# OEDIPUS THE KING

SOPHOCLES (497-406 BC)

CRITO

- Appealing because it suggests the hard path is the right path

- Socrates comes before Civil Rights, non-violence, etc.; there is another path that neither replies with violence to the law, nor simply acquiesces to it.

- The argument is not democratic (the law is superior to the individual, the expert knows better) and perhaps does not recognize the embodied nature of the subject: don't like it? Just move somewhere else!

- Has a certain amount of resonance in our era: doctors or Twitter? (But the paranoia of the Allegory!)
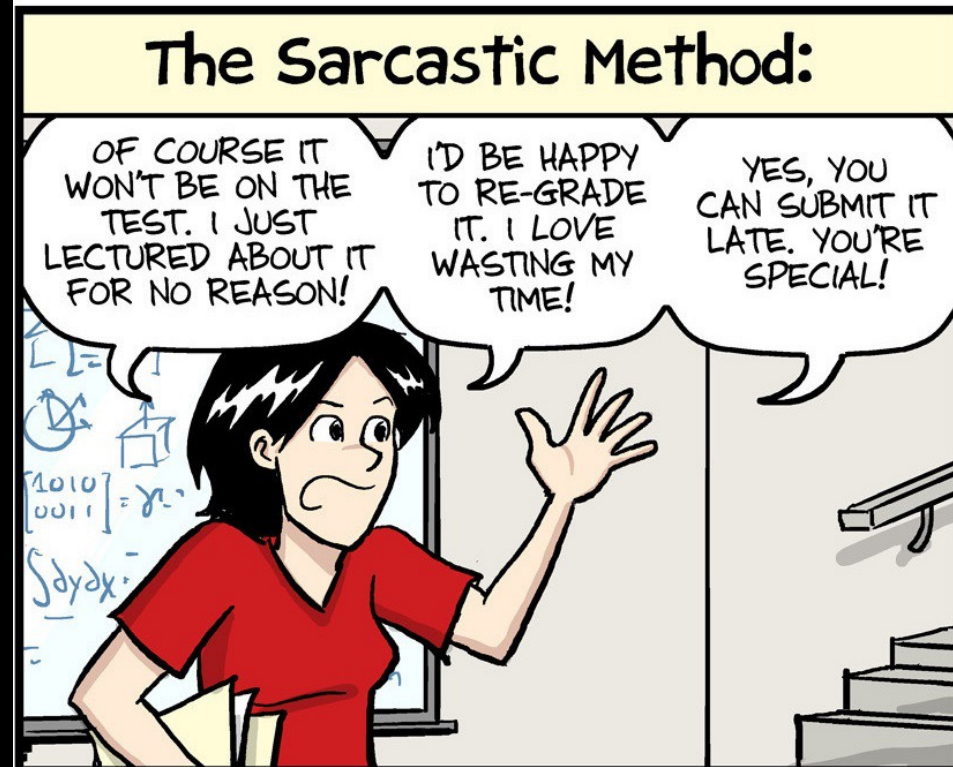
DIONYSUS

- God of wine, fertility, ecstasy, and (divine) madness. Also, *theater*

- Dionysian mysteries: secret communal ceremonies of fasting, dance, music and wine to alter consciousness, create social bonding (*re-ligio*). Separate cults for men and women

- In short, we drink, party, dance, play music, and afterward, we are bonded. A kind of "brotherhood" or "sisterhood," as it were

Animal House (1978): party lessons

DIONYSUS

- This was curiously the older sense of religion — not about worship (although that was part of it), but about conscientiously following traditions in the name of social bonding

- Some portion of these ceremonies (which were kept secret) became storytelling or re-enactment, eventually plays

- Focus on *catharsis*, the shared social experience of emotional tension and release
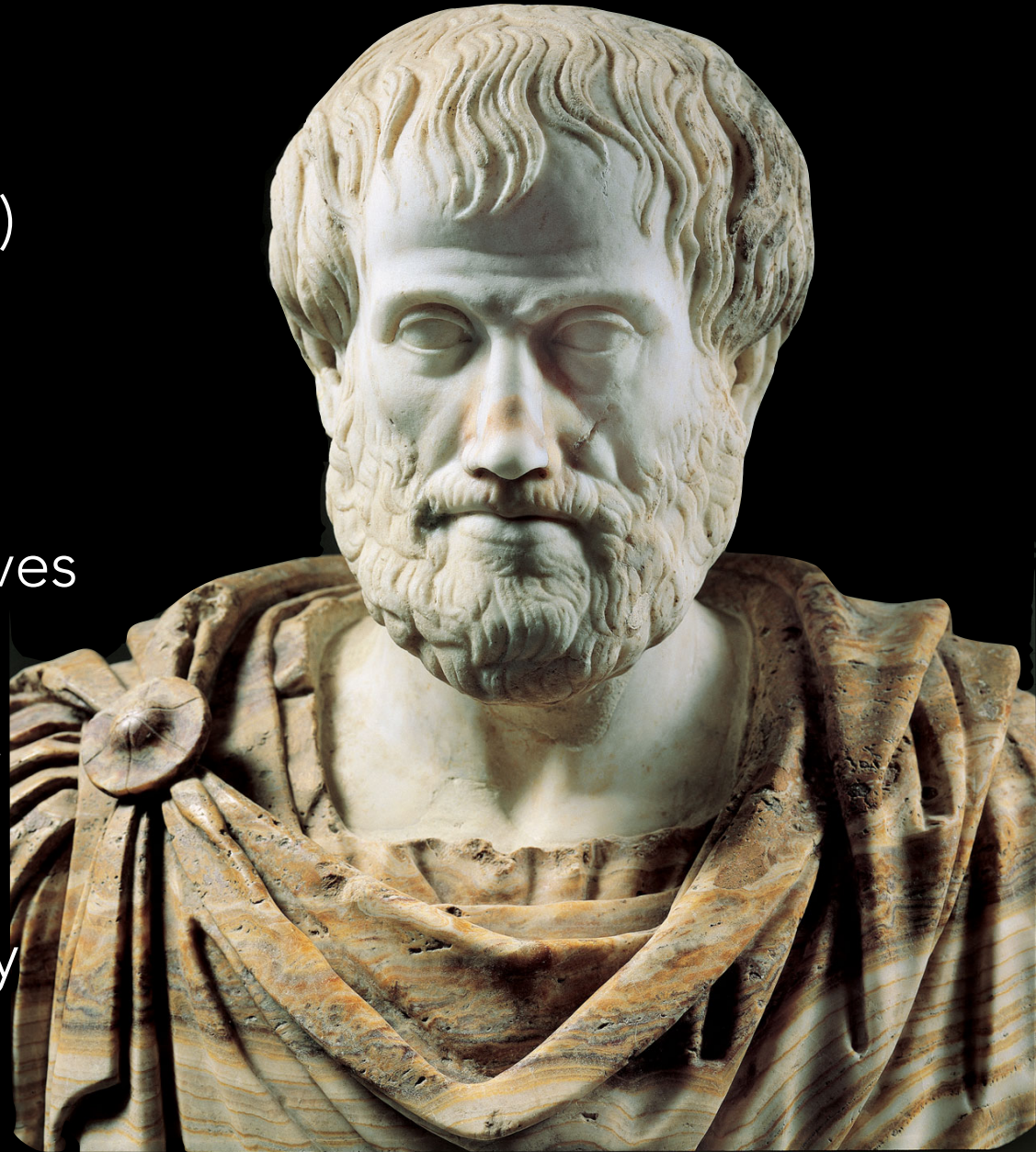
GREEK THEATER

- Over time, subjects become less religious: tragedies, comedies, "satyr" plays (vulgar, playful, serious)

- competitive: Sophocles always wins or comes in second

- initially a single actor and the chorus (the people)

- Aeschylus (520-455) adds a second actor, Sophocles a *third!* (Also backdrops)

THE "RULES" OF TRAGEDY

- Only a 24 hour period can depicted in the play (hence copious backstory)

- one place (everyone gathers)

- one topic (focus on a single character)

- A "fatal flaw" (*hamartia*) proves to be the hero's undoing

- Play elicits strong feelings of anxiety (fear, grief) for the audience that are collectively "purged" (catharsis)

GREEK THEATER

- masks worn in order to make the actor into a role, not an individual

- although Dionysus largely a female cult, female roles (private) performed by men (public)

- women *may* have been present in audience; still important female roles (Jocasta, Antigone)

- 12-50 members of chorus (15 in Sophocles); possibly sung

- Acting stylized, ritualistic

Oedipus Rex (1957): Oedipus vows revenge

GREEK THEATER

- *theatron* (theater) = "seeing place"

- *amphitheaters* (double seeing place) were large (could seat up to 14,000)

- *orchestra* (dancing place) contained the *chorus*

- backdrop called *skênê* (scene), space in front called *proskenion* (proscenium), literally "scene front"

- *parados* (entry) and *exodos* (exit); *mechane* (crane for flying); *deus ex machina* (gods descend onto the stage via mechanical joist)

- Thespis (6th c BC) first known actor, i.e., first *thespian*

FEET
METRES

N

THEOLOGEION

THYROMATA

LOGEION

PARODOS

ECCYCLEMA

HOIST
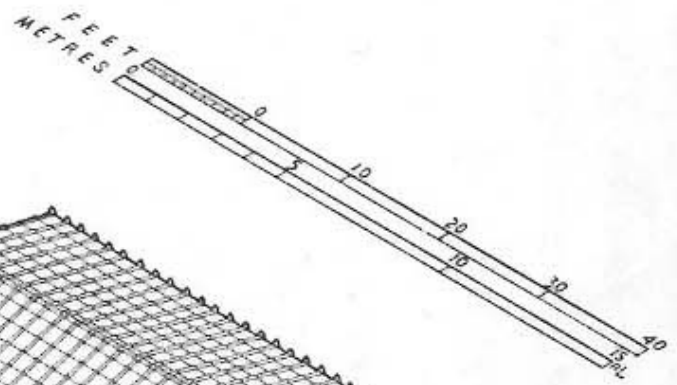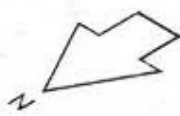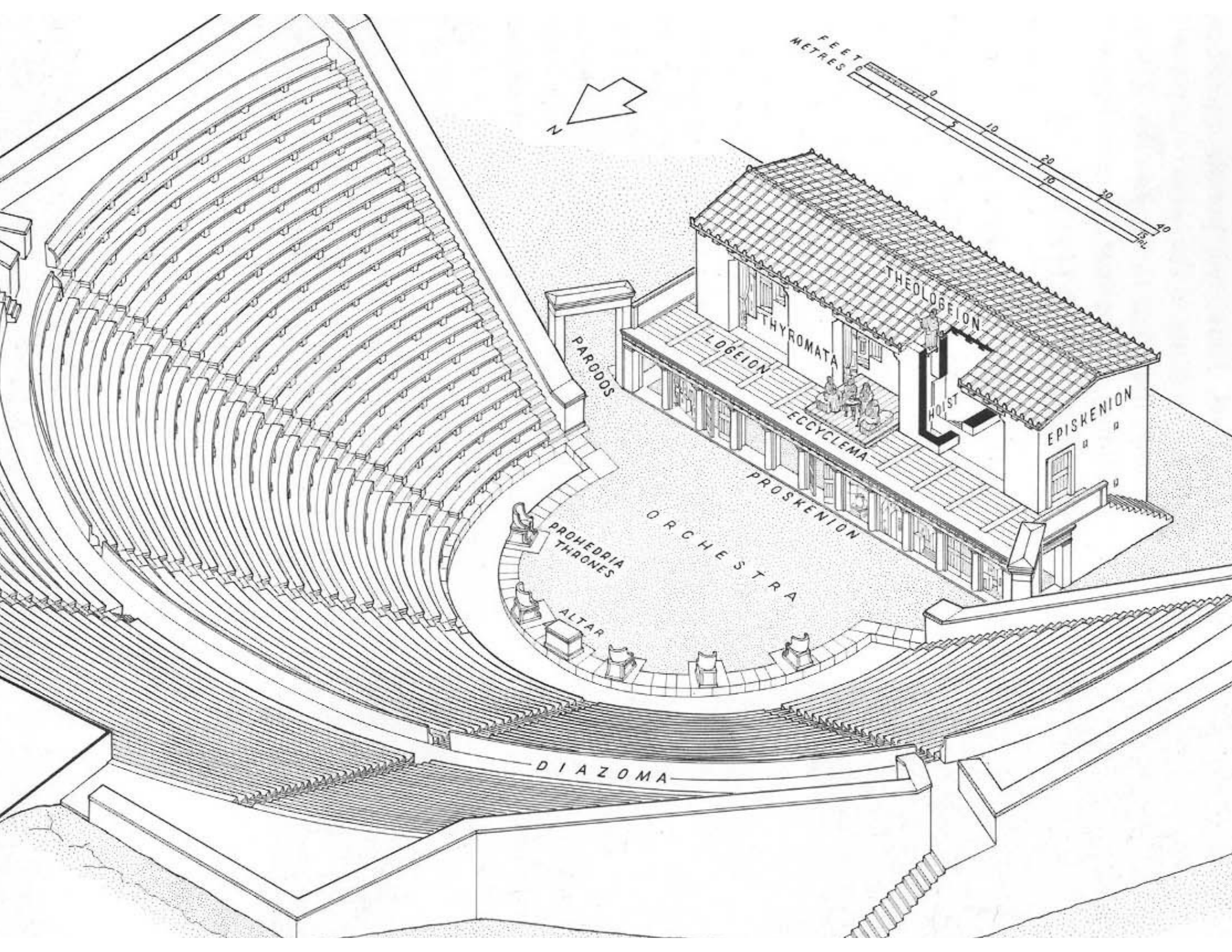
EPISKENION

PROSKENION

ORCHESTRA

PROHEDRIA
THRONES

ALTAR

DIAZOMA

SOPHOCLES

- ca. 497– ca. 406 BC (over 90 at the time of his death)

- wealthy family, highly educated

- the greatest dramatist of antiquity; almost all of his plays are lost (we have 7 of 123)

- *Oedipus at Colonus* was written in the year of his death, one of three "Theban plays"

- advanced complexity, especially through *irony*
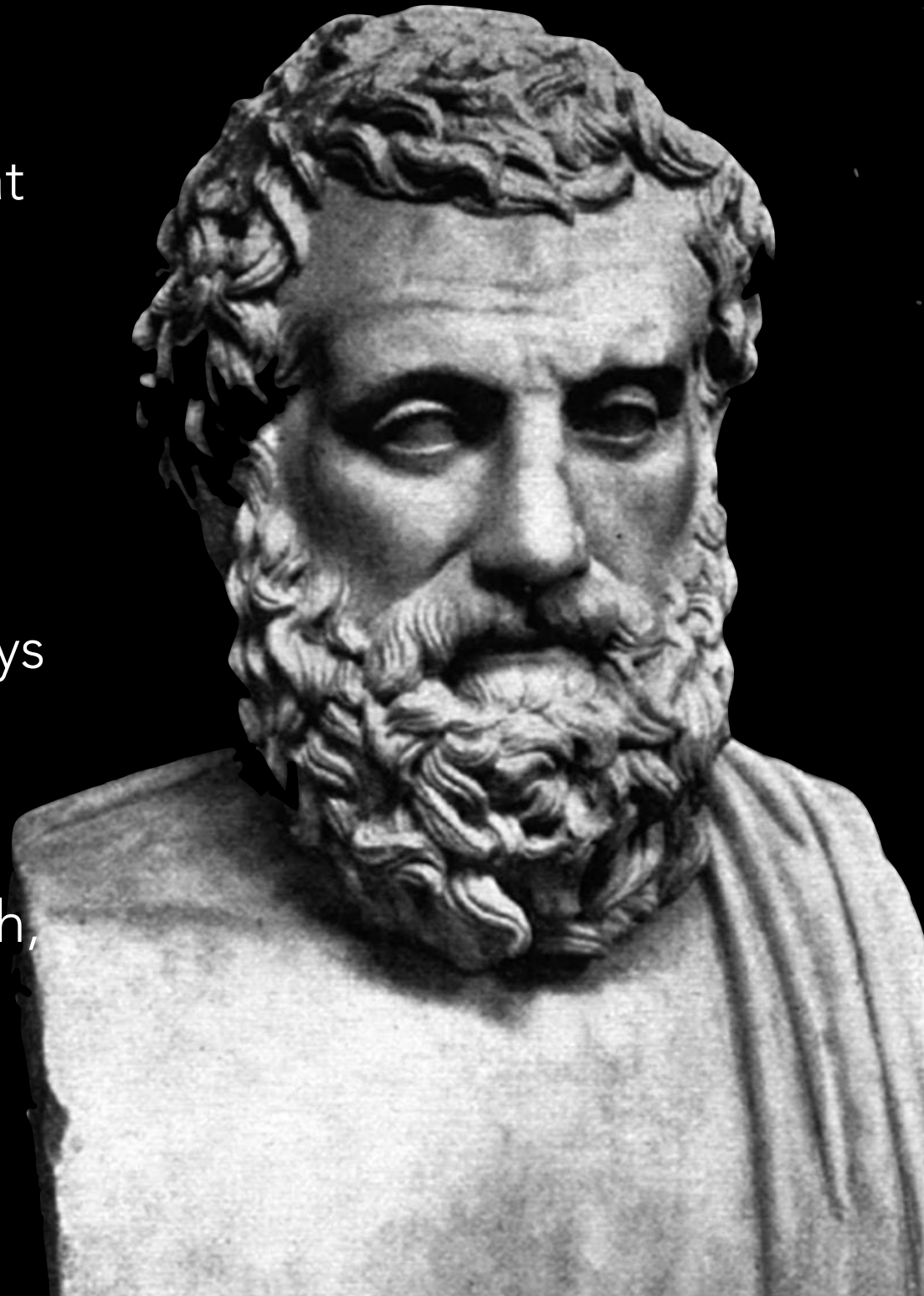
IRONY

THE
1990s

Reality Bites (1994): Lelaina (the mom from *Stranger Things* but like *way* younger), a videography student, tries to get a job after college.

1996,
"IRONIC"

is it or isn't it
IRONIC?

10,000 SPOONS But NO knife

NO Smoking SIGN on CIGARETTE BREAK

isn't it IRONIC?

TRAFFIC jam WHEN YOU ARE ALREADY late

FREE Ride BUT ALREADY PAID

RAIN on your WEDDING day

MEET MAN of DREAMS then meet WIFE

Mr. FRAID to FLY CRASHED in FLIGHT

IRONY

- irony: enormous confusion surrounding one of the few *tropes* (figures of speech) that we use and talk about every day

  - "Wow. That's so ironic."

- But English teachers tell us that irony is when you say the literal opposite of what you mean!

- But now the definition of "literally" in the dictionary has been changed to include the meaning "metaphorically, not literally"

  - Wait: is *that* ironic?

literally | ˈlitərəlē, ˈlitrə- |
adverb

in a literal manner or sense; exactly: *the driver **took it literally** when asked to go straight across the traffic circle* | *tiramisu, literally translated "pick me up."*

- *informal* used for emphasis or to express strong feeling while not being literally true: *I have received literally thousands of letters.*

usage: In its standard use, **literally** means 'in a literal sense, as opposed to a nonliteral or exaggerated sense': *I told him I never wanted to see him again, but I didn't expect him to take it **literally**.* In recent years, an extended use of **literally** (and also **literal**) has become very common, where **literally** (or **literal**) is used deliberately in nonliteral contexts, for added effect: *they bought the car and **literally** ran it into the ground.* This use can lead to unintentional humorous effects (*we were **literally** killing ourselves laughing*) and is not acceptable in formal English.

All of these examples *are*, in fact, ironic.
Is it ironic that everyone attacked a song
called "ironic" for not being really about irony
when in fact, it really *was* about irony?
Yes. But it's not Ethan Hawke's irony.

IRONY

- Socratic irony: "I'm so glad you know what virtue is, Meno—I don't know what it is at all! Tell me!"

- verbal irony: "I have to get a root canal. How delightful."

- dramatic irony: "Find me the killer of Laius!"

- cosmic irony: I moved to a foreign land to avoid fulfilling the prophecy—and thus fulfilled the prophecy

Nothing is Written In Stone
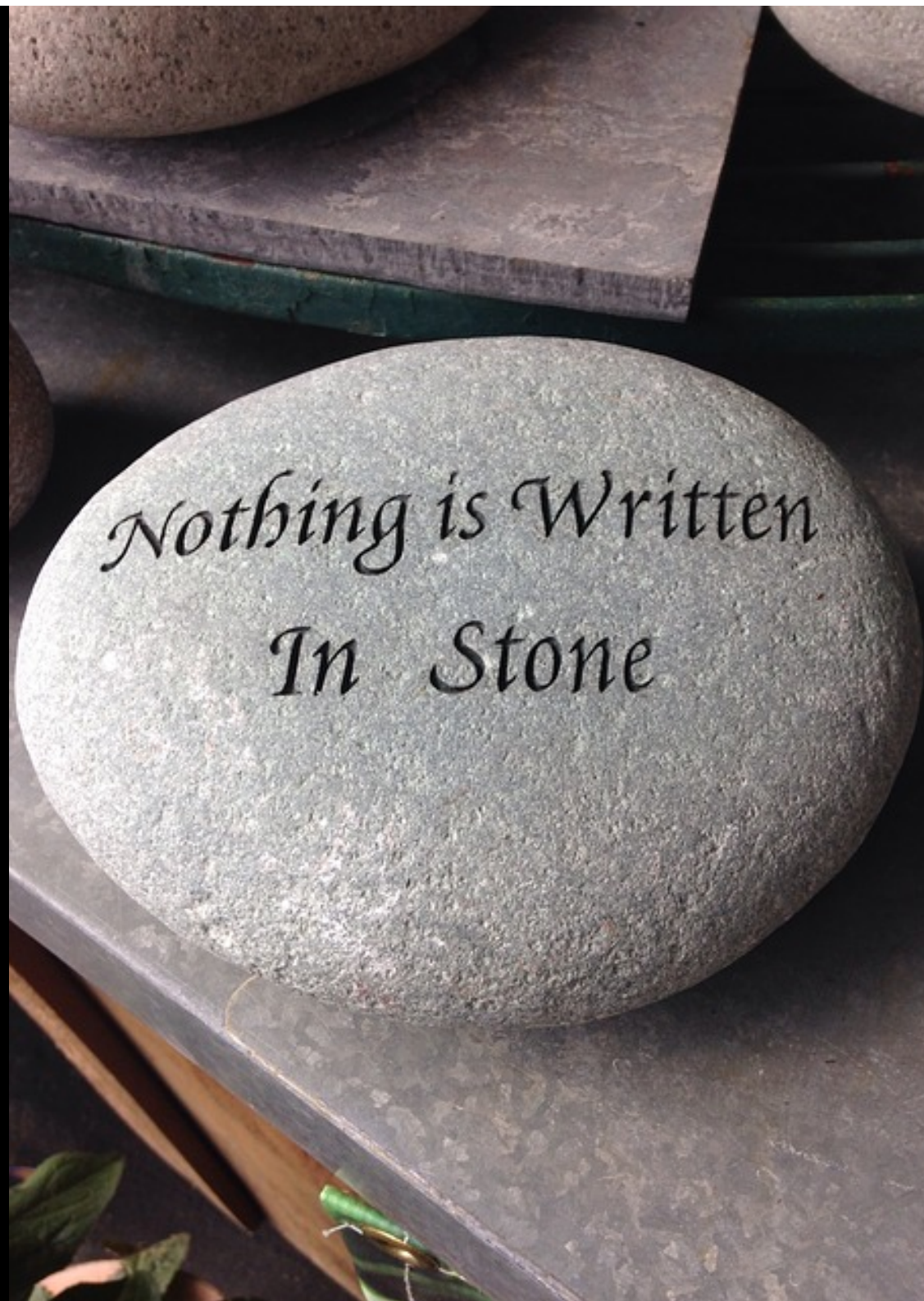
irony: a condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events *as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things*.

—The *Oxford English Dictionary*

SO, WHAT IS IRONY?

MIND THE GAP

verbal	Socratic	dramatic	cosmic
literal meaning	appearance	performer's knowledge	expectation

THE GAP

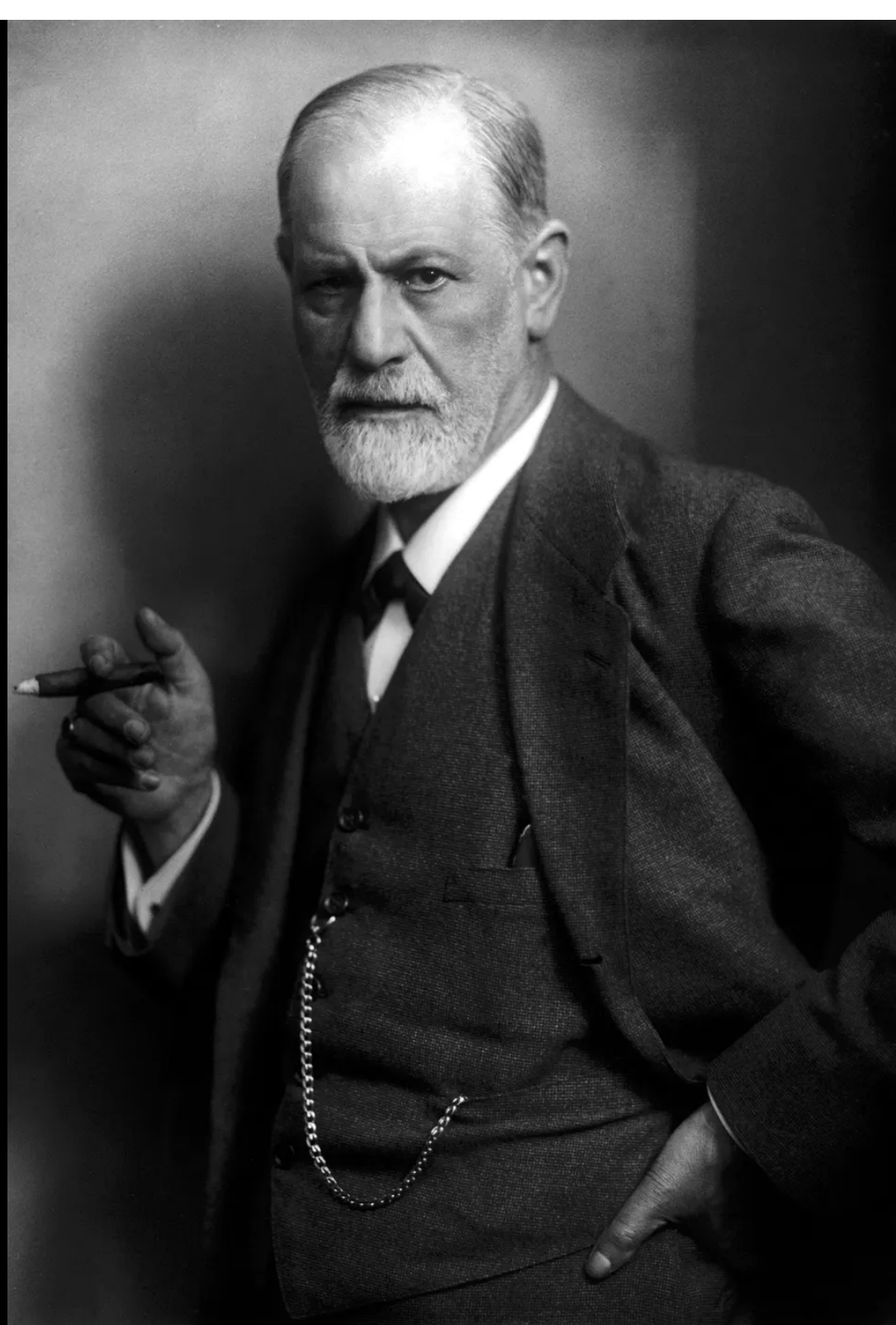|			
actual meaning	reality	audience's knowledge	reality

IRONY

- dramatic irony and psychology

  - Sometimes others understand the true meaning of our words—and we do not

  - I perform myself at all times —but for which audience?

  - the "other stage" (*andere Schauplatz*)

  - the "primal scene"

- *Oedipus the King* is *the* text of dramatic irony

Oedipus Rex (1957): Oedipus vows revenge

Oedipus Rex (1957): Oedipus investigates

DRAMATIC IRONY

- "She who would have borne him heirs, had he but lived…"

- 'I take up his cause, even as I would if it were that of my own father…"

- "I will bring to light the murderers of Laius!"

- "In doing right by Laius, I protect myself…"

- "…whoever slew Laius might turn a hand against me!"

IRONY.

DRAMATIC IRONY

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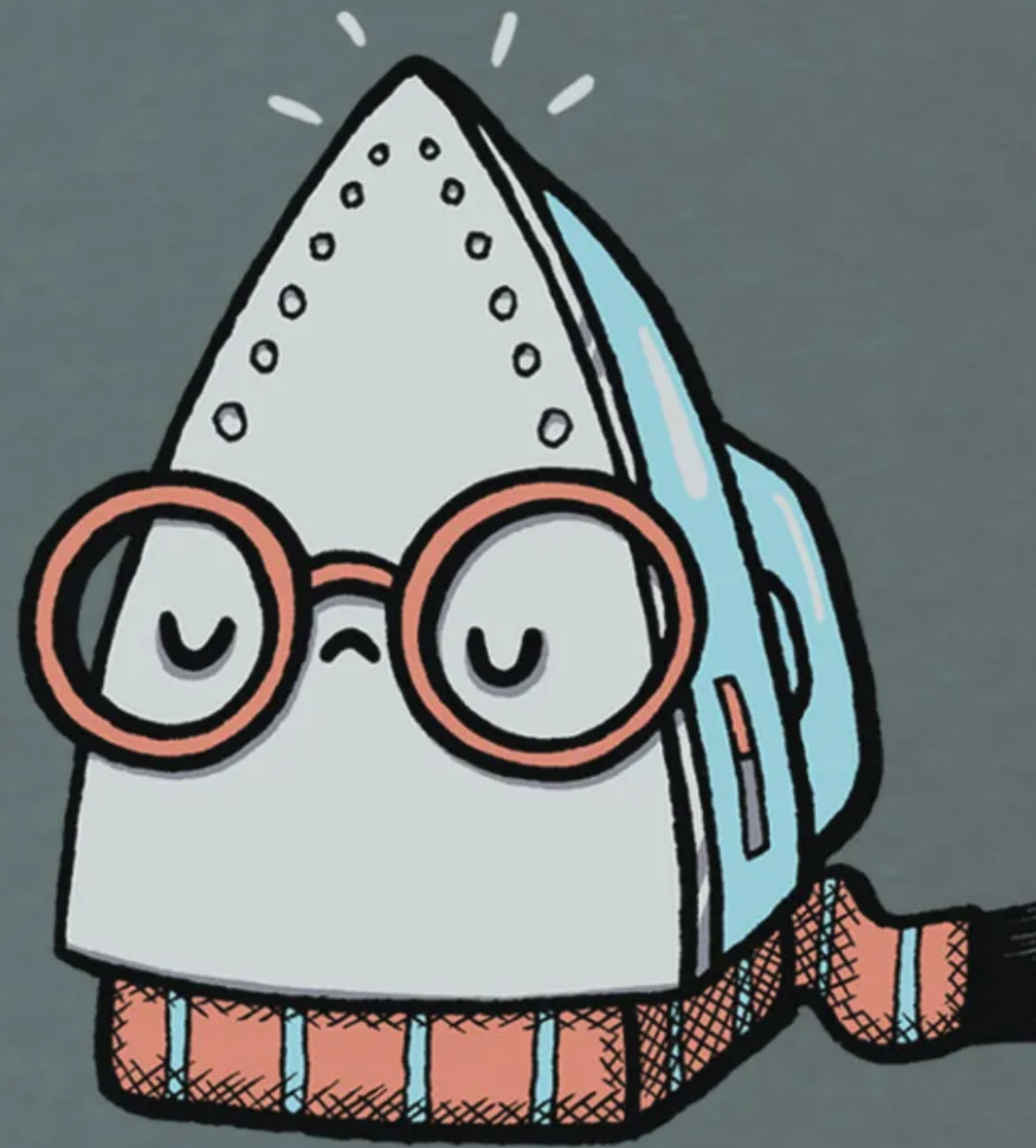
■ Perversely true

■ Perversely untrue

She *did* bear him an heir — you!

He actually *is* your own father!

You will — but it will not be a good thing for you!

No! Quite the opposite!

He might — and he will!

"Listen to me and learn that human beings
have no part in the craft of prophecy.
Of that I'll show you a short proof.
There was an oracle that told Laius
that it was fate that he should die a victim at the
hands of his own son. But, see now, he,
the king, was killed by foreign highway robbers
at a place where three roads meet…
and for the son—before three days were out
after his birth King Laius pierced his ankles
and by the hands of others cast him forth
upon a pathless hillside."

–OEDIPUS THE KING

"So Apollo
failed to fulfill his oracle to the son,
that he should kill his father, and to Laius
also proved false in that the thing he feared,
death at his son's hands, never came to pass.
So clear in this case were the oracles,
so clear and false."

–OEDIPUS THE KING

THE SPHINX

- knowledge and self-knowledge (blindness and insight)

- the riddle of the Sphinx

- the answer of Oedipus

- How correct? How wrong?

- he answers in the universal ("man") rather than in the particular, missing what is individual about him, how he, Oedipus, walks

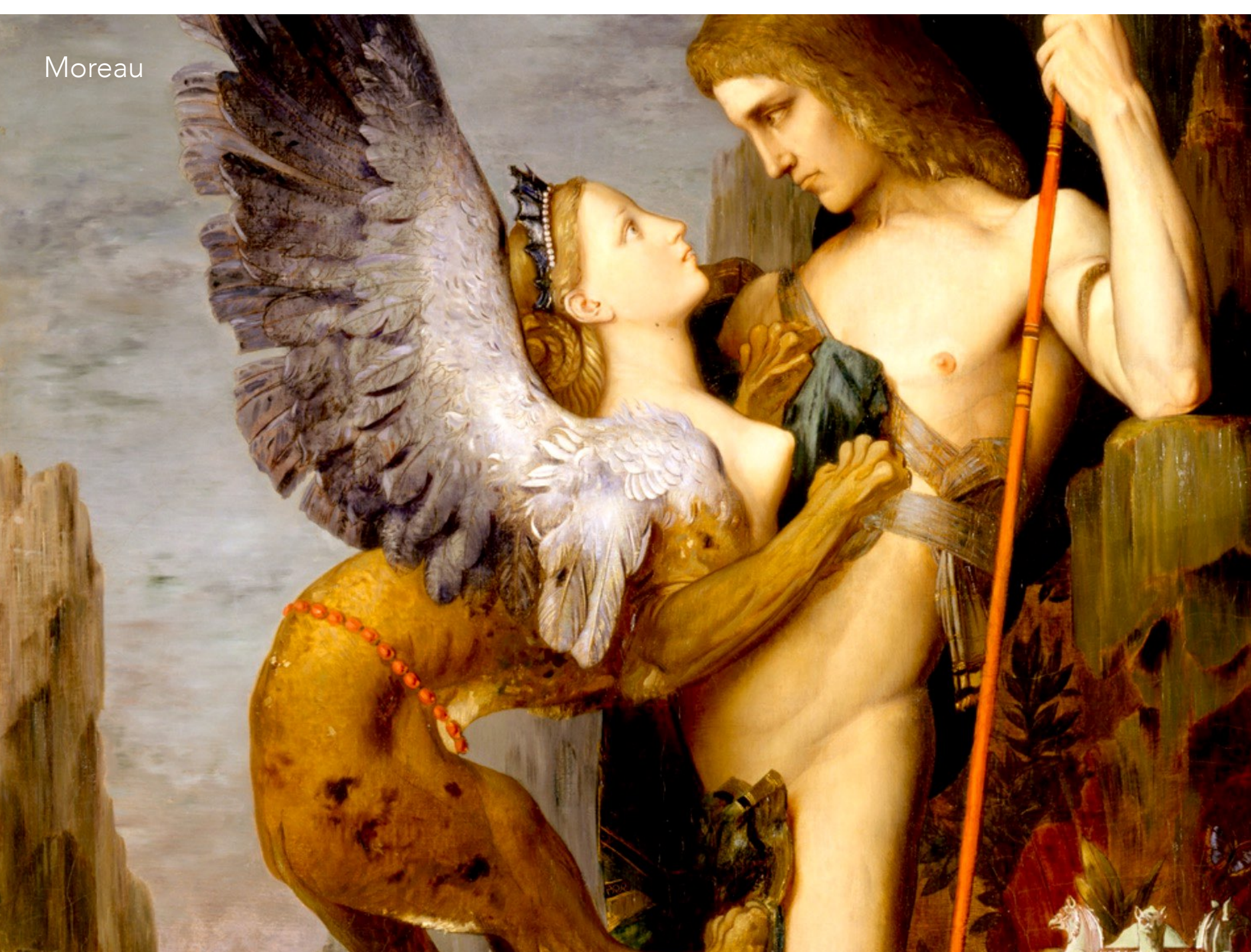- written in his name: Oedi-pus (swollen foot)

Moreau

Fabre

Moreau

OEDIPUS AND PLATO

- knowledge vs. self-knowledge (blindness and insight)

- Sophocles asks seriously about the paradox of self-knowledge. Is it always good to know the truth about yourself? What if that truth were monstrous? What if I turned out to be the thing I most loathed and feared?

- Contrast to the author of the motto "know thyself" — Socrates/Plato (Platocrates!)