Foucault’s Oedipus and the History of Truth

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The publication of Michel Foucault’s lecture courses at the Collège de France have provided new insights into his work. His 1970-71 course, entitled Lectures on the Will to Know, includes two important pieces dedicated to the figure of Oedipus, as we find him in Sophocles’ play, Oedipus the King. Foucault’s reading places the story of desire, familiar from Freud, to one side and instead presents Oedipus as uniquely placed in a configuration of knowledge, power, and history.

Importantly, in Oedipus, one can recognise the figure of man, which Foucault characterised in Les mots et les choses as at once the subject and the object of knowledge: Oedipus tries to find the identity of a murderer that he committed himself. In the context of the Sophocles’ play, Oedipus is at once caught in a certain relation between knowledge and politics, and disrupts that relation.

In this seminar, I will: 1) set out the reasons for Foucault’s interest in the figure of Oedipus against the background of his account of man in Les mots et les choses (The Order of Things); 2) situate his reading of Oedipus the King in relation to his analysis of knowledge, truth, and history, earlier in the same lecture course; 3) consider the extent to which Foucault’s analysis of the figure of Oedipus both looks back to Foucault’s earlier work on ‘archaeology’ and forward to his later writing, with a particular focus on the political dimension of the care of the self.