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# Souls/Soles of Signs Tell Totems and the Sphinx Wager

Darryl A. Smith M.Div., Ph.D.  
*Pomona College, Darryl\_Smith@pomona.edu*

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### Souls/Soles of Signs Tell Totems and the Sphinx Wager

*Darryl A. Smith*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper develops a philosophy of play through an analysis of the foot wager of the Sphinx. Applying a construction of the cosmology of Plato along with a Socratic etymology of her riddle's answer, it provides a reading of Sphingian contestation consistent with contemporary practices of deception found in modern games like poker. I argue that such deception is constitutive of the excessive illumination of signaling tells in games and that such excess, in turn, is indicative in allied political contexts of a covetous and acquisitive obsession with light. This theory makes use also of Ralph Ellison's refiguring of Oedipal play as a theory of tyranny and serves as a riposte to the psychoanalytic idea of the Oedipus complex.

**Keywords:** tells, true names, Sphinx, Oedipus, philosophy of play

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"I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men.

... [H]e had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

As a deceptive weapon, [bluffing] is at least as important as slowplaying. Whereas slowplaying suggests weakness when you have strength, bluffing announces strength when you are weak. Recollect the Fundamental Theorem of Poker: Any time an opponent plays his hand incorrectly based on what you have, you have gained; and any time he plays his hand correctly based on what you have, you have lost.

—David Sklansky, *The Theory of Poker*

In her bet with him, the Sphinx takes sly notice of the soles, thick and scarred, of her sandal-footed contestant.

As he confronts her with cool bluster there outside the gates of Thebes, to which he seeks entry, she already discerns something of importance in this peculiar quirk of his before he ever even announces his name – Oedipus – that means “swollen foot.” Aware of these things, certainly she also knows that there are other riddles among her knotted repertoire of puzzles that she might choose from in order to test this brash upstart. You know, riddles other than the particular one she likes to stump trespassers with that has everything to do

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with feet.<sup>1</sup> (Perhaps the one about the two sisters instead?)<sup>2</sup> But, no. This is the very one the Sphinx, as it were, runs with. This is the one she apparently stakes her life on—

—The one all about feet and uncanny footedness asked of a man himself defined by an uncanny footedness who is named after feet.

Hmm...

But the Sphinx is not so poor a gambler. There is much proverbial method in her madness. And if we are to purge from her choice of questions such ascriptions to it as those of ruinous stupidity or overwrought miscalculation (she is, after all, a very avatar of the cold scourge of Nemesis) and, instead, take her faithfully as a wholly capable and acutely adept revolutionary menace, one who reads men keenly, then let's examine these methods as tools of the erotics of gaming (*agon*) and the philosophy of play. For it may be in 1) probing the motivation of the Sphinx to operate as a kind of hedge and emblem against false purity in any authentic kind of dialectical play, on the one hand, as well as 2) examining her own critical discernment of something like the swelled feet of Oedipus as the cryptic tell of his own hidden true name, on the other, that commends this more charitable and, I believe, more edifying, interpretation both of her and of deception in games as such. Here I construe the mythic encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx as an effort on the part of the latter to teach Oedipus his true name. In doing so, and through the collateral enlightenment of Oedipus, the Sphinx achieves consummation, if not apotheosis, for herself as the most fearsome of monsters – i.e., a tutelary one. In short, and through a heretical reading through Ralph Ellison's refiguring of this mythic cycle, I suggest that the Sphinx – in strategic self-sacrifice rather than in being outdone – does not ultimately lose her bet with

Oedipus after all.<sup>3</sup>

To these ends, let us prepare to examine the relationship between game tells and true names. Through several different figures of the foot-wager mythos, first consider two about-faced pairs of anagrams drawn from modern Sphingian narratives. Each signals their source in respective gambling lairs – Ellison's "Golden Day," represented by the self-described "rounder," Peter Wheatstraw,<sup>4</sup> a gambling hauler of hoarded blueprints, and David Mamet's "House of Games," run by con artist Mike Mancuso. We find through these reflexive dyads an intuition regarding true names (autonyms) and use names (pseudonyms):

FORD: Listen to this: in her dream: she saw a foreign animal. What is the animal? She cannot think of the name. It's saying, the animal is saying, 'I am only trying to do good.' I say, 'What name comes up when you think of this animal?' She says it is a 'lurg,' it is called a 'lurg.' So if we invert 'Lurg,' a lurg' is a 'girl,' and she is the animal, and she is saying, 'I am only trying to do good.'

MARIA: And now someone has heard her. Good, Maggie, good for you. And now what are you going to eat?<sup>5</sup>

Consider the "girl-lurg" in relation to the Sphingian entity sung about by Wheatstraw, to whom he professes his love, in *Invisible Man*:

'She's got feet like a monkey  
Legs like frog—Lawd, Lawd!  
But when she starts to loving me  
I holler Whoooo, God-dog!  
Cause I loves my baabay,  
Better than I do myself...'<sup>6/7</sup>

Like Mamet's "girl-lurg," Ellison's "God-dog" is a quite conscious aesthetic juxtaposition of the old colloquial expression with condensed Sphingian overtones, one semantically shot through with all manner of tactical implications for the recognition and resolution of puzzles. This same aural-textual construction of reflexive dyads with all their strategic intent and intricacy intact is manifest in the

brinkmanship of tell-reading within a gambling setting. Consider the representative tells below for weak and strong hands, respectively (Figs. 1a and 1b<sup>8</sup>). Noting the middle player and his bearing relative to the bettor seated to his immediate right, suggests the relevance of correct takes on bodily axial dynamism and divergence for successful tell-reading. Such somatic axes are equally relevant and, indeed, wholly akin to their semantic counterparts such as those above of Mamet and Ellison—behaviors across which are indispensable to the activity of true-naming.

In terms of tell reading, we may visually conceptualize the alternative visions of the Sphinx's foot-wager with Oedipus. Holding in parallel the images above with the following, the Sphinx is construed in the first instance (Fig. 2a) as holding a weak-hand, indicative of the orthodox interpretation of her situation with respect her challenger. In the next image (Fig. 2b), she holds her head in a position that under tell-reading pedagogy is indicative of a strong hand, the sort of upper hand Ellison would likely ascribe to her. Also, the monster appears to fix her gaze upon the feet of Oedipus, as if she were reading his tell-sign and surmising much in the run-up to the asking of her riddle.

This connection to Sphingian about-faced anagrams, both of the semantic kind within the arts and of the somatic variety in gambling (another art form, to be sure) is captured within a third modern narrative containing the Sphinx. In Jean Cocteau's 1934 play, *The Infernal Machine*, a Theban mother reports on the death of her son at the hands of the monster:

MOTHER. My young son says he was caught in a police trap, but I know better. The Sphinx killed him. If I live to be a hundred I'll remember that morning when they brought him home. I opened the door and there I could see *the soles of his poor feet, and far, far off his poor little face*. On his neck – just there – was a great wound, but

the blood wasn't flowing any more. He was on a stretcher. I just said, 'Oh-oh!' and fainted dead away.<sup>9</sup>

The distal meta-/physical relationship described between the feet of the boy and his face “far, far off” is cosmologically cogent. It bears centrally on the mythic conception of the axes and hierarchies of the body in the midst of agonistic play with other bodies. The response Oedipus gives the Sphinx in answer to her riddle, *Anthropos* (the human being), is reflective of that cosmic conception, as it is both the meta-/physical and etymological reversal of his own name. Outlining this relationship in Part I of this article via the cosmology of Plato as well as through Socratic etymological considerations of the term *Anthropos*, I consider how this Reply/Replier relationship bears upon the nature of deception along the continuum of all dialectical play, with a focus on poker tells as a modern practical exemplar of the Sphingian foot-wager. In Part II, I consider the nature of deception as a kind of inevitably excessive illumination rather than of darkness. And, through this construal, I reinterpret the proverbial Oedipus complex as a form – manifest in its namesake's political tyranny and as a result of his “forgetting his feet” – of covetous obsession with light (phoebomania<sup>10</sup>).

### Part I

So-called true names are traditionally associated with sacred language in the performance of some ostensibly supernatural activity, e.g., with conjuration, exorcism, summoning, etc. Within this sacred – some will prefer “magical” – language there has existed the belief that the personal name is an intrinsic part of the self that is, perhaps, in fact, even more intrinsic than physical parts of the body. As such, to utter the true name of someone or something is to invoke the essence in some sense of the inmost

other that bears that name.<sup>11</sup>

But what if, for some purpose or other, we wanted to know what these true names were and didn't? How would we go about detecting them? What relation would they bear, if any, with the pseudonymous use names that hide them? As my preparatory discourse on Oedipus suggests, true names do bear a relationship with their use names. Often, however, true names are not the so neatly perfect reversals of use names such as those addressed in the preceding section. Though it appears that such a notion of the cryptic "reflection" of a true name somewhere within the use name(s) it bears is an incorrigible constant. When they are not obviously "perfect" reflections they remain "tainted" or, more neutrally, "retentional" opposites of each other, and this exposes all the more keenly the natural bearing of *incomplete* exclusion that true and use names have upon each other. What this means is that some aspect of the true name is always already to be found in and as a vanishingly close opposite – but not complete opposite – of its use name. Structurally, then, this is a form of irony. More specifically, it involves a certain figure of speech within the family of irony known as enantiosis.<sup>12</sup> Without belaboring the point, the intuition here is simply that a true name is often a near, though not total, opposite of the name that hides it. I examine this notion through the cosmological antecedents of the foot-wager's Reply/Replier relationship – that is, between the nature of Oedipus' name and that of his answer to the Sphinx's riddle.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato articulates a view of the human body that renders it divine asymmetrically. Within his cosmogony, there are no less than three kinds of soul that govern the human form, with the godliest of them – the intelligence of *nous* – governing the head.<sup>13</sup> As this most celestial of bodily divisions, the head is that which lifts us from

the earth as rather a hyper-extended bulb of heaven hooked to an earthly outcropping. Practically, it contains all of what we are of cosmic goodness and, insofar as it manages our animal form, prepares us throughout life for our return to that good.

And as for the lordliest form of soul within us, one must think of it in this way: that god has given it to each of us as a divinity that dwells at the peak of our body and lifts us up toward our kindred in heaven and away from the earth, since we're not an earthly but a heavenly plant. And we say so most correctly, for it is from there, whence the soul's first birth sprouted, that our divine part, by suspending our head and root, would keep the entire body upright.<sup>14</sup>

Only when the head governs as the body's master, then, are they both truly upright.

*Anthropos* is defined as one that looks up at. It is distinguished from all those other beings in the cosmos that do not look up at things. But the implication here is that for it to be possible to look up at, one must be able to look up *from*. From whatever characterizes that space of oblivion that conditions what it is about those that cannot look up at, it is away from such a realm that the human creature is capable of performing a movement of departure. And this movement of departure – of looking up from, is the necessary transpositional reversal of "to look up at." It is the flipped sign of *Anthropos*. But in forgetting his feet, this is precisely what Oedipus cannot do. He cannot look up at because he cannot look up from. For him, there is no "from" there. As such, he cannot perform the defining action of *Anthropos* and, therefore, is not himself such a being at all in the critical sense. It is the swollenness of his feet that mark him as *An-anthropos* – non-human. His feet are not paired in proper *agon* with his head (*nous*) in order to be capable of the play necessary for him to look up at things. Rather, his feet are weighted down, grounding him, as it were to a condition akin to that which Plato reserves for the lowest of earth-crawling animals:

[T]he beastly form that goes on foot has been born from those who neither applied themselves at all to philosophy nor at all pondered the nature of the heavens, because they no longer made use of the circuits in their head but followed as their leaders those parts of the soul that are in the area of the chest. So from these pursuits their forelimbs and their heads were dragged down toward earth by their kinship with it and there supported;...and this was also the explanation for why their kind grew up four-footed and even many-footed, since god placed more supports under the ones that were more thoughtless, so that they might be dragged down toward earth.<sup>15</sup>

To which I'd add "swollen-footed." But, indeed, Oedipus so forgets his feet that, perhaps, he belongs to what, for Plato, is an even more wretched order of earth-dwelling creatures:

And since there was no further need of feet for the most thoughtless among these same animals, which had their whole body stretched along the earth, they begat them footless and crawling around on the ground.<sup>16</sup>

But the swollen, too-footed, feet of Oedipus are the physical source and signal meaning of his name. And as such, it puts the word in reflective contrast with the word he utters as his answer to the riddle of the Sphinx.

SOCRATES: The name *anthropos*, which was once a sentence, and is now a noun, appears to be a case just of this sort, for one letter, which is the alpha, has been omitted, and the acute on the last syllable has been changed to a grave.

HERMOGENES: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I mean to say the word 'man' implies that other animals never examine, or consider, or look up at what they see, but that man not only sees (*opope*) but considers and looks up at that which he sees, and hence he alone of all animals is rightly *anthropos*, meaning *anathron a opopen*.<sup>17</sup>

*Anthropos* and Oedipus are radical (not retentional) opposites. *Anthropos* is that which looks up at and Oedipus that which draws down to. But it is level-footedness in play along with level-headedness that conditions the erotics of real play that Plato sees as the authentic expression of philosophy. It is how *anthropos* works, since to look up at involves looking up *from*, a consideration we will explore more in Part

II. Oedipus is not level-footed. He is rather, over-footed and, as such, cannot engage in the activity and practice of looking up at. He cannot be *anthropos*. And, so, he utters the word as his answer to the Sphinx from a standpoint, if you will, of radical estrangement.

The Sphinx is aware of the estrangement – in the telling tone of Oedipus' utterance, in the tell of his swollen foot, in his inability to look up *from*. And she exploits it, terminally. But the terminus of her exploitation goes beyond mere death. Killing Oedipus, this (non-)man, there on the spot, would do little "honor" to the abysmal condition of a being such as he who cannot play at all. A thorough, perhaps a greater, monstrosity than even herself has been seen in Oedipus by the Sphinx through his telltale feet, the scandal of it a true challenge to her own.

## Part II

Really, tells – when read as such – are read as things of excessive brightness.

They are depleted or, better, are the depletions themselves, of the inherent irony that natural, conceptually perceivable, signs must bear. When you look at tells in gambling, in poker specifically, you find in them an absence – a lack to a lesser or greater extent, depending on the skill of the player – of this most natural form of irony that is always only near-irony. So, straightforwardly – too straightforwardly for nature, it turns out – with tells as tells, "weak means strong and strong means weak."<sup>18</sup> But it is precisely this straightforward oppositional irony that distinguishes a telling weak or strong hand from a natural, that is, real weak or strong hand. Any natural hand will detectably possess – in its play – the retained opposite of its relative power. As a brightness that is too bright to be real brightness, let us consider for a moment what I mean by this

in relation to the Oedipal foot-tell as detected by the Sphinx and as indicative of a tyrannical obsession with light. How in the “foot-forgetting” of his phoebomania does King Oedipus and Thebes relate to the colonial imperialism of, say, Joseph Conrad’s London, or Ralph Ellison’s New York City? Consider the following passages from the work of the latter two:

My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer’s dream night. But I take advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our civilization—pardon me, our whole culture (an important distinction, I’ve heard)—...I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness.<sup>19</sup>

How this extreme light is utilized by power in order, not to illuminate, but to hide things, and how such great brightness functions as a tell – one of weakness masquerading as strength – we will soon examine. Now, Conrad:

The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shown pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds.<sup>20</sup>

Both Ellison and Conrad see in this blinding light a tyranny behind it, a grand and compulsive hoarding addiction that gathers ever more such radiance to itself as a narcissistic balm of attention-catching and stain-removal. But such a compulsion is driven, of course, not by the possession but the perceived lack of potency, lack of enabling light. The mythos of such a lack involves a young man who comes to question his paternal origins and has a meeting that will prove deadly with someone – a ruler and charioteer both – whose course as sovereign he will disrupt. But this is the tale of Phaëton, as well as of Oedipus, who, being the son of the Sun

Phoebus (Helios) itself, seeks his father’s place.<sup>21</sup> And Ovid describes that place this way, from Phaëton’s point of view:

Here Phaeton still gaining on th’ ascent,  
To his suspected father’s palace went,  
’Till pressing forward through the bright abode,  
He saw at distance the illustrious God:  
He saw at distance, or the dazzling light  
Had flash’d too strongly on his aking sight.<sup>22</sup>  
[sic]

When asked by the Sphinx in Cocteau’s *Infernal Machine* what he wants most, among these desires Oedipus says, “the sun, the gold and purple” – all abundant attributes of the House of Phoebus.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Ellison’s nameless protagonist and Conrad’s Charles Marlow – though not entirely so – Oedipus/Phaëton is drawn to the excessive light of the potential source of his origin. But so taken by it is he that he wholly forgets himself or, rather, fails to know himself to begin with. Even as a young man, he is yet the oblivious infant left to die.

\* \* \*

Jocasta takes her baby boy up the mountain, piercing his feet in order to suspend him upside down on the bough of a tree before abandoning him there. For the duration of his torment, the child that will be named after the injury he incurs to his feet is, in his pain, all there is to him. This propels us into a concern for the relationship between the torture of language (as tells entail the torture of signs) and its relationship to the torture of the body (as tells implicate the torture of soles). The signs of torture (on human bodies), on the one hand, and the torture of signs (of certain words on the other). Both the literal and the literary study of the “signs” (marks) of torture are tortured in much the same way. When the body is tortured, it is placed under a form of duress that forces a part of the body to “stand (in)” for the whole. It is, for the duration of torment, just “all there is” to the body in the midst of torture and at the site of elicited pain. In this sense, torture

becomes an eliminative process, reducing the infinitude of the body human to the singular and total “event” of extracted pain. But just as we can understand the signs of torture in this way, we can similarly construe the language of tortured signs. In literary creation – in Aeschylus and Thoreau, Hawthorne and Ellison, Dostoevsky and Orwell – signs are revised in the service and disservice of life through like means of elimination and replacement.<sup>24</sup> Consider oft-cited slogans from a certain dystopian text by the latter:

Ignorance is Strength / War is Peace /  
Slavery is Freedom<sup>25</sup>

These are Orwellian instances of what I've been calling retentional opposites. It is this same inevitable ambiguity with language that let's us recognize in that strange backhanded sense that we can what, indeed, is “strong” about ignorance in that nightmarish verse “Ignorance is Strength” and, yes, what we know intuitively is, in fact, *sort of* peaceful about even war in the scriptural party motto of INGSOC, “War is Peace.” That part of war that can be ironically “peaceful” is made to crowd out the rest of the sign “war.” (Of course, the making of war permanent is one such way of doing this.) Similarly, the underlying refrain of, say, the torture memos of the U.S. Office of Special Council a few years ago – memos which tortured the very sign “torture” as they did – become something, anything other than torture. And that whatever remained besides torture as both sign and effect was just “all there was (to it)” and nothing more. The sign was reduced strictly to “interrogation,” and could be nothing more than the tortured body can be a human being but, instead, only a solicited pain-register.

In other words, when Orwell says, for example, “War is Peace,” he's exploiting deeply by destroying thoroughly the inherent, nature ambiguity of opposites. He

makes *overbright*, *hyperluminous*, what is, indeed, peaceful (e.g., habitual, new normal/normative, annihilative) about protracted war. Tells – poker tells and foot-tells alike – are tells in this same sense: they 'tell' because they are overbright with a reductive conceptual element that conditions its own lack of ambiguity by eliminating the retained opposite. With tells of weakness, the reader is picking up on an attempt to look like natural weakness. But natural weakness always carries with it the taint of ambiguity, collusions with strength. The tell of weakness is told because weakness is overplayed. It is weakness overlit. In this sense, a tell of weakness is, as it were, “more weak than weak.” And a tell of strength is “more strong than strength.” So, again, whenever weak means strong, this means, too, that this “weak” is *too* weak to be real weakness. This “strong” is *too* strong to be real strength. It is too unambiguously weak. It is too clearly strong. It is too good, but better, too pure, to be true. There's a little bit even of the foot in any eye.<sup>26</sup>

The irony of Oedipus' obstinate certitude is that his own excessive clarity is what makes him unclear about things. All true clarity contains some confusion, some illusion. The Sphinx sees in his forgotten feet and hears in his answer to her riddle just this kind of hyperclarity and exploits it, just as Wheatstraw does in hearing the apparent clarity of literalness in the voice of the protagonist in *Invisible Man*. Fearsomely, both take it upon themselves to help correct it. *Anthropos*, as that which looks up at must look up *from* something and understand this obscured though indispensable aspect of looking up at in order to truly see. Oedipus does not because he never is down in order to look up *from* there in the first place.

So, it is not just its opposition but, rather, the relative purity of its opposition to its converse that makes a tell a tell. In fact, without that purity of disambiguation, a tell



cannot be a tell that tells at all. Tells tell through an excess of clarity however slight. A tell is a deception, and a deception requires an overbrightening. Deception just is an overbrightening. And, too, deception is, of course, a darkness.

As a term, the “Golden Day” is yet another indication drawn from literature of excessive light, set within a tyrannical colonial setting wherein lurking Sphinxes can be found wagering with the gullible. It is Ralph Ellison's name for a place where decent people from the protagonist's Southern college never go and where a band of ostensibly crazy war veterans cut up on the wrong side of the tracks: “The Golden Day. It's a kind of sporting-and-gambling house...”<sup>27</sup> However, the Golden Day is also Ellison's allusion to the title and term which the famous historian Lewis Mumford uses to identify that storied period in American life, literature and letters between 1830 and 1860, also known as the American Renaissance. But if Mumford's is an historic revival – one so splendid that it deserves styling as the “Golden Day” (with all the same sort of blinding luster that we find in Conrad's London in *Heart of Darkness*) then it is because in Ellison's view such a golden day is hiding something. It is hiding “dark with excessive bright,” as John Milton put it,<sup>28</sup> what we know too well is also going on in the United States of that antebellum period. It conceals, dark with such excessive bright, the cost to large parts of the national population for that so-called Golden Day.<sup>29</sup> So, again, here is the irony of Ellison's epithet for the *other* Golden Day, the one in his novel. Ellison's Golden Day is separated by the railroad tracks and isolated from the beautiful college that the protagonist attends, where “[t]he buildings were old and covered with vines and the roads gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun.”<sup>30</sup> Ellison's (near-)ironic Golden Day is

darkened out by the blinding light of the beautiful college. But he is suggesting that this is an attempt to erase the inevitable, radical indebtedness that the college owes to the Golden Day “casino” for its existence.

When Orwell says in his anti-colonial essay, “Killing an Elephant,” that, “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys,” he is making a statement about his realization of the ambiguity – the collusion – of all natural opposites. Like the peace there is somewhere inside war, control ends up meaning servitude for the character. He does not realize this beforehand, as the British Crown is overbright with its Burmese colony. His being forced as a “sahib” to kill an elephant that he does not want to kill makes him aware of this. Slowly, the protagonist of *Invisible Man* will learn that the bright college is likewise indebted and, indeed, beholden in ways he couldn't understand before to the Golden Day sporting-and-gambling house – the overbrightness of the former no longer a concealment but a tell of that condition.

And it will be the Golden Day itself, that persists Sphinx-like, to teach him this. While emphatically a gambling house, Ellison's Golden Day has not always been just that alone. It has also served variously as a church, then a bank, then a restaurant. “I think somebody said it used to be a jailhouse too,” as one of the mad veterans there explains.<sup>31</sup> Ellison does this not only to reiterate his many Sphingian symbols, but also to press the idea of gambling as a cipher for ambiguity itself – of the sheer taintedness of any sign or figure.

Rounder David Sklansky says that card games like poker are games of incomplete information. These, he maintains, are unlike games such as backgammon, checkers, and chess, in which there is always a mathematically optimal play available for each move because all of the information

needed for perfect play is there on the board to be seen. These latter, then, are games that trade in a form of denotative certainty that poker cannot. They are scientific.<sup>32</sup> But, Ellison's protagonist asks, "What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment?"<sup>33</sup> By this same contrast, in poker, one must artistically supply what information is missing from the game at any given time by both sticking as close to how you'd play if such information were there and by preventing as far as possible your opponents from doing the same. He refers to this principle as the Fundamental Theorem of Poker.

"Creating mistakes is, in a sense," Sklansky concludes, "the whole objective of the game."<sup>34</sup> If this is so, then poker – and all games of incompleteness as such – are antithetical to the manifest intentions of totalizing, i.e., radically disambiguating, imperialism.<sup>35</sup> Imperialism, as someone like George Orwell articulates it, is intent on not creating mistakes – not even in its "native" opponent. Rather, its aim is to create an order so certain and so completely articulated that everyone, sahib and native alike, know their own place exactly within the system of the regime. As the regulative ideal – that ideal made manifest in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* – mistakes are made to be made impossible because play itself is to be made impossible. Everyone is to know what to do, how to act, what to expect. In his essay "Shooting an Elephant," Orwell relays this agenda of colonial imperialism as the conditioning of comprehensive, error-free social discipline when the narrator speaks of his own and the attitude of the crowd that watches him:

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute... I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes – faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. ...And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant

after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. ...[I]n reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives," and so in every crisis he has got to do what the "natives" expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible.<sup>36</sup>

Just as words are eliminated in the production of the radically denotative language of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the colonial tyrant yearns for and, indeed, acts out the death of play – play that can only occur with the collusion of darkness (i.e., in *agon* with the lack of light) in his pursuit of inviolable order. It seeks to place everything into daylight with the covetousness of such daylight that makes of the tyrant a glowing heliocentric omniscience. Colonial tyranny behaves as if in a world of static aftermath: any game had concluded long ago and the present is only that post-historical and eternal age of "GAME OVER." The much-regarded End of History. By contrast, games – like poker – that intended to be incomplete, open-ended, and reversible in terms of fortune and misfortune are instantiations of play itself and thus of the anathema of colonial phoebomaniacal obsession. "Sahib" or "Master," is the mask and masking use name that, at once, tells the narrator's true name: "I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys."<sup>37</sup>

Tells are the equivalent of the use name that conceal, but also reveal, a true name.

The true name is the actual, that is to say, autonymic hand of the player as shown in the behavior he's failed, through the tell, to hide. As the mere use name, tells announce the (telling) player's hidden true name through the "excessive bright" a tell gives off – those inevitably overly disambiguating oppositional behaviors to the player's actual, autonymic hand.

### Conclusion

To read these together – the Sphingian wager and the foot figure *qua* tell totem – as a meditation on play and the requirements for play, invites wonder about the breakdown of play as a living capacity of sentient agents and the terminal/interminable consequences of such a breakdown. Such consequences are grave indeed and are, perhaps – as the unseen sign of the Oedipus myth suggests – far worse than any loss through authentic play could ever be. The soul-sign/sole-sign of Oedipus, is a tell that the Sphinx reads not only to fathom the risk there is in all play but also, finally, to recognize the risk to life itself as that to which a threat to play itself *is*.

### About the Author

Darryl A. Smith, M.Div., Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Pomona College and Affiliate of the Intercollegiate Department of Africana Studies at the Claremont Colleges.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

**Fig. 1a - Looking Toward: Strong Means Weak**



**Fig. 1b - Looking Away: Weak Means Strong**



**Fig. 2a - The Sphinx as a weak-handed bettor**



**Fig. 2b - The Sphinx as a strong-handed bettor**



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The feet of Oedipus were bound by his mother to prevent him from one day committing the actions to which he was fated. The Riddle of the Sphinx – “What goes on 4 legs in the morning, 2 at midday, and 3 in the evening?” asks after the identity of something of uncanny footedness. Oedipus is such a podonymic being himself being asked to name a podonymic being.

<sup>2</sup> There is reference, apparently, to at least one alternative riddle of the Sphinx with which she terrorized challengers. See *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*, C. Scott Littleton, ed. 2005. “Some tragedians claimed that the Sphinx also had a second riddle: “There are two sisters. One gives birth to the other, then that one gives birth to the first. Who are they?” The answer to the second riddle is Night and Day, which [in Greek] are both feminine nouns.” P. 1042.

<sup>3</sup> We need not domesticate the Sphinx and divest her of her legendarily monstrous nature to suggest that she does not necessarily intend to kill Oedipus. One may simply suggest that she has a more thorough form of killing in mind for him, not merely physical. As such, I would suggest that a reasonable alternative motive, given the riddle she chooses for him, is to destroy the present Oedipus in the worst (possible) way – by teaching him his true name. She gains power to do this when he obliviously utters that name in practical ignorance of just what it means. He is then set on a journey that will radically rescind him (and resurrect him) in a way that merely taking his physical life never could. It is by a tell that she sees in the form of Oedipus’ swollen foot, I’m suggesting, that prompts her terrifying gamble. So, the Sphinx is still every bit a monster – just a greater monster than we at first might have suspected. She’s the more monstrous for being willing to die herself in order to achieve this end. And, perhaps, in terms of wagering, her own death is still a great deal less of a loss than the kind of destruction that awaits Oedipus.

<sup>4</sup> See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. “Somehow he was like one of the vets from the Golden Day.” P. 174. I assimilate Wheatstraw to the goings-on at the “asylum” because the protagonist rightly does.

<sup>5</sup> Exchange between Margaret Ford and Maria Littauer, David Mamet’s “House of Games: A Screenplay.” Though not required in order to make the specific case I’m developing above about how true names are discerned, I interpret Margaret herself as an instantiation of the Sphinx – herself the “foreign animal” – in Mamet’s film. As a psychoanalyst who feels does no real good but, rather, only cons her patients, she essentially exposes and articulates the unique riddle of each of her clients but cannot, for all that, help them to practically resolve the puzzle of themselves. Margaret consumes them as they, nonetheless, give her their confidence. She negotiates her own Elektra complex—the female equivalent of Oedipal neurosis—as evinced by scenes in the film of which, unfortunately, there is insufficient space here to explore at length. But, perhaps most tellingly is the verbal slip she makes in confusing the abusive father of her patient, a “murderess,” for her own. Her father, then, the ultimate source of her own compulsions is, symbolically, Typhon, the hundred-headed patron of all monsters in Greek mythology. Literally, these heads are the rounders led by Mike Mancuso whom she meets in the film. A persuasive case could be made that her interest in the lighter is a manifestation of the fire that Typhon breaths, her Freudian chain-smoking being part of that compulsion.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 173. Beyond the mere palindromic lyricism that surely inspired the phrase, Ellison would have understood the mythological and cosmological implications of the “God Dog,” from transformations in its astronomical identity as the night sky’s brightest star, Sirius (meaning “glowing” or “scorcher” in ancient Greek), the

Dog-Star in the constellation *Canis Major* (Greater Dog) – to such figures as the jackal-headed god Anubis and arguably to Jesus Christ as the true “Bright and Morning Star” in the *Book of Revelation*. All of these references and more are potentially in play in Ellison’s literary Sphingianism.

<sup>7</sup> For a deeper discussion of the figure of Wheatstraw and of this scene see Steven C. Tracy, “The Devil’s Son-in-Law and Invisible Man”. MELUS, Vol. 15, No. 3, Discovery: Research and Interpretation (Autumn, 1988), pp. 47- 64. ‘Oh goddog, daddy-o,’ he said with a sudden bluster, ‘who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before!’ By “who got the dog?”, as a Southern black colloquialism, which the protagonist of Ellison’s novel fails to understand, Wheatstraw is asking him whether he’s feeling in control. Symmetrically, are you what controls or are you what’s controlled? He deepens his hint about this meaning for the literal-minded protagonist when he adds, “Well, maybe it’s the other way round....Maybe he got holt to you.”

<sup>8</sup> Photos are from *Caro’s Book of Tells*, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis mine. Jean Cocteau. *The Infernal Machine and Other Plays*. Albert Bermel, trans. New Directions Publishing. New York. 1963. P.39.

<sup>10</sup> My coinage. From Gk. Phoibos (from which we get the name Phoebe), lit. “bright, shining, radiant.” Tells, then, are always phoebomaniac displays. And, as I shall suggest in Part II, colonial tyranny is a relatedly phoebomaniacal spectacle. Phoebus (Helios) and Clymene, in Greek myth, had a son Phaëton or Phaethon. In Ovid’s version, from *Metamorphoses*, Book II, Phaëton wants convincing by Clymene that the sun god is his real father. As proof, Phaëton is eventually allowed by his father to drive the sun chariot. However, Phaëton is unable to manage, threatening Earth’s ignition. To preempt total ruin, Zeus is forced to kill Phaëton with a thunderbolt. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, Phaëton is the shining Dawnbearer, the Morning Star, Venus, which chases, only to fall away from, that greater source of starlight, the Sun (Phoebus). (This is likely a Platonic description of the astronomical phenomenon of planetary retrogradation, see Zeyl’s translation, *Timaeus*, xlvi, and 38e.) This sequence is Biblically equated with Lucifer (the “Bright One”) in pursuit of God’s light. That King Laus is himself a former charioteer and that it is in a scuffle over right-of-way on the road of their respective chariots that leads to Oedipus killing his father is all relevant to the Oedipal notion of what I’m calling phoebomania, or the acquisitive preoccupation with bright light, as a riposte to the psychoanalytic idea of the Oedipus complex. Oedipus’ departure from Thebes as a child and retrogressive return to his home leading to disaster is, I think, a further parallel with the astronomical mythos of Phaeton and the etymology of Venus/Lucifer.

<sup>11</sup> So, his true name is not the one Odysseus at first reveals to his foe, the Cyclops, in Homer’s *Odyssey*. (He rather stupidly does later, of course.) It is not the one Rumpelstiltskin casually goes by in the Brother’s Grimm. It isn’t the one Job knows in order to lament of his woes to God. It isn’t that which St. Olaf is familiar with before he finally figures it out in order to use against the troll he must overcome. Superman cannot defeat Mr. Mxyzptlk by calling him by that name. And in a panicked fear of it that they will learn is misplaced, people — half bloods and pure bloods alike — generally shy away altogether from uttering the apparent autonym of “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” — dare I say, Lord Voldemort — in Harry Potter. So these beings go by other names – use names – in their daily lives, lest the revelation of their real names threaten exposure to that which might undo them.

<sup>12</sup> Enantiosis, also synoeciosis or discordia concors is a rhetorical means for juxtaposing apparent opposites in order to track their semantic collisions and collusions. For a classic meditation, see Ch. 17, “The Enantiosis Considered,” of Thomas Gibbons’ *Rhetoric; Or, A view of its principle tropes and figures*, 1767.

<sup>13</sup> *Psyche* governs the human trunk, with its more deific, superior half above the midriff in the heart, and the inferior below it, in the stomach. *Soma* administers the lower extremities.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*. Peter Kalkavage, trans. Focus Philosophical Library. Newburyport, MA. 2001. P. 128.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*. Benjamin Jowett, trans. Bibliobooks. South Carolina. 2007. P. 93

<sup>18</sup> Since Mike Caro, this has become a virtual mantra in poker. And so he himself says in his poker guide, *Caro's Book of Tells*. "Once you understand this basic concept and apply it," he concludes, "poker domination will become easy and your wallet will begin to bulge." Many other poker masters have invoked it as shorthand for the contrapuntal "Way" of poker and the intrinsic nature of tactical deception within it.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Paul B. Armstrong, ed. W.W. Norton and Co. New York. 2005. P. 2. The potency of Conrad's illustration is made all the more acute in the apprehension that the light of London he describes is not even that of noon, but merely dusk. The sun would have seemed to truly never set on the British Empire.

<sup>21</sup> See Footnote 10 for a further discussion on the clear collusion between the Oedipus and Phaëton myths. Also, see Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. His discussion on the name taboo suggests that the totem of a clan is representative of the father's household authority, and is not to be challenged by speaking its name. To do so is to commit, symbolically, the power-usurping horror of incest. Light itself, I am tempted to say, is treated by myth as a kind of *Ur*-totem of the father-figure, that which the son more or less subconsciously covets of the father-figure. But such a discussion is for another occasion.

<sup>22</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al., trans. 1994-2009.

<<http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.2.second.html>>

<sup>23</sup> Jean Cocteau, *The Infernal Machine and Other Plays*. P. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Consider the language of the torture memos as conceived and composed by Jay Bybee, etc., in this regard. Our semantic inheritance – doubtless through technological social transformations – of generally positive psychological associations to the word "enhancement," for example, can only make an exploitative substitution for "torture" via the phrase "enhanced interrogation" sound encouragingly enlightened and finally, perhaps, even laudatory.

<sup>25</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

<sup>26</sup> Consider the tarsus in this regard. Etymologically, it is the medical designation for both the heel of the foot as well as the eyelids. From Gk. *tarsos* "ankle, sole of the foot, rim of the eyelid," originally "flat surface, especially for drying." *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

<sup>27</sup> *Invisible Man*. P. 80.

<sup>28</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, Book III at line 330, in reference to the bedazzling hem of God:

Drawn round about thee  
like a radiant Shrine,  
Dark with excessive bright  
Thy skirts appeer,  
Yet dazle Heav'n that  
Brightest Seraphim  
Approach not, but with both  
Wings veil thir eyes...[sic]

<sup>29</sup> Ellison is, through the metaphor of gambling, accusing Lewis Mumford of overbrightening history and saying that the term "The Golden Day" that Mumford chooses to refer to that history is a mere use name, not a true name. That is, the very term is a gambling tell for that history's true name

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which is not wholly opposite – but, yes, retentionally opposite – of the name "Golden Day." He is, to put it in the black vernacular, and after theorist Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s construction, "Signifyin'" on Mumford. The simultaneous collision and collusion between these two Golden Days leads to the kind of inevitable chaos (play) that is exactly what Ellison wants to keep us mindful of. Really, The "play's" the thing, as the Bard said — in which we catch the conscience of the king. And, to mix metaphors, all that glitters isn't necessarily the Golden Day. (... Except, of course, when it is.)

<sup>30</sup> *Invisible Man*, 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> See David Sklansky's *The Theory of Poker*. Two Plus Two Publishing. 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 441.

<sup>34</sup> Sklansky, *Theory of Poker*, p.36

<sup>35</sup> Though I realize I may be forced to limit this claim to certain forms of "classic totalitarianism." Work by theorists such as Sheldon Wolin on so-called "Inverted Totalitarianism" may suggest that more open forms of such control are open because more amenable to and adept at ambiguous play, perhaps rather like the "house" in gambling. This certainly invites further inquiry.

<sup>36</sup> George Orwell. *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays and Reportage*. Harcourt Brace and Co. 1984. P. 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* If the use name is "Sahib," than the true name it tells is its retentional opposite: "Native." In this situation then, just how incorrect would it really be to call the native crowd of two-thousand here "Sahibes"?

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