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academic rationalism and mystical empiricism" (whatever that is). The Conclusion to the book, which reads like an obituary notice in a parish magazine, should be read by all who find joy in pomposity. The fact is, that were Gordon to be seriously compared with writers like Peter of Abano or Taddeo Alderotti he would appear like a parrot in a cage of singing birds.

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NICOLE GONTHIER, *Lyon et ses pauvres au moyen-âge (1350–1500)*, Lyons, Editions L'Hermès, 1978, 8vo, pp. 271, illus., F.51.00 (paperback).

This study is inspired by a desire to reveal those who have been "hidden from history" using whatever documents are available for the period. Relying heavily on wills, church archives, and fiscal documents, Gonthier has skilfully reconstructed the changing material situation of the poor, as well as the place of poverty in the medieval world-view. Gonthier's central thesis is that by the sixteenth century a new attitude towards the poor had emerged in Lyons which took a critical moral stance towards them, denigrated their usefulness and value in the social order, and portrayed them as dangerous and potentially subversive. She contrasts this with the prevailing belief of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the religious significance of poverty and the acceptance of the large numbers of "Christ's poor" who filled the city. Those with property and money were exceedingly generous in their charity, often in the form of handouts (food, clothing, money) at their funerals or on the anniversaries of their deaths.

Gonthier detected unease about the poor beginning in the fifteenth century, partly because of their association with revolt and insurrection in times of economic hardship but also because of their role in spreading epidemics. The fear of contagion, she suggests, played a significant role in the willingness of the citizens of Lyons to allow the secular town administration to take over the task of organized poor relief from small, scattered religious foundations and individual bequests. Thus, for Gonthier, secularization and centralization went hand in hand with a hardening of attitudes towards the poor, and feeling that poverty indicated failure rather than a gift from God. Thus the rich, in a period of prosperity, felt entitled to their wealth, and no longer used elaborate bequests to the poor as a route to salvation.

The strength of this book is the way in which the economic, demographic, social, and cultural aspects of poverty are woven together to form a vivid and detailed narrative. Its weakness lies in its lack of rigorous analysis and in the limitations of a local study which needs to be put in a more general context for its full significance to emerge.

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ELI SAGAN, *The lust to annihilate. A psychoanalytic study of violence in Ancient Greek culture*, New York, Psychohistory Press, 1979, 8vo, pp. viii, 231, \$12.00.

"Thus the Greeks, the most humane men of ancient times, have a trait of cruelty, a tigerish lust to annihilate . . ." said Nietzsche, correctly. "Why?" asks Sagan. A child can weather the storms of the Oedipal situation if he has received adequate love and reassurance from his parents – reassurance that vengeance, castration, annihilation is not what he need expect for his unacceptable feelings and misbehaviour. He may become a loving and humane adult, not a paranoid who sees the world as a place to kill or be killed, where human nature is competition and war is inevitable.

From such simple formulation of personality development and political philosophy Sagan proceeds to evaluate Greek culture through the Classical period. The *Iliad* exhibits a failure to work through Oedipal aggression. Homer's presentation condemns the revolt against legitimate authority and condemns the reversion to barbarism represented by cannibalism and human sacrifice, but in the process it approves the "normal" violence of the society. Yet there is a clear strain of rejection of sadistic violence in favour of love. Effectively, the ambivalence about the

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Oedipal revolt present in Homer produced the creative tensions in Greek, and especially Athenian culture. "Both tragedy and democracy are impossible when all authority is seen as good and blind obedience to authority is considered a high virtue." In the end, Plato joined Homer's condemnation of the revolt by proposing an ideal system that would produce fathers so virtuous that revolt would be unnecessary. And the old ambiguous stories, such as Cronus' castration of his father, need not even be told any longer. What had happened in the archaic and classical periods was "not the transformation of a shame and glory culture into a guilt and conscience culture," rather transformation "into one in which shame and guilt, glory and conscience, would coexist and struggle against each other. In cultural terms, the final resolution of that conflict has yet to be accomplished." In this way Sagan addresses the current discussions that derive from E. R. Dodds.

Sagan offers readings of tragedy which emphasize tyranny and justice within the family as the prototype for political values. He finds that the tragic poets do write scenes of reconciliation, but fail to convince in the way that, e.g., those of Lear and Cordelia or Joseph and his brothers do. "Something in the Greek mind seemed to withdraw when faced with the problem of making people love each other after they had held each other in hatred. The hatred in these plays is always believable, the love which is supposed to conquer the hatred is vague or spoiled." He finds a series of negative pronouncements about human nature in Thucydides, and finds that Euripides feebly objects to the attitudes that Thucydides exhibits. I find Sagan's readings compelling.

As a student of Classical history and literature Sagan is not scholarly, in the sense that he does not acknowledge and discuss authoritative interpretations that differ from his own, but in the end that is of little moment. He has used good sources and has gone beyond them in ways that should be of use even to those who dispute his readings of individual works, so long as they admit the validity of the general approach. Is there an Oedipal complex which is collective, societal, as a result of shared values? Can the Hebrew-Christian God-the-Father compete with the Greek pantheon for parenting, and is it meaningful so to discuss civilizations? I recommend the book as an interpretive manifesto. I hope that its methodology and interpretations of ancient documents will receive serious attention.

We read the past in order to learn. Sagan finds a parable for us, "The western civilization which now doubts its credentials is capitalist civilization, built upon economic inequality, imperialist wars and that subtle form of human aggression called "competition" which insists that those who suffer in society somehow deserve that suffering" (p. 216). It is a long stretch, and I think that one Oedipal theory does not have to cover everything, but the attempt is worthy.

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J. L. HEILBRON, *Electricity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A study of early modern physics*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 1979, 8vo, pp. xiv, 606, illus., £24.00.

The title is prosaic, but the content is anything but a pedestrian account of a science that has been a sleeping partner in the "Scientific Revolution" industry. Heilbron presents an engaging and marvellously detailed exploration of almost every facet of the history of electricity in the period, surveying the experimental and theoretical labours of a large army of "electricians", from Gilbert, the founder of the science, to Volta, Cavendish, Coulomb, and Poisson, whose quantifications of newly-emerged fundamental concepts and their relations, together with parallel developments in magnetic theory and with Volta's invention of the electric pile, led to the establishment of the links between electricity and magnetism detailed in classical electromagnetic theory. Philosophically, Heilbron writes in instrumentalist mode (Poisson is his *terminus ad quem* and on the last page he invokes Dirac's famous 1930 dictum), and his history chronicles the struggle of experimentally-vindicated quantitative laws to win recognition in the face of tough opposition from conceptual eccentricity, explanatory blind-alleys, fanciful