

Hanna M. ROISMAN
TEIRESIAS AND OBI-WAN KENOBI

Both Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and the *Star Wars* trilogy present an old sage, whose function in the narrative is to be a sincere and good adviser, whether to the city of Thebes, or to the young Luke Skywalker, the Jedi-to-be. In both cases, however, the well-intentioned advisers reveal a streak of dissembling in their advice or lack of it. Both works maximize the role of the advisers in terms of the artistic residue the spectators carry with them at the end of the performance.

Students' questions about *Oedipus the King* more than often serve as an almost eternal mainspring for isolating crucial problems. One is ubiquitous: "How come Oedipus never tried to account for the shape of his ankles?" Although one can disarm this and similar questions by the handy although not entirely satisfactory axiom of the Aristotelian *exo tês tragôidias* "beyond the scope of the play," there is one question that cannot be dismissed as easily since it is posed explicitly and provocatively by Oedipus to Creon: "Why didn't your wise man say anything then?" (568). That is to say, why didn't Teiresias tell who murdered Laius when the initial investigation took place? The follow-up question is, of course, "Why didn't Teiresias prevent humankind's greatest taboo: the marriage of a son to his mother?" Both questions are crucial, but the latter is especially of such powerful significance in terms of human behavior that the answer to it always leaves one perplexed. The usual answers; that Teiresias might have feared Oedipus's reaction, or that Teiresias is just the mouthpiece of Apollo, do not hold water. It does not seem in the tragedy that Teiresias reveals the secret to Oedipus either voluntarily or under Apollo's inspiration, or that he is afraid of him. He speaks when he is enraged by Oedipus and loses control, or wishes it to appear this way. It is noteworthy that in all other instances of seers in the extant plays of Sophocles, they are cast in prohibitive roles.

In the *Star Wars* trilogy a similar strategy is employed in regard to the role of Obi-Wan Kenobi. Obi-Wan, a master Jedi, appears as the benevolent old man who counsels and advises to good effect. And yet as the trilogy unfolds, we learn that in fact from the outset not only did he hide the facts about the identity of Luke Skywalker's father from Luke, but contrived to incite the son against his father to the point of trying to ensure that Luke would kill his own father. Eventually, just as Oedipus poses the ultimate question to Creon about the prior knowledge of Teiresias and the seer's failure to prevent the plight, so does Luke Skywalker challenge the spirit of the dead Obi-Wan to ask why Obi did not disclose the truth about Darth Vader's identity. We never get any answer from Teiresias or Creon to Oedipus's question. Obi's answer is evasive and unfulfilling: "What I told you was true from a certain point of view," he tells the young Luke.