act III, scene iv (1.763), Oedipe says: "Quel que soit le destin que le ciel nous annonce", a phrase full of tragic irony and pregnant with meaning.

Voltaire's use of appropriate vowels and consonants to reinforce the poetic effects of his lines is in most cases adequate and sometimes most impressive. It can be seen, for example, how, in the following lines the succession of long and closed vowel sounds helps to give the listener an impression of the horror felt by Jocaste:

Cet hymen fut conclu sous un affreux augure:
Égine, je voyais dans une nuit obscure . . . (II,ii,391-2)

A succession of plosive consonants is used elsewhere to build up an image of something that is vile, and also of dripping blood. It was predicted to Jocaste that she would receive into her bed Oedipe: "Dégouttant dans mes bras du meurtre de son père " (IV,i,980).

Some lines were borrowed from Racine and Corneille: others were written in conscious imitation of the style of these dramatists. In general the lines reminiscent of Corneille are more successful than those reminiscent of Racine. A few examples will show this: "L'amitié d'un grand homme est un bienfait des dieux " (I,i,121); "J'ai fait des souverains et n'ai point voulu l'être " (II,iv,556). These lines are heroic and express the nobility of sentiment or of character often found in Corneille. Bad imitations can also be found, especially in Act II, scenes ii and iii and Act III, scene ii. The best imitations of Racine, in fact the only good ones, are to be found in Act IV, scene i, where Jocaste tells how she had her son killed.⁷ For example: "J'ordonnai

⁷ Oedipe, IV,i,987-1005.

par pitié qu'on lui donnât la mort" (IV,1,994). Elsewhere Voltaire tends to imitate the precious tirades of Racine's successors rather than the master's harmonious simplicity.

VI

POLITICS

Voltaire was not the first playwright to involve politics in a tragedy about Oedipus. The theme of politics was associated with the legend from the beginning. The Oedipus tyrannus of Sophocles was written at a time when there was great interest in politics and deep concern over the political implications of the future. Oedipus' title of "tyrannus" was itself enough to arouse conflicting emotions in the audience. The position of Oedipus has been compared to that of Pericles, and even to that of Athens and its empire in its relations with the other Greek states.¹ The play has been interpreted as a warning to the Athenians that their political hegemony was not necessarily eternal; indeed, shortly after the production of Sophocles' play, the power of Athens was virtually destroyed as a result of the defeat of the Sicilian expedition.

Corneille's Oedipe was mainly concerned with love and the sacrifice of private desire to public welfare. References to politics seem to imply that Corneille supported absolute monarchy, with the king empowered to decide the mode of conduct of his subjects in every domain. Oedipe's

¹Knox, Oedipus at Thebes.

chief interest in Corneille's play seems to be in the possible political implications of any course of action, and it might be said that he is unreasonably suspicious of other people's motives. This particular preoccupation with politics may be explained in part by the fact that Corneille's play was composed and became famous during a period when there seemed little likelihood of any change in the existing form and policy of government.

On the other hand Voltaire's play was composed at least in part in the political upheaval which followed the death of Louis XIV in 1715. Moral principles had ceased to be important, public and personal morality were at a very low ebb, and vice and expediency were the order of the day. In these conditions it is surprising that the political views expressed in Voltaire's Oedipe were as moderate as they were. When writing this play, Voltaire must have been aware of at least some of the political implications of the plays of his illustrious predecessors on the same subject, and it is reasonable to assume that inferences which may be drawn from his plot and the speeches of his characters were intentional.

One persistent rumour must be destroyed. It has often been said that Voltaire's choice of subject was influenced by the incestuous relationship between the Duc d'Orléans and his daughter. The powers of the Regent were such that if he had ever had reason to believe that Voltaire intended to criticise him or his family, Voltaire's fate

would have been very different. In fact it was probably a conscious attempt to avoid making the play reflect the contemporary scene which was partly responsible for Voltaire's decision to eliminate the Regent Creon from his play. He wanted to express general political truths, not invite disaster by criticising those in power at the time.

In Gay's book on Voltaire's Politics few references are made to Oedipe. On page forty-eight he mentions the "humanitarian propaganda" of Oedipe and the Henriade; on page forty-two he says: "In his first two tragedies, Oedipe and Marianne, he had criticised despotic power and superstitious religiosity;" on page ninety-eight he says: "Oedipe displays rudimentary ideas about politics." The importance and maturity of the political ideas which can be found in Oedipe may not be great, but the political views expressed in this tragedy are worth more than casual dismissal.

Of considerable interest is the fact that the young Voltaire gave in the character of Oedipe a picture of his conception of the ideal ruler. On several occasions Oedipe shows great unselfishness and devotion towards his Thebans. He is willing, perhaps too willing, to die for them, as his first speech reveals:

Que ne puis-je sur moi détournant leurs [the gods']
vengeances
De la mort qui vous suit étouffer les semences.
(I,iii,163-4)

This entry of Oedipe has been carefully prepared and his first speech was probably intended to indicate his most important

characteristics in the same way as Tartuffe revealed his character in his first speech.² Oedipe repeats the same idea later:

Être utile aux mortels, et sauver cet empire,
Voilà, seigneur, voilà l'honneur seul où j'aspire.
Si le ciel m'eût laissé le choix de la victime
Je n'aurais immolé de victime que moi:
Mourir pour son pays, c'est le devoir d'un roi.
(II, iv, 499-500, 504-6)

Until the end of the Fronde, when Corneille's heroes were expressing similar noble sentiments, audiences could feel that at least some of the Court, if not the king, believed in and shared such ideals. In 1718 the rulers of France had no ideal of sacrifice. This ideal was part of the traditional "mystique" of classical tragedy which Voltaire, among others, tried to carry over into times when it did not apply. Theatre ceases to be valid and alive when it expresses sentiments which awaken no echo in the spectator. This irrelevance to the feelings and aspirations of the audiences was a cause of the decline in popularity of the classical tragedy in France. Though striking a somewhat false note, these speeches do portray Oedipe as having the self-sacrifice desirable in a good king.

Oedipe is also at pains to tell his audience that it is not easy to rule. In Act I scene iii he emphasises the transitory nature of fame in lines which, according to the Kehl edition of Voltaire's works,³ were applied to Louis XIV

²Molière, *Tartuffe*, III, ii, 853-6.

³Moland, II, 67.

at early performances of the play.⁴ Saint-Simon, though sometimes unreliable when dealing with specific persons, may be believed when he says of Louis XIV's death:

Louis XIV ne fut regretté que de ses valets intérieurs, de peu d'autres gens, et des chefs de l'affaire de la Constitution . . . Paris, las d'une dépendance qui avait tout assujéti, respira dans l'espoir de quelque liberté, et dans la joie de voir finir l'autorité de tant de gens qui en abusaient . . . Le peuple, ruiné, accablé, désespéré, rendit grâces à Dieu avec un éclat scandaleux, d'une délivrance dont ses plus ardents désirs ne doutaient plus. . . . Le vendredi 6 septembre, le cardinal de Rohan porta le coeur aux Grands-Jésuites avec très peu d'accompagnement et de pompe; outre le service purement nécessaire, on remarqua qu'il ne se trouva pas six personnes de la cour aux Jésuites à cette cérémonie. Ce n'est pas à moi . . . à relever une si prompte ingratitude.⁵

The insertion of these lines implies that Voltaire recalled the earlier, more successful years of the reign of Louis XIV, and that he believed that a system should not be condemned because one old man abused it.

Later, when forced to accuse Philoctète of the murder of Laius, Oedipe confesses to Araspe:

Je me plaignais à moi de mon trop de vigueur.
Nécessité cruelle attachée à l'empire!
Dans le coeur des humains les rois ne peuvent lire.
Souvent sur l'innocence ils font tomber leurs coups
Et nous sommes, Araspe, injustes malgré nous. (II, v, 574-8)

Oedipe's attitude here may be read as a criticism of the accusation of Sophocles' Oedipus against Creon, and a justification of absolute monarchy in general and Louis XIV in particular. The idea that frequent injustice is inherent in government,

⁴Oedipe, I, iii, 183-92.

⁵Saint-Simon, Mémoires, IV, 1093, 1095, V, 29.

though no doubt prevalent in 1718, shows how great was the change in Voltaire's outlook in later life. It was probably his experience in England which showed him that while absolute justice is obviously unattainable, miscarriage of justice can be reduced by safeguards and vigilance.

Voltaire may also intend to indicate to the Regent that he saw his incarceration in the Bastille and his subsequent exile as an unfortunate mistake for which he bore no ill will. Certainly he never seemed to show the resentment over this affair which would normally be expected of a man who seems to have been innocent.

It is also important to note that the lines just quoted insist on man's inevitable limitations. The same idea is expressed in Oedipe's first speech:

Mais un roi n'est qu'un homme en ce commun danger
Et tout ce qu'il peut faire est de le partager.
(I, iii, 165-6)

These lines are a direct attack on the doctrine of the divine right of kings, a doctrine which Voltaire obviously opposed from his youth. This rejection of the divine right is not incompatible with the idea implied by Oedipe's speeches in Act III, scene iv. Here the High Priest is accused of being an unfaithful interpreter of oracles, but the expression is such that there is a definite implication that the mere act of accusing the king was deserving of death.⁶ When accusing Philoctète of killing Laius, Oedipe makes one interesting

⁶Oedipe, III, iv, 807-14, 831-7.

remark. He admits that if Philoctète did kill Laius it must have been for a good reason and in honourable conflict.⁷ He goes on:

Le vainqueur de Laius est digne du trépas;
Sa tête répondra aux malheurs de l'empire; (II, iv, 838-9)

It is not certain whether the murderer of Laius would be killed even if this death were not necessary to assuage the anger of the gods; however it seems likely that this is the correct interpretation. In this case Voltaire is implying that though kings are only human and subject to human error, their position itself makes any attack on them, however justified, to be treason. Thésée in Act IV, scene ii, of Corneille's Oedipe says this more explicitly: "Mais jamais sans forfait on ne se prend aux rois." Absolutism encourages such a notion, and the manner of its presentation here implies that Voltaire was a monarchist even if he did not believe in the divine right of kings.

The grief of Oedipe when he realises that Phorbias has been punished for a crime committed by Oedipe seems sincere.⁸ Later he recalls Phorbias and gives the following reason for doing so:

Il faut de mes bontés lui laisser quelque marque,
Et quitter mes sujets et le trône en monarque. (V, i, 1191-2)

Again Voltaire expresses the belief that a good king is compassionate, honest, and willing to accept his responsibilities

⁷ Ibid., II, iv, 523-8.

⁸ Ibid., IV, ii.

and discover by reason the path to follow under any circumstances. In this case he acknowledges that he became king wrongly and he therefore decides to abdicate. In editions before 1738, Oedipe was even more sympathetic towards Phorbas. He says:

Que Phorbas vienne ici; c'est son roi qui l'en prie.
Auteur de tous ses maux, c'est peu de les venger,
C'est peu de m'en punir, je dois les soulager.⁹

These lines, which make Oedipe an even more sympathetic character, were dropped in 1738 and replaced by the present reading. This attempt to integrate Philoctète into the action of the play is not happy. The qualifications which Oedipe mentions as sufficient in a king are power, virtue, courage, good breeding and good friends;¹⁰ while his "vertu" might be open to question, Caligula's horse certainly had all the other qualifications mentioned. Voltaire is oversimplifying matters. It is interesting to note that in 1738 there was no question of an alternative form of government: "Il vous faut un roi" (V,1,1186).

Little emphasis can be put on Oedipe's remark to Philoctète: "Des guerriers comme vous sont égaux aux monarques" (II,iv,536). At no time in his life did Voltaire have much respect for warriors. This remark is more or less in the nature of a compliment as Oedipe goes on to say that, despite Philoctète's worth, he will be killed if guilty. ✓

⁹Moland, II,116-7.

¹⁰Oedipe, V,1,1186-9.

A more important line is that where Oedipe finally dismisses Philoctète's arguments by saying: "On vous jugera, prince" (II,iv,560). Voltaire is saying here that even princes should be subject to the law and that the Cornelian idea that honour is more important than justice must be reversed. It is difficult to see how kings with the great powers that Voltaire seemed to want to vest in them, could be made responsible before the law in any practical way. This belief seems naive, especially as Voltaire knew well enough the corruption which is the usual concomitant of absolutism.

That Oedipe had absolute power is made plain when the High Priest admits: "Ma vie est en vos mains, vous en êtes le maître " (III,iv,815). This is a somewhat weaker imitation of the challenge of Sophocles' Tiresias to Oedipus, and is followed by a speech which is part-warning, part-curse.¹¹ However the attitude of Phorbas before Jocaste, whom he believes to be ruling on her own since Laius is dead, is simply that of a man who knows that his ruler has absolute power.

Eh bien! est-ce aujourd'hui qu'il faut que je périsse?
Grande reine, avez-vous ordonné mon supplice? (IV,iii,
1091-2)

Oedipe has persuasive power over his people. No guard is ever mentioned and hence Oedipe is supposed to rely on the approbation of the people to get any of his dictates obeyed. Again this seems to contradict the notion of the

¹¹ Ibid., III,iv,815-30.

ruler's power of life and death over his people. Oedipe tells Philoctète:

Prince, ne craignez point l'impétueux caprice
 D'un peuple dont la voix presse votre supplice:
 J'ai calmé son tumulte, et même contre lui
 Je vous viens, s'il le faut apporter mon appui.
 On vous a soupçonné; le peuple a dû le faire.
 Moi, qui ne juge point ainsi que le vulgaire,
 Je voudrais que, perçant un nuage odieux,
 Déjà votre innocence éclatât à leurs yeux.

(III,iii,719-26)

Obviously he considers the people to be on a much lower level than Philoctète and himself. It must be assumed that "appui" means moral support. It is unlikely that Oedipe is implying that he will fight his own people on Philoctète's behalf, but the whole issue is confused.

The attitude of the people to Oedipe must be deduced from the words of the chorus which is supposed to represent them. When Oedipe has been told he murdered Laius, the chorus is most anxious for him. It says:

O ciel, dont le pouvoir préside à notre sort,
 Nommez une autre tête, ou rendez-nous la mort.

(III,iv,793-4)

Half the speeches of the chorus in this play are a plea for death so the final hemistich should not be taken too seriously. The speech does, however, indicate a bond of affection between ruler and ruled. Earlier in the same scene the chorus says: "Oedipe a pour son peuple une amour paternelle." (III,iv,767)

Voltaire means to say that paternalistic and benevolent despotism such as he was later to exercise over his

estates at Ferney, is the best form of government. Voltaire never thought that many men were fit for kingship. Laius is referred to as "Des véritables rois exemple auguste et rare" (IV,1,923). The only time Oedipe misused his powers was when he killed Laius.¹² This was in mortal combat, but the combat had been provoked by Oedipe himself. For this he was truly contrite. The incident is used by Voltaire to show once more that even kings can do wrong and their wrongs have greater effects than those of other men. Oedipe was only a prince when he killed Laius but he was of regal birth. Voltaire was pointing a moral whose truth had been made plain to all in the later years of the reign of Louis XIV.

Voltaire took less care with the character of Jocaste and her political ideas are sometimes contradictory. She was apparently loved by her people, as the chorus says: "O reine, ayez pitié d'un peuple qui vous aime" (II,1,311). Phorbas states that she was usually just: "Vous ne fûtes jamais injuste que pour moi" (IV,11,1093). While Oedipe is concerned about the safety and well-being of his people, Jocaste seems to despise them. She tells Philoctète:

Oubliez ces Thébans que les dieux abandonnent,
Trop dignes de périr depuis qu'ils vous soupçonnent
(II,111,463-4)

She also refers to "un vain peuple" (IV,1,951) and has no objection when Égine says:

¹²Ibid., IV,1,1063-70.

Madame, vous savez jusqu'à quelle insolence
Le peuple a de ses cris fait monter la licence.
(III,1,611-2)

The sentiments of both Égine and Jocaste seem to indicate not paternalism but disdain.

There is some confusion over the marriage between Jocaste and Oedipe. In Sophocles no mention is made of details. In Corneille, Oedipe says:

Le peuple offre son sceptre, et la reine son lit.
La reine tint parole et j'eus le diadème.¹³

In Voltaire's play the marriage is first mentioned by Dimas who tells Philoctète simply: "Oedipe à cette reine a joint sa destinée" (I,1,132). Égine is the next to speak of the marriage and she tells Jocaste:

Et votre coeur, du moins sans trop de résistance,
De vos Etats sauvés donna la récompense. (II,11,367-8)

Five lines later Jocaste says:

Par un monstre cruel Thèbe alors ravagée
A son libérateur avait promis ma foi. (II,11,372-3)

Fifteen lines further on she gives this account of her marriage to Oedipe:

Cependant sur ses pas aux autels entraînée,
Égine, je sentis dans mon âme étournée
Des transports inconnus que je ne conçus pas. (II,11,387-9)

Finally Philoctète says to Jocaste:

L'empire des Thébains sauvé par sa sagesse,
Ses exploits, ses vertus, et surtout votre choix,
Ont mis cet heureux prince au rang des plus grands rois.
(II,111,432-4)

¹³Corneille, Oedipe, I,iv.

The contradiction is obvious, if unimportant. Voltaire probably did not intend to imply that in times of crisis by some means unspecified the people ever did, or ever should, take the regal power into their own hands and barter the life of their queen. It is probable that he was simply careless and did not realise what he had written. In any case the idea of the hero claiming the beautiful queen as his prize is legendary.

On two occasions Voltaire puts in the mouth of Jocaste speeches which seem both out of context and out of character, and which can only be considered as attacks on the Court of France. The first occasion is when she delivers a virulent attack on courtiers in Act III, scene 1.¹⁴ Her ideas resemble those of the Princesse de Clèves, but her language is stronger. There is no preparation and no need for such a speech at this point; a simple couplet to the effect that love cannot be concealed from the populace would have sufficed. It is significant that in her previous speech she speaks of "on";¹⁵ it is obvious that she is referring to the same courtiers that she castigates in her next speech. This is further evidence both that Jocaste was concerned only with her Court and not with her people, and that this attitude was accepted as normal in France at the time. At this stage of his life Voltaire had had no personal contact with the French court, but his

¹⁴ Oedipe, III, 1, 631-44.

¹⁵ Ibid., III, 1, 627.

companions at the "Temple" and the gossip of the city had no doubt given him an insight into Court affairs.

Further evidence of this insight may be found in Jocaste's explanation of the fate of Phorbas in Act I, scene iii.¹⁶ The explanation is unsatisfactory, as Voltaire admits in the Lettres sur "Oedipe",¹⁷ but it corresponded to what he and the audience had heard of Court politics. The summary imprisonment of Phorbas by Jocaste on very weak grounds was an injustice which Oedipe, the good king, hastened to rectify.

The other main attack on the Court by Jocaste is in Act IV, scene i.¹⁸ Here she criticises unnecessary pomp and ceremony. No doubt her criticisms were echoed by those in the audience whose taxes had gone to pay for the grandiose buildings and luxury of which Louis XIV was so fond. Laius, like Oedipe, was treated by Voltaire as an ideal ruler and hence he did not need to be protected from his subjects. The fact that a French king did need such protection and could not rely on "l'amour de son peuple" is a direct criticism of the French royalty. It must be pointed out that it was because Laius had no bodyguard that he was killed, but it is most unlikely that Voltaire is here recommending the

¹⁶ Ibid., I,iii,236-40.

¹⁷ Moland, II,36.

¹⁸ Oedipe, IV,i,715-21.

use of bodyguards by revealing the fate of kings who do not have them. Voltaire knew that French history has more than its quota of regicides¹⁹ and the irony of this eloquent passage probably escaped him.

Philoctète on several occasions makes references to kings. His is an interesting case as his presence in the play is an invention of Voltaire and the author could make his character act and speak as he wished. The only connection between the legendary Philoctète, who is the subject of a play by Sophocles, and Voltaire's creation is the fact that both were said to be of royal birth and noble companions of Hercules. Exaggeration and bombast are an integral part of Philoctète's character, but granted this, some of his references to kings and his opinion of them must have seemed strong in 1718. In the first scene of the play as it now stands Philoctète says of Hercules:

Qu'eussé-je été sans lui? Rien que le fils d'un roi
Rien qu'un prince vulgaire . . . (I,1,126-7)

Moland says of these lines: "À la première représentation ce vers fut applaudi avec transport" but this is unlikely as they were not in the first edition of the play. Some of Philoctète's other outbursts were in the original version and among these was his statement:

Un roi pour ses sujets est un dieu qu'on révère,
Pour Hercule et pour moi c'est un homme ordinaire.
(II,iv,531-2)

¹⁹See Lettres Philosophiques, ed. Naves, p.37.

This is insisting further on the fact that kings, despite popular adulation, are only human. Philoctète, as Oedipe states,²⁰ tends to speak as a demi-god, but it is unlikely that Voltaire intended the audience to believe that kings were demi-gods also. There is no record of the reaction of the audience to this statement, except that Voltaire felt the need to apologise in the Lettres sur "Oedipe" for the language of Philoctète. However, of a later speech of Philoctète:

Le trône est un objet qui n'a pu me tenter.
 Hercule à ce haut rang dédaignait de monter.
 Toujours libre avec lui, sans sujets et sans maître
 J'ai fait des souverains et n'ai point voulu l'être.
 (II, iv, 553-6)

Moland notes, again without giving a source, that in 1801, when the play was performed in the presence of Bonaparte, the last line of this quotation was applauded "à plusieurs reprises."²¹ However, this is no reliable guide to the audience reaction eighty years before. It was not unusual for heroes of French classical tragedy to give up the throne but usually the reason was love.²² Here the reason is a sense of superiority on the part of Philoctète which, in a country where the divine right of kings was still a burning question, seems to be a clear case of "lèse-majesté". Philoctète shows his

²⁰ Oedipe, III, iv, 806. The present reading dates only from 1738.

²¹ Moland, II, 78.

²² As in, for example, Rodogune.

lack of respect for the people by his remark:

Un vain peuple en tumulte a demandé ma tête.
 Il souffre, il est injuste, il faut lui pardonner.
 (III, 11, 676-7)

This is not true forgiveness but simply arrogance. The rather fatuous nature of his plea that because he was a noble warrior he must be innocent, has been dealt with.

It is difficult to find in the play any of what Gay called "humanitarian propaganda". The general impression is that Voltaire looked on benevolent despotism as the best form of government, but thought that the governed should be able to prevent their ruler from doing wrong by some unspecified means. The criticisms of the Court in the mouth of Jocaste are direct and must be supposed to reflect the feelings of the audiences of the period. It is possible that Voltaire originally intended to pour scorn on the idea of some kings, especially Louis XIV, that they were super-human, by making Philoctète speak as he did. Certainly Philoctète's language becomes stronger and his attacks are spread wider in the revision of 1738 which gave the present readings. If this were true, then the apology for Philoctète's language contained in the Lettres sur "Oedipe" would have been necessary either because the audience did not understand the author's intention, or because the authorities understood too well. It is impossible to be sure, but such an interpretation is of doubtful validity. Voltaire's political ideas in 1718 as revealed in this play were rudimentary and conservative.

Any other conclusion can be reached only by prejudice or by an insufficient study of the text and of the later additions to it.

VII

RELIGION

1. Destiny or the Gods?

In this play there are 120 references to the gods and 75 to fate. As both these concepts occupy an important part in the play it is well to try to define the precise meanings of the terms used and their relationship.

All the major characters refer to "le ciel" as the force which rules over their destinies: similarly, and more often, they all refer to "les dieux" in the same sense. The High Priest uses "dieux" only once (V,vi,1382). This is just three lines after he has referred to "le dieu du ciel et de la terre": the one term seems as comprehensive as the other and there is no apparent reason for the change. In general the plural form is used more often than the singular in the ratio of about four to one.

In some cases some distinction can be drawn between the meaning of the singular and plural uses. The first time Oedipe himself refers to a singular "dieu" is at the beginning of Act III, scene v (1.853). He has just become aware that not only are the gods a threat to Thebes, but that they are threatening him personally:

Il me semble qu'un dieu descendu parmi nous,
Maître de mes transports, enchaîne mon courroux.

The same feeling is expressed on the other occasions when he refers to a god in the singular.¹ However, on similar occasions the plural is also used. Line 1052 has: "Le dieu qui me guidait seconda mon courage", but later in the same speech at lines 1076-7 Oedipe says:

Dieux puissants! je ne sais si c'est faveur ou haine,
Mais sans doute pour moi contre eux vous combattiez.

Further examples can be found and in general logical explanation is impossible.

Similarly there is no consistent distinction between Voltaire's use of "destin" (singular or plural), "destinée", "sort", and "fortune". Guizot in his Dictionnaire des synonymes says: "Le Destin veut, et ce qu'il veut est notre destinée." Voltaire chose to ignore this distinction. In Act III, scene iv, line 763, for example, Oedipe says: "Quel que soit le destin que le ciel nous annonce." No doubt it is for reasons of metre that "destinée" is not used here where strict meaning requires it. Similar examples abound.

Guizot also says: "Le sort est aveugle et tient du hasard: le destin semble posséder quelques idées de science et de prévoyance. . . . On résiste au sort, on peut échapper au sort: mais on se soumet au destin, on n'échappe pas au destin." On some occasions "sort" is used in this sense. Jocaste tells Philoctète in Act III, scene ii (1.674): "Partez: de votre sort vous êtes encor maître." Oedipe

¹Oedipe, III, v, 874; IV, i, 1052; IV, iii, 1142; IV, iii, 1145; V, iv, 1339.

describing his travels says:

Et tous ceux qu'à mes yeux le sort venait offrir
Me semblaient mes sujets . . . (IV,1,1069-70)

Elsewhere "sort" has the same meaning as "destin", as, for example, earlier in the same scene where Jocaste tells how she consulted the oracle: "Sur le sort de mon fils . . ." (IV,1,967). Even "destinée" and "fortune" are used in the sense of being governed by chance. Araspe speaks of Philoctète:

Il partit: et, depuis, sa destinée errante
Ramena sur nos bords sa fortune flottante. (II,1,295-6)

Nowhere is there any confusion as to the meaning intended, but neither is there any distinction. The word most frequently used for "fate" is "destin", closely followed by "sort"; "destinée" and "fortune" are relatively rare. Usage depends rather on the euphony than on the meaning of the line.

Sometimes a distinction is drawn between fate and the gods, and at other times fate is put on a level with the gods. The Chorus invokes: "O ciel, dont le pouvoir préside à notre sort" (III,iv,793). Oedipe says: "Non, si le ciel enfin de nos destins décide" (II,v,600). Jocaste tells Philoctète: "Les dieux vous réservaient un plus noble destin" (II,iii,466).

Finally, on two occasions there seems to be definite confusion. In the final couplet Jocaste says:

. . . au milieu des horreurs du destin qui m'opprime
J'ai fait rougir les dieux qui m'ont forcée au crime.

It is not clear whether "destin" is under the control of "les

dieux"; circumstances indicate that it was, but grammatically the two seem separate. Similarly Philoctète addresses Oedipe with these words:

Oui c'est lui qu'en ces murs un sort aveugle jette,
Et que le ciel encore, à sa perte animé
À souffrir des affronts n'a point accoutumé. (II, iv, 484-6)

He seems to consider himself a victim of the will of the gods and at the same time of blind fate: the two are irreconcilable.

In general, therefore, it can only be said that there is some power or powers which control the lives of the characters: sometimes it is supposed to be blind but usually it follows a plan. The reactions of the characters to this power by whatever name it may be called, are to be treated next.

2. Attitudes of Voltaire and his characters towards the Gods

Even a cursory comparison of the Oedipe of Voltaire with the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles reveals a marked difference between the actions of the gods in the two plays. In Sophocles' play Oedipus emphasises his human accomplishments and boasts to Tiresias that the gods had no part in the killing of the Sphinx:

ἀλλ' ἐγὼ μολών,
ὁ μηδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπους, ἔκρυσα νῆν,
γνώμη κρησῆας οὐδ' ἀπ' οἰωνῶν μαθῶν.²

²Sophocles, ll.396-8. "But I, the Oedipus who stumbled here without a hint, could snuff her out by human wit, not taking cues from birds" (Roche translation).

His account of the killing of Laius is simple³ and does not mention the gods. The reactions of Oedipus to the oracular pronouncements were entirely his own:

The tragedy of King Oedipus was not only that he suffered the improbabilities of murdering his father and marrying his mother -- both were mistakes anyway -- the tragedy was that having murdered his father and married his mother he made the fully responsible mistake of finding it out. As he was an upright man, but proud, the gods allowed him to make the first mistake; as he was a head-strong man, but overweening in self-confidence, he allowed himself to make the second. Zeal mysteriously worked with destiny to trip him up on his self-righteousness and then reveal an arrogance which pressed forward to calamity.⁴

The gods allowed Oedipus the freedom to destroy himself: "It is true that the downfall of the House of Oedipus was foretold even before Oedipus was born, but it was foretold because it was going to happen; it was not going to happen because it was foretold."⁵ Corneille's interpretation of the legend is not consistent. Throughout his play until the last act, Oedipe makes no mention of the gods' influence over his actions. His accounts of the killing of the Sphinx⁶ and of Laius⁷ give no indication of any superhuman aid. Even in Act V he holds Phorbas and Iphicrate responsible for his crimes. He tells them:

³Ibid., 11.796-8.

⁴The Oedipus plays of Sophocles, trans. Paul Roche, Introduction, pp.IX-X.

⁵Ibid., p. IX.

⁶Corneille, Oedipe, I,iv.

⁷Ibid., IV,iv.

Vos dangereux secrets par un commun accord
 M'ont livré tout entier aux rigueurs de mon sort.
 Ce sont eux qui m'ont fait l'assassin de mon père,
 Ce sont eux qui m'ont fait le mari de ma mère;

Le ciel l'avait prédit, vous avez achevé.

(Corneille, Oedipe V,v)

The tirade of Thésée in Act III, scene v, glorifying the freedom of the will is well-known. However in Act V, scene vii, Oedipe states:

Aux crimes malgré moi l'ordre du ciel m'attache.

Hélas! qu'il est bien vrai qu'en vain on s'imagine
 Dérober notre vie à ce qu'il nous destine.

Dircé agrees with him:

Le juste choix du ciel peut-être me le [ce trépas
 glorieux] garde,
 Il fit tout votre crime . . .

The contradiction was probably not intended or noticed by Corneille and it doubtless indicates that the legend was interpreted in different ways in the seventeenth century as it is today.

There is no confusion in Voltaire's Oedipe. Voltaire seems to have decided exactly what his attitude to the gods was before he started writing. His Oedipe goes to Thebes "guidé par la fortune",⁸ "fortune" being either the tool of intelligent gods or the gods themselves. His wanderings were controlled by "le dieu qui me guidait",⁹ and the "dieux

⁸Oedipe, I,1,65.

⁹Ibid., IV,1,1052.

puissants"¹⁰ fought with him against Laius and Phorbas. Even in the scenes he most closely imitated from Sophocles, Voltaire has changed the whole interpretation of events. Voltaire's Oedipe is continually pleading with the gods to give him information, but they refuse to do this until the occasion suits them. In Sophocles the oracles give true messages whenever asked. When accused of the murder of Laius Oedipe is calmed by the gods. He says:

Il me semble qu'un dieu descendu parmi nous,
Maître de mes transports, enchaîne mon courroux.
(III, v, 853-4)

The gods deliberately make Oedipe forget past events in order to ensure his destruction: this is mentioned in three places.¹¹ Even the rescue of the baby Oedipe is ascribed to the work of the gods.¹² Voltaire introduces to good effect the story of the gods' rejection of the offerings of the young Oedipe in the temple. While Sophocles' Oedipus leaves Corinth in an attempt to thwart the oracle of the gods, Voltaire's Oedipe has the opposite reaction:

Et suspect à moi-même, à moi-même odieux
Ma vertu n'osa point lutter contre les dieux.
(IV, i, 1045-6)

It is only after discovering that he is an incestuous patricide that Oedipe attacks the gods and for this reason

¹⁰ Ibid., IV, i, 1076-7.

¹¹ Ibid., IV, i, 1059-60; IV, ii, 1109-10; V, ii, 1285-6.

¹² Ibid., V, ii, 1262.

his indictment is the more damning. Speaking of his "vertu" he says:

Un dieu plus fort que toi m'entraînait vers le crime;
 Sous mes pas fugitifs il creusait un abîme;
 Et j'étais malgré moi dans mon aveuglement
 D'un pouvoir inconnu l'esclave et l'instrument.
 Voilà tous mes forfaits, je n'en connais pas d'autres.
 Impitoyables dieux; mes crimes sont les vôtres,
 Et vous m'en punissez! . . . (V,iv,1339-45)

There is no room for doubt. The audience, having seen the play unfold, must be of the same opinion as Oedipe: the gods are the villains and Oedipe is almost completely innocent. His one bad action, the killing of Laius, he ascribes to heredity and the environment of his youth, and the intervention of the gods.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Jocaste. After recounting the fate of Phorbas she says:

Peut-être, accomplissant ses décrets éternels,
 Afin de nous punir il [le ciel] nous fit criminels.
 (I,iii,229-30.)

In later scenes her language becomes stronger. She tells Oedipe of her decision to kill her infant son, described by Oedipe as "l'objet du céleste courroux" (IV,i,986):

Je crus les dieux, seigneur; et, saintement cruelle,
 J'étouffai pour mon fils mon amour maternelle.
 En vain de cet amour l'impérieuse voix
 S'opposait à nos dieux, et condamnait leurs lois.
 (IV,i,987-90)

When Oedipe discovers he killed Laius, Jocaste insists, rightly: "Vous êtes malheureux et non point criminel" (IV,iii,1150). It is she who closes the play with a final bitter attack on the gods:

Par un pouvoir affreux réservée à l'inceste,
La mort est le seul bien, le seul dieu qui me reste.

.....
Honorez mon bûcher, et songez à jamais
Qu'au milieu des horreurs du destin qui m'opprime
J'ai fait rougir les dieux qui m'ont forcée au crime.
(V,vi,1399-1400,1406-8)

Pomeau points out that the injustice and cruelty of the gods is made obvious from the first scenes which contain such lines as:

On dit qu'enfin le ciel, après tant de courroux,
Va retirer son bras appesanti sur nous:
Tant de sang, tant de morts ont dû le satisfaire.
(I,1,18-19)

The Sphinx was:

... du courroux des dieux ministre épouvantable
Funeste à l'innocent, sans punir le coupable.
.....
Le ciel, industrieux dans sa triste vengeance,
Avait à le former épuisé sa puissance. (I,1,39-40,43-4)

Dimas goes on: "Les dieux nous ont conduit de supplice en supplice." (I,1,75)

Pomeau sums up admirably in the following words:

"Tout au long des cinq actes, une plaintive humanité courbe le front sous le despotisme divin."¹³ He also says:

"Voltaire a écrit Oedipe pour exprimer l'horreur du Dieu terrible. Il y a fait passer un frémissement qui porte à croire que l'angoisse de son personnage ne lui est pas étrangère
... Voltaire connaît sans doute l'angoisse du Dieu terrible, mais, avec lui, [Oedipe] il refuse cette angoisse. Voltaire
... repousse ici par des arguments critiques le Dieu de ce

¹³Pomeau, p. 87.

jansénisme."¹⁴ The first half of this quotation probably expresses the truth but the second part is less likely to be true. Voltaire portrays the world and the fates of men as playthings of a cruel and wicked god, but at no point does Voltaire or Oedipe reject the status quo, or offer any alternative to it. Jocaste dies angrily and Oedipe is noble in defeat but in both cases the defeat is total. There are signs at the end of Sophocles' play that Oedipus, though bowed, is not broken, but there are no such signs in Voltaire's Oedipe. The picture of the world without free will is drawn in detail and the pessimistic conclusion is not lightened by a single ray of hope.

Many an intelligent and thoughtful youth has concluded that the world is governed by the unjust whims of a "Dieu terrible". Many factors could have contributed to such an outlook in the young Voltaire; his authoritarian father and his Jansenist home-life; the confusion and conflict between his Jansenist home and his Jesuit teachers and education, both of which were mocked by his mentors of the "Temple"; the arbitrary interventions of Authority into his life, forcing him to leave The Hague, and later incarcerating him for a crime he did not commit. Any, all or none of these may have led Voltaire to write a play which offers no hope and no solution to humanity. We shall probably never know if this was the message Voltaire intended to convey to the audience,

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.88-9.

or if he really believed in it, but he seems to have manipulated the Oedipus legend deliberately to make it give this message. However, the popularity of the play implies that the audiences did not find it unduly pessimistic.

3. Attitudes towards Oracles and Priests

There may be some doubt as to the correct interpretation of Voltaire's attitude to religious institutions, as seen in Oedipe. It is important to note that the most vehement attacks on the clergy were added by Voltaire in 1738, and fit without difficulty into the context of his work at that time. In 1718 his attacks were less numerous and less strong. They could have been defended on the grounds that, despite attacks on them, the priest and the oracles were proved in the end to be speaking the truth. There was nothing new in these attacks on the good faith of priests in such situations. In Corneille's Oedipe Thésée tells Jocaste:

Delphes a pu vous faire une fausse réponse;
 L'argent put inspirer la voix qui les prononce.
 Cet organe des dieux put se laisser gagner
 À ceux que ma naissance empêche de régner,
 Et par tous les climats on n'a que trop d'exemples
 Qu'il est ainsi qu'ailleurs des méchants dans les
 temples.¹⁵

Fontenelle had pointed out in his Histoire des Oracles of 1687: "On corrompait les Oracles avec une facilité qui faisait bien voir qu'on avait à faire à des hommes",¹⁶ and

¹⁵Corneille, Oedipe, III, v.

¹⁶Fontenelle, Histoire des Oracles, Première dissertation, chapter 10.

quotes from Herodotus to prove his point. The refutation of Fontenelle's work published by Balthus in 1707 had brought about considerable reaction, but it is unlikely that the audiences who watched Oedipe ten years later had any recollections of the philosophical implications of attacks on oracles. Hence there is no reason for Pomeau to say: "La pièce dut son succès à certains vers frappés avec une netteté telle qu'ils ne quittent plus la mémoire."¹⁷

The High Priest, as has been seen, is practically characterless in Voltaire's Oedipe. Therefore there is no clash of personalities between Oedipe and him. Sometimes the High Priest is attacked by characters saying his interpretations of the oracles or messages from the gods are deliberately misleading. Sometimes the implication is that the interpretation of the oracle is correct, but the gods have deliberately made the oracle false. Most of the attacks of both kinds take place within the space of two hundred lines, from the middle of Act III, scene iv, to the middle of Act IV, scene i. Oedipe has little to say on the subject, except immediately after the High Priest has accused him of the murder of Laius. He calls the High Priest: " . . . d'un mensonge indigne, abominable auteur " (III, iv, 837), and charges:

Grâce à l'impunité, ta bouche sacrilège,
 Pour accuser ton roi d'un forfait odieux,
 Abuse insolemment du commerce des dieux. (III, iv, 808-10)

¹⁷Pomeau, p. 89.

This is no worse than the statement of Thésée in Corneille's play, quoted above. It is an instinctive reaction which the audience realises is unjust. The only other time that Oedipe mentions oracles in an offensive way is near the end of Act V, scene ii, where he accuses the gods of deceiving him: "par vos trompeurs oracles" (V,ii,1275). This is ironic because he is quickly approaching the point where he realises that the oracles were not false. It is interesting to note that Oedipe in this play first hears what his fate is to be not from an oracle or a drunkard but from the gods themselves. Apart from the one occasion mentioned above, Oedipe treats the High Priest and his messages with respect,¹⁸ and he refuses to accept the idea of Araspe that the priest might be corrupt.

Serait-il dans le temple un coeur assez perfide? . . .
Non. (II,v,599-600)

Oedipe, then, is not anti-clerical.

Philoctète is more interesting. When Voltaire revised his play for the 1738 edition he gave Philoctète two more speeches in Act III;¹⁹ both of them are strongly anti-clerical, and both refer to the place of the Church in the State. The second implies that he considers religion in almost Marxist terms as an opiate of the masses:

Et, dans son zèle aveugle, un peuple opiniâtre,
De ses liens sacrés imbécile idolâtre . . . (III,iv,863-4)

¹⁸In Act I, scene iii, for example.

¹⁹Oedipe, III,iv,801-4; III,v,857-68.

He had implied similar scorn previously in this act when, having listed all those who might have testified as to his good character,²⁰ he says disdainfully:

De vos dieux cependant interrogez l'organe:
 Nous apprendrons de lui si leur voix me condamne.
 Je n'ai pas besoin d'eux, et j'attends leur arrêt
 Par pitié pour ce peuple, et non par intérêt.
 (III,iii,747-50)

Philoctète throughout the play acts like a demi-god so this need not be taken to be an expression of Voltaire's attitude. It is, however, worthy of note that Voltaire never lost sight of the usefulness of the concept of a god who rewards and punishes to a ruler who wanted to control his people. Philoctète's attitude is more likely to be that of the Temple than Voltaire's own.

Jocaste is the character who makes most frequent reference to the falseness of oracles. This in itself is not surprising as she had reason to believe that the oracle concerning her first husband and her son had been false. Several of her attacks on oracles seem to have been inspired by the play of Sophocles, and at least one is closely copied from the Greek original.²¹ With one exception her remarks are not couched in strong terms and the attack is brief. The exception is in Act IV, scene 1, where she scorns the traditional Greek and Roman methods of consulting the auspices.²² This

²⁰All of them are, in fact, dead.

²¹Oedipe, IV,1,963-76. Sophocles, 11.707-25.

²²Oedipe, IV,1,940-52.

could not have offended the French audiences of the early eighteenth century, as the entrails of animals could not be confused with the sacraments of the Church. In any case, as Moland points out,²³ Du Ryer had expressed the same idea in similar terms in his Scévole of 1644. However, the last two lines of the speech are an attack on all priests:

Nos prêtres ne sont point ce qu'un vain peuple pense;
Notre crédulité fait toute leur science. (IV, i, 951-2)

In the Discours Préliminaire published with Alzire in 1736 Voltaire refers to these lines. He says: "On m'a traité, dans vingt libelles, d'homme sans religion: une des belles preuves qu'on en a apportées, c'est que, dans Oedipe, Jocaste dit ces vers."²⁴ He makes no attempt to deny that the lines are meant as an attack on priests, indeed the phrasing is such that he seems to be reiterating his statement rather than qualifying it. He does not say at what point these lines came to be quoted in evidence against him, whether it was from 1718 onwards or only after 1730. Out of context the lines do seem to constitute an intentional attack on the priesthood; but it must be remembered that events were to prove Jocaste wrong and the priests right. This seems to be another case where later generations, by picking a passage from its context, have read much more into the passage than the audiences for whom it was intended.

²³Moland, II, 93.

²⁴Ibid., III, 382.

More surprising and perhaps more significant is the attack on priests put into the mouth of Araspe in Act II, scene v.²⁵ There is nothing extraordinary about the attack itself because, as has been pointed out,²⁶ it corresponds quite closely to the speech of Thésée in Corneille's Oedipe quoted above. However, in Corneille's play the speech of Thésée was in an appropriate context; in Voltaire's play it is unprepared. It is possible that, finding himself short of material, Voltaire was impressed by the anti-clerical tone of Thésée's speech and decided to include his own version of it in his play. In this case it would confirm that Voltaire had definite anti-clerical views, but there is insufficient evidence for this view to be stated categorically.

The so-called anti-clerical tone of the play has been greatly exaggerated by critics who, prejudiced by Voltaire's later views, extract a few lines from their context to build up a specious case. The 1738 additions were anti-clerical; the play of 1718 contained nothing which cannot be explained by reference to the plot.

One final interesting point is the relationship Voltaire implied that the Church should have with the State. As the alterations in the 1738 edition refer to this relationship, it is worth while comparing the apparent views of the author in 1718 and 1738. On several occasions Oedipe speaks

²⁵Oedipe, II, v, 583-98.

²⁶See chapter on Characters.

to the High Priest in a manner indicating that the priesthood had to obey the king. The priest never speaks until ordered to by Oedipe or addressed directly by him. The only exception to this is in the last scene when Oedipe is not present. In Act III, scene iv, there is a progression from questions to pleas and eventually to a direct order, and at this point the High Priest speaks. Oedipe's reaction is to accuse the High Priest of corrupt practices and this he regards as an offence punishable by death. To Oedipe's accusation the High Priest replies with an admission that Oedipe as king had power of life and death over him: "Ma vie est en vos mains, vous en êtes le maître." (III, iv, 815) This is not imitated from Sophocles, whose Tiresias is confident that Oedipus cannot hurt him;²⁷ therefore it is reasonable to assume that Voltaire wished the priesthood to be under the direct control of the King of France as well. The appointment of bishops had always been a cause of contention between the Pope and the King of France, and Voltaire seems to have favoured the King. Voltaire was probably unconsciously describing the actual position in France throughout its history when he made Araspe say in the next scene:

Seigneur, vous avez vu ce qu'on ose attenter;
Un orage se forme, il le faut écarter.²⁸

The quarrels brought about by the promulgation of the Bill

²⁷ Sophocles, 11.376-7.

²⁸ Moland, II, 116.

Unigenitus were fresh in the spectators' minds in 1718. At this point it is probable that Voltaire disapproved of any defiance of the temporal power of the King by any members of the priesthood. In 1738 he uses stronger terms to say the same thing. There is the further implication that not only should the priesthood not attack the King but that under any circumstances it should support him, specifically against the people:

Un prêtre quel qu'il soit, quelque dieu qui l'inspire,
Doit prier pour ses rois, et non pas les maudire.
(III,iv,803-4)

Philoctète complains that on the contrary, priests often move their faithful flocks to attack the king.²⁹ This was true but there is no evidence that Voltaire was referring to any specific instance. The concept of an official church used by a ruler to propagate any view he might find politically expedient, is totalitarian and contrary to the belief in freedom of thought for which the philosopher fought. It is possible that Voltaire did not realise the natural results of his policy and certainly he believed that the common people were incapable of free thought. He did not see that to deny freedom to the majority was liable in an authoritarian state to diminish the freedom of the remainder. Voltaire had some reason to distrust the use made by the priesthood in France of its temporal and spiritual power, but he put forward no effective alternative which would not in the long

²⁹Oedipe, III,v,857-8.

run have produced worse results.

It can be seen that Oedipe, as it was originally performed in 1718, was not anti-clerical. Changes that Voltaire later made in the text, particularly those in the 1738 edition, made the play much more anti-clerical in tone. Too many commentators, by not distinguishing between the original text and that published in 1738, have ascribed to Voltaire ideas and opinions which he may not have had, and certainly did not express, when he wrote Oedipe.

VIII

SUCCESS

Voltaire received a reward from the Regent for Oedipe. Opinions differ as to the actual amount,¹ but it was substantial. The success of the play was extraordinary. Dangeau noted on November 18, 1718, that despite the prejudice against "Arouet", "[la pièce] a fort bien réussi et a été fort louée." On November 28, 1718, he stated that the duchesse de Berry went to see it at the Comédie Française; two days later when the same troupe acted it at the Palais Royal, there was a "monde prodigieux" at the performance, given in the presence of the duc d'Orléans and his mother. He noted that the duke saw it again on December 14 and that it was "fort applaudie" when acted before the young Louis XV on February 11, 1719. Oedipe was played thirty times from November 18 to January 21, then twice in March, twice in April, 1719, and eight times in August, 1720. During all this time the attendance remained so good that Voltaire continued to receive his share of the profits, amounting in all to 4445 fr., 17 s., more than any tragedy had previously earned for its author, so far as the records show. Nor had any other tragedy of the eighteenth century been played so

¹Lion, Les tragédies de Voltaire, p.22.
Desnoiresterres, I, 156.

often in the first two years of its existence.

Some credit for this must be given to the troupe, especially to Quinault-Dufresne, who played Oedipe, and to his brother, Maurice, who played Philoctète, and to La Desmares, who took the part of Jocaste, but the tragedy continued to be well received long after they had ceased to act, and La Motte was generous enough to express the opinion that it would be as popular when read as when acted. In approving the publication he wrote: "Le public à la représentation de cette pièce s'est promis un digne successeur de Corneille et de Racine: et je crois qu'à la lecture il ne rabattra rien de ses espérances."

The Mercure praised the tragedy when it was first performed, alluding to its great success and finding it "plus nette et moins chargée d'événemens" than Corneille's Oedipe.² Bolingbroke in a letter to the Comtesse d'Argental (on February 4, 1719), said: "Son mérite n'a pas attendu le nombre des années, et son coup d'essai passe pour un coup de maître."³ The Mercure of March 1719 (pp.104-23) criticised several points in the play but concluded by attributing to Voltaire a "génie riche et saillant" from which much might be expected, provided it was always regulated by "la droite raison". J-B. Rousseau wrote to Voltaire on March 25, 1719: "Je suis obligé d'avouer que le Français de vingt-quatre ans

²Mercure de France, Novembre. 1718, pp.165-6. Décembre, 1718, pp.137-8.

³Best., I, 98.

a triomphé en beaucoup d'endroits au Grec de quatre-vingts . . . Les anciens ont tous été de parfaits jansénistes . . . Vous avez très bien fait de représenter votre Oedipe exempt des défauts que Sophocle lui a donnés et . . . vous avez mieux marqué par là le néant des vertus humaines que ne l'ont peut-être fait tous les sermons que vous avez ouïs pendant ce carême . . . M^{sgnr.} le prince Eugène, qui attendait votre pièce avec une impatience extrême, l'a reçue avec le même plaisir et m'a fait l'honneur de m'en parler avec une estime dont je suis sûr que vous ne seriez pas moins flatté que de celle du public . . ." ⁴ So members of the thinking public were at an early date drawing conclusions from the philosophical ideas expressed in the play, and the play itself was appreciated at the highest level.

Brossette, writing to Rousseau on the same day finds in the play "malgré ses défauts, d'assez bons endroits, de grands mouvements, des vers fort bien tournés et des situations intéressantes. Mais ce n'est ni Corneille ^{in ni} Racine."⁵ The implication is that the play is not only different from, but inferior to those of Corneille and Racine. He goes on to quote a letter from a friend in Paris which stated: "Oedipe a enlevé d'emblée presque tous les suffrages." Rousseau in reply says of the play: "Je l'ai trouvée encore plus belle que je ne me l'étais figurée et . . . je ne

⁴ Ibid., I, 102-3.

⁵ Ibid., I, 105.

m'attendais pas à trouver si peu de fautes dans un ouvrage où Corneille lui-même a échoué . . . Elle a ses défauts mais elle en aurait peut-être d'autres plus considérables s'il avait voulu les éviter trop scrupuleusement."⁶ Brossette says again in June: "Le nouvel Oedipe de Mr. Arouet de Voltaire continue à faire du bruit . . . il faut qu'il y ait tout au moins une vingtaine de brochures pour ou contre cette nouvelle tragédie."⁷ Moland lists nineteen. As might be expected the contents of most of the pamphlets are full of exaggerations. The main criticisms seem to have been of plagiarism, bad rimes and the introduction of Philoctète. Voltaire in his Lettres sur "Oedipe" denies the charge of plagiarism,⁸ apologises for Philoctète and defends his rimes. He is said to have prepared by 1763 a version of the play in which Philoctète did not appear.⁹ This is possible, but it is difficult to see how the plot could be made to last the requisite time unless some new character such as Créon was brought in. Another sign of the play's celebrity is the appearance of a parody, first acted on April 17, 1719, by Dominique (Pierre-François Biancolelli). All allusions which might be considered contentious were omitted, but Philoctète

⁶Ibid., I, 106-7.

⁷Ibid., I, 115.

⁸Lion (p.19) claims that a cursory reading revealed over one hundred borrowings from various authors.

⁹Lancaster, French Tragedy 1715-1774, I, 56.

in particular, under the name of *Finebrette*, was strongly satirized. Voltaire never liked parodies of his plays but there is no record of his opposition to this one.

The tragedy long remained popular, ousting Corneille's Oedipe from the repertory of the Comédie Française. It remained there until 1852 and its record of 336 productions was unequalled by the first acted tragedy of any other French dramatist. Napoleon seems to have liked it, as Moland says it was performed in 1801 and again in 1807 in his presence: on both occasions Napoleon was entertaining foreign rulers, and on both occasions lines from the speeches of Philoctète were applied to the rulers in question.¹⁰ Napoleon was not a very perceptive critic, but the fact that Oedipe was the play he saw on these two important occasions is some measure of the esteem in which the play was held over eighty years after its composition. It is difficult to estimate to what extent the name of the author was responsible for the continued success of the play. As has been pointed out, the ideas in it are not new, and therefore novelty cannot be said to be a factor. Voltaire's reputation as a precursor of the Revolution was probably one reason for the play's popularity after 1789. Another reason is the character of Oedipe, an innocent man and an ideal king, crushed by superior power. Oedipe could be identified with Napoleon by his sympathisers, and his opponents could ponder on the fact that even a supreme ruler is shown to be subject to the wishes of the gods.

¹⁰Moland, II, 64, 78.

CONCLUSION

Critics who mention the Oedipe of Voltaire usually try to find in it support for views they already hold. They often neglect to note that on several occasions, notably in 1730 and 1738, Voltaire made changes of considerable importance to the play. Even the text of the original edition of 1719 was different from that of the play as staged, and Voltaire says of the play's faults: "J'en ai ôté autant qu'il en reste: chaque représentation de mon Oedipe était pour moi un examen sévère où je recueillais les suffrages et les censures du public, et j'étudiais son goût pour former le mien."¹ We shall probably never know the precise nature of the faults Voltaire corrected, but the edition of 1719 gave the play in what was probably its best form. The minor faults were, in general, eliminated, and in the Lettres sur "Oedipe" which accompanied the first edition, Voltaire confessed to most of the major faults. The later revisions emphasised certain religious and political ideas but the task they were supposed to accomplish, the integration of the character of Philoctète into the play, was impossible, and the additions never quite harmonize with the original.

Despite the apparent contradiction, Voltaire showed originality by treating a subject already treated in a play

¹Moland, II, 39.

of Corneille which was still in the repertory of the Comédie Française. The urge to rival Corneille and the desire to renew classical tragedy by showing that some of Corneille's work could be improved upon certainly influenced Voltaire in his choice of subject, but there is no way of accurately judging the weight of this influence. Corneille's play was concerned mainly with politics and love, and it bore little resemblance to Sophocles' play. Though Voltaire kept the love interest which Corneille had added to the legend, he was wise enough to confine it to the first three acts of his play. Furthermore his Jocaste and Oedipe, unlike Corneille's Dircé and Thésée, talk of their love as a thing of the past. To reconcile a love intrigue in the manner of Corneille with a simplicity and realism imitated from Sophocles proved to be a task too difficult for Voltaire, but his attempt was noble and original.

Voltaire's Oedipe was certainly better than that of Corneille, but equally certainly it lacked both the genius and the dramatic excellence of Sophocles' play. It does, however, show a technical proficiency truly remarkable in one so young. In this respect it can stand comparison with all but the very greatest of French classical tragedies. Unfortunately, with the exception of Jocaste in the second half of the play, the characters, especially Oedipe, never come to life; and the play lacks the indefinable quality which awakens an echo in the hearts or minds of people of

all periods and makes a play of eternal validity. French classical tragedy was moribund when Voltaire wrote Oedipe, but this play helped to keep the traditions alive a while longer. Voltaire wrote this play to achieve fame and his success must have exceeded his expectation. Under the circumstances, and despite the play's limitations, this success was entirely justified.

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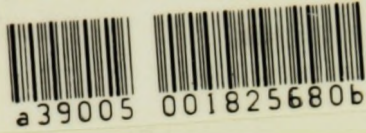
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