

The Power of Oedipus: Michel Foucault with Hannah Arendt*

The play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. *We are much less Greeks than we believe.* We are neither in the audience, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*¹

In recent years it has become increasingly common to draw connections between the political thought of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Although they never referred to one another in their own writings, many critics point out the striking convergence of their projects. On the one hand, there are strong continuities between their respective theories of power. Power is a key concept for them and both have emphasized its relational, performative and generative character. Nevertheless, as Dana Villa has cautioned, when Foucault and Arendt speak about power, they may not be referring to the same thing.² While the Foucauldian concept of power is ubiquitous, pervasive, and ultimately co-extensive with force, for Arendt, power is contrasted to violence and emanates from political action in concert. Arendt's power is neither dark nor troubling but is rather the public and visible manifestation of human action's potency and potential to open up unforeseen possibilities. Foucault's notion of power evolves across his work and perhaps ends up more Arendtian – more generative than repressive.

On the other hand, influential theorists such as Giorgio Agamben have argued that Arendt and Foucault share an account of modernity and of the entry of biological life into the political sphere.³ Although Hannah Arendt never used the term 'biopolitics'⁴

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¹ Foucault (1979), 217

² Villa (1992)

³ Agamben (1998). I am inspired in this pairing also by the brilliantly provocative reassessment of Foucault's antiquity by Porter (2022) and his (brief) championing of Arendt. For a different attempt to bring Arendt and Foucault together in an ancient context, see Straehle (2020).

⁴ For a brilliant analysis of the complexity of this term and its ancient/modern connotations see Holmes (2019).

she analysed the primacy of life in modernity as well as studying the treatment of people as no more than living things in 20th-century totalitarianism. *The Human Condition* charts the tendency in industrial societies to reduce the human to his/her function as a labouring animal. This emphasis on the biological maintenance of life is pursued at the cost of a vision of humanity defined by its capacity for political action. For Arendt, marginalisation of the domain of politics in the modern age is the result of a blurring between the public and the private spheres: “The distinction between a private and public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities since the rise of the ancient city-state: but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state. What concerns us in this context” she writes “is the extraordinary difficulty with which we, because of this development, understand the decisive division between the public and private realms, between the sphere of the *polis* and the sphere of the household and family, and finally, between activities related to the common world and those related to the maintenance of life, a division upon which all ancient thought rested as self-evident and axiomatic”.⁵ Although it is differently articulated, a particular understanding of the reduction of the concept of life subtends Arendt’s powerful analyses of totalitarianism. As Duarte argues “the notion of biopolitics, which is not an Arendtian one, would be the missing link that fully articulates Arendt’s reflections concerning the tragic contemporary shifts of the political, in *The Human Condition*, with her close analysis of totalitarian regimes, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.”⁶ Biopolitics in Arendtian terms names the process whereby politics is demoted to a knowledge-based administration of life. This conjunction of knowledge and repression finds its ultimate expression in the camps: “The concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible, is being verified”.⁷

⁵ Arendt (1998), 29

⁶ Duarte (2005), 2

⁷ Arendt (1968), 437

At the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault for his part, describes how in the modern age the concept of ‘life’ becomes the hazard of politics: “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question”. Having marked this decisive break between antiquity and modernity, Foucault goes on to elaborate the institutions which underpin the conceptual shift: “Power [in the modern age] would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate domination was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body”.⁸ The concept of life which Arendt and Foucault discuss, is clearly not a life story, a biography, but rather the *zoē*-aspect, the creaturely part of our existence (“what follows is a kind of bestialisation of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques”)⁹. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, according to Foucault, public policy and new knowledge-based institutions emerged to maintain and regulate human life: “the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population.*”¹⁰ Biopower, for Foucault, shows itself at its most extreme in the atom bomb and the Nazi genocide: “It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed.”¹¹

Writing before the publication of Foucault’s late seminars, Giorgio Agamben makes the rather curious claim that neither Foucault nor Arendt connected their biopolitical analyses to a discussion of totalitarianism, yet it is clear now that the events of the twentieth century form a crucial background for both thinkers. For Agamben,

⁸ Foucault (1978), 142-3

⁹ Foucault *Dits et écrits* 3, 719

¹⁰ Foucault (1978), 139

¹¹ Foucault (1978), 137

biopolitics and modernity are co-extensive: “the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis--the politicization of bare life as such--constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought. It is even likely that if politics today seems to be passing through a lasting eclipse, this is because politics has failed to reckon with this foundational event of modernity.”¹² Biopolitics marks the break between the classical and the modern. Yet in their respective accounts of modernity, both our thinkers share a reference to antiquity. An analysis of the ancient world frequently finds itself at the heart of Arendt’s and Foucault’s thinking about the modern condition.¹³ In fact, one aspect of these thinkers’ work which makes them particularly interesting to Classicists is a methodology which combines a philosophical perspective with a close attention to history. Foucault famously described himself as writing ‘the history of the present’ and Arendt’s project could certainly be characterised in a similar way. For both, antiquity plays a crucial role in the ‘present’ whose genealogy they seek to uncover. In this article, I want to look a specific example of this reference to antiquity. I will be exploring how Foucault and Arendt’s different accounts of Oedipus as a political figure reveal their preoccupations with questions of power and political subjectivity.

Foucault analysed Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* in a series of essays and lectures from the early 1970s to the early 1980s.¹⁴ With the recent publication of his lectures it has become clear the extent to which Sophocles’ play punctuated his thinking over his last decade. Consequently, he developed his thinking on Oedipus in tandem with his exploration of the prison in *Discipline and Punish*, on the one hand, and, on the other, with his analysis of the *History of Sexuality*. Both these projects were key to the formulation of his thinking about ‘biopolitics’. They also span a period in which Foucault’s attention was increasingly drawn away from modernity towards antiquity. Across Foucault’s more minor works, Oedipus becomes a significant protagonist in the development of his thinking around the nexus of power/knowledge. One of his earliest explorations of Oedipus was formulated in 1973 in a series of lectures he

¹² Agamben (1998), 17. Agamben himself nevertheless also makes the link to antiquity and his use of antiquity has been contested see Holmes (2019), Miller (2021) and Backman/Cimino (2022).

¹³ On the continuities between Foucault’s interest in biopolitics and his engagement with the Greeks see Prozorov (2022), Holmes (2019) and Miller (2022) and Telò (2022).

¹⁴ Defert (2011), 279 notes that there are seven versions of the lecture ‘Oedipal Knowledge’ which he first delivered in 1972 alone. For the context of the lectures in Foucault’s late work see Elden (2016) and (2017) and Lemm and Vatter (2014).

delivered in Brazil later published as ‘Truth and Juridical Forms’. These lectures situate themselves explicitly in the context of the critique of the Freudian Oedipus developed by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* which was published the previous year in 1972. At the very beginning of his discussion Foucault comments: “Since Freud, the Oedipus story has been regarded as the oldest fable of our desire and our consciousness. However, since last year's publication of the book by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, the reference to Oedipus plays an entirely different role”¹⁵. He goes on to explain how “Oedipus, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not the secret content of our unconscious, but the form of constraint which psychoanalysis, through the cure, tries to impose on our desire and our unconscious. Oedipus is an instrument of power”.¹⁶

Another major influence emerges in the footnotes: Jean-Pierre Vernant. First published in 1967, Vernant’s essay ‘Oedipus without the Complex’ ostensibly subjected the Freudian reading to philological scrutiny but the power of his new analysis of Sophocles went much further than a scholarly correction. Rather, here, and in his later essay ‘Ambiguity and Reversal on the Enigmatic Structure of *Oedipus Rex*’ published in 1972 (in the same year as *Anti-Oedipus*), Vernant transforms the reading of Oedipus from a psychological to a political parable.¹⁷ It is not difficult to detect a Vernantian echo when Foucault asserts: “The very title of Sophocles’ tragedy is interesting. *Oedipus* is *Oedipus the King*, *Oidipous Tyrannus*. [...] Oedipus is the man of power, the man who exercises a certain power. And it is characteristic that the title of Sophocles’ play is not *Oedipus the Incestuous*, or *Oedipus, the Killer of his Father*, but *Oedipus the King*”.¹⁸ For Vernant, tragedy’s politics are profoundly linked to the changing conceptual landscape of fifth century BCE Athens. The advent of democracy tracked a new way of knowing: “Greek reason is that reason which makes it possible to act practically, deliberately, and systematically on human beings, not to transform nature. In its limitations as in its innovations, it is a creature of the city.”¹⁹ Foucault follows Vernant in establishing the link between tragedy and a new politics of knowledge. Writing against the background of both Deleuze/Guattari and

¹⁵ Foucault (2000) 16

¹⁶ Foucault (2000), 16

¹⁷ See Vernant/Vidal-Naquet (1988)

¹⁸ Foucault (2000), 22-23

¹⁹ Vernant (1984), 132.

Vernant, Foucault presents Oedipus “as not the one who didn’t know but, rather, the one who knew too much”.²⁰ Foucault drills deep into Oedipus’ identity as a knowing subject to show how his pursuit of truth is firmly linked to his wielding of power. “The play of veridictions that Foucault extracts from *Oedipus Tyrannos* paints a picture of Oedipus not as the exemplary victim of unconscious destiny, but as a singular subject of the relation between the power of truth and the truth of power.”²¹

Foucault would return to the analysis of Oedipus at various points over the next decade, but he takes on particular prominence in his 1980 seminar *The Government of the Living* and the associated 1981 lectures published as *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. It is here that the reference to Vernant becomes all the more explicit. Foucault starts by characterising Sophocles’ play as a juridical drama. He then speaks about the double anagnorisis which structures the play. First, there is the “individual anagnorisis” of Oedipus – what he calls the “emergence of the truth in the subject”. But, for Foucault, “there is another axis [...] for if indeed Oedipus is searching for the truth, he is doing so precisely so that the chorus can recognise it – the chorus, that is the citizens, the people in the assembly, or what is constituted as the judicial body with responsibility for discovering, establishing, and validating the truth. [...] This is the axis I would like to study: the establishment of the truth in valid and legitimate juridical terms”.²² This preoccupation with halves of truth and the mechanism of the *symbolon* had been important to him since his earliest formulations on Oedipus – but here they take on a more explicitly political structure.

In his reading of *Oedipus*, Foucault emphasises how the play dramatizes the extraordinary difficulty of accepting the truth. For, in fact, the play is characterised by a proliferation of characters who tell a truth which will *not* be recognised. He contrasts three instances of what he calls ‘alethurgy’: the divine truth saying of the oracle and Tiresias; the accounts of Oedipus and Jocasta; and finally, the witness statements of the messenger from Corinth and the shepherd of Cithaeron. Foucault shows how at various points in the play “the truth has been spoken” and the play, as Foucault says “could end here”. “The problem arises”, however, “of knowing why

²⁰ Foucault (2000), 24

²¹ Toscano (2022), 781

²² Foucault (2014), 63

this truth [...] cannot be received”. Oedipus’ inquiry in Sophocles’ play ends by bringing divine knowledge into harmony with the truth telling of the slave. As Paul Allen Miller writes: “Yet what is really new on the epistemic level, as Foucault observes, is not that the gods are in the end proven to be correct, or that the rulers of Thebes are shown to be subject to the laws of fate, the will of Apollo, and the vision of Tiresias, but that these truths can only be accepted, only be verified, when confirmed by the eyewitness testimony of slaves, of those who have no claim to the authority of truth other than their status as knowing subjects”²³:

The circle of alethurgy will be closed only when it has passed through individuals who can say “I,” when it has passed through the eyes, hands, memory, testimony, and affirmation of men who say: I was there, I saw, I did, I gave with my own hands, I received into my own hands. So, without what could be called this point of subjectivation in the general procedure and the overall cycle of alethurgy, the manifestation of the truth would remain incomplete.²⁴

The slave testimony thus emerges as the *telos* of this parable of knowledge-power. Yet, as Alberto Toscano specifies, “the alethurgy of slaves” within the Athenian juridical practices is extracted on pain of punishment and thus “the slaves are not the agents of ‘their’ truth’s manifestation, their alethurgy cannot but be judicial in kind, taking the form of the extraction of testimony, of forced remembrance”.²⁵ In the case of the slaves in the *OT*, this claim to alethurgy is further ironised: it is in fact the half-truths that they tell Jocasta about the exposure of Oedipus that propels the tragedy and ultimately leads to the fulfilment of prophecy. So Foucault remarks: “Disobedience, lie, silence. It is thanks to this that the god’s prophetic utterance could in fact be realized. The god’s word could be verified because there was an interplay of truth and lie in human discourse, or in the discourse of slaves”.²⁶ In the paradoxical coming together of these two realms, divine prophecy and slave testimony, the kind of tyrannical knowledge that Oedipus represents is bypassed: ‘Oedipus was necessary for the truth to appear...but he was eliminated as a kind of “excess”’²⁷:

²³ Miller (2022), 37

²⁴ Foucault (2014), 73

²⁵ Toscano (2022), 782

²⁶ Foucault (2014b), 41

²⁷ Foucault (2014), 81

In short, one no longer needs to be king, to have killed one's father, to have married one's mother, and ruled over the plague, to be forced to discover the truth of oneself. It is enough to be anyone. One does not have to be Oedipus to be obliged to seek one's truth. No people in the grip of the plague asks it of you, but merely the whole institutional, cultural, and religious system, and soon the whole social system to which we belong.²⁸

What Sophocles' play dramatizes for Foucault is the emergence of the juridical subject. Oedipus' quest helps to bring this about but effectively replaces the power of the *tyrannus* with the *nomos* of the people. As Foucault concludes: "The public square that stages the judicial institutions assures, guarantees, and confirms what has been said through the flash of divine prophecy".²⁹

In depicting Oedipus' power as the power of the tyrant, Foucault's analysis closely follows Vernant. Yet, there is another more decisively Foucauldian dimension to his power that he emphasizes: "Sophocles's text associates Oedipus's *techne* to [...] two other arts. This trilogy – the art of governing, the art of healing, the art of navigation – this trilogy, you know well, would remain absolutely essential to political thought up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the West. During Sophocles's time, this classic trilogy made an analogy between the political leader and the doctor and the pilot, demonstrating that there was a type of knowledge proper to the exercise of political power".³⁰ Although Foucault's analysis of biopolitics in the *History of Sexuality* is predicated on a rupture between antiquity and the modern period, we can see in this passage some of the difficulties in maintaining this chronology. Deleuze and Guattari showed how Oedipus, through psychoanalysis, had become the site of the infiltration of politics into our inner lives. The Freudian unconscious had become an instrument of state intrusion. Yet, here we see how the power of the *Sophoclean* Oedipus is already allied to a certain biological *techne*. If the Oedipus of modernity collapses the boundaries between political and biological subjecthood, the Oedipus of antiquity already anticipates this conflation.³¹ Furthermore in identifying the excess of power in his tyranny which condemns him to obsolescence, Foucault sees Oedipus prefiguring the transition from sovereign power to biopower which elsewhere he

²⁸ Foucault (2014b), 306

²⁹ Foucault (2014), 81

³⁰ Foucault (2014), 76

³¹ For the contemporary biopolitical resonances of the *OT* as a plague narrative, see Telò (2022) and (2023).

maps to the end of the eighteenth century. While sovereign power is identified with a strict codification of rights, biopower is a far more fluid and distributed form of agency: “the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death”.³² Foucault may have argued: “*We are much less Greeks than we believe*”, but his repeated returns to Oedipus tell a different story. To quote Jim Porter: “The problems in Foucault’s picture of antiquity [...] point to an underlying ambivalence in his project, which cannot decide whether to free the ancients from history altogether or to enrol them in a burdensome genealogy.”³³

In his analyses, Foucault makes a strong distinction between Sophocles’ two Oedipus plays:

In the entire tragedy, Oedipus will never say that he is innocent, that he may have done something but that it was not of his own accord, that when he killed that man he didn’t know it was Laius. That defense at the level of ignorance and unconsciousness is never ventured by Sophocles’ protagonist in *Oedipus the King*. It is only in *Oedipus at Colonus* that we will see a blind and wretched Oedipus wailing throughout the play, saying: ‘I couldn’t help it, the gods caught me in a trap that I didn’t know about’. In *Oedipus the King*, he doesn’t at all defend himself because of his innocence. His only problem is power – can he stay in power? It is this power which is at stake from the beginning of the play until the end.³⁴

For Foucault, the political Oedipus of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* stands in opposition to the metaphysical protagonist of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Where Oedipus is hyper-agentic in the *OT*, he is characterised by the disavowal of agency in the *OC*. In the *OC* Oedipus’ blindness – his inability to pronounce *oida* – is emblematic of the human condition. The human limits of knowledge result in a powerlessness in the face of the divine. Foucault’s characterisation of the *OC* in many ways recalls the earlier invocations of Oedipus in German idealism. For Schelling, Oedipus embodied the contradictions of Greek reason and its attempts to reconcile freedom with necessity. In accepting to be punished for a fate for which he was not responsible, Oedipus came to stand for the compromised freedom of humanity: “This is the most sublime idea and the greatest victory of freedom: voluntarily to bear the punishment for an

³² Foucault (1978), 138

³³ Porter (2022), 398

³⁴ Foucault (2000), 25

unavoidable transgression in order to manifest his freedom precisely in the loss of that very same freedom, and to perish amid a declaration of free will”.³⁵ As Simon Goldhill has forcefully argued, such a perspective was fundamentally predicated on a Christian logic where suffering is linked to knowledge and action. For Schelling, Oedipus’ greatest achievement is to reach a form of self-reconciliation - a reconciliation which requires a submission to the divine - through suffering. But, as Goldhill argues, “in order to reach this sense of reconciliation and internal transformation it is essential for Schelling [...] to add the *Oedipus Coloneus* to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, as if there were one unbroken story of Oedipus”.³⁶ Foucault’s Oedipus may share Schelling’s emphasis on knowledge, yet the roots of his knowledge will not be located in suffering and self-sacrifice. Foucault refutes Schelling by declining to follow Oedipus to Colonus.³⁷

Hannah Arendt’s rejection of the Idealist reading is even more strident in affirming Oedipus’ power in the *OC* itself. For Arendt the political reading of Oedipus carries over to his death at Colonus. Arendt takes up Oedipus at the point where his self-exile leaves him stateless yet she ends up affirming his power as political agent. Oedipus makes his appearance in the closing paragraph of Arendt’s book *On Revolution*. Arendt’s account of revolution was written in 1963 and stands in stark contrast to the account of totalitarianism she wrote a decade earlier. As Jonathan Schell argues “alongside this portrait of the political world, *On Revolution* seems to belong to another moral universe. [...] In place of the concentration camps, the historical scene at the dead center of *On Revolution* is the Mayflower Compact.”³⁸ Where the earlier book analyzed the suppression of freedom with forensic detail, the later writings celebrate the project of human emancipation through action in concert. Arendt’s opening formulation, characterizes the modern thirst for revolution in strikingly transhistorical terms: “no cause is left but the most ancient of all, the one, in fact, that from the beginning of our history has determined the very existence of politics, the cause of freedom versus tyranny”.³⁹ The “ancient” cause of “freedom versus tyranny”

³⁵ Schelling (1989) 254.

³⁶ Goldhill (2014), 644. For the significance of the Oedipus at Colonus to German idealism, see Billings (2013).

³⁷ Though part of the argument of Foucault’s seminar on *The Government of the Living* (2014b) is to place Sophocles’ *Oedipus* in a genealogy of alethurgy which develops through Christianity.

³⁸ Arendt (2006), xiv

³⁹ Arendt (2006), 1

is given form at the very close of the book where Arendt turns her attention to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. There Arendt contrasts the famous declaration of the futility of existence expressed in the 'Ode to Silenus' to Theseus' decision in the same play to grant Oedipus asylum in Athens. She writes:

Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the play of his old age, wrote the famous frightening lines:

Μὴ φῶναι τὸν ἅπαντα νικᾷ λόγον: τὸ δ', ἐπεὶ φανῆ,
βῆναι κείθεν ὅθεν περ ἦκει,
πολὸν δεύτερον, ὡς τάχιστα.

'Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came'. There he also lets us know, through the mouth of Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens and hence her spokesman, what it was that enabled ordinary men, young and old, to bear life's burden: it was the *polis*, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendor - τὸν βίον λαμπρὸν ποιεῖσθαι.⁴⁰

While Arendt only quotes the first lines of the Ode, it is worth looking at these lines in context (from David Greene's translation):

Not to be born is best of all:
when life is there, the second best
to go whence you came,
with the best speed you may.
For when his youth with its gift of light heart
has come and gone, what grievous stroke
is spared to man, what agony
is he without? Envy, and faction,
strife and fighting and murders are his,
and yet there is something more that claims him,
old age at last, most hated,
without power, without comrades, and friends,
take up their dwelling with him.

⁴⁰ Arendt (2006), 273; Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1225-9, 1143-4

Silenus' diagnosis of the human condition is reformulated to describe the position of man *within the polis*. Man's afflictions are not abstract, he suffers them as an active member of the community. The ode may start as a dirge about senility but the political context of human existence soon makes itself manifest. Oedipus' fate is bound to the fate of humanity: in proffering the answer 'man' to the riddle of the Sphinx Oedipus binds his predicament to the fate of humanity. Oedipus' ability to identify the life-cycle of man, to recognize his distinctiveness from his birth to his grave – from his four legs in the morning to his three in the evening – is also paralleled in this ode which references man's unfortunate journey from youth to old age. As Pat Easterling writes: "The syntax of the whole ode brings out very clearly the fact that what is true for Oedipus is true not only for him [...] but for all humanity".⁴¹ But Oedipus' human universalism is also tied to the universal of political subjectivity. The trials that Oedipus encounters are political as well as being human. Easterling points out the list of troubles singled out in this ode "sounds more like Solon or Theognis reflecting on the problems of the *polis* than like traditional meditations on mortality".⁴² Oedipus in the *Oedipus of Colonus*, of course, encounters specifically political turmoils in the actions of his own sons who place him at the centre of their own struggles for power. Indeed, as Foucault's analysis makes clear, Oedipus' incest and parricide, are in a different light political problems: regicide, dysfunctional succession, tyrannical overreach and resulting exile. Seemingly benign old age, the ode suggests, is a greater burden even than civil war, political factionalism and murder. And yet, what makes old age so difficult to bear is the loss of power and the absence of a community. Old age is now the only thing "that dwells in common" (*sunoikein*). If to live in common is the definition of *polis* life, old age stands as its antithesis.

Although she doesn't say so explicitly, the pessimism of the world-view expressed by Silenus, could be linked to Arendt's analysis of how biological life – what she calls *homo laborans* – exists in conflict and isolation from the life of political action. When the chorus comment on a life lived beyond its natural course they characterise the life

⁴¹ Easterling (2009), 165

⁴² Easterling (2009), 167

of biological necessity: a life lived in bodily decrepitude in isolation from the community. For Foucault, the blind Oedipus is cut off from *polis* life by his disavowal of knowledge which is tantamount to a relinquishing of power. When the Foucauldian Oedipus reaches *Colonus* he resigns himself to a creaturely existence. But Arendt sees a more paradoxical political predicament in Sophocles' final play. For the play cannot be encapsulated by the ode alone. In fact, Arendt contrasts Silenus' "antinatalist" philosophy to her own philosophy of natality and its investment in the generative power of human action. Thus Arendt writes in *The Human Condition* (1998), 247: "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born".⁴³ Where Silenus wishes never to have been born, Arendt affirms that once born one is compelled to act and in this act reaffirm life and community.

In arguing that it is the *polis* "that enabled ordinary men... to bear life's burden", Arendt appears to reference Aristotle's distinction in the *Politics* between *eu zên* (living well) and *zên* (existing).⁴⁴ The city, in other words, is not for "surviving", but for "living well". Theseus' offer of "living well" thus, in a sense, parallels Silenus' insight "best not to be born": both are in opposition to "surviving" (i.e. Aristotle's "zên"). Since the city offers not survival but only "living well", it is "best not to be born" if to live is only to exist. Tragedy's message that life qua existence is not worth living would be the foundational statement of political life.

Such, for Arendt, is Theseus' offer to Oedipus. In granting asylum, Theseus recognises Oedipus as a figure of more than *mere* life. The life of the *polis* depends on the recognition of the other human as a political not a biological subject. In recognising in Oedipus the situation of the stateless, Arendt brings his predicament into contemporary focus. For Arendt had powerfully addressed the situation of refugees in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. There, in a passage which has become

⁴³ Arendt (1998), 247

⁴⁴ Aristotle *Politics* 1252b.

famous for the formulation ‘the right to have rights’, Arendt insists on the absolute priority of political recognition:

We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who lost it and did not regain these rights because of the new global political situation. The trouble is the calamity arose not from any lack of civilization, backwardness, or mere tyranny, but, on the contrary, that it could not be repaired because there was no longer any ‘uncivilized’ spot on earth, because whether we like it or not we have really started to live in One World. Only with a completely organised humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether.⁴⁵

In this passage Arendt evokes the specific situation of refugees in the mid-twentieth-century at a time when the power of the nation state was such that the exclusion from its bounds resulted in complete destitution. Yet, it is to Aristotle that Arendt turns to make sense of this modern situation:

Before this, what we must call a ‘human right’ today would have been thought of as a general characteristic of the human condition which no tyrant could take away. Its loss entails of the relevance of speech (and man since Aristotle, has been defined as a being commanding the power of speech and thought), and the loss of all human relationship (and man, again since Aristotle, has been thought of as a ‘political animal,’ that is one who by definition lives in a community), the loss, in other words, of some of the most essential characteristics of human life.⁴⁶

Although the condition of the refugee in the Europe of the 1930s and 40s (Arendt, of course, experienced this condition herself) was in many senses unique, its political logic has ancient roots. If as Aristotle says, political community is “an essential characteristic of human life”, then its loss results in the loss of humanity. This understanding of the political animal, as Arendt goes on to show, is the premise of Aristotle’s dehumanisation of the slave: “This was to a certain extent the plight of slaves, whom Aristotle therefore did not count among human beings. Slavery’s fundamental offense against human rights was not that it took liberty away (which can happen in many situations), but that it excluded a certain category of people from the possibility of fighting for freedom – a fight possible under tyranny, and even under

⁴⁵ Arendt (2017) 388

⁴⁶ Arendt (2017) 388

the desperate conditions of modern terror (but not under any conditions of concentration-camp life).⁴⁷ The slave is not counted as human not because she was denied liberty but because of her exclusion from the right to have rights. The slave in her mere life prefigures the concentration camp victim. Rather than a justification of slavery, Arendt provocatively upholds Aristotle's words here as a warning about the dangers of political exclusion and its resulting dehumanisation. Arendt reminds us of how Aristotle's conflation of the political animal with a speaking animal reduces the slave to silence. Her startling juxtaposition of slave and camp inmate differs substantially from Foucault's analysis of the slaves' narrative in the *OT*. For Foucault, the play reaches its resolution when the speech of the gods and that of the slaves becomes aligned and Oedipus' knowledge and his power are exposed as excessive and irrelevant. The Foucauldian Oedipus reaches his destiny when he can proclaim: "Yes, I was there, autos, I gave with my own hands, I received with my own hands, I saw with mine own eyes" no longer as king but as blind beggar.⁴⁸ Arendt will see in the conflation between Oedipus and slave, between blind beggar and refugee, the spur towards a protection of the political realm. With Theseus, Arendt reminds us that without the *polis* words will be silent and action ineffective.

On Revolution ends with the same juxtaposition of ancient and modern we find in this passage from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In lamenting the loss of the "spirit of revolution" in political institutions, Arendt turns to the importance of memory and recollection: "Since the storehouse of memory is kept and watched over by poets, whose business it is to find and make the world we live by, it may be wise to turn in conclusion to two of them (one modern, the other ancient)".⁴⁹ Before turning to Sophocles, then, Arendt invokes the French poet and resistance fighter René Char whose book of aphorisms written in the last year of the war testified to the "treasure" of collective action which he experienced through his involvement in the Resistance. Preceding her Sophoclean coda, Arendt remarks: "These reflections are significant enough as they testify to the involuntary self-discourse, to the joys of appearing in word and deed without equivocation and without self-reflection that are inherent in action. And yet they are perhaps too 'modern', too self-centered to hit in pure

⁴⁷ Arendt (2017), 388-9

⁴⁸ Foucault (2014b), 66. See Miller (2022), 48.

⁴⁹ Arendt (2006), 272

precision the centre of that ‘inheritance which was left to us by no testament’.⁵⁰ Where in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* it is the modern catastrophe of Nazi racial laws and the Shoah which illustrates the biopolitical stakes of Aristotle’s *Politics*, in *On Revolution* it is Oedipus’ fate which drives home the enormity of the loss of political identity ancient and modern – *and* the possibility of its reaffirmation.

For Arendt the central scene of Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* is the encounter between Oedipus as refugee and Theseus as political saviour. Yet, what role is there here for Antigone – the dutiful Antigone who provides the aged and blind Oedipus with a fourth human leg as he totters towards his redemptive death? In thinking Oedipus through the lens of power and biopolitics is there room to consider gender? Arendt’s stark division between the domains of labour and action, her demarcation in Agamben’s terms of *zôe* from *bios* has proved controversial. On the one hand, as the example of her reading of the *OC* performs, it has had the effect of lionising action in a domain traditionally (and, in the context of antiquity, exclusively) occupied by men. On the other hand, Arendt’s was an anti-essentialist gesture which aimed to differentiate women from their biological function and define them instead through action in the public sphere. The failure to recognise women’s actions is historical and contingent, in other words, rather than structural. Following Arendt’s own return to Aristotle, we could argue that it was their exile from the political sphere across history which has underpinned the dehumanisation of women and made them doubly vulnerable to the excesses of totalitarianism. We would need, in short, for Theseus to have granted citizenship to Antigone and Ismene too.

If we turn back to Foucault, while Jocasta and Oedipus are seen as complementary halves in the search for truth, there is no sense of Jocasta functioning as a gendered entity– yet where power is at stake, it is unmistakably Oedipus’ and not hers. Yet, if we contextualise Foucault’s decade-long fascination with Oedipus as contemporaneous with his *History of Sexuality*, the gender-neutrality of Foucault’s analysis seems particularly striking. In citing Aristotle’s *Politics* as the source for biopolitics in *La volonté de savoir*, Foucault seemingly forgets that Aristotle prefaces his formulation of the *zôon politikon* with a discussion of the female and the slave.

⁵⁰ Arendt (2006), 272-3

Both Foucault and Arendt discover in Sophocles' Oedipus a myth about power and about the imbrication of biological and political lives. For Foucault, Oedipus' power is linked to his knowledge and he wields this power by virtue of his *techne*. He thus anticipates how states increasingly use deep knowledge about their subjects lives to exercise a new form of power. For Arendt, by contrast, it is Theseus who returns Oedipus to power and to political community by redrawing the boundaries between the public and the private spheres. Theseus accepts Oedipus as a citizen independent of biography. He refuses to reduce him to his life, his *bios* and his *zôe*, and rather recognises him as a subject with a right to have rights. Despite the overlap in their 'histories of the present', in their readings of Oedipus, Foucault and Arendt articulate contrasting political visions of antiquity. While Foucault ultimately places Sophocles' Oedipus in continuity with Freud's, and thus traces a line between the biopolitical impulses of fifth century Athens and those of modern democracies, Arendt instead, insists that it is in antiquity that we can find the resources to resist the reduction of life to biological necessity – a reduction which laid the groundwork for the most horrific crimes of political modernity. As Jim Porter has argued, there is more at stake than historiography in choosing between a Foucauldian or Arendtian genealogy here. While, in his return to antiquity, Foucault may well be providing *a* history of the present, we do not need to consent to it being *our* present. In Porter's words: "Foucault's conception of the self summons up exactly the specter [we are] turning away from- that of the rising bourgeois (neo)liberal sovereign ego".⁵¹ Arendt, by contrast, turns away from the self in its relation to itself, in order to connect with others and overcome "world alienation". Where Foucault sees in the ancient theatre only the looming threat of the panopticon, Arendt instead hails the passage from acting to action, from collective spectatorship to political community.

⁵¹ Porter (2022), 400

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