

Oedipus the King and *Memento* Meet the Sophists Halfway

“You don’t know who you are ... maybe it’s time you started investigating yourself,” says Teddy to Leonard in the critically acclaimed neo-noir film *Memento* (C. Nolan, 2000). As a result of anterograde amnesia, Leonard does not know that he himself is the very culprit he seeks to punish for killing his wife. The multiple and seemingly conflicting roles of Leonard as detective, criminal, and avenger correspond to those of Oedipus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*. I explicate these and other associations of narrative, and then discuss a deeper correspondence. According to my critique, the prevailing critical assessment of how these works relate to sophism is misinformed. In both cases, this view is monolithic: *Oedipus the King* rejects sophism and *Memento* embraces it. I believe that the relation of these works to sophism is more nuanced and instead lies somewhere between the extremes of rejection and embrace. *Oedipus the King* is more appreciative of sophism than previously understood, and *Memento* less so, and in the process they meet somewhere in the middle. Both works, I believe, acknowledge the problematic nature of how language reflects reality without denying its ability to do so.

The narrative correspondences between *Oedipus the King* and *Memento* are obvious and abundant: both Oedipus and Leonard commit crimes unintentionally and in response to information they misinterpret; investigate crimes of homicide and sexual violation; conduct their investigations in a veritable wasteland of death and dysfunctional relationships; overestimate their own cognitive skills because of past successes; ignore the warnings and advice of others; ultimately discover their true identity and simultaneously their own culpability.

I will now turn to how each work relates to sophism. Knox (142), de Romilly (16), and most others understand *Oedipus the King* categorically to reject the sophists. These sophists included Gorgias, who published his treatise *On the Nonexistent* in the 440s, taught prominent

Athenians as a guest in their homes in the 430s, including Pericles whose inner circle numbered Sophocles, and settled in Athens in 427, all before the premiere of *Oedipus the King* probably in 425, according to the most recent and thorough dating of the play by Robin Mitchell-Boyask (55-66). In the third section of his treatise *On the Nonexistent* (DK 82 B3), Gorgias argues that accurate verbal communication is impossible. It relies on word (λόγος), which exists only within the realm of human speech and thought, and is different from the external reality (πρᾶγμα) to which it refers.

Previous critics are undoubtedly correct that *Oedipus the King* rejects Gorgias' view of language as incapable of reflecting reality. Nevertheless, as I argue, the play responds appreciatively to Gorgias by underscoring the problematic relation of language to reality. Numerous examples include verse 1250 with its chiasmic juxtaposition of normally conflicting terms: "from a husband a husband and children from her child she [Jocasta] bore" (ἐξ ἀνδρὸς ἄνδρα καὶ τέκν' ἐκ τέκνων τέκοι). Also notable are the play's pervasive disjunctions between words and reality, as when Oedipus contrasts his name (see ὠνομάζετο 1021), "son of Polybus," with his body, the biological offspring of Laius.

Memento is widely interpreted categorically to embrace Derrida and his (neo-)sophistic understanding of language as "unable to summon forth meaning" (see Smith 34, and his bibliography; Derrida 1963 and 1967). In my view, however, the film mirrors the dualistic relation of *Oedipus the King* to sophism. On the one hand, in accord with previous interpretations (that I will summarize) and my own analysis of the so-called FACTS tattooed on Leonard, *Memento* recognizes the problematic relation of language to reality and thus responds positively to Derrida. On the other hand, in contrast with previous understandings, I argue that *Memento* ultimately rejects Derrida's linguistic indeterminacy. Teddy's concluding revelation of Leonard's history

provides a yardstick by which to measure the truth-value of every aspect of Leonard's (re)construction of his past. Indeed, it is this last measurement on which hinges *Memento*'s final, twisted impact. Thus, the film duplicates *Oedipus the King* in recognizing the real-life clash between linguistic uncertainty and brute reality.

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