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Four-footed Weakness: Childhood and Neoteny in Oedipus Rex

Rodolfo Piskorski

Introduction

Sophocles' Oedipus Rex (c. 429 BC, henceforth OR) is famous for the several things it does not show: for example, the violence of self-blinding, murder and suicide; the oracles; and past events in Oedipus' life. Perhaps the most well-known of these unseen events is Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx. By the time Sophocles was writing OR, the Oedipus myth — including the Sphinx — had already been referenced in many classical works. Probably the oldest extant version of the full riddle is included as a scholiast's commentary to Euripides' Phoenician Women (c. 408 BC). In the commentary to his translation of OR, Thomas Gould translates the riddle thus:

There exists on land a thing with two feet and four feet with a single voice, that has three feet as well. It changes shape [phuēn], alone among the things that move on land or in the air or down through the sea. Yet during the periods when it walks supported by the largest number of feet, then is the speed in its limbs the feeblest of all.¹

The answer to the riddle is, classically, 'man', since 'he' crawls on all fours as a baby, walks on two feet as an adult and taps the ground with a walking stick in old age. Gould stresses the 'childish and frivolous' character of the riddle and credits Sophocles with the skill of transforming it into a questioning worthy of tragedy. I claim that the riddle offers a zoo-anthropological perspective by means of the comparison between the human and all other living beings. It creates a parallelism between the four-footed stage of the mysterious creature and 'the things that move on land', herpeta. Herpeton, according to the LSJ Greek-English

Lexicon, means ‘beast or animal which goes on all fours’, or a ‘creeping thing, reptile’.

Framed thus, the short narrative of a human’s life from four-footed to bipedal erect stature, culminating on the technical addition of the walking stick, seems to suggest the superiority over animality of a humanity literally rising above the other living beings. Today we would identify this account of a shift from quadrupedal to bipedal locomotion as a fable of biological evolution, with the walking stick representing the technological skill of an animal who no longer need rely solely on its own body for survival. Moreover, evolutionary scientists would highlight that the summarising of the evolution of a species into the life of one individual as it ages is an instance of the now old-fashioned theory of recapitulation. This notion maintained that stages in one individual’s development (be it embryonic, physiological, or even intellectual) retrace the steps previously undertaken on a macro level by the whole of its species. As Stephen Jay Gould puts it, it results from a comparison ‘between stages of ontogeny and a sequence of adult organisms’.² The riddle offers this seemingly recapitulationist approach in order to demonstrate the contrast between the fixity of animal life, predestined to follow instincts, and the human, who ‘alone changes shape’. It frames human free will, rationality and technics as a result of its unstable nature (as represented by its changing number of feet).

I argue that Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex is a comment on the riddle — especially on the riddle’s point about the difference between animal fixity and human freedom. By positioning its protagonist as especially attuned to the content of the riddle, the play can comment on the latter through Oedipus’ plot. The main point of the riddle is based on the shifting nature of human ontogeny, so that aging becomes a crucial aspect of the argument. Consequently, different meanings in the play of the various life stages, as well as the significance of birth, rearing, education, growth, etc., present a systematic response to the riddle’s point. Crucially, Oedipus’ own life stages will have a particularly vital role in this dramatic response. His role

in OR rejects the recapitulationist impulse of the riddle by insisting on a persistence of childhood that counters the neat recapitulation narrative. This preservation of infantile characteristics is called neoteny and was indeed one of the concepts in evolutionary biology that cemented the demise of recapitulationism.

The Oedipal Condition

The play is acutely concerned with children: where they come from, how to protect them, how they go on to become adults and what influences this becoming. The very first word of the play (after the interjection ō) is tekna, ‘children’, used by Oedipus to address the diverse group of supplicant citizens.³ Oedipus positions himself as the paternal figure protecting his subjects, but he is, more than anyone else in the play, marked as still a child. His name overtly connects him to the riddle, since it means ‘swollen foot’ (from oideō, ‘to swell’, and pous ‘foot’), as acknowledged in the play (1036). As a child, he was exposed to the elements by his parents in the hope he would be killed, which means he experienced first-hand the consequences of the feebleness ascribed by the riddle to the crawling infant. Oedipus does not remember that, but he carries on his feet the mark left by the pins that fastened his ankles together and led them to swell up. And, as Tiresias so darkly reveals in his prophecies, Oedipus will in his old age need a walking stick to compensate for his weakness and blindness. If ‘feet’ is the language used by the riddle to refer to the human condition, it is significant that Oedipus carries, on his feet, a token from his own original infantile helplessness. The riddle poses a question regarding the human condition, and if Oedipus is revealed to fit the terms of the riddle much more than ‘generic man’, then the ‘Oedipal condition’ is elevated to a universal human one. Moreover, it suggests a connexion between the Oedipal scenario and the topic of the riddle: the difference between anthropomorphising humans and stable animals.

What is pertinent to the terms of the riddle is that Oedipus, by means of his incestual marriage, occupies two generations at the same time. The incest underscores the fact that, even in his role as adult husband (the two-legged stage in the riddle), he still does not lose his child status (acutely/cruelly highlighted by his wife's role in his acquiring his scars as a 'four-footed' child). But Freud has shown that what the Oedipal conflict reveals is a refusal to come of age: the plot of OR literalises the infantile desire to eliminate the father and return to the bosom of the mother. At the moment when Oedipus ought to relinquish the maternal bond in order to join adult society and become a man in his father's image, he does so by literally taking his father's place and refusing to give up the mother. This is what psychoanalytic readings of the play have underscored since Freud: it reveals in a literal fashion that the woman a young man marries after relinquishing the mother by becoming an adult is, in a way, still the mother. This has strong neotenic implications.

Recapitulation and Neoteny

The concept of neoteny has had a layered history traversing biology, anthropology and the humanities. Julius Kollmann coined the term in 1884 to describe the retention of juvenile characteristics in salamanders, especially the axolotl. Louis Bolk was one of the first to describe the evolutionary phenomenon of neoteny in the human being, in 1926. His ideas, however racist, were taken up by social scientists such as Arnold Gehlen in Man: His Nature and Place in the World (1940) and Peter Berger in The Sacred Canopy (1967). Georges Lapassade mapped, in L'entrée dans la vie: Essai sur l'inachèvement de l'homme (1963), the consequences of the concept of neoteny for the human sciences.

This concept has had an even more productive discussion in the biological sciences, with Stephen Jay Gould offering a prominent bridge for neoteny to circulate between the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. Ontogeny and Phylogeny describes in detail

how the discovery of neoteny undermined the concept of recapitulation. Neoteny emerges as a strange temporality within recapitulation since it describes the fact that what would be, in one's ancestors, a transient stage before maturation actually becomes one's permanent state achieved after sexual maturity. According to Jay Gould, humans are highly neotenic due to the 'striking resemblances between juvenile pongids [great apes] and adult humans' and the subsequent 'obliteration of this similarity during pongid ontogeny' (OP, 353) (the ape's aging process, which, among other modifications, enlarges its jaw beyond human likeness). Human personal development — that is, ontogeny — recapitulates the history of hominid species, but only up to a certain point. Our juvenile characteristics (large rounded skulls, small jaws, big eyes, hairlessness, etc.), which we share with the young of our hominid ancestors, are retained into adulthood, so that the recapitulatory clock appears to be detained.

Lapassade positions neoteny against a backdrop of competing philosophical and anthropological theories of human nature and development. He shows that the apparent incompleteness [inachèvement] of the human new-born has attracted a range of explanations. One theory, popularised during the Enlightenment, maintained that infantile incompleteness represents only a provisional indeterminacy [indetermination]: in this perspective, 'the human infant "contains everything", but this "everything" is still enfolded within the germ; it is there, provisionally, in a virtual state; the future perfection of the adult lies in potentiality [en puissance] within the imperfection of birth.'⁴ This came to be known, both in embryology and other areas influenced by it, such as psychology, as preformationism. It held that the exclusively human capacity for perfectibility was in fact only an actualisation of possibilities dormant in the human 'seed'.

This botanical language of actualising dormant potentials runs throughout OR in the language in which it portrays human reproduction. That has three main consequences: a steady stream of analogies between agriculture (planting, seeding, etc.) and begetting; a

devaluation of the role of the mother, cast solely as a nurturing soil to the male seed; and strong suggestions that human identity is determined by the punctual moment of the original ‘seeding’ or ‘sprouting’. Hence, the Chorus laments the ills brought by the initial plague by means of parallel references to agriculture and childbirth: ‘What our glorious | earth gives birth to does not grow. Without a birth | from cries of labor do the women rise’ (171–3). And Oedipus curses any citizen who shelters or protects the (yet unknown) killer of Laius thus: ‘This prayer against all those who disobey: | the gods send out not harvest from their soil, | nor children from their wives’ (270–1). The character of Apollo in Aeschylus’ Eumenides (458 BC) spells out the consequences of this botanical conception of human reproduction:

The mother of what is called her child is not the parent, but the nurse [trophos] of the newly-sown embryo. The one who mounts is the parent, whereas she, as a stranger for a stranger, preserves the young plant, if the god does not harm it.⁵

This comes across in OR as the ‘standard’ Ancient Greek understanding of human generation, which has sizable consequences for Oedipus’ search for self-knowledge. As Lapassade demonstrates, this conception of human origins will require a complex approach to the nurturing demanded by infantile incompleteness, especially under the guise of education. The notion of perfectibility is employed to explain the emergence of (adult) human perfection from prematurity, but this perfectibility runs the risk of undermining the organicist theory of preformationism. Lapassade demonstrates that the two explanations for the excessive length of human childhood — as either necessary in order to ripen a behaviourally complex rational animal, or that which produces such a complexity in the first place — pivot around two different conceptions of perfectibility: ‘at times one highlights the potentiality of the equipment that must ripen and at times one accentuates education’ (EV, 24).

The possibility that education may fashion the development of the human haunts the botanical logic of preformationism and, consequently, OR as well. Despite the agricultural language of reproduction and the recurrent suggestions that one's origin is the source of one's nature, nurturing consistently lurks in the language of the play as a possible destabilising divergence from origins. Thus, in the very first line, Oedipus addresses his subjects not only as 'children' [tekna],⁶ but also as 'newest wards [trophē] of old Cadmus': those most recently under the (spiritual) shelter of the ancestral founder of the Thebes. In truth, the role of foster parent is more applicable to Oedipus, who at this point believes himself to be a foreigner, than Cadmus, ancestor of most Thebans. It is convenient here for Oedipus to blur the distinction between biological and adoptive fathers, but this difference will become his main source of anxiety. I argue that this anxiety stems from the challenge of rearing to the logic of the seed, which threatens the latter's reliance on perfectibility as mere actualisation. This challenge most often manifests in the play via the verb trophō (τρέφω), meaning 'to rear, to bring up', and other words derived from it (such as in the first line). As I discuss below, these words occur many times in the play but only towards the second half will they be employed to refer literally to a parent's act of bringing up a child, which demonstrates the dramatisation of a shift from concern with origins to an interest in nurturing.

The play's acknowledgement of the role of rearing relies on an understanding of Oedipus as resistant to the neat recapitulationist impulse of the riddle insofar as he is recognised as remaining an eternal child. This acceptance of the indefinite prolongation of childhood is, according to Lapassade, the argument which breaks the dilemmas of perfectibility. He credits Darwin with showing that 'the adult can be said to precede the child', in such a way that childhood does not have as its only role the preparation of the adult (EV, 24). This is the idea that neoteny develops. Neoteny can 'refer to a fact, for example the existence of amphibians which conserve their larval state and reproduce under that form. But

it can also designate Darwin's idea: that these juvenile forms, frozen in the path of evolution, would follow after an ancestral adult state.' (24). This idea in fact reworks the main point of the riddle: from the riddle's initial cross-species approach, it introduces an evolutionary perspective and concludes that the human animal comes to be by preserving what was, in a different animal species, only a temporary infantile state. As Lapassade puts it,

We can see the consequence of this discovery for a theory of evolution. If the neotene is an adolescent which has replaced the adult, then evolutionary progress is no longer the consequence of a continuous development of adult forms. On the contrary: a new species can emerge from an infancy which is preserved and which replaces maturity. In the history of the living, the child can follow the adult rather than precede it. (26)

However, Lapassade shows that the 'idea' of neoteny (as opposed to the 'fact') is especially significant because it reveals that humans inaugurate a new form of neoteny. We can identify that in OR in the way that Oedipus, as the paradigmatic human, preserves the plasticity commonly located, in the animal world, only in infancy. The changing number of feet represents the exclusively human ability to 'change shape' throughout life, but this ability is no other than the universal infantile capacity to learn, grow and acquire a nature, here prolonged for the entirety of a human life. In OR, Oedipus is continuously being compared to the riddle: he is the one whose very identity (i.e. his name) carries the marks of childhood vulnerability, whose adulthood consists in returning to the nurturing bosom of the mother, and whose old age is set to echo his own (and the riddle's) infantile weakness of the limbs.⁷ According to Lapassade,

Saying that the human is neotenic is pointing out that it conserves the plasticity of the embryo and the child, as well as their fragility. (...) In that logic, the human species, insofar as it is primarily a species of animal, displays not only this peculiar infantile morphology, which is common to all neotenes, but also the open indeterminacy of a being forever marked by an originary incompleteness. With the human, neoteny thus acquires a new sense. (...) If the course of human life is seen from the perspective of neoteny, prematuration is not only a characteristic of the human's birth and beginnings; rather, it concerns the entire life of a being who will never reach the adult state from which it was at one point removed. (29–30)

He reminds us, however, that even after Darwin, many biologists and anthropologists continued to defend the recapitulationist theory that human childhood repeated in a micro scale the evolution of the species, concluding on a completed state — the adult. It is relevant to us that one of those thinkers was Freud, who maintained that the infantile Oedipus complex was a recapitulation of an ancient process undertaken at the level of species, namely the events narrated in Totem and Taboo. Lapassade finds this curious, as recapitulation goes 'against the spirit of [Freud's] discovery' (27): the persistence of infantile psychosexual structures into adulthood characterises the human as perpetually lacking — nothing like the fully realised human animal suggested by a childhood able to enact the whole of human evolution.

Animal Perfection and the Adamo-Promethean Tradition

In that respect, Lacan differs from Freud by insisting on that perpetual lack as the foundation of the properly human relation with the Symbolic. Lacan starts his Seminars I and II with the

argument that it is neoteny that disturbs the imaginary function in humans and creates the characteristically non-animalistic structure of human desire. This maladapted functioning of desire, Lacan argues, is what ultimately leads the human into the realm of the Symbolic. Derrida analyses this logic and maintains that Lacan follows an ‘Adamo-Promethean tradition’ which views ‘man as defect of premature animal, as yet insufficiently determined’.⁸ For Lacan, ‘the entry of the subject into the human order of the law presupposes this passive finitude, this infirmity, this defect that the animal does not suffer from. (...) What the animal lacks is precisely the lack in virtue of which man is subject to the signifier.’ (BS, 125). It is upon this very lack — this ‘generic prematurity of birth’, i.e. neoteny — that a human exceptionalism and superiority is formulated over against animals. For Lacan, this lack is mythologised by Adam’s original sin, or by Freud’s establishment of the Oedipus story as a myth, but experienced as real in the castration complex (Lacan, cited in BS, 133, 135).

However, as Derrida and others underscore, the acceptance of a fundamental lack in the human (derived either from mytho-theological events or from neoteny) in no way breaks free from the traditional anthropocentric gesture that divides humans essentially from animals.⁹ What Derrida calls the Adamo-Promethean tradition in fact allows the human to see itself as unshackled from the ‘laws’ of embodiment and free to shape itself and the world by means of the link with the divine required by its lack. Humans lack the animal’s perfect readiness for the world and therefore must supplement it with language, technology, religion, societies and anything else that places humans over other living beings.

The Prometheus myth is extremely relevant for Ancient Greek tragic thought, as argued by Bernard Stiegler in the first volume of Technics and Time. Plato’s Protagoras recounts the myth of creation according to which the gods fashioned men and animals out of elements and then ‘they ordered Prometheus and Epimetheus to equip them, and to distribute to them severally their proper qualities’. The two brothers’ names mean, respectively,

foresight and hindsight. Epimetheus, as his name lays bare, was unable to work with foresight and so did not plan ahead of distributing nature's gifts that would compensate the creatures for their nakedness. His brother comes to inspect and realises that humans were left with no qualities and attempts to come up with a solution: he steals the 'mechanical arts' from Hephaestus and Athena, and the fire necessary to use them, for the humans. Thus, animal characteristics are furnished by Nature, whereas humans are compensated in relation to animals. But as they do not live in the polis yet, they are simply a match to the animals. In an attempt to stave off animal threat, humans gather in cities for protection, but cannot co-exist peacefully as they are bereft of political abilities. Zeus finally grants humanity political wisdom so that humans shall not destroy each other while living together in cities.¹⁰

According to Stiegler, this myth has direct consequences for the genre of tragedy. As he puts it, 'the tragic is still experienced in terms of (the astonishment at the fact that there is) technicity',¹¹ that is, the supplementation necessary for the creatures that humans are: unfurnished by Epimetheus with natural, stabilising properties like animals and not immortal and unchanging like the gods. Because the human will never truly be an 'adult', since it will never have a complete nature like an animal with specific characteristics, it will have a malleable identity that will need to be reared by various influences. It is on the nature of these influences that much of the conflict of OR pivots. Oedipus wishes to discover his real identity by revealing his origin, but his helpless exposed prematurity will require a nurturing that will mould this identity. As Stiegler puts it,

The qualities of animals make up a sort of nature, in any case a positive gift of the gods: a predestination. The gift made to humanity is not positive: it is there to compensate. Humanity is without qualities, without predestination: it must invent, realize, produce qualities. (TT, 193)

In Greek tragedy, this lack of predestination is experienced only through the cracks of the theory of preformationism and even then only ambiguously, as is usually the tension between nature and nurture. This lack allows for human freedom and the self-reliant sovereignty of which Oedipus is so proud but threatens characters with the prospect of a meaningless life and the charge of impiety (which is the case of Jocasta, who defends that lives are ruled by chance). It also allows for ongoing interference both from the gods and other mortals, undermining the influence of origins. On the other hand, the absence of biological predestination is often balanced by the idea of divine fate (represented in the play especially by the oracles), but fate has the power of annulling any notion of human free will, ‘animalising’ the characters and neutralising audience identification. Much of the tragedy of OR is predicated on the recognition that both human sovereignty and the stability of origins are undermined by a certain ontological emptiness, which allows for interference from others (mortals and immortals) during life. Throughout OR, Oedipus learns what the riddle leaves only implicit: that the four-footed stage of the human, because of its feebleness, cannot progress to the adult two-footed stage without outside help. He finds that, even in his maturity, he was affected by the influences he received as a small child (from Laius and Jocasta, the two shepherds and Polybus and Merope), influences that were beyond the power of both his natural origin and his own sovereign free will.

The Supplement of Origin

In order to defend against the traditional, Adamo-Promethean implications of neoteny, it is necessary to rely on a deconstructive vigilance. It is well known that Derrida proposed his ‘quasi-transcendentals’ — such as the supplement — as a strategy to intervene in classical metaphysical dichotomies without having to ‘choose’ one of the sides. If deconstruction does

contain a moment of overturning of dichotomies, it ought to be followed by a gesture of displacement. It is relevant for us that much of Derrida's elaboration of supplementarity in Of Grammatology is carried out in relation to Rousseau's writings on childhood and education. He reveals the extent to which this discussion is related to neoteny when he explicates Rousseau's questioning thus:

Childhood is the first manifestation of the deficiency which, in nature, calls for supplementation [suppléance]. Pedagogy illuminates perhaps more crudely the paradoxes of the supplement. How is a natural weakness possible? How can nature ask for forces that it does not furnish? How is a child possible in general?¹²

As Derrida demonstrates in detail in OG, it is this aporia regarding the concepts of nature and culture, triggered by neoteny, that leads Rousseau, despite himself, to theorise supplementarity. Both Rousseau and the traditional botanical language of Sophocles are interested in locating and being true to an originary human nature which is not the same as animal nature. However, culture cannot be employed here to differentiate between the two, since, in this preformationist logic,¹³ cultural supplementation always carries the threat of a corruption of originary nature. For Rousseau, education will have to compensate for childhood's 'natural weakness', but only to the extent that it can restore what ought to have been an originary human nature. As in Lapassade, the necessarily aporetic conception of education required by perfectibility is radically changed by the concept of neoteny. Therefore, if childhood is the manifestation of supplementarity, and if childhood, for the human, never in fact ends, supplementation itself becomes the true 'origin' of the human. Perpetual childhood means that the 'proper' of the human is change (which was in fact already suggested by the riddle), but this proper cannot be a 'property' of the human.

Quasi-transcendental supplementarity is necessary to avert a reinforcement of classical metaphysical assumptions (such as the Adamo-Promethean tradition), a possibility broached by the concept of neoteny. Neoteny is interesting only insofar as it resists these simple oppositions; it cannot rest on the moment of inversion. Ascribing, via neoteny, a lack to human beings as opposed to animal perfection amounts to nothing but the mirror image of traditional anthropocentrism predicated upon animal poverty. Regardless of the value judgements attached to perfection and poverty in these models, the structure remains the same. Deconstruction allows us to take the next step and view neoteny as the originary articulation between animality and humanity which, by means of supplementarity, creates them.

Feminine begetting

In OR, the notion of neoteny and the nurturing it requires is explored both by the plot (Oedipus uncovers the true meaning of his name) and by the language: instances of (masculine) begetting and reproduction — especially as expressed by the verb phuō¹⁴ and its derivatives — become metaphorical at key points, whereas occurrences of trephō trace the get more literal. One of the most crucial instances of the reconfiguration of phuō occurs during Oedipus' argument with Tiresias, as the latter will use his precise wording to indicate the truth of Oedipus' identity, even beyond the apparent bald statements in his prophecies. His declarations not only state Oedipus' identity as dependent on his origin, but also acknowledge the role of rearing for who he is and for the crimes he has committed. His careful language can reconfigure the meaning of phuō to accept the input of nurturing over time in human identity.

After being insulted by Oedipus, Tiresias retorts: 'Stupid I seem to you, yet to your parents | who begot you [goneusi hoi s' ephusan] I seemed quite shrewd' (435–6, translation

modified). The wordy reference to Oedipus' biological parents appears to redundantly combine the plural noun for begetter and a descriptor with phuō. Tiresias' overdetermined expression seems initially to be an continuation of the concern in OR with generation, but actually hides something more profound: it points to the fact that there are different kinds of parents and that humans are 'generated' not only by means of (usually masculine) seeds, but also by means of the ongoing process of rearing.

Oedipus jumps at this strange phrasing: 'Who? Wait! Who is the one who begot me [ekphuei]?' (437, modified). Tiresias then appears to cruelly turn Oedipus' obsession with biological origins by echoing his verb with a different meaning: 'This day will beget you [phusei], and ruin you too' (438, modified). The verb phuō is rarely associated with the mother; as Finglass points out, motherhood has its own verb, tiktō.¹⁵ However, it is clear that line 438 pivots the verb toward the feminine: not only because the noun 'day' is feminine but also because a day, unfolding over a length of time, recalls the process of maternal gestation, as opposed to punctual paternal insemination. In his enigmatic language, Tiresias is saying that what generates (phuō) the human is not only the originary point of insemination or birth but also continuous nurturing, here invoked by the Greek figure of the mother, associated only with gestation. This prophetic line works metatextually by promising a narrative shift (over the course of the one day in which the play is set) from concerns with begetting towards an interest in rearing, an investigation into which will be necessary for Oedipus to uncover his identity. He shows the influence of Tiresias' logic when he celebrates his status as a foundling:

I (...) count myself the child of Chance,

the giver of good. (...)

She is my mother, [pephuka mētros],¹⁶ and the months my brothers

who first marked out my lowness, then my greatness.

I shall not prove untrue to such a nature [ekphus]

by giving up the search for my own birth [genos]. (1080–5)

This formulation goes even further than the characterisation of ‘day’ as feminine: it literally names the mother, and here the maternal figure is, in a way, nurture itself. The framing of Chance as the giver of good, dispensing lowness and greatness, suggests the ongoing guidance of a parent over time. Oedipus thinks that the gods have a role in how Chance dispenses luck, but even divine guidance undermines the idea of a single origin as suggested by phuō. As Finglass points out, the last lines present a circular argument: knowledge of his parentage is said to lead him into searching for his parentage. But the lines are also paradoxical: it’s impossible for Oedipus to betray the changing tides of Chance (his natural origin) by altering it, since it’s in the nature of these changes to welcome alteration.

Masculine rearing and husteron proteron (Nachträglichkeit)

The narrative shift foreshadowed by Tiresias starts around line 726, when Oedipus recognises in Jocasta’s account the place where Laius was killed. Crucially, this is also the point when Oedipus’ exposure as a child is first mentioned. Now that Oedipus accepts that he may have killed Laius (who at this point he still believes a stranger), he laments that he has cursed himself and will not only need to leave Thebes, but also to avoid Corinth all his life, as he still fears the original oracle: ‘[I may not] set foot in my homeland, or else be yoked | in marriage to my mother, and kill my father, | Polybus, who raised me and gave me birth’ (825–7). The last line is ‘Polubon, hos exethrepse kaxephuse me’, using the verbs ek-trephō and ek-phuō. This is the first occurrence of trephō literally meaning parental rearing. It is relevant that, after the idea of maternal begetting, the play offers the image of paternal nurturing, entangled with — albeit separate from — generating. Interestingly, the order of the terms is the inverse of the logical order of events. This classical rhetorical device is called husteron proteron (‘later

earlier’), in which, according to some scholars, the most important element of the sequence is fronted to emphasise it, despite logically occurring later.¹⁷ For Finglass, the order suggests, with a deal of tragic irony, that rearing always implies begetting, which strengthens the role of rearing.

The other instance of husteron proteron echoes this line in form and meaning, but also the feminine transformations of phuō by both Tiresias and Oedipus: the chorus is similarly excited with the idea of Oedipus as the child of Chance and sings an ode to Cithaeron, the mountain where he was exposed: ‘you shall not, Cithaeron, (...) | fail to hear us celebrate you as the countryman | of Oedipus, his nurse [trophon] and mother [mater]’ (1089–91). This husteron proteron similarly inverts birth and rearing and reinforces Oedipus’ neotenic need of nurturing when exposed. The rhetorical device mirrors both the retroactive structure of the play itself and of the content of its discoveries: Oedipus learns about his many foster parents before his biological ones, and the dreadful coincidences that happened during his time as a nursling are retroactively projected into an ‘evil’ origin. This nachträglich movement of the play is fundamental to the meanings it produces,¹⁸ and it is not an accident that the role this movement plays in the constitution of neoteny mirrors the temporality of supplementarity as described by Derrida.

This shared après-coup temporality of neoteny and the supplement highlights the deconstructive impulse of the former and the neotenic aspects of supplementarity in the human. Theorising neoteny in a deconstructive framework allows us to engage with posthumanist critiques of the human/animal divide, locating the lack of ‘propers’ of the human more precisely. Ultimately, neoteny reveals that the tensions that animate metaphysics (such as nature and culture) must be addressed from the starting point of a human being who is essentially disappropriated and that only in that supplementary space can the work of difference (between humans and animals) enact its play.

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- ¹ Sophocles, Oedipus the King, translated with commentary by Thomas Gould (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 19.
- ² Stephen Jay Gould, Ontogeny and Phylogeny (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1977), 13, hereinafter abbreviated OP.
- ³ All English citations from the play are from Thomas Gould's translation. Each citation is followed by the line number(s) from the original Greek text. References to the original Greek (and transliterations) are from Oedipus the King, in Sophocles, Vol. 1, translated by Francis Storr. (London: William Heinemann, 1912).
- ⁴ Georges Lapassade, L'entrée dans la vie: essai sur l'inachèvement de l'homme (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963), 20. All translations of Lapassade are my own. Hereinafter abbreviated EV.
- ⁵ Aeschylus, Eumenides, translated by Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1926), ll. 658–61.
- ⁶ Teknon is derived from the verb titkō, which, when used in reference to a father, means 'to beget, to engender', whereas in maternal contexts, it means 'to give birth'. This reinforces the masculinist logic of the agricultural model of reproduction.
- ⁷ OR often utilises foot imagery, especially to describe humanity as opposed to gods (865–82).
- ⁸ Jacques Derrida, The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), 124, 129; hereinafter abbreviated BS.
- ⁹ Derrida makes sure that his own writings on the trace do not restate these metaphysical assumptions mostly by means of his discourse on the supplement, which I discuss in more detail below.
- ¹⁰ Plato, Protagoras, in Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 3, translated by W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 320d–322c.
- ¹¹ Bernard Stiegler, Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus, translated by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 185; hereinafter abbreviated TT.
- ¹² Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, Fortieth Anniversary Edition, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2016), 159; hereafter abbreviated OG. Interpolation is mine.
- ¹³ Lapassade aligns Rousseau with other Enlightenment philosophers who considered the actualisation of a dormant human nature the only true role of childhood rearing.
- ¹⁴ Meaning 'bring forth, produce, put forth; beget, engender; put forth shoots; grow, wax, spring up or forth, esp. of the vegetable world; to be formed or disposed by nature to do so and so'. It is related to words such as 'nature, origin' (phusis) and 'plant' (phuton).

¹⁵ Sophocles, Oedipus the King, edited by P J Finglass (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2018), 309.

¹⁶ ‘The mother from which I originated’.

¹⁷ This line has attracted considerable scholar attention: manuscripts and editors do not agree regarding the correct order of the two verbs, and scholars diverge regarding which position in the husteron proteron is more emphatic.

¹⁸ This can be seen in the importance of Nachträglichkeit for the Oedipus complex in Freud and is explored narratologically in OR by Jonathan Culler in The Pursuit of Signs (London: Routledge, 1981), 188–208.