

# SOPHOCLES



A presentation by Kevin Batton  
October 17, 2022

# OEDIPUS



# ΟΙ ΔΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ

**(likely original title)**





**ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ  
ΤΥΡΑΝΝΟΣ**

**(ancient manuscript title, to distinguish it from *Oedipus at Colonus*)**

A dark silhouette of a bull's head with curved horns, facing right, set against a dark grey background. The silhouette is positioned behind the text.

**OEDIPUS**

**TYRANNINUS**





**OEDIPUS**

**REX**



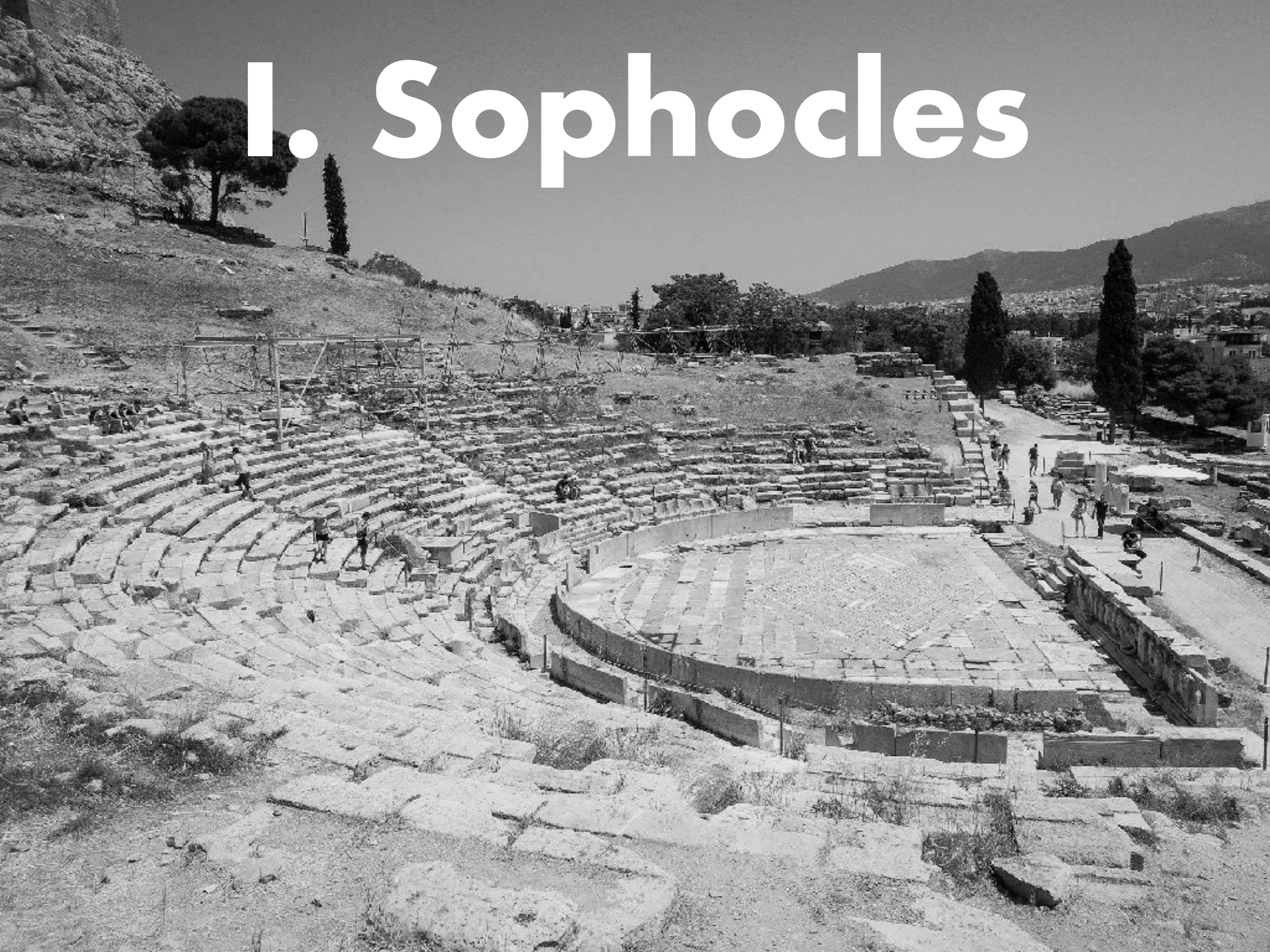
**OEDIPUS**

**THE**

**KING**

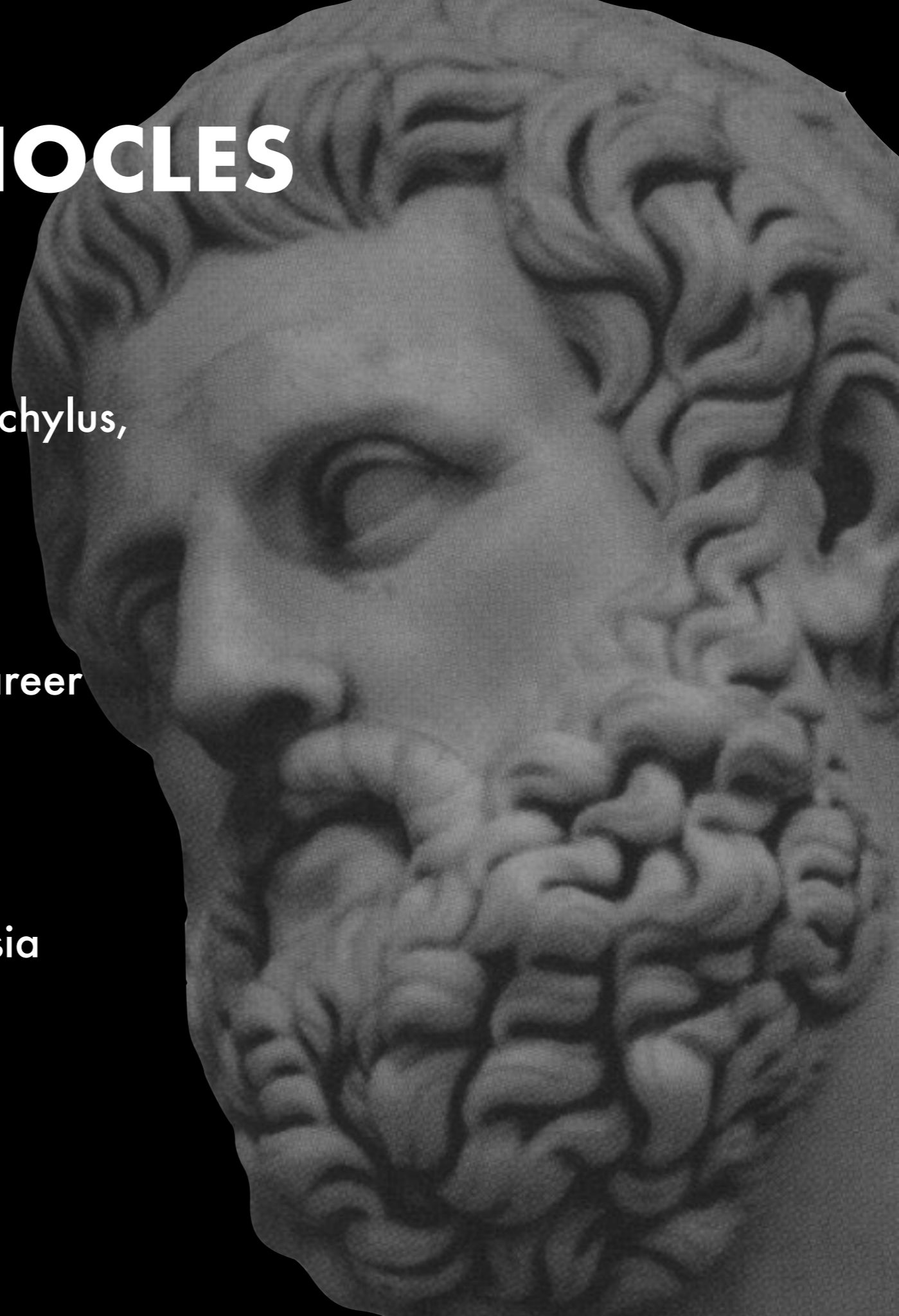


# I. Sophocles



# SOPHOCLES

- Born c. 495 BCE in the deme Colonus
  - (about 25 years younger than Aeschylus, 15 years older than Euripides)
- Over 120 plays produced across a career that spanned more than 60 years
- At least 18 victories at the City Dionysia
  - Aeschylus won 13, Euripides 4





# SOPHOCLES' CAREER



c. 468 BCE

First competition and first victory (over Aeschylus!)

???

*Ajax*

???

*Trachiniae*

442 BCE (?)

*Antigone*

???

*Oedipus Tyrannus* (second prize!)

???

*Electra*

409 BCE

*Philoctetes*

406/5 BCE

Death of Sophocles (months after death of Euripides)

401 BCE

*Oedipus at Colonus*

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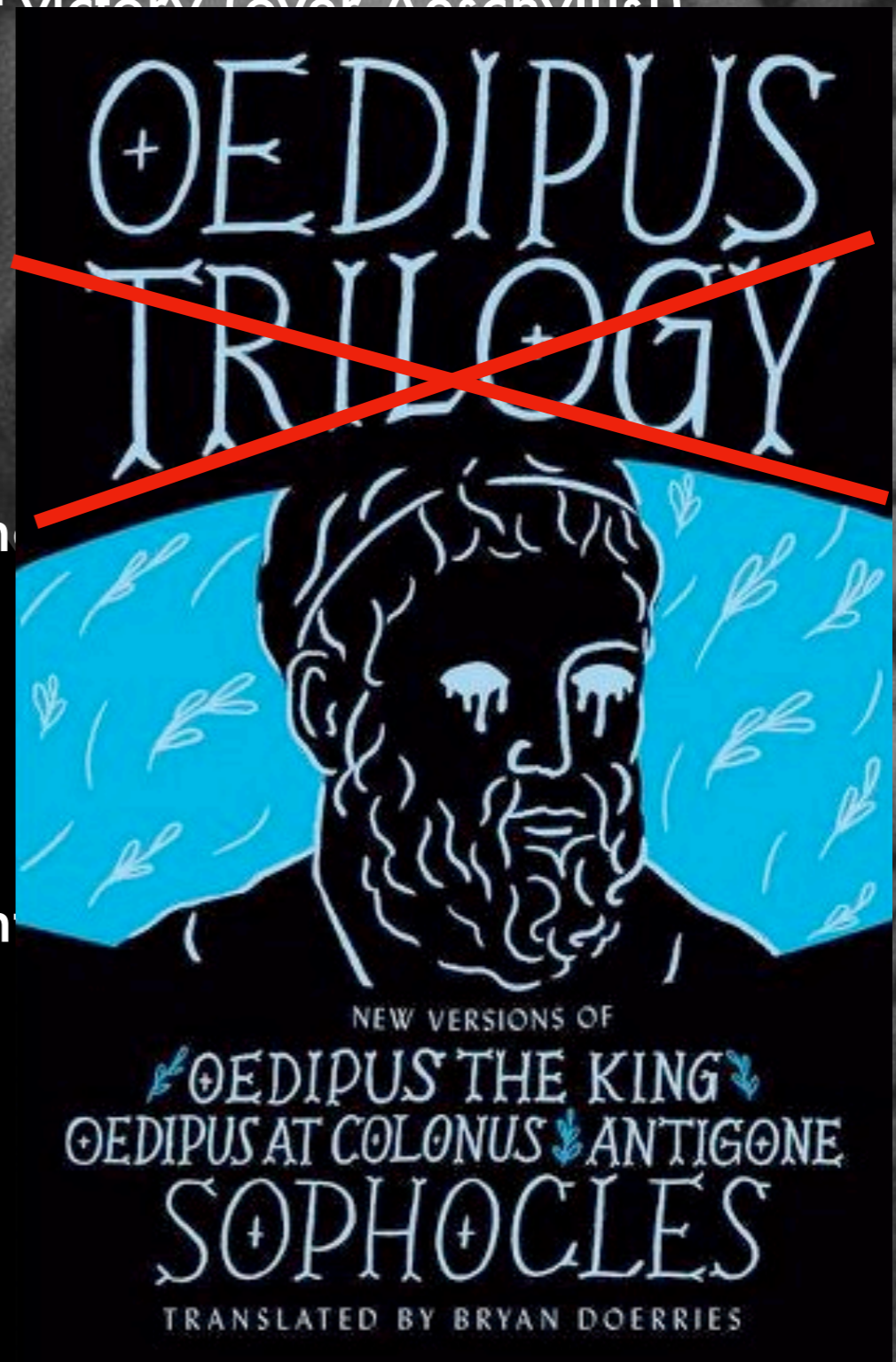
??? *Oedipus Tyrannus* (second)

??? *Electra*

409 BCE *Philoctetes*

406/5 BCE Death of Sophocles (mon)

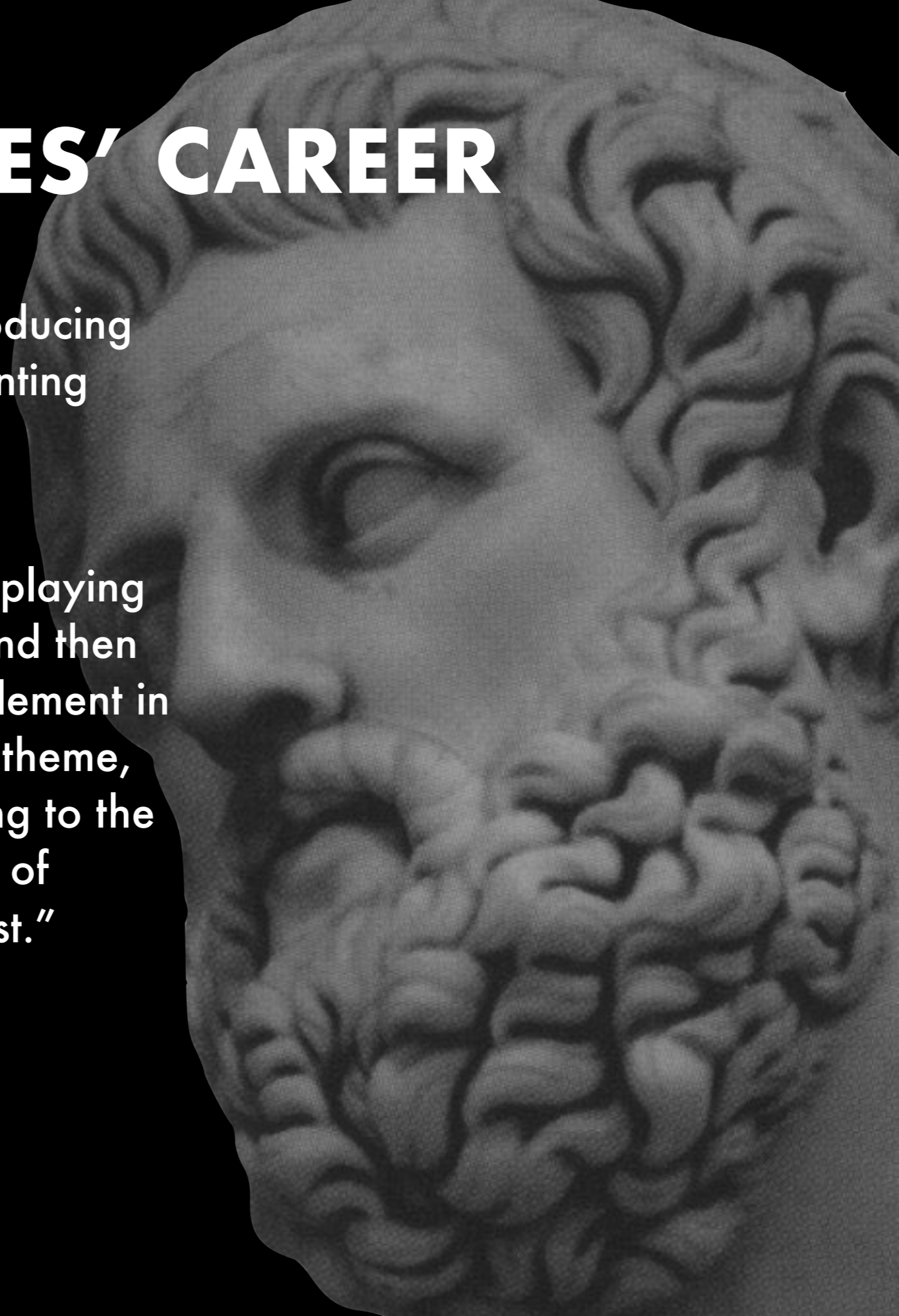
401 BCE *Oedipus at Colonus*



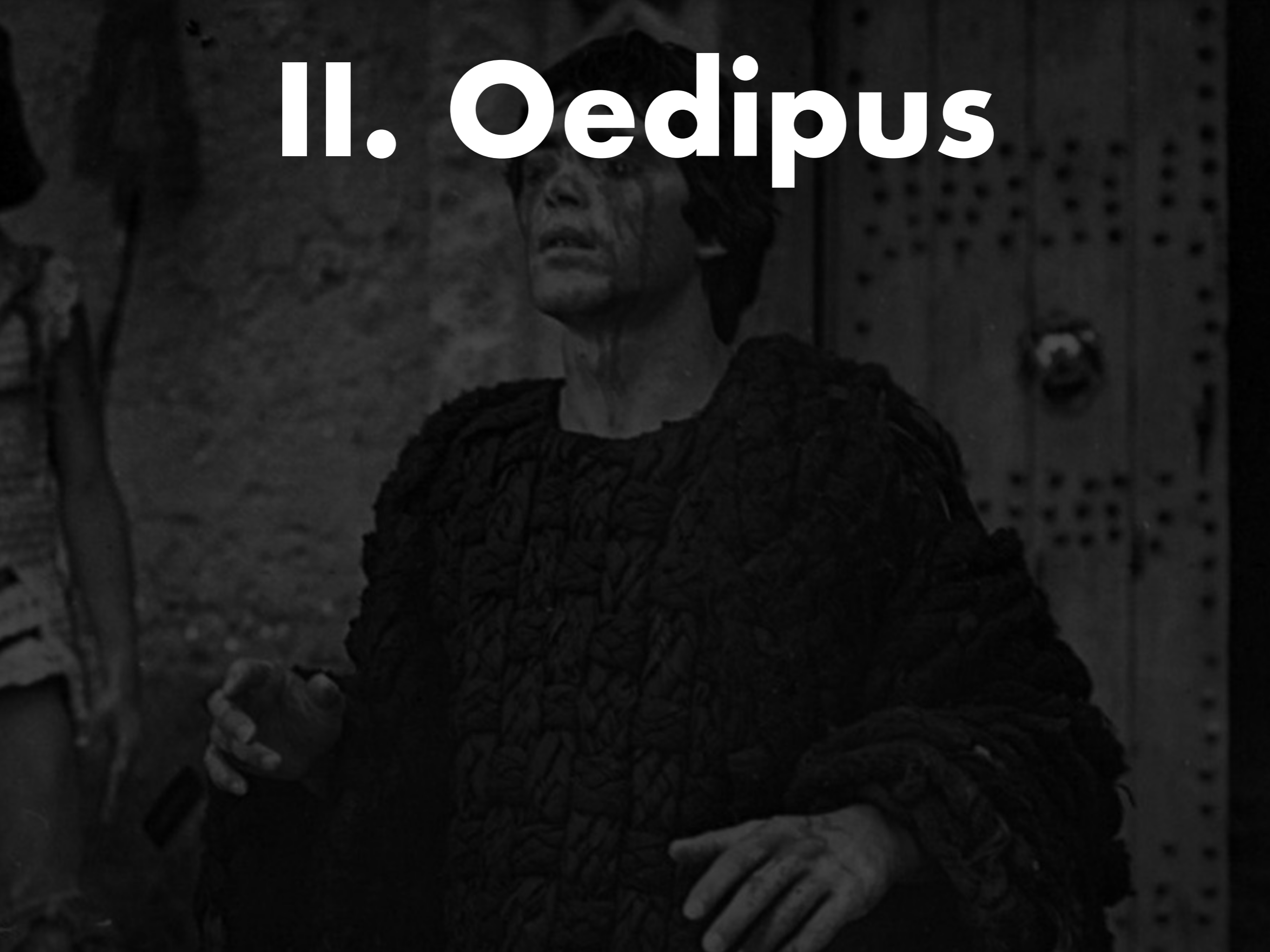


# SOPHOCLES' CAREER

- Credited by Aristotle with first introducing the third actor as well as scene painting
- “Having got through the stages of playing with Aeschylean grandiloquence and then with the displeasing and artificial element in my own manner of elaborating my theme, now in the third stage I am changing to the kind of style that is most expressive of character (*ēthikōtaton*) and the best.”  
(Plutarch, *Moralia* 79B)



# II. Oedipus







ADRIATIC SEA

NORTH MACEDONIA

ITALY

ALBANIA

GREECE

AEGEAN SEA

TURKEY

Thebes

Athens

IONIAN SEA

SEA OF CRETE

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

0 100 200 mi

0 150 300 km

OCEANOS : OEDIPUS

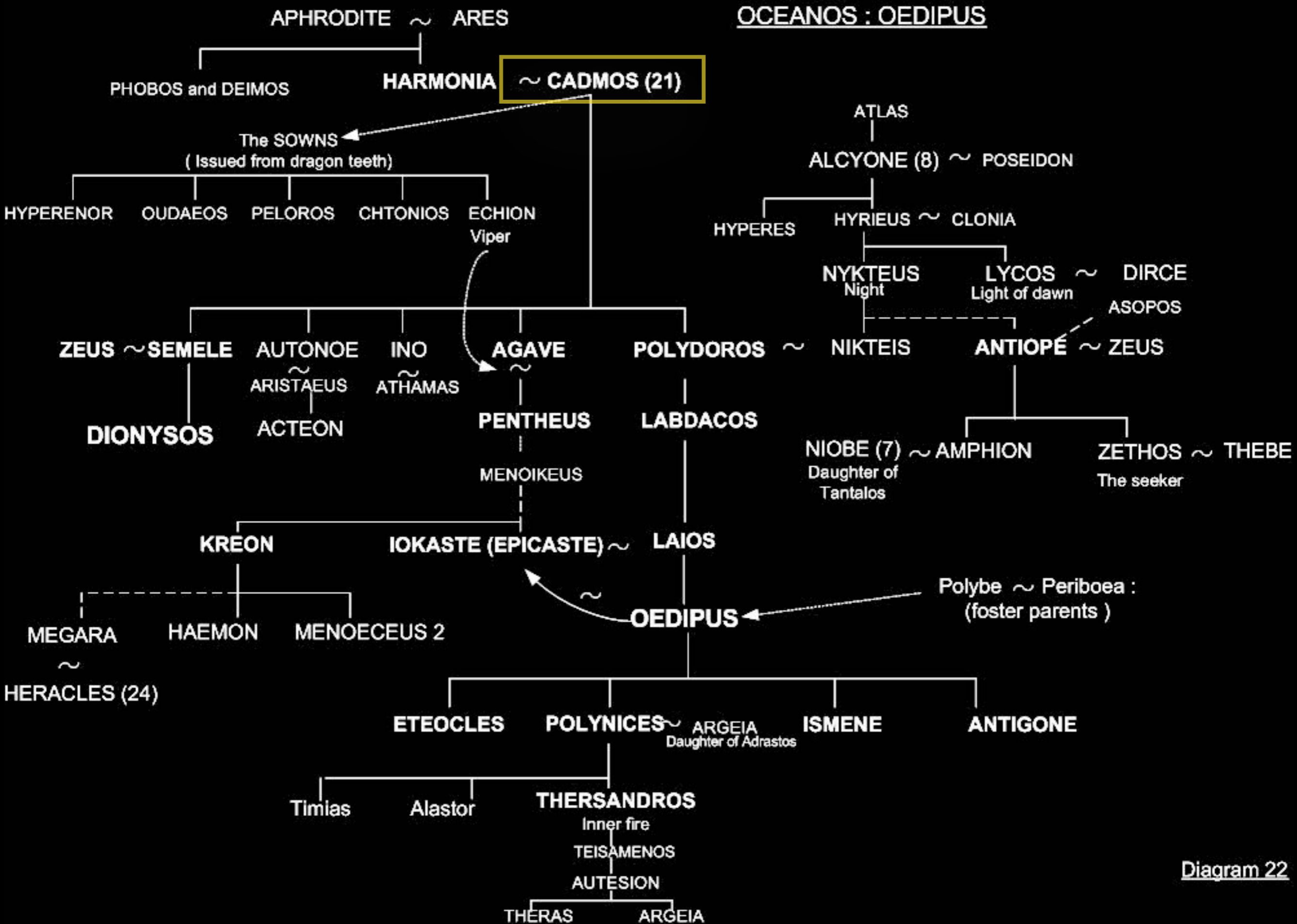


Diagram 22





Calyx-krater, ca. 450s BCE. Metropolitan Museum.



OCEANOS : OEDIPUS

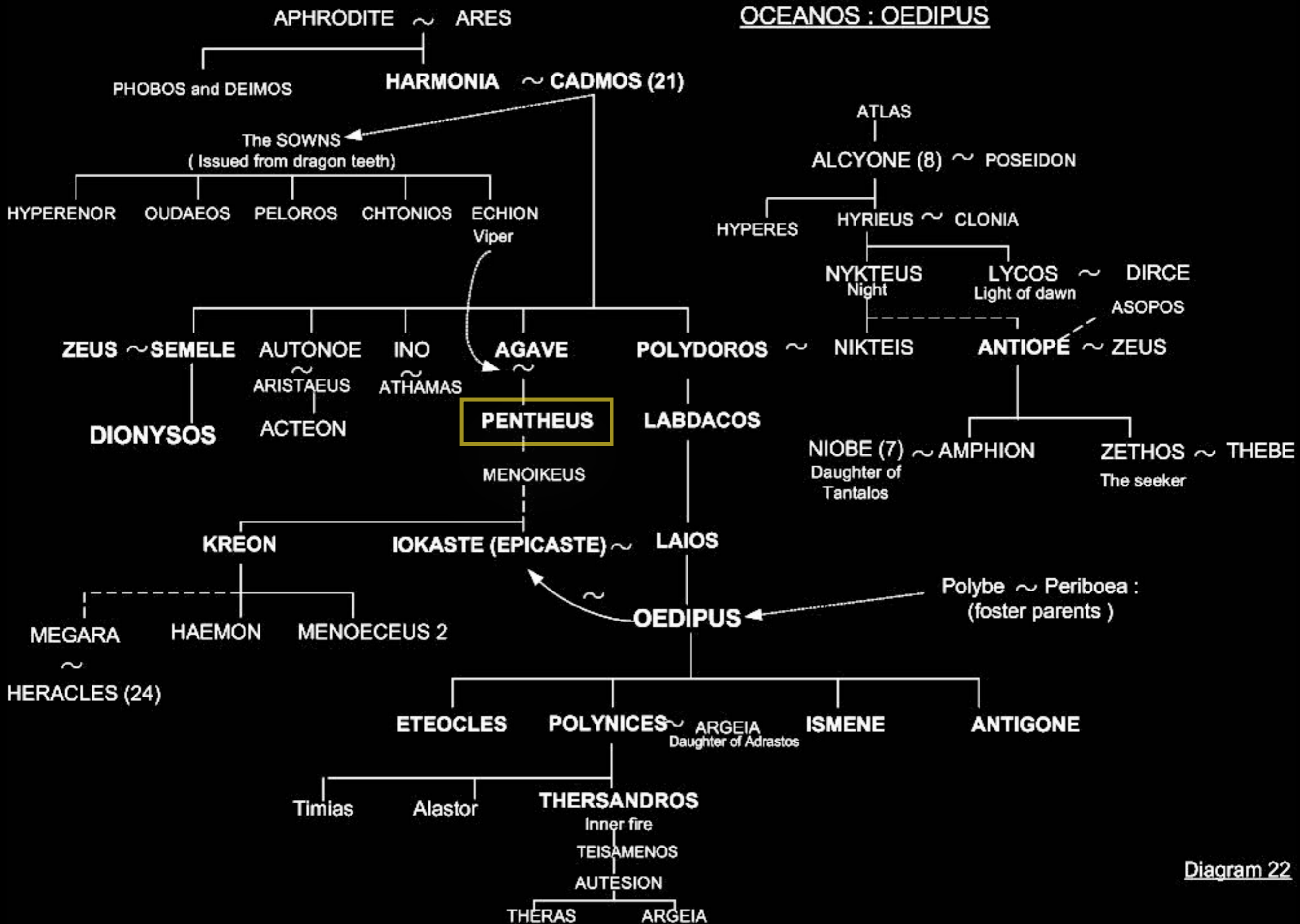


Diagram 22





Kylix, ca. 480s BCE. Kimbell Art Museum.



OCEANOS : OEDIPUS

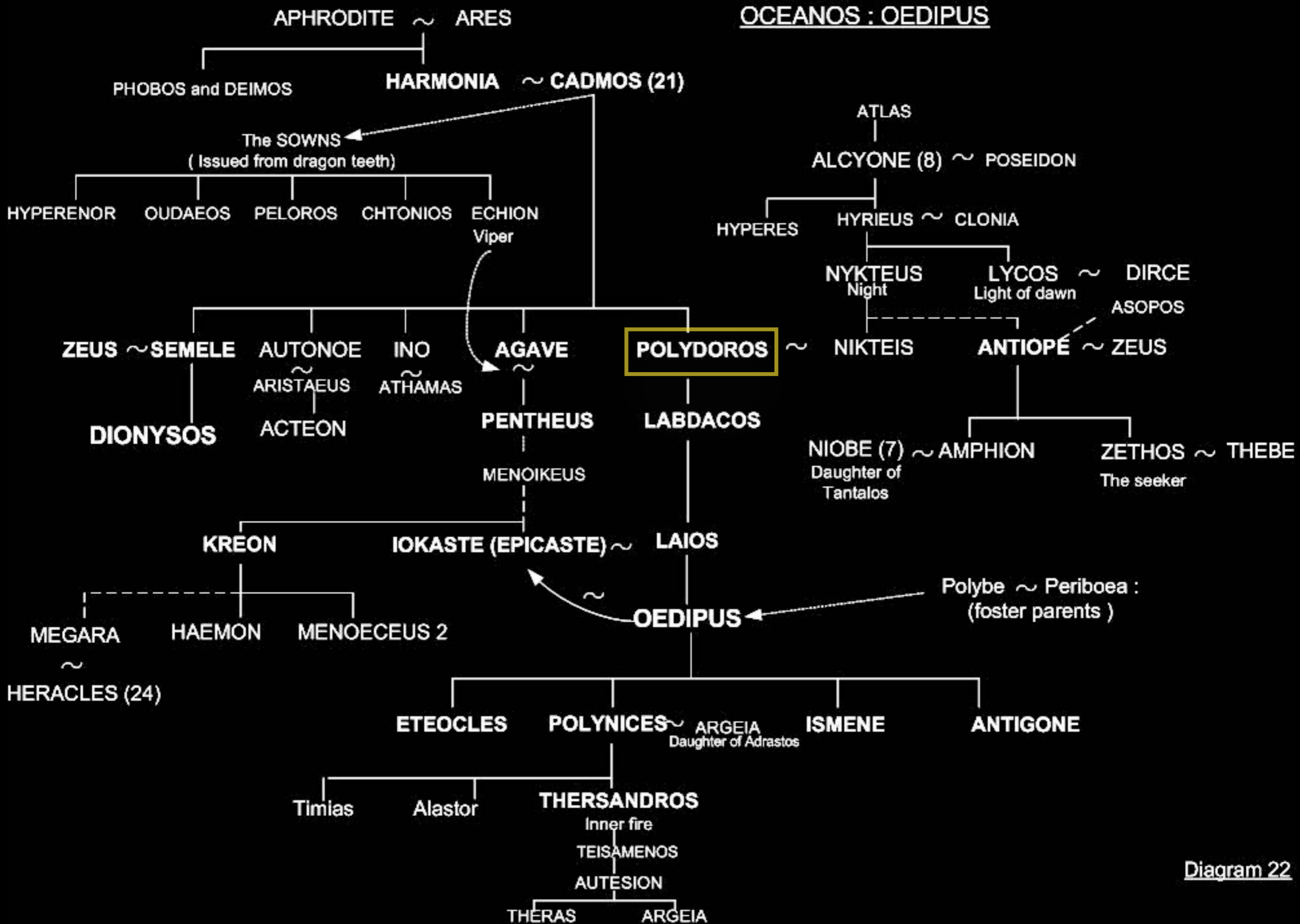


Diagram 22



OCEANOS : OEDIPUS

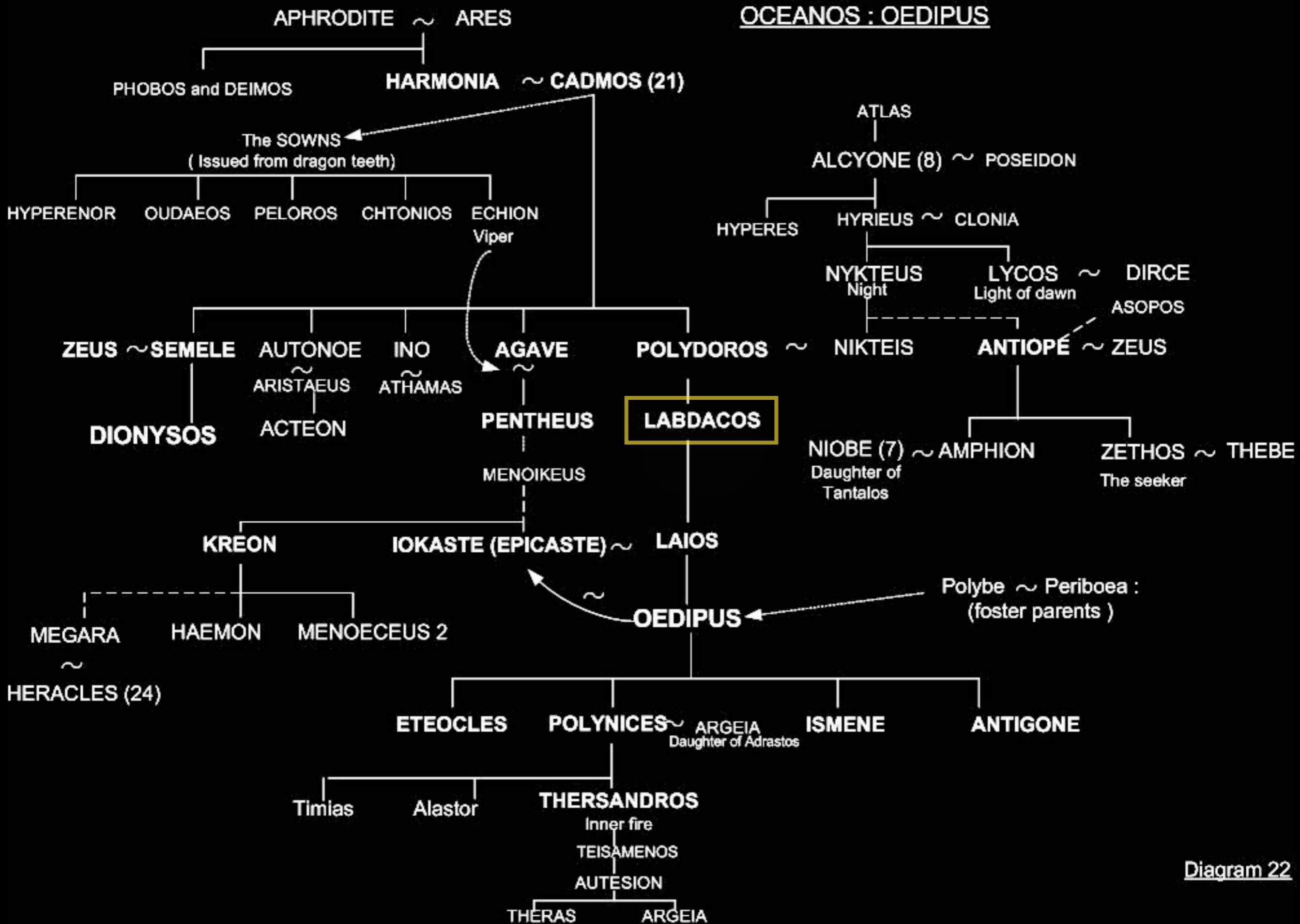


Diagram 22

OCEANOS : OEDIPUS

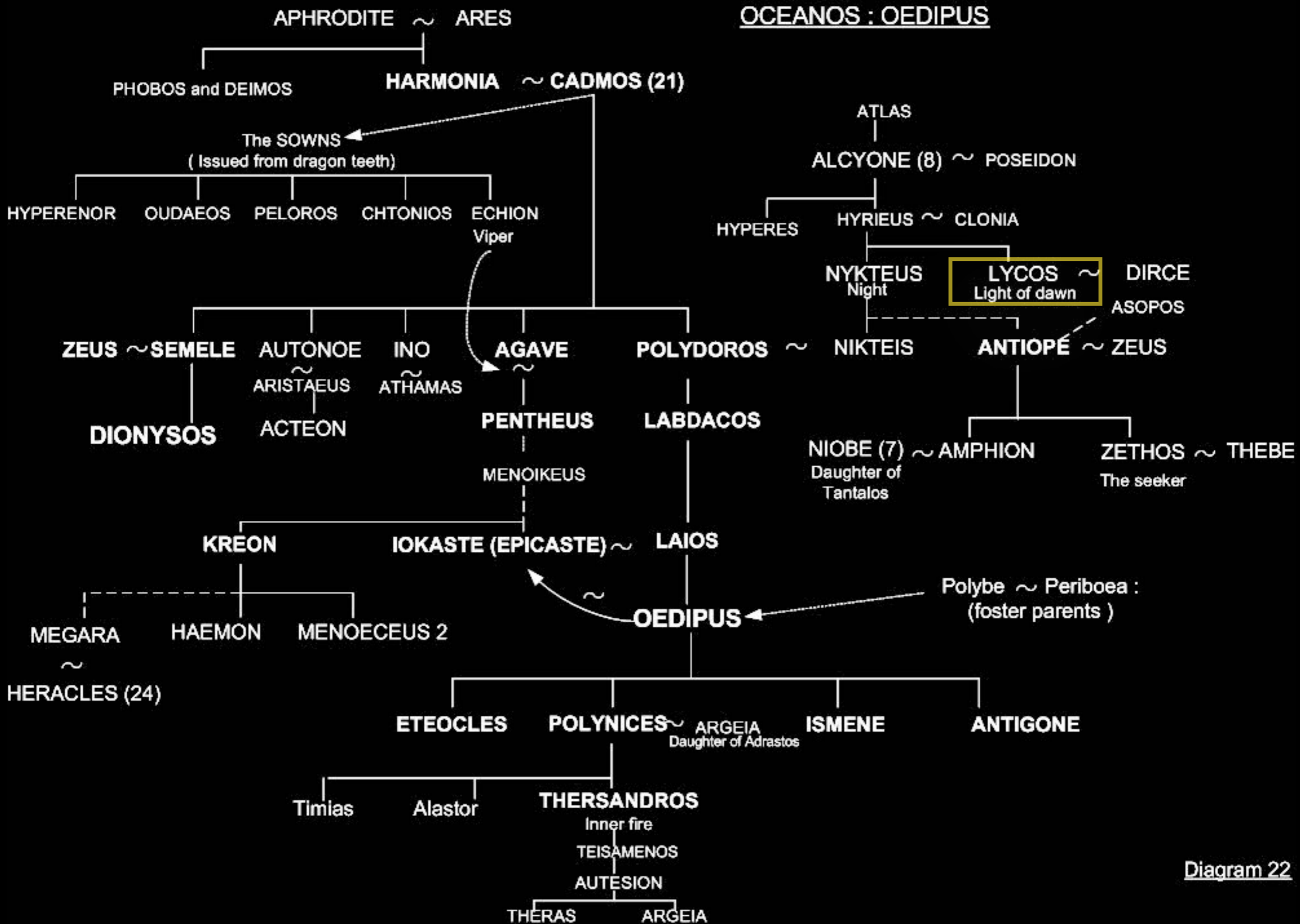


Diagram 22



OCEANOS : OEDIPUS

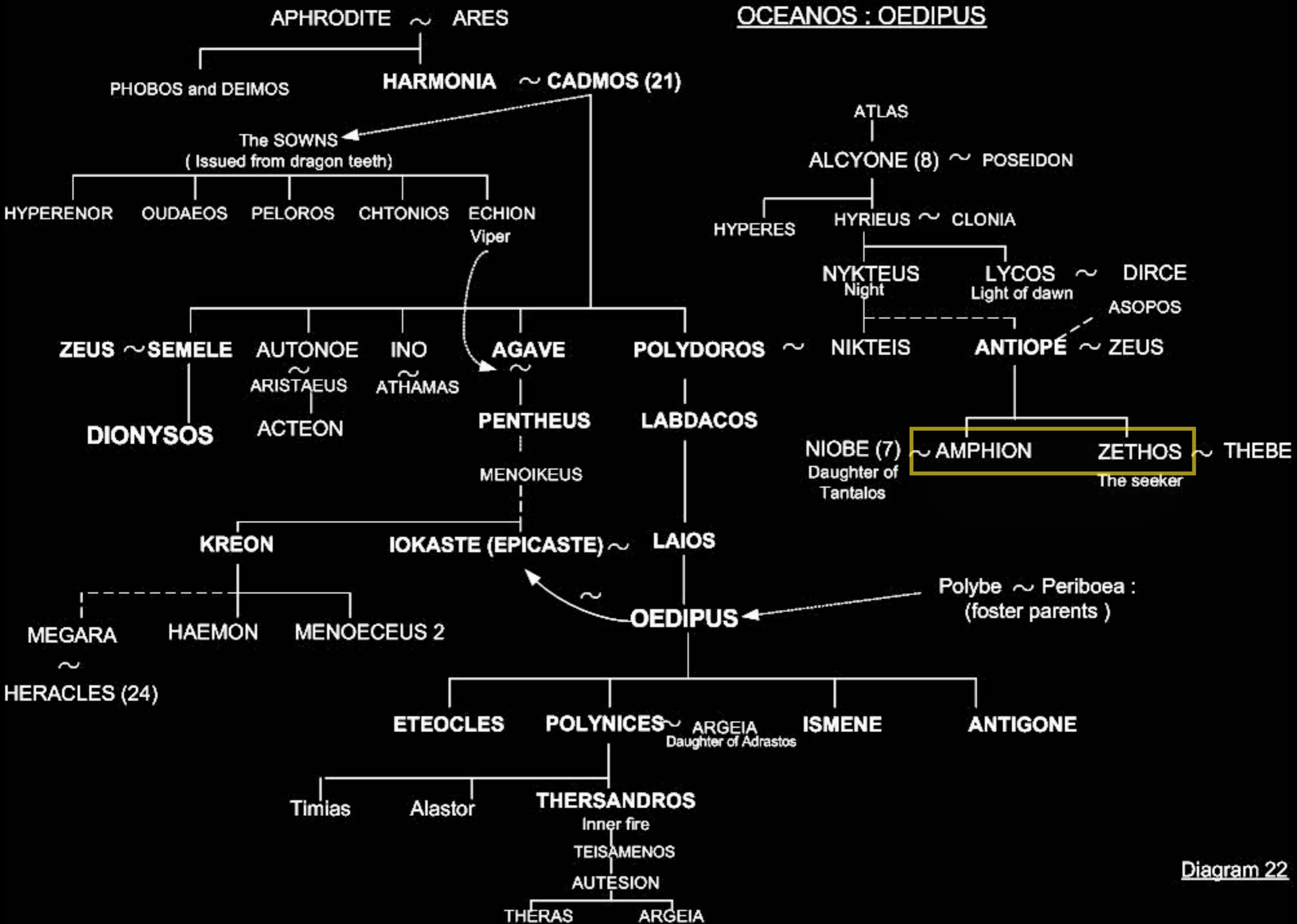


Diagram 22







72.AA.126

OCEANOS : OEDIPUS

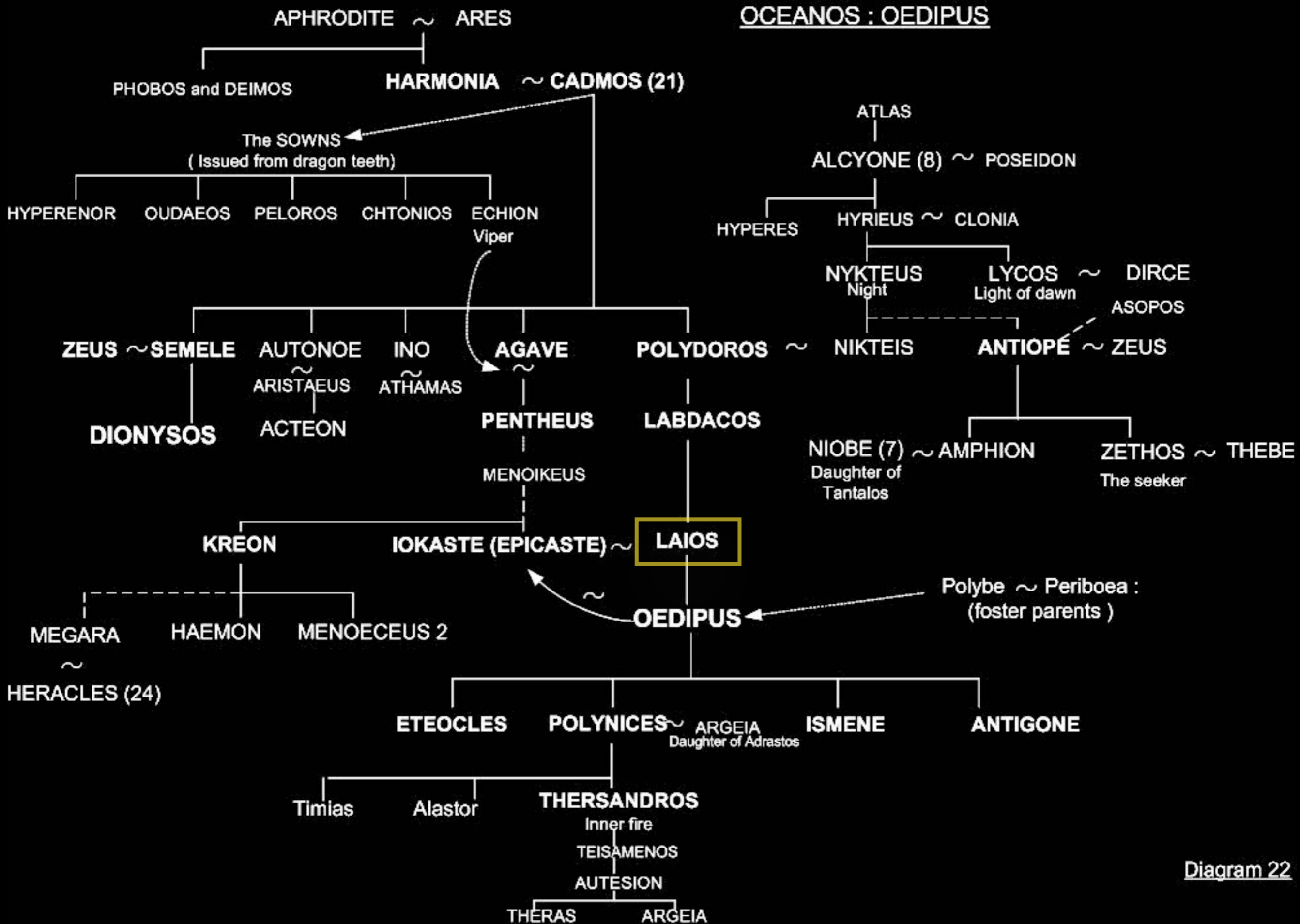


Diagram 22







ΕΥΦΟΡΒΟΣ

ΣΙΔΙΡΟΔΑΙ











ca. 480-70s BCE, Louvre Museum.





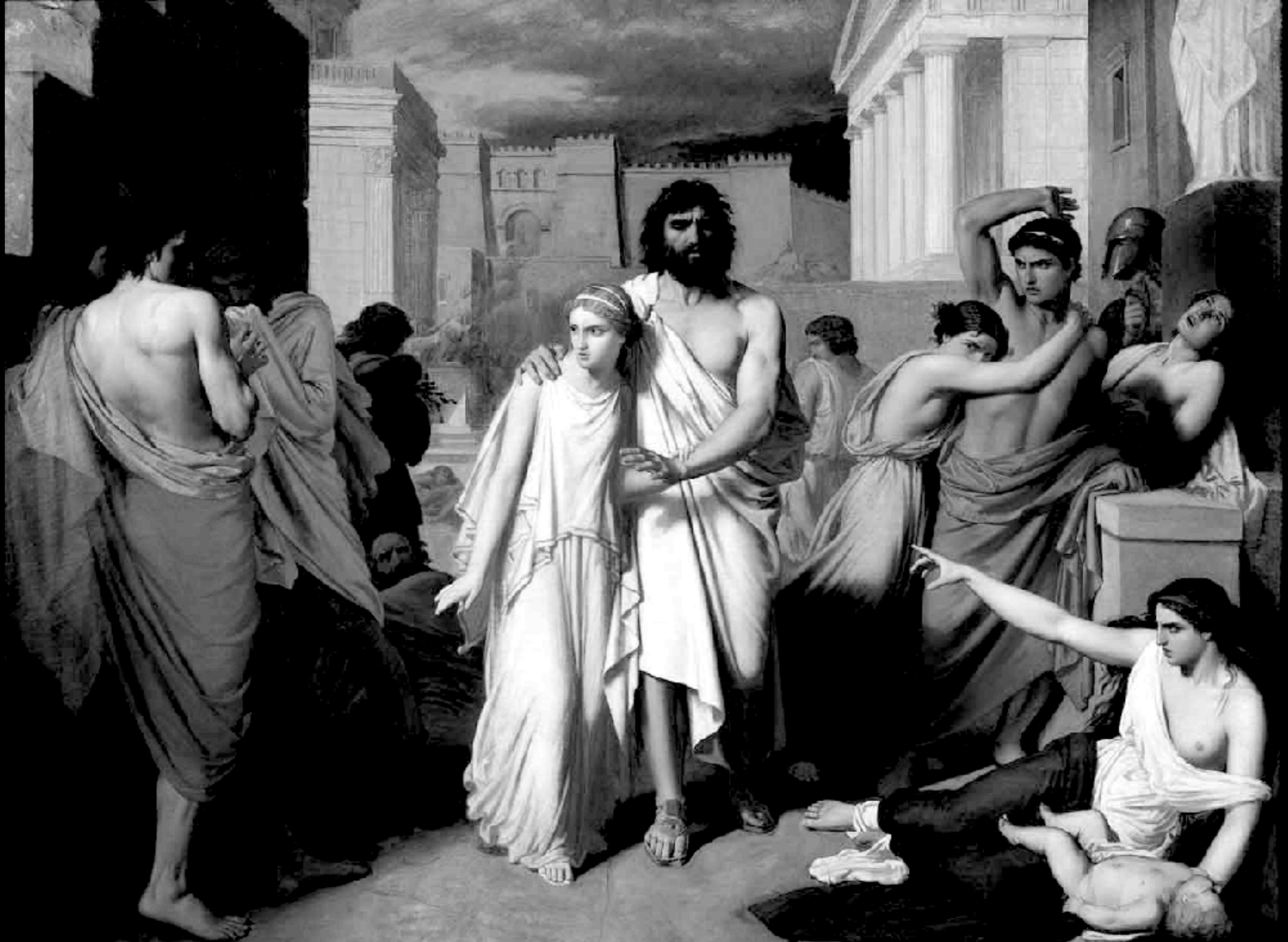
Sicilian calyx-frater, ca. 330s BCE. Museo Archeologico Regionale, Syracuse.











Charles Jalabert, *Oedipus and Antigone, or the Plague of Thebes*, 1843, Musée des Beaux-Arts



Henry Fuseli, *Oedipus Cursing His Son Polyneices*, 1786, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.



# OEDIPUS IN EPIC



In the *Iliad*:

Only Euryalus rose to take [Epeus] on, heroic volunteer,  
bred of Talus' blood and a son of King Mecisteus  
who went to Thebes in the old days, when Oedipus fell,  
and there at his funeral games defeated all the Thebans.

(23.754-7, trans. Fagles)

# OEDIPUS IN EPIC



In the *Odyssey*:

I saw  
fine Epicaste, Oedipus' mother,  
who did a dreadful thing in ignorance:  
she married her own son. He killed his father,  
and married her. The gods revealed the truth  
to humans; through their deadly plans, he ruled  
the Cadmeans in Thebes, despite his pain.  
But Epicaste crossed the gates of Hades;  
she tied a noose and hung it from the ceiling,  
and hanged herself for sorrow, leaving him  
the agonies a mother's Furies bring.

(11.271-81, trans. Wilson)



# OEDIPUS IN EPIC

In the Epic Cycle:

[As witnessed] by Homer, I do not believe that Oedipus had children by Jocasta; his sons were born of Eurygeneia as the writer of the epic called the *Oidipodeia* clearly shows.

(Pausanias, 9.5.10, trans. Evelyn-White)

The authors of the *Oidipodeia* [say] of the Sphinx:

But furthermore [she killed] noble Haemon,  
the dear son of blameless Creon, the comeliest and  
loveliest of boys.

(Σ Eur. *Phoen.* 1750)

Two other epic poems, the *Thebaid* and the *Epigonoï*, dealt with the Theban cycle.

# OEDIPUS IN LYRIC

A papyrus fragment first published in 1977 and attributed to Stesichorus seems to depict Jocasta addressing and advising her sons after the death of Oedipus:

It is in this way, I think,  
that both of you may gain release from that doom foretold  
By the prophet of Apollo,  
If it is true what men say, that the city of Cadmus and his heirs  
Are guarded by Zeus,  
Ever deferring until a distant tomorrow the evils  
Destined to claim our race.



# OEDIPUS IN TRAGEDY

Aeschylus had previously written a trilogy based on the Oedipus story in 467:

*Laius*

*Oedipus*

*Seven Against Thebes*

*Sphinx* (satyr play)

Only two lines from the first two plays of the trilogy survive in a marginal note to an ancient manuscript of *Oedipus Tyrannus*:

On our journey we were approaching the junction of three wagon-tracks were the road forks, where we were passing the meeting of the three ways at Potniae.

(Σ Soph. OT 733, trans. Sommerstein)

# OEDIPUS IN TRAGEDY

Passages from *Seven Against Thebes* show that the outline of the familiar story:

For I speak of the transgression  
born long ago, punished swiftly, but remaining to the third  
generation, when Laius, defying  
Apollo, who had told him thrice  
at the central navel of the earth... to die  
without issue to save his city...

begot his own death,  
Oedipus the father-slayer,  
who sowed the sacrosanct soil  
of his mother, where he had been nurtured,  
and suffered a bloodstained progeny.

(Aesch. *Sept.* 742-56, trans. Sommerstein)



# OEDIPUS IN TRAGEDY

Passages from *Seven Against Thebes* show that the outline of the familiar story:

But when he became aware,  
wretched man, of his appalling marriage,  
enraged by grief,  
with maddened heart,  
he perpetrated two evils:  
by his own father-slaying hand  
he was robbed of his... eyes,  
and angered at his sons... he let fly at them  
the curses of a bitter tongue.

(Aesch. *Sept.* 778-87, trans. Sommerstein)

# OEDIPUS IN TRAGEDY

Sophocles' *Antigone* suggests Oedipus died at Thebes, seeming to contradict the later *Oedipus at Colonus*:

I'll arrive [at my tomb] as loving to my father,  
and beloved to you, my mother,  
and as loving towards you, dear brother;  
since all of you, when you lay dead, I washed  
and dressed and poured out  
funeral offerings with my own hands.

(Soph. *Ant.* 897-902, trans. Taplin)



# OEDIPUS IN TRAGEDY

Euripides depicted Oedipus in his *Phoenician Women*, which survives, and an *Oedipus*, of which only a few fragments remain:

The very learned Euripides produced a poetic drama about Oedipus and Jocasta and the Sphinx.

(John Malalas, *Chronicles* 2.17)

“Euripides differed markedly from Sophocles: (1) he included a long narrative of the Sphinx’s riddle and, it seems, how Oedipus solved it; (2) Oedipus is blinded not by his own hand but by servants of the dead Laius while he is known at Thebes only as the son of Polybus of Corinth; (3) when the truth of Oedipus’ life is revealed, Jocasta does not kill herself as in Sophocles (and Homer) from shame, but lives on to share in his guilt and suffering (in *Phoenician Women* she tends Oedipus in seclusion at Thebes and kills herself only after their twin sons Eteocles and Polyneices have died at each other’s hands).”

(Collard and Cropp)

# III. Oedipus the King

A dark, high-contrast, black and white image of a person's face in profile, looking down. The person has long, dark hair and is wearing a textured garment. A sword or dagger is resting against their cheek, with the hilt visible. The overall mood is somber and dramatic.



## Structure of *Oedipus Rex*:

Scenes 1,2	Prologue (1-150)	Oedipus, Priest, Creon
	Parados (151-215)	Chorus entrance
Scenes 3,4	First Episode (216-462)	Oedipus, Chorus, Teiresias
	First Stasimon (463-512)	Chorus
Scenes 5,6	Second Episode (513-862)	Creon, Chorus, Oedipus, Jocasta
	Second Stasimon (863-910)	Chorus
Scene 7	Third Episode (911-1072)	Jocasta, Oedipus, Old Corinthian, Chorus
	Third Stasimon (1086-109)	Chorus
Scene 8	Fourth Episode (1110-85)	Oedipus, Chorus, Old Slave
	Fourth Stasimon (1186-222)	Chorus
Scenes 9-11	Exodos (1223-530)	Messenger, Chorus, Oedipus, Creon



Likely distribution of roles:

First actor (*protagōnistēs*)

Oedipus

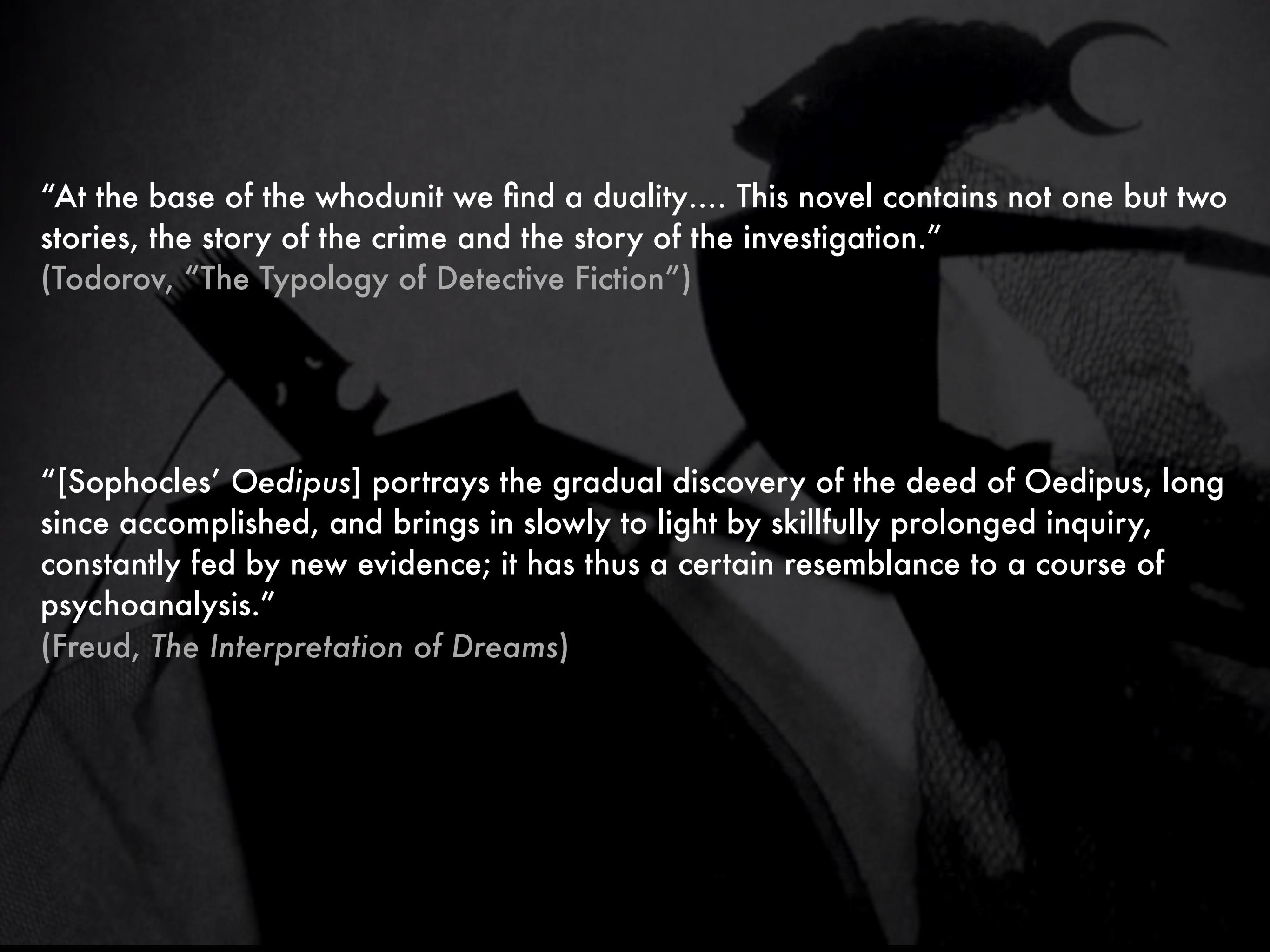
Second actor (*deuteragōnistēs*)

Creon, Tiresias, Old Corinthian

Third actor (*tritagōnistēs*)

Priest, Jocasta, Old Slave of Laius





**“At the base of the whodunit we find a duality.... This novel contains not one but two stories, the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.”**

(Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction”)

**“[Sophocles’ *Oedipus*] portrays the gradual discovery of the deed of Oedipus, long since accomplished, and brings in slowly to light by skillfully prolonged inquiry, constantly fed by new evidence; it has thus a certain resemblance to a course of psychoanalysis.”**

(Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*)

# Dramatic Irony

OEDIPUS

My children, youngest generation  
from this ancient land of Thebes,<sup>o</sup>  
why have you hurried here with suppliant branches?<sup>o</sup>

Why is the city thick with incense smoke,  
and chants of Paean<sup>o</sup> mixed with cries of pain?

I thought it would be wrong  
to find this out through other sources,  
so I've come to hear you for myself—

I, Oedipus, whose fame is known to all the world.

It's proper you, old man, should act as spokesman for them: 10

is it fear that brings you here like this? Or need?

It is my wish to offer every help I can—

I'd have to be impervious not to melt  
with pity seeing such a gathering.

(1-14)



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# Dramatic Irony

*Oedipus the King*

23

But if you hold your tongue, or if someone, through fearing  
for a kinsman or themselves, rejects this my decree,  
then hear from me what I shall do:

I hereby formally declare

that no one whatsoever in this land,  
where I am holder of the royal power,  
shall give protection to the guilty one,  
nor speak to him, nor join with him  
in making prayers or sacrifice, or any sacred rite.

240

All must expel him from their homes,  
because that person spreads miasma fouling us,  
as has been newly made apparent  
by the holy Delphic Oracle to me.

So now you see what kind of man I am,  
a fellow-fighter for the god and for the murdered man.

°[I pray the guilty party, whether it's a single man  
who has escaped detection, or someone with accomplices,  
may that man miserably wear away his wretched days.

What's more, I pray that if he be a member  
of my household, and with me complicit, then  
may I be subject to those curses

250

I have just called down on them.]

I do command you to fulfil all this,

both for my sake, and for the god,  
and for this failing land, infertile, god-accursed.

For even had the issue not been prompted by the god,  
it was not right for you to leave it undischarged like that;  
after a noble man, your king, had been cut down,  
you should have sought the matter out.

But now I hold the power he held before,

and have in common the same bed and wife as him,

260

and would have shared in children from one womb—  
had he not been unfortunate, in that disaster struck him down—  
for all these reasons I shall face the fight on his behalf,  
as if it were for my own father.

I shall go to any length to catch the guilty murderer  
of Laius, the son of Labdacus, the son of Polydorus,  
son of Cadmus, king before, son of Agenor long ago.°

And as for any who do not comply, I pray the gods  
make sure their farmlands offer up no fruit,  
their wives no children from the womb;

270

(232-70)



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# Sight, Blindness, and Knowledge

In Greek, the verb used to mean “I know” in the present tense, οἶδα (oida), is also the perfect tense form of the verb meaning “to see.”

οἶδα = I know = I have seen



# Sight, Blindness, and Knowledge

TIRESIAS

You may be king,  
but I still have an equal right to make reply.  
I also have this power because I am no slave  
to serve your beck and call: I am Apollo's. 410  
So do not write me down in Creon's list.  
And since you have insulted me as blind, now listen:  
°you have your sight, yet do not see the truth  
of how the place you're at is bad, or where you live,  
or who they are you share your home with.  
Do you know what people you are from?  
You little realize you're an enemy to your own kin  
below the earth and here above.  
One day the fearful-footed curse  
from mother and from father shall  
with double spike expel you from this land.  
You see things focused now, but then you shall see dark.  
°There is no anchorage, 420  
no hollow of Cithaeron's mountainside,  
that shall not resonate in echo to your cry,  
once you have learned about your marriage-song,  
and what a treacherous harbour-home  
you entered in full sail, thinking your voyage fair.  
And there's a further crowd of horrors, which you'll find  
enough to crush° you, and your children too.  
Now, after that, go spread your smears  
all over Creon and my words.  
There is no human who shall be  
more harshly ground to dust than you.

(408-28)

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# Sight, Blindness, and Knowledge

OEDIPUS

But I must surely live in fear of making love. . .  
in my own mother's bed.

IOCASTA

°Why should we humans live in fear  
when fortune has control of us,  
and there's no knowing anything  
with certain foresight? It is best to live  
and let things be, so far as we are able to.  
That's why you should not be afraid about  
this union with your mother.  
Just think how many men have gone to bed  
together with their mothers in their dreams.  
The man who wastes no time on matters such as these  
can weather life most easily.

980

(1182-6)

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(1182-6)

# Sight, Blindness, and Knowledge

OEDIPUS (*with a terrible cry*)

It all has come out clear.

Now, light of day, may this be my last sight of you.

I am the man who's been exposed  
as born from those I should not,  
coupled with those I should not,  
killing those I never should have killed.

(1182-6)



# Sight, Blindness, and Knowledge

OEDIPUS (*with a terrible cry*) σαφής (saphēs)

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(1182-6)

“Would you rather be Ion of Chios or Sophocles? Ion and Bacchylides are impeccable, uniformly brilliant writers in the polished manner; but it is Pindar and Sophocles who sometimes set the world on fire with their vehemence, for all that their flame often goes out without reason and they collapse dismally. Indeed, no one is his senses would reckon all Ion’s works put together as equivalent of the one play *Oedipus*.”

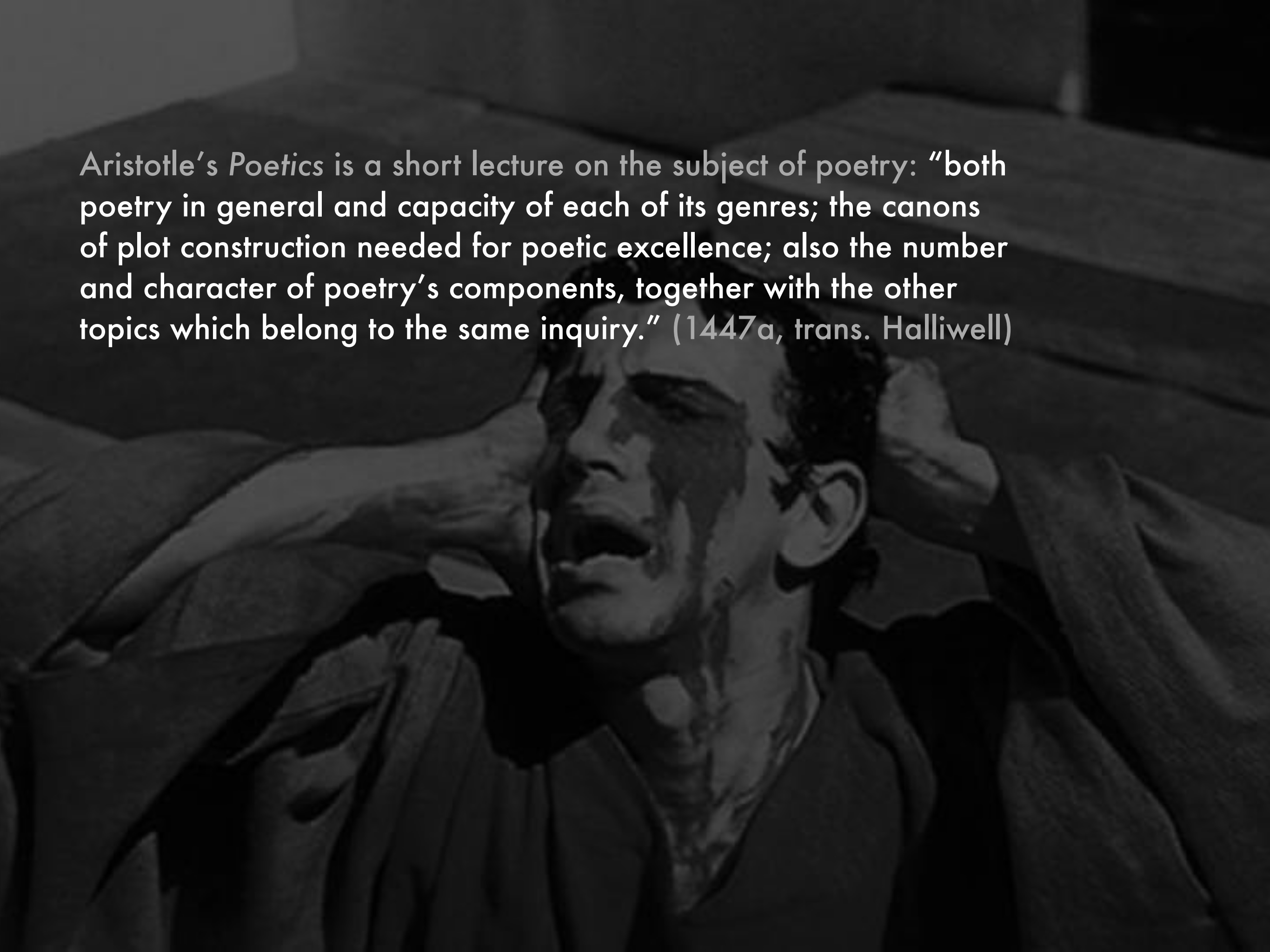
(Longinus, *On the Sublime* 33. Trans. Russell)





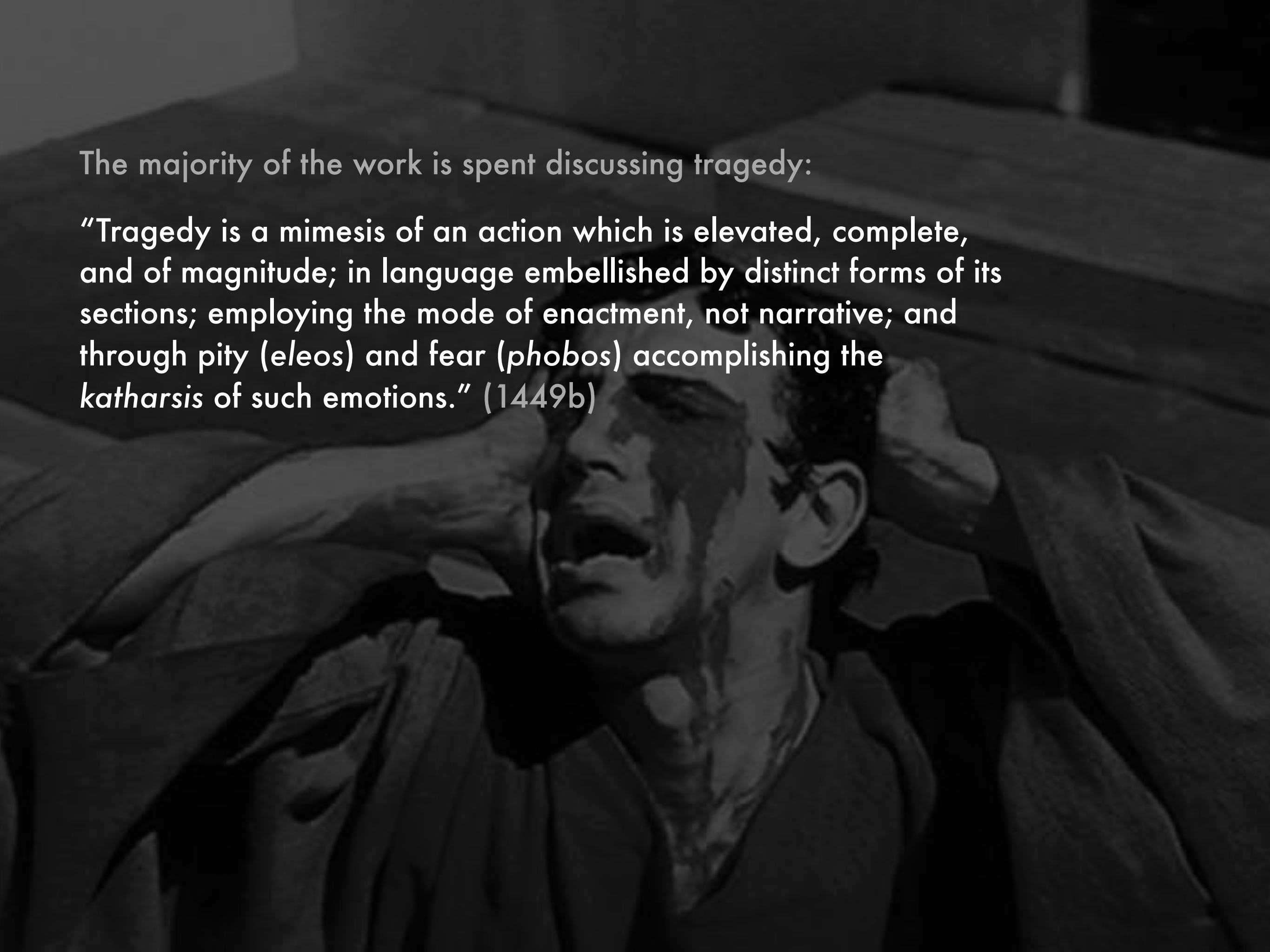
# IV. Aristotle and Freud





Aristotle's *Poetics* is a short lecture on the subject of poetry: "both poetry in general and capacity of each of its genres; the canons of plot construction needed for poetic excellence; also the number and character of poetry's components, together with the other topics which belong to the same inquiry." (1447a, trans. Halliwell)





The majority of the work is spent discussing tragedy:

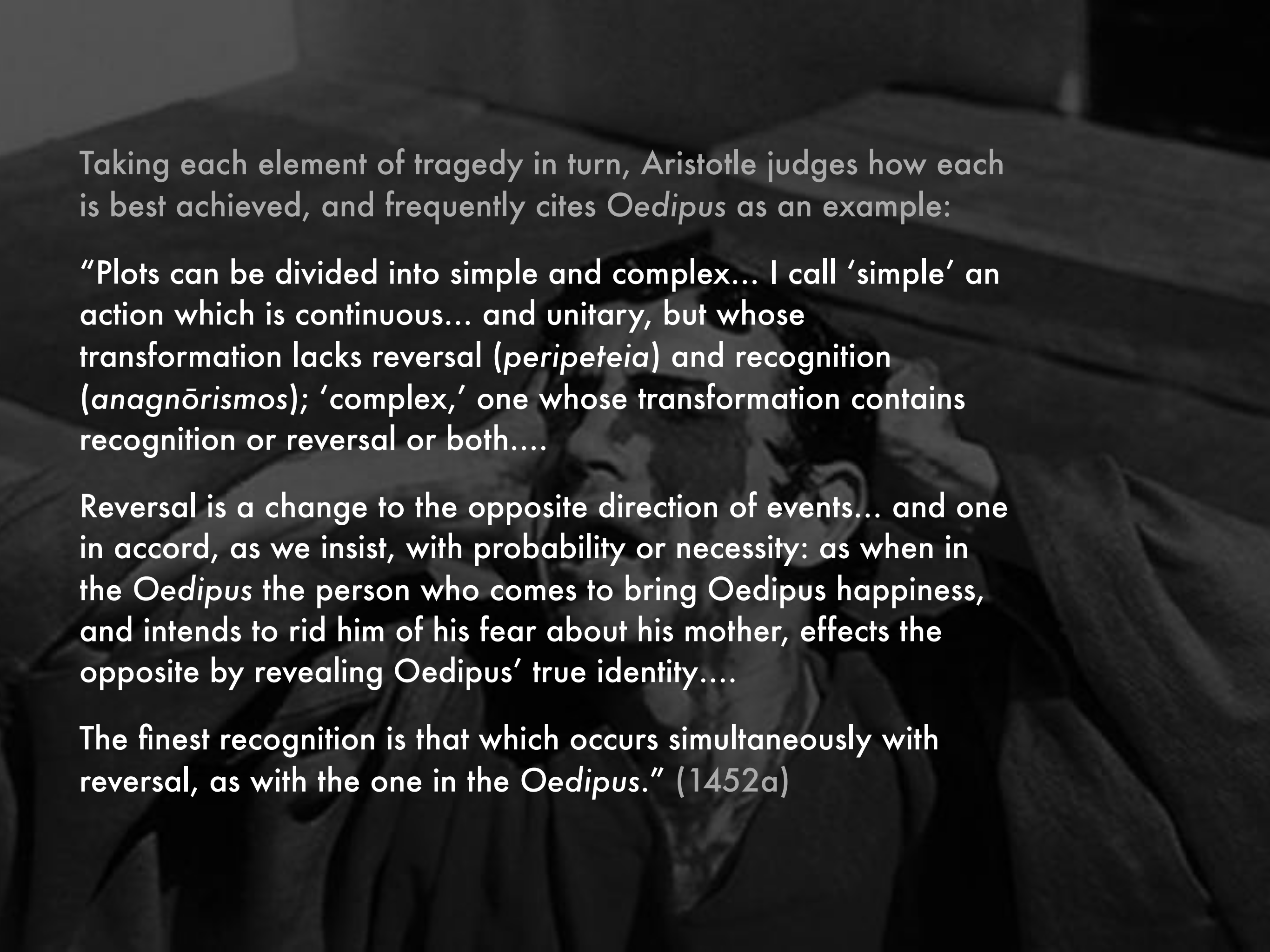
“Tragedy is a mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms of its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) accomplishing the *katharsis* of such emotions.” (1449b)

The majority of the work is spent discussing tragedy:

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“Practically every drama has items of spectacle, character, plot, diction, lyric poetry, and thought, alike. The most important of these things is the structure of events, because tragedy is mimesis not of persons but of action and life; and happiness and unhappiness consist in action.... Thus, the events and plot are the goal of tragedy, and the goal is the most important thing of all.” (1450a)



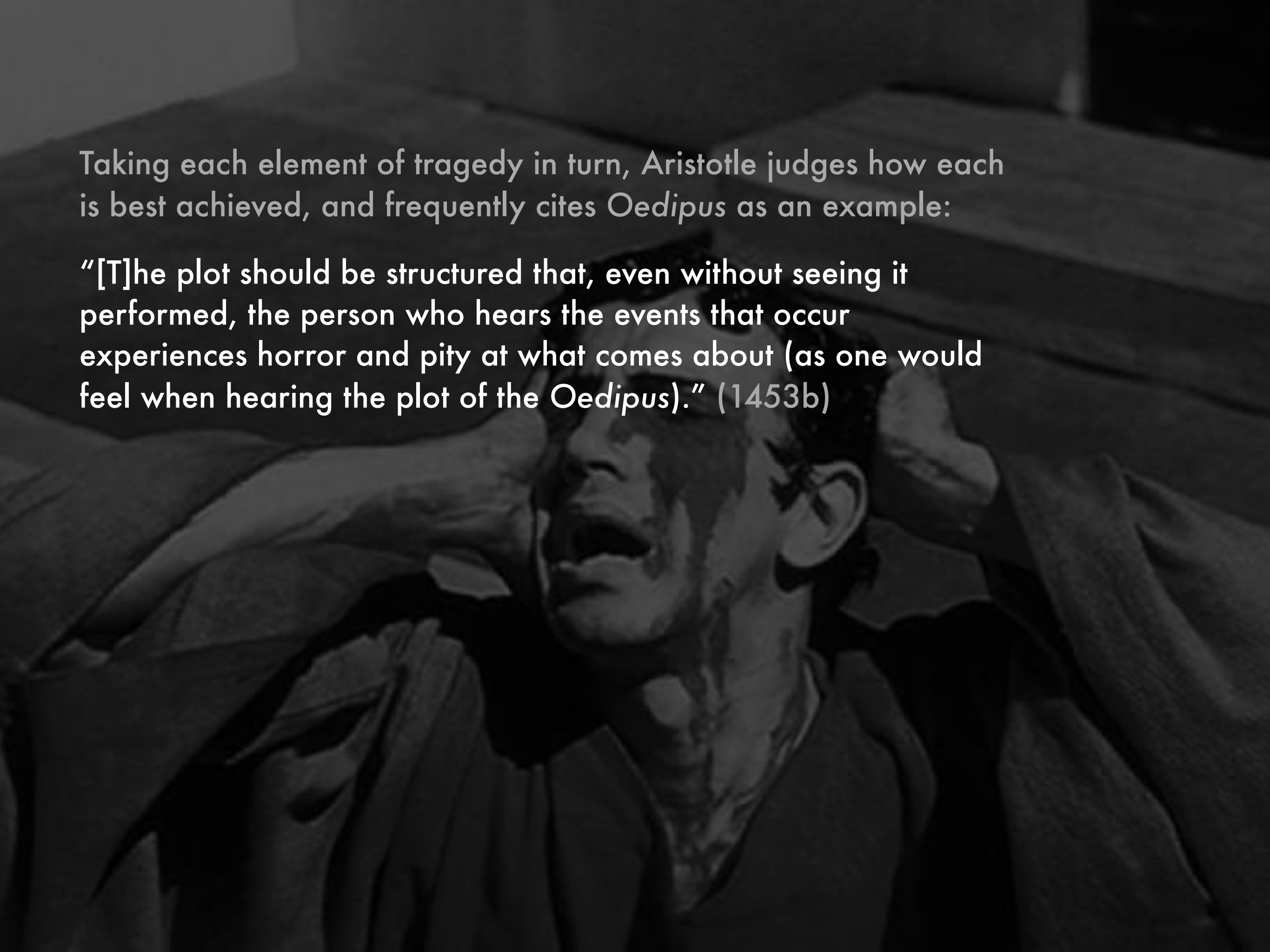


Taking each element of tragedy in turn, Aristotle judges how each is best achieved, and frequently cites *Oedipus* as an example:

“Plots can be divided into simple and complex... I call ‘simple’ an action which is continuous... and unitary, but whose transformation lacks reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnōrismos*); ‘complex,’ one whose transformation contains recognition or reversal or both....

Reversal is a change to the opposite direction of events... and one in accord, as we insist, with probability or necessity: as when in the *Oedipus* the person who comes to bring Oedipus happiness, and intends to rid him of his fear about his mother, effects the opposite by revealing Oedipus’ true identity....

The finest recognition is that which occurs simultaneously with reversal, as with the one in the *Oedipus*.” (1452a)



Taking each element of tragedy in turn, Aristotle judges how each is best achieved, and frequently cites *Oedipus* as an example:

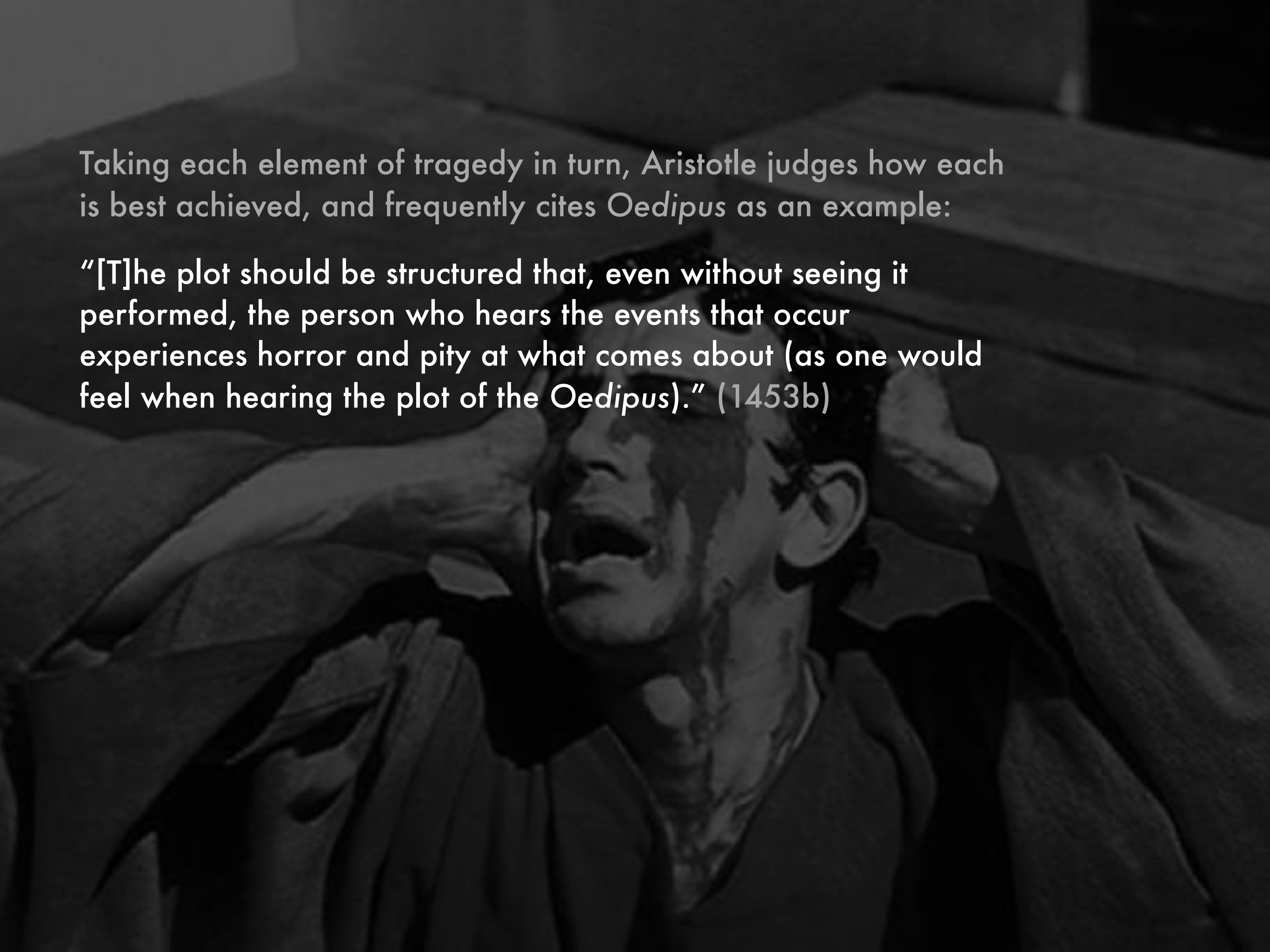
“[T]he plot should be structured that, even without seeing it performed, the person who hears the events that occur experiences horror and pity at what comes about (as one would feel when hearing the plot of the *Oedipus*).” (1453b)



Taking each element of tragedy in turn, Aristotle judges how each is best achieved, and frequently cites *Oedipus* as an example:

“Since the structure of the finest tragedy should be complex, as well as representing fearful and pitiable events... it is clear that neither should decent men be shown changing from prosperity to adversity... nor the depraved changing from adversity to prosperity... nor should tragedy show the wicked person falling from prosperity to adversity....

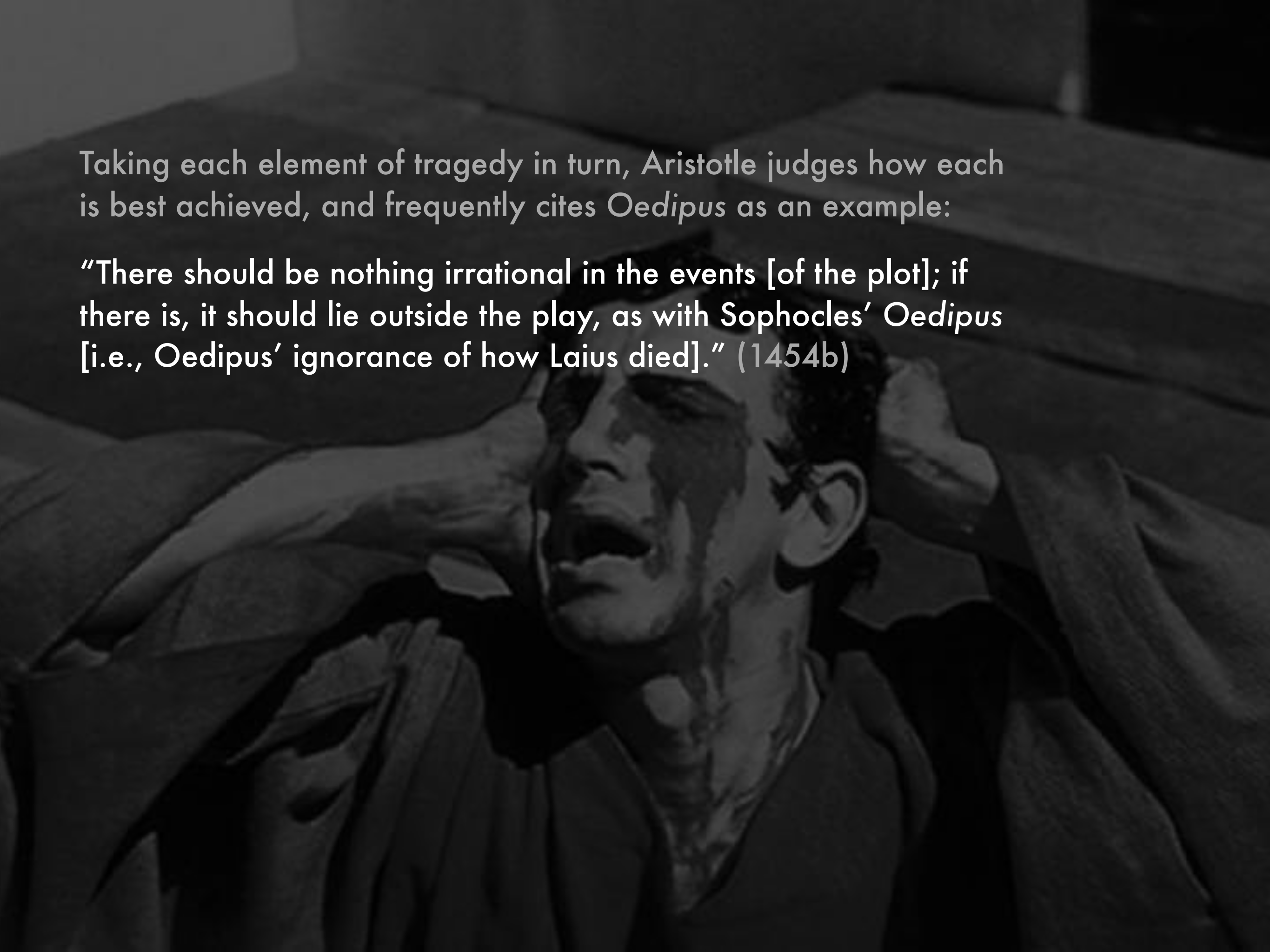
This leaves, then, the person in-between these cases. Such a person is someone not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error (*hamartia*); and one belonging to the class of those who enjoy great renown and prosperity, such as *Oedipus*.” (1453a)



Taking each element of tragedy in turn, Aristotle judges how each is best achieved, and frequently cites *Oedipus* as an example:

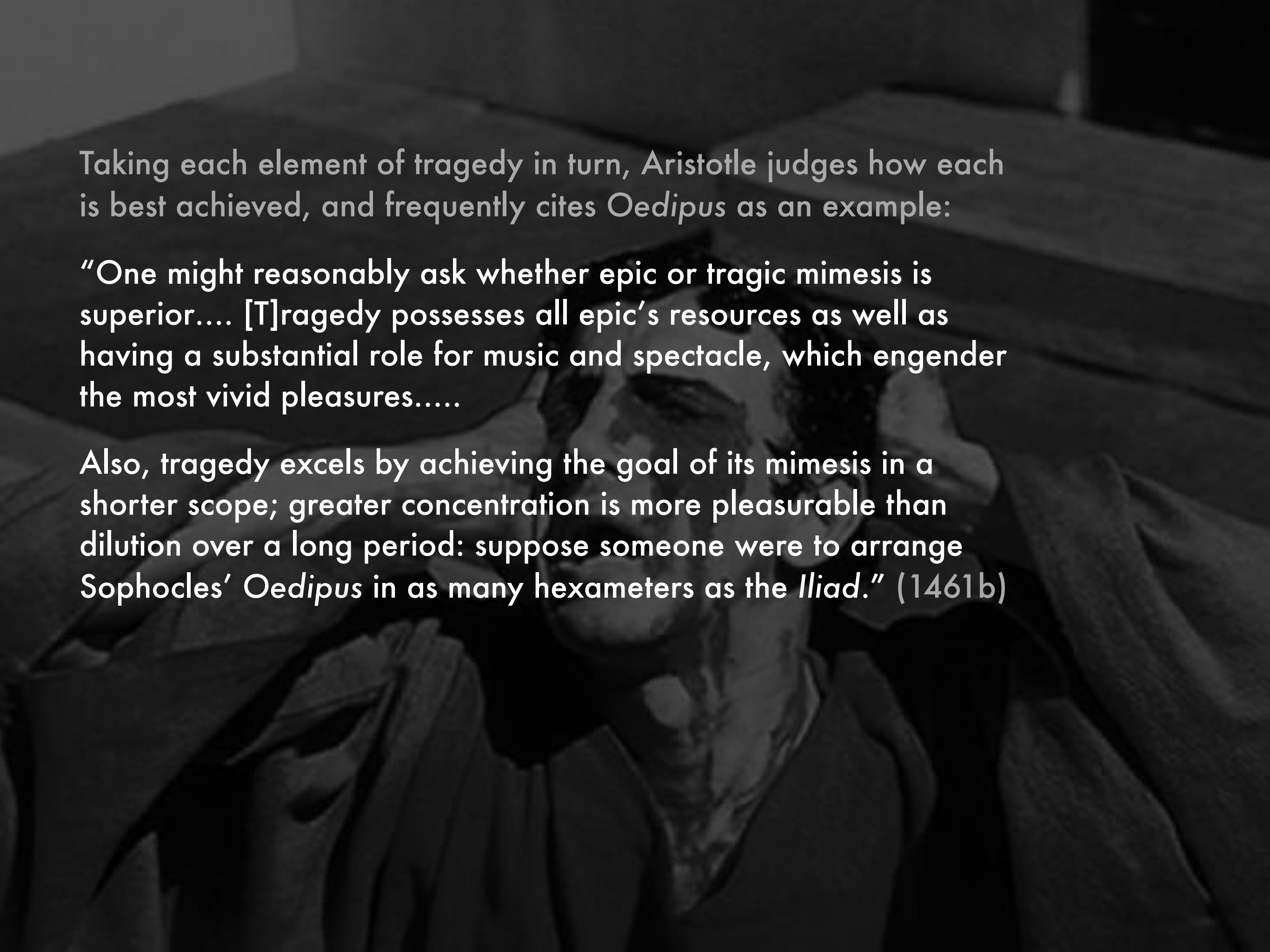
**“There should be nothing irrational in the events [of the plot]; if there is, it should lie outside the play, as with Sophocles’ *Oedipus* [i.e., *Oedipus*’ ignorance of how Laius died].” (1454b)**





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Taking each element of tragedy in turn, Aristotle judges how each is best achieved, and frequently cites *Oedipus* as an example:

“One might reasonably ask whether epic or tragic mimesis is superior.... [T]ragedy possesses all epic’s resources as well as having a substantial role for music and spectacle, which engender the most vivid pleasures.....

Also, tragedy excels by achieving the goal of its mimesis in a shorter scope; greater concentration is more pleasurable than dilution over a long period: suppose someone were to arrange Sophocles’ *Oedipus* in as many hexameters as the *Iliad*.” (1461b)



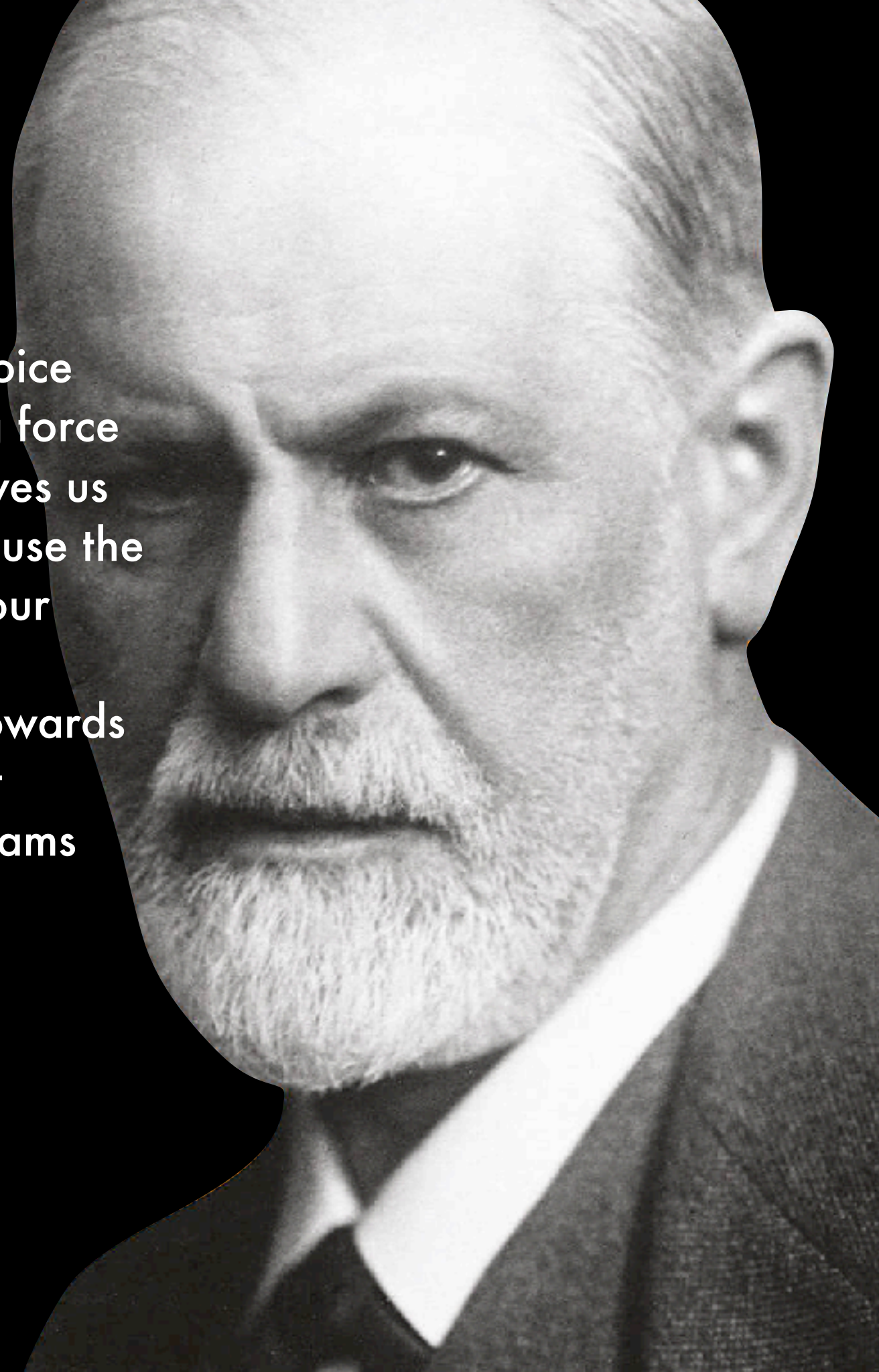
Aristotle's prescriptions were interpreted as strict rules in the Renaissance and Early Modern periods

Ludovico Castelvetro, translator of the *Poetics*, popularized the concept of the "three unities"

- unity of action
- unity of time
- unity of space

Adherence to these rules characterizes the neo-classicism of playwrights like Corneille, Racine, and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*

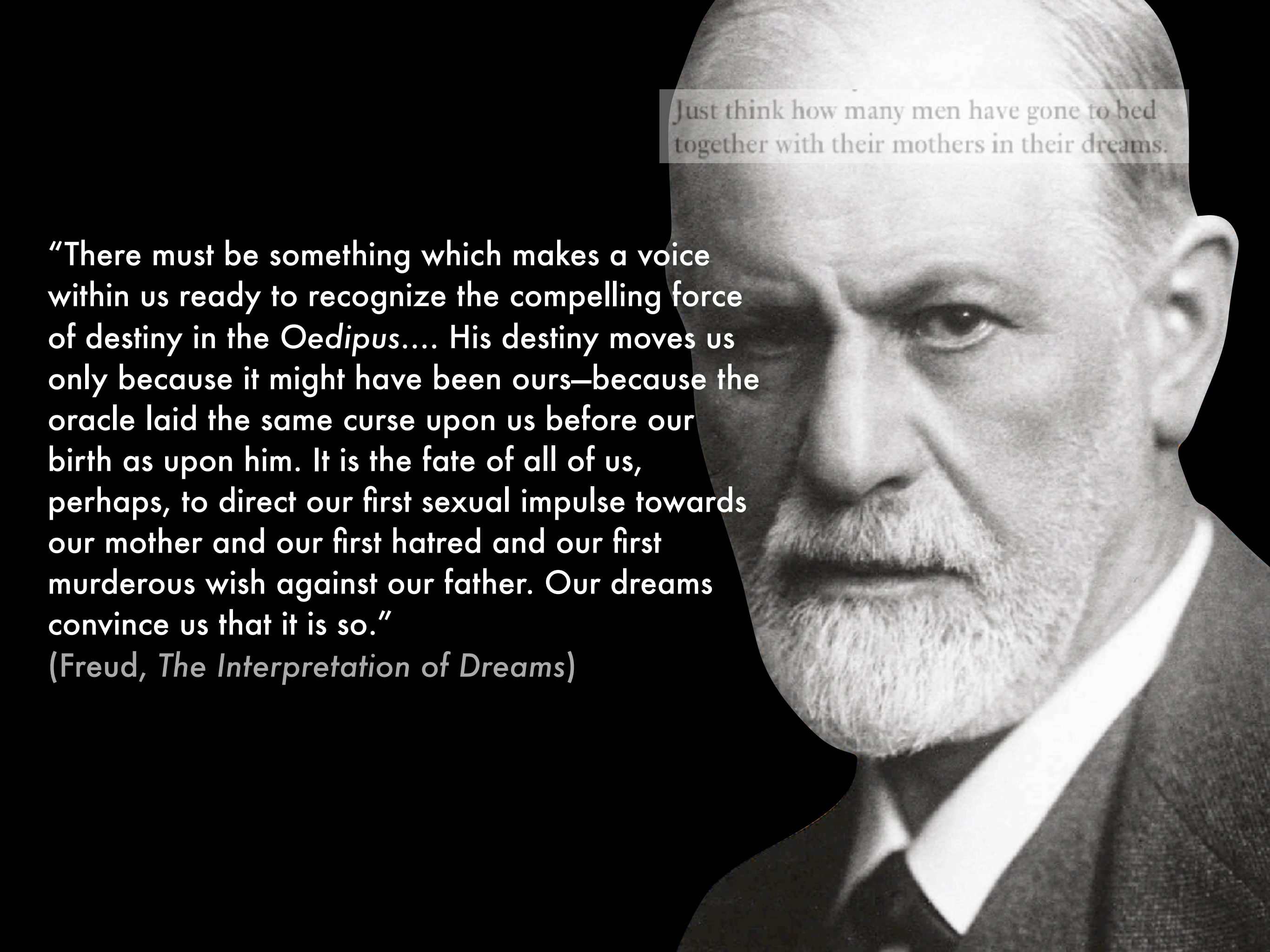


A black and white portrait of Sigmund Freud, showing his face from the nose up, with a full white beard and mustache. He is wearing a dark suit jacket and a white shirt. The background is black.

“There must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the *Oedipus*.... His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that it is so.”

(Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*)



A black and white portrait of Sigmund Freud, showing his face from the nose up, with a full white beard and mustache. He is wearing a dark suit jacket and a white shirt. The background is dark.

Just think how many men have gone to bed together with their mothers in their dreams.

“There must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the *Oedipus*.... His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that it is so.”

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ca. 5th-4th c. BCE. Freud Museum, London.







ca. 5th-4th c. BCE. Freud Museum, London.







Dir. Woody Allen, "Oedipus Wrecks" from *New York Stories*, 1989.



- Structuralist interpretation
  - Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009)
  - Myth as mode of communication
  - Binary structures





Kadmos seeks his sister  
Europa ravished by  
Zeus

Kadmos kills the  
dragon

The Spartoi kill  
each other

Labdacos (Laios' fa-  
ther) = *lame* (?)

Oedipus kills his  
father Laios

Laios (Oedipus' fa-  
ther) = *left-sided* (?)

Oedipus kills the  
Sphinx

Oedipus marries his  
mother Jocasta

Eteocles kills his  
brother Polynices

Oedipus = *swollen-  
foot* (?)

Antigone buries her  
brother Polynices despite  
prohibition

Table 3.1. Myth of Oedipus

1	2	3	4
Oedipus marries his mother, Jocasta.	Oedipus kills his father, Laius.	Oedipus immolates the sphinx.	"Labdacos" means lame. "Laius" means left.
Antigone buries her brother, Polynices, in defiance of the law.	Eteocles kills his brother, Polynices.		"Oedipus" means swollen foot.
Blood ties are overrated.	Blood ties are underrated.	The destruction of monsters	Difficulties in walking properly
Contraries		Contraries	
Human origins		Autochthonous origins	
Contraries			

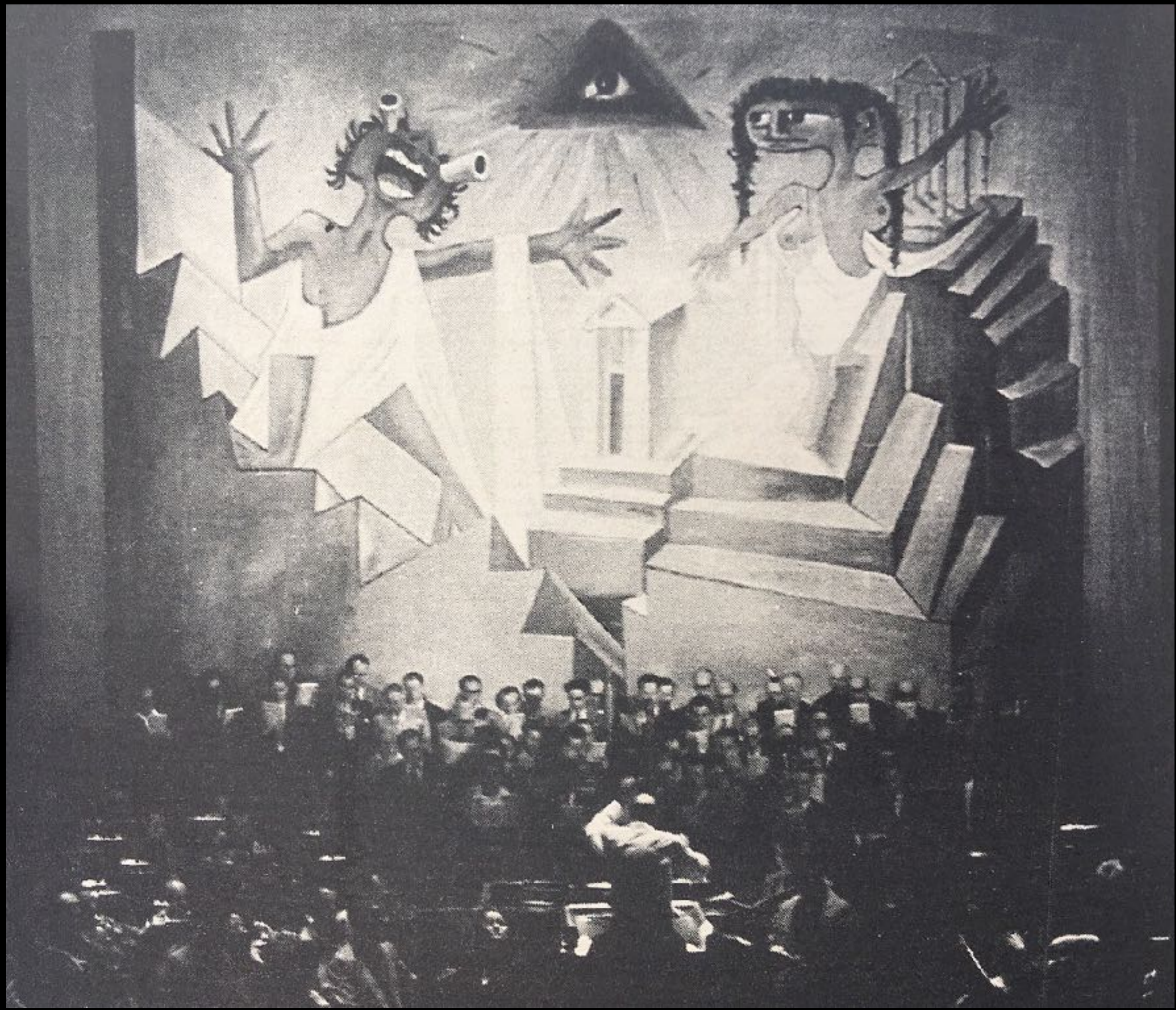


# Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

- The libretto to *Oedipus Rex* (1927) was written by Jean Cocteau, then translated into Latin by Jean Daniélou
- “What a joy it is to compose music to a language of convention, almost of ritual, the very nature of which imposes a lofty dignity! One no longer feels dominated by the phrase, by the literal meaning of the words. Cast in an immutable mold which adequately expresses their value, they do not require any further commentary. The text becomes purely phonetic material for the composer.”









A dark, stylized illustration of a crowd of people, possibly a funeral procession, with a large eye in the sky above them. The scene is rendered in a high-contrast, almost monochromatic style with some highlights on the figures and the eye.

Igor Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex* (1927)

Libretto: Jean Cocteau and Jean Daniélou (trans. e. e. cummings and Deryck Cooke)

Natus sum quo nefastum est,  
concupui cui nefastum est,  
Cecidi quem nefastum est.  
Lux facta est!

Sinful was my begetting, sinful  
my marriage,  
Sinful my shedding of blood.  
My light is put out!