

Jocasta and the Sin of Thebes

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ABSTRACT: The tragic victim of *Oedipus the King* is not Oedipus, who after his sufferings shall be raised to divinity; it is his mother Jocasta. She attempted the death by her torture of her own son. When she discovers that he has survived and is her husband, she seeks even to continue her mother-son incest so as to conceal her misdeeds. Cowardly silence among the citizens of doomed Thebes seals their collusion in evil. An examination of the culture of the fatal city can bring the play more vitally into the world that our students actually inhabit, and serve as a warning against the moral collapse that encourages the killing of children.

OEDIPUS THE KING, the most famous drama of Sophocles, invites many approaches in the classroom. One can delve into such questions as the proper limits of human knowledge, the relation of fate and freewill, responsibility for inadvertent crime, the proper understanding of piety and the power of the gods, and the relation of kingship and self-sacrifice. One can address *hubris* – pride, overreaching – and *hamartia* – the mistake or tragic flaw. One can trace dramatic irony in the images of vision and deliberate blindness, or perhaps, with Freud leering in the background, contemplate sexual taboos. Many scholars investigate the guilt of Oedipus, but rarely does the focus shift from the polluted scapegoat to the deep corruption in the scapegoating city of Thebes. The Thebans cast out Oedipus as impure, but in fact they cause their own destruction. By considering the fate of the city, rather than that of Oedipus, our students can make this play vital in the world that we actually inhabit. Indeed Oedipus suffers, but the most tragic figure in this story is not Oedipus. After his sufferings he will be raised to divinity. It is his mother Jocasta, who dies tragically by suicide after she discovers that she has married the son whom she thought she had killed. While Oedipus is still ignorant of his identity but she already knows it, she deepens her guilt by concealment. Cowardly silence among the Theban citizens seals their collusion in evil. In its adherence

to convenient falsehood, the city is doomed.¹

The play opens in a highly unusual way for a Greek tragedy.² Oedipus is addressing a crowd of children on stage and assuring them of his empathy: “I would be very hard / should I not pity suppliants like these.”³ Lest anyone miss the focus on children, Sophocles closes the play with a plea by Oedipus for the defense of his children, now likely to be rejected as defiled by their ancestry: “Do not take them from me,” Oedipus says, with his arms around his daughters. Creon, who has usurped the kingship of Thebes, replies with a taunt to his blinded, deposed brother-in-law: “Do not seek to be master in everything, for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life.”⁴ In many ways Oedipus gives voice to the rejected child. Both of his parents consented to his mutilation and murder. The riveting of his ankles was meant to make sure that no one would find it worthwhile to heal or even shelter the agonized baby. The procedure is timed and executed to assure the death of an unwanted newborn; Planned Parenthood calls such actions “post-birth abortion.”⁵

Since he kills his father and marries his mother, Oedipus could have been presented as a monster who should never have been allowed to exist. Sophocles chose to make him likable. Oedipus sympathizes with the sick.⁶ He sends for help from the gods to stop the plague, and he energetically pursues the truth that might benefit his people – even when

¹ It is not only the other two Theban plays of Sophocles that take up the tale of the Theban disaster. Aeschylus also presented the legend in *Seven Against Thebes*.

² As to such an opening in any other play, one other example is extant: in *The Suppliants* Euripides presents children in a group. This is another play about the matter of Thebes: the sons of warriors dead in the fratricidal war instigated by the sons of Oedipus are put on stage, accompanied by their mothers.

³ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, translated by David Grene in *Greek Tragedies*, edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), Vol. 1, p. 111, ll. 10ff.

⁴ Ibid, p. 176, ll. 1522-3.

⁵ Ben Johnson, “Planned Parenthood Official Defends Post-Birth Abortions,” *Life Site News* (1 April 2013), available at: <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/planned-parenthood-official-defends-post-birth-abortions>.

⁶ *Oedipus*, l. 60.

he fears it will cost him exile or death.⁷ His anger at Tiresias is motivated by his eagerness to do good. When the prophet is reticent about naming the killer of King Laius because the killer is Oedipus, the perplexed king is frustrated that Tiresias would hesitate to help the plague-stricken city.⁸ Later, Oedipus conscientiously attempts to avoid giving pain to others by exiling himself.⁹ This is not hubristic rebellion against his fate. No one would find Oedipus a more virtuous person had he decided that he might as well submit to the gods by murdering the kindly father who adopted him in Corinth and then replacing him in his mother's bed. We might be puzzled as to why celibacy and pacifism evidently do not occur to him as ways to avoid the predicted pollution, but, of course, oracles are difficult to interpret. He took precaution against all but the most improbable fulfillment of the prophecy; his painful voluntary exile as a youth would have preserved him from incest if his adoptive parents had been his birth parents. Oedipus is indeed uneasy about whether he might be adopted, but not uneasy enough to investigate his paternity with five strangers who accost him violently on the road. After killing a person who turns out to be his father in the fight at the crossroad, he encounters the magical Sphinx, which seems to have had no function but to draw him into the disaster of the incestuous marriage.

Oedipus is, of course, the embodiment of his parents' impiety. He exists as the result of spiritual pollution and he triggers disaster. Nevertheless, his voluntary actions merely touch off a catastrophe already loaded and ready to explode. The Sphinx is not the only trouble that Oedipus meets in Thebes. When Oedipus accuses Jocasta's brother Creon of conspiring with the prophet to usurp his monarchy, Creon replies in a speech that shows a very tangled authority structure in the city. Oedipus obeys his wife as he would a mother, and Creon, who is merely the king's brother-in-law, with no discernible right of inheritance, rules the royal pair. He brags of using kingly authority without the title, enjoying his domination:

The prizes are all mine – and without fear.

⁷ *Oedipus*, l. 845.

⁸ *Oedipus*, l. 330.

⁹ *Oedipus*, p. 173, ll. 1455-60.

But if I were the king myself, I must
 Do much that went against the grain.
 How should despotic rule seem sweeter to me
 Than painless power and an assured authority?
 I am not so besotted yet that I
 Want other honors than those that come with profit.
 Now every man's my pleasure; every man greets me;
 Now those who are your suitors fawn on me, –
 success for them depends upon my favor.¹⁰

Oedipus complains that to please her brother Creon, Jocasta is willing to hand her husband over to exile or death.¹¹ Indeed, at the play's end, as Creon cynically revels in unquestioned power over Oedipus and his children, one might reasonably wonder what gave Creon such a grip on his sister. Sophocles gives a hint of the reason when he makes clear that Jocasta is very afraid of the exposure of inconvenient truths.

She is not alone. The chorus shows how cowardice about the truth is endemic in Thebes. They refuse to tell Jocasta about the quarrel that they have just witnessed, because Creon has brought the prophet Tiresias to the court, and he has identified Oedipus as killer of Laius.¹² When aware of the accusation, Jocasta tries to exonerate Oedipus by narrating the death of Laius and is somewhat evasive as she refers to the false tale that many thieves killed him.¹³ Oedipus asks why no one tried to find the truth about the killers. Jocasta discourages Oedipus from investigating, but he insists on questioning the herdsman who saw the murder and who asked to be sent away from the city when he saw who had married the queen. The herdsman reluctantly yields information under the king's arm-twisting. Oedipus presses him fiercely for information because the king already has come to fear that he might have killed Laius. Once the evidence seems solid, he admits guilt freely, agonizes at having murdered his wife's first husband, and laments (but does not evade) the fact that he has incurred the murderer's curse of exile.

Jocasta presents the opposite way of dealing with guilt. She already

¹⁰ *Oedipus*, ll. 589-97.

¹¹ *Oedipus*, ll. 657-58.

¹² *Oedipus*, l. 685.

¹³ *Oedipus*, ll. 715 ff.

knew the herdsman had taken Oedipus from her arms to kill him. Long before Oedipus realizes it, she knows who Oedipus is and does not want Oedipus to know who he is. Jocasta would rather live in conscious incest with the child whom she tried to murder.¹⁴ Confronted with the choice between revealing her guilt and abandoning her faith in the gods, she eagerly sneers at divine action and prophecy. Impiety follows upon (rather than precedes) her effort to conceal her sin and keep her rank. In attempting to convince Oedipus that prophecy is worthless, Jocasta narrates the plan to condemn her baby to a slow, excruciating death. She cheerfully recalls the action without regret, as a problem solved. When Oedipus asks the herdsman which parent was “so hard” as to cripple him, the herdsman deflects Oedipus’s question. He does not lay the blame on the dead Laius, and his fear implies that the listening queen instigated the torture.

Oddly, when Oedipus becomes insistent, Jocasta professes perfect obedience to her “lord” Oedipus, whom she had commanded minutes before. The story invites us to infer that, a generation before, she had obeyed the instructions of her vile husband. Laius, having been warned by an oracle of Apollo to have no children, got her cooperation in keeping their marriage childless. The offense that provoked this sentence from Apollo was well known to Greek audiences, although the play does not mention it. Laius had committed a sexual offense by means of abusing his authority. On extant painted vases, a fury hovers over the lecherous Laius in the chariot as he abducts his pupil, the prince Chrysippus, for the purpose of rape.¹⁵ But despite his vicious crime and the divine curse following upon it, Laius ascended to power, satisfied his sexual desires, and did violence to ensure these satisfactions. No one drove him from Thebes as impure. The choral ode that follows upon Jocasta’s declaration of obedience is gnomic, full of general observations about tyranny. But at just this moment, when Jocasta has again pledged obedience to her bed partner, the chorus sings of the *hybris* of the tyrant and how honoring *hybris* corrodes a culture. They close by invoking the fate of the impious:

¹⁴ *Oedipus*, ll. 1060 ff.

¹⁵ Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 292, accessed via Google Scholar.

If a man walks with haughtiness
 Of hand or word and gives no heed
 To Justice and the shrines of Gods
 Despises – may an evil doom
 Smite him for his ill-starred pride of heart!
 If he reaps gains without justice
 And will not hold from impiety
 And his fingers itch for untouchable things.
 When such things are done, what man shall contrive
 To shield his soul from the shafts of God?
 When such deeds are held in honor,
 Why should I honor the Gods in the dance?
 The oracles concerning Laius
 Are old and dim and men regard them not.
 Apollo is nowhere clear in honor; God's service perishes.¹⁶

The language applies ambiguously to Oedipus and to Laius. The chorus may be tottering in its faith about divine oracles, but the audience knows that the prophecies about both Oedipus and Laius were true. The oracles signal not so much one man's fate but what happens to a society like Thebes for colluding in evil by deception and silence about the fulfillment of destructive appetites in its ruling class. Sophocles implies that it is possible to get over one's revulsion for acts like those of Laius and Jocasta, at least for a while, but in fact it is not a good idea. The truth has a way of catching up with such a culture in a generation or two. Conquest and slaughter will overtake Thebes.

Jocasta's eagerness to quash Oedipus's faith in oracles is especially acute after he becomes confused by the natural death of his adoptive father. She wants him to feel reassured, but he still fears that he might commit incest with his adoptive mother. Insisting that nothing bad happened according to the oracle that cursed Laius, Jocasta even goes so far as to assert that men often dream of sex with their mothers. If there was any doubt of her knowledge of the incest, it is gone by the time that she expresses that revealing reassurance. After a century dominated by Freud's enthusiastic support of this notion, it is worthwhile to point out that objective evidence shows that Jocasta's ploy is desperate indeed. Cross-culturally, reports of any sort of sexual content

¹⁶ *Oedipus*, ll. 884-910.

in dreams involving mothers are vanishingly few.¹⁷ Thus Jocasta attempts, by fraud, to make use of her son sexually in order to preserve her social status. She fully knows that Oedipus is too pious to live with the incest or its concealment. Seeing him bent on breaking her false narrative, she kills herself, embracing real death in order to avoid the social death of shame. Jocasta remains true to type, as Aristotle would put it: she is consistently weak under disapproval and therefore terrified of truth.

Then again, Oedipus is sometimes criticized as being too aggressive in his search for truth – should he not have practiced *sophrosyne*, moderation, in his pursuit of the king’s killer? Administrations create myths, narratives, talking points, to keep the system running smoothly. And if the system does run smoothly without transparency, why publicize Jocasta’s private sexual decisions? Concealment even seems to be endorsed by Tiresias, the prophet, when he delays telling Oedipus the fantastic coincidences of his life, expecting a hostile reception (a thoroughly justified expectation). Tiresias, however, is sure that the truth will come out, and it is he who first declares baldly the identity of Oedipus. Sophocles does not attempt to inculcate in his audience the view that moderation should abet the concealment of sin. The character who actually praises *sophrosyne* is Creon, celebrating his own moderation in being a behind-the-scenes manipulator instead of king:

I was not born with such a frantic yearning
To be a king – but to do what kings do.
And so it is with everyone who has learned
Wisdom and self-control [*sophrosyne*].¹⁸

¹⁷ The dreambank.net search engine reveals that men dream of their mothers relatively rarely, and a raw data review of almost five hundred random men’s dreams revealed absolutely no sexual content involving mothers. Cf analyses at <http://www2.ucsc.edu/dreams/TSSOD/chapter1.html> with similar results; no sexual content in dreams involving a mother. Cf Jeffrey Masson’s masterly investigation of Freud, *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York NY: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1984).

¹⁸ *Oedipus*, ll. 585-89. See also *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles Translated and Explained*, translated by J. T. Sheppard (New York NY: Macmillan and Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1920). The term *sophrosyne* was used later to refer, incidentally, to chastity.

If Oedipus were to hold back in pursuit of truth, the alternative, objectively, would be to continue his incest, perhaps siring yet more children to increase the chaos in the royal family. Other Sophoclean texts show his sons bringing Thebes to complete destruction in the years following.¹⁹

When Oedipus discovers the full tale of his identity and rushes in to find his mother, she is already dead. Oedipus explains why he blinded himself when he found her: it was an act of both taking responsibility for and releasing himself from the sight of the misery he had caused:

I do not know with what eyes I could look
 Upon my father when I die and go
 Under the earth, nor yet my wretched mother –
 Those two to whom I have done things deserving
 Worse punishment than hanging. Would the sight
 Of children, bred as mine are, gladden me?
 No, not these eyes, never. And my city,
 Its towers and sacred places of the Gods,
 Of these I robbed my miserable self
 When I commanded all to drive him out,
 The criminal since proved by the God impure
 And of the race of Laius.
 To this guilt I bore witness against myself –
 With what eyes shall I look upon my people?²⁰

He will not kill himself, however, for he is convinced that if he has come to exist and been preserved in life, his suicide would be opposing divinely-ordained fate.²¹ Certainly it is no sin of his own but the sin of his parents that has made all days dark to him. When he pierces his own eye-sockets, Oedipus uses the pins holding the dead Jocasta's garment, unveiling her corpse now so as to prevent incest rather than, as she had hoped, to commit it again. Connecting the mother's attack on the son with the man's attack on himself, Richmond Lattimore detects puns in

¹⁹ This social instability resulting from illicit sexual unions was discussed by René Girard in *Violence and The Sacred* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978). As for the continuation of the Oedipus myth, Sophocles himself provides it in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. Euripides uses the same mythic material in *Seven against Thebes*.

²⁰ *Oedipus*, ll. 1370-85.

²¹ *Oedipus*, ll. 1455 ff.

the Greek word common to the rounded bones of the eye-socket and of the ankle-joint. Likewise a single word names both the rivets that cripple him and the pins that blind him.²² The difference is, of course, that Oedipus is inflicting the suffering on himself because he does not desire his city, or even the shades in the underworld – not even the father and mother who were “so hard” as to expose him – to suffer more for his deeds.²³ The tragedy is complete, as most critics see it. Nevertheless, one must not forget that Oedipus finishes the play by voicing the lament of a father for his children, who will indeed suffer violent death in the dynastic chaos that descends upon Thebes when, as we see in Sophocles’s later play *Oedipus at Colonus*, Creon creates yet another administrative version of the facts in order to gain status at the expense of violence to the young.

It is possible, of course, to argue that Oedipus should not have been born, or at least should not have been adopted – that adoption is not the solution for a baby whose parents definitively want it out of the way. After all, would not all the trauma of Jocasta and Thebes have been avoided if the herdsman had been more hardhearted? Should not the Thebans be lobbying for more effective strategies of exposure that would actually guarantee a dead baby? Such an interpretation would support one of our cultural narratives: some people would indeed rather abort than give a child up to the chances of adoption. Even though the adoption in the Athens of the fifth century B.C. usually took the form of an inheritance agreement made to benefit a young adult, such secretly adopted children as Oedipus were not unknown; an early adoptee was called a *plastos* (a “suppositious”) child.²⁴ No doubt Sophocles saw in his own day what sociological studies have shown in ours, namely, that early adoptees are more likely to get parental attention than their peers living with birth families, compensating, though not completely, for the

²² Richmond Lattimore, *The Poetry of Greek Tragedy* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003), p. 86.

²³ *Oedipus*, l. 1175.

²⁴ Marianne Novy, *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (Ann Arbor MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005), ch. 2, accessed at <http://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472115073-ch2.pdf> on April 6, 2013.

disadvantages of disconnection from the birth families.²⁵ And like Oedipus, in our own day and culture, children are far more likely to be abused by natural parents in irregular family situations than to be abused by adoptive parents.²⁶ Sophocles shows us a loving relationship between Oedipus and the Corinthian royalty who adopted him. He feels tenderly towards them and looks out for their welfare. The play's depiction of the virtue of Oedipus supports rather than disparages adoption as a means to rescue a young life out of some sort of disaster.

Yet it is true that the very existence of Oedipus is a nightmare, a terror for his parents, who have a divine oracle predicting horrors to be expected from his birth. One might argue "that there are exceptional cases in which humanity itself recoils from demanding that a pregnancy be carried full term."²⁷ Certainly we have our contemporary oracles – mostly medical but sometimes sociological – telling parents that the life of a child will have some sort of curse following it – disability, genetic disease, social context. Sophocles, however, gives us in this horrific child a noble king, an energetic administrator, a tender son, a compassionate (if impulsively aggressive) man, a person infinitely superior to the cowards and liars surrounding him in Thebes. That portrait would be almost enough for an argument against the elimination of risk factors by elimination of the child carrying them. But there is more: Sophocles clearly shows us that it is not at root the fertile sexuality generating a

²⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. Appendix E-1 in *Child Welfare Outcomes 2007-2010*, Report to Congress. Access is available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cwo07-10/cwo07-10.pdf>.

²⁶ Of the perpetrators who were parents, more than 80% (viz., 84.2%) were the biological parents of the victim (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/foundation/foundatione.cfm>). Yet a situation involving a live-in boyfriend of an unmarried mother creates the highest risk for child abuse. Cf. W. Bradford Wilcox and Jeffrey Dew, "Unrelated Males in Caretaking Roles: A Particular Danger to Children" at <http://www.americanvalues.org/pdfs/researchbrief7.pdf>.

²⁷ W.B. Allen of Harvey Mudd College, in "Oedipus Complex Towards Life," *CRA News* (Fall 1986), takes up this challenge by holding that the real argument of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* is, as I concur, against the "character of the very persons who attempted the" destruction of Oedipus. His essay is accessible at: http://williambarclayallen.com/articles/Edipus_Complex_Toward_Life.pdf.

child that has originated the destructive tendencies of the Theban culture. The return of Oedipus to Thebes merely reveals a corruption long present in his parents and their kingdom. Creon, Jocasta, Laius, and the people of Thebes represented by the chorus have all been involved in a conspiracy of cynical self-indulgence, impiety and cowardice. Thebes clearly has a culture in which sexuality has been separated from childbearing. Laius raped not only a child but a child of his own sex; he then proceeded to contract for a marriage in which childbearing would be excluded. Having accepted this understanding of marriage, Jocasta finds it essential to keep her reproductive decision secret. Pursuing that self-protection, she finds herself willing to accept a lifestyle that appears to create a family but in fact destroys it so completely that all distinctions of roles are blurred. A free-for-all for authority inevitably follows, with the power going to the most ruthless. It is only an apparent happiness and stability for the ruling class, and its sycophants in the city, that rests upon respect for concealment and unseen power structures.

The deformation of social order continues in the second generation. Oedipus appears to have authority but cedes power to his wife. The royal pair seem to have authority but Creon, the power behind the throne, is manipulative, impious and needlessly cruel to the weak. The populace accepts and supports the secrecy necessary to uphold the corruption: about the existence of the child Oedipus, about the circumstances of the death of Laius, about the strained relations between Oedipus and Creon. Thebans resist revealing anything that might require them to endure distress or deprivation for the sake of truth and compassion. Among all these people only Oedipus and the prophet tell the truth, and only Oedipus volunteers for suffering. Of course, the Greek audience knew the end of the story. Sophocles himself presented it in other plays. Thebes will go down to fratricidal ruin while Oedipus, despite his pollution, will be tended by his daughter and raised to divinity.

Sophocles articulates some very clear positions about unwanted children, about predictions of disaster because of the birth of a baby, about adoption, and about the practices and attitudes that can destroy a civilization. The analysis of Theban corruption can touch our students far more intimately than questions about fate, the gods, oracles or free will. Callousness towards children in the interest of the sexual self-

indulgence of adults marks a society headed for self-destruction. A state whose interest in protecting its children collapses before the need to keep the powerful from embarrassment is already entangled in disaster. A ruling class that will support the collapse of family relationships in order to feel more comfortable in its pleasures leads its supporters into cultural suicide. Oedipus cares for children when the rest of the ruling class does not. He searches for the truth and tells the truth, despite the offense that he gives. He rejects and repents of abominations even when he has been involved in them through the manipulations of others. He accepts suffering for the sake of halting the spread of evil. Such a man is not merely a hero but also, as Sophocles shows us, a manifestation of that which is divine, of that which exalts the human race. Reading *Oedipus* in this way may offer our students a vision of heroism that they too can practice.