



Sophocles, Freud and the revision of their opinion of Oedipus

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Freud's first mention of Sophocles' play "Oedipus Rex" is in Letter 71 to his close friend, the otolaryngologist Wilhelm Fliess, in October 1897. "I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood, even if not so early as in children who have been made hysterical. If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the objections that reason raises against the presupposition of fate".

The "Oedipus Dream" in Freud's early works

The Oedipal subject was first published and extensively covered in the "Interpretation of Dreams", in November 1899. Freud begins with a synopsis of the play in his unique way: "Oedipus, son of Laius, King of Thebes, and of Jocasta, was exposed as an infant because an oracle had warned Laius that the still unborn child would be his father's



murderer. The child was rescued and grew up as a prince in an alien court, until, in doubts about his origin, he too questioned the oracle and was warned to avoid his home since he was destined to murder his father and take his mother in marriage”.

He continues with the journey towards Thebes, the Sphynx’s riddle, the gratitude of the Thebans, his crowning as king, the marriage to Jocasta, the four children, the peaceful life of the Theban people, the revelation that Oedipus is his father’s murderer and his mother’s husband, the self-punishment and self-exile “a process that can be likened to the work of psycho-analysis” Freud writes.

Freud goes on to write about the fateful character of the play, the antithesis between destiny and human will, and also about how influential the play is: “His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulses towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that that is so. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes”.

Freud named this phenomenon “Oedipus Dream”. In a footnote in 1901’s “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life”, he mentions: “The ‘Oedipus dream’, as I am in the habit of calling it, because it contains the key to the understanding of the legend of King Oedipus. In the text of Sophocles a reference to such a dream is put in Jocasta’s mouth”. The phrase first appeared in 1899, in the “Interpretation of Dreams”.

The term “Oedipus Complex” essentially appears eleven years later, in 1910, in his work “Contribution to the Psychology of Love” and develops into a cornerstone of psychoanalytic thinking. In 1920, Freud gave an up-to-date summary of the concept in a footnote of the “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality”, where he mentions that the Oedipus complex is “the shibboleth that distinguishes the adherents of psychoanalysis from its opponents”. In his long, prolific scientific life the concept does not remain a dream phenomenon, it evolves and mutates. It becomes connected to the theories about the libido, the erogenous zones, the primal totem, castration and the superego.

Freud: The legend of Oedipus differs from Sophocles’ play

Yet, even though Freud uses Sophocles’ play as a starting point for his analysis of the Oedipus complex, towards the end of his description in “The Interpretation of Dreams”, he distinguishes the former from the latter. He acknowledges and comprehends that his interpretation may not fully identify with Sophocles’ perceptions. “There is an unmistakable indication in the text of Sophocles’ tragedy itself that the legend of Oedipus sprang from some primeval dream-material... The story of Oedipus is the reaction of the imagination to these two typical dreams (murdering the father, in love with the mother). And just as these dreams, when dreamt by adults, are accompanied by feelings of repulsion, so too the legend must include horror and self-punishment. Its further modification originates once again in a misconceived secondary revision of the material, which has sought to exploit it for theological purposes. The attempt (by



Sophocles) to harmonise divine omnipotence with human responsibility must naturally fail in connection with this subject-matter just as with any other”.

In other words, Freud notes here that his opinions refer to the original legend and not necessarily with the play “Oedipus Rex”. In his book “Totem and Taboo”, and in other subsequent writings, Freud formulates the following sequence: The Oedipus complex was born in the human psyche, it was then expressed through the legend, later it was utilised by the playwright and finally it emerged as the focal point of psychoanalysis.

But what was the original legend? In the penultimate rhapsody of the Iliad, Homer says that Euryalus (a prince and wrestler) that participated in Patroclus’ funeral games organised by Achilles, had also participated and won in King Oedipus’ official funeral games in Thebes (Book XXII, lines 676-680). In the Odyssey, the king of Ithaca sailed to the land of Cimmerians, where he dug a hole, poured a libation and came in contact with the inhabitants of Hades. Among them was Epicaste (Jocasta), who after having died, sent the Furies (Erinyes) against Oedipus who was continuing his reign (Book XI, lines 271-280).

In “Olympian II”, Pindar mentions that nobody can foretell his time of death and that the price that was payed for Oedipus’ patricide was the mutual slaughter of his sons, which was overseen by Erinys (lines 30-42).

Aeschylus mentions in his play “Seven Against Thebes”, that the oracle had warned Laius three times never to have any children in order to save the city (lines 742-791).

In “Phoenissae”, Euripides mentions that Jocasta became pregnant with Oedipus from a drunken Laius and that the Corinthian queen Merope presented the infant to her husband as her own. Also, that Oedipus killed Laius before even knowing about the prophecy, and that he gave his carriage as a gift to his adoptive father Polybus. After blinding himself, his sons Eteocles and Polynices lock him up in an attic. Jocasta survives and kills herself years later over the dead bodies of her sons that have killed one another. It is then that Creon sends Oedipus into exile (lines 1-8, 1427-1459, 1584-1624).

There are various versions from different authors up until Roman historian Gaius Julius Hyginus in the 1st century A.D., claims that Oedipus died when he saw Jocasta’s hanged body. Thus, it is very difficult to be certain of what the original legend that Freud refers to really was. It is probable that the older the source, the closer it is to it, however, that is not certain either.

Furthermore, religiousness in antiquity was not as strict nor did it follow rules in the way that is done today. Modern day interpretation of religious rules leads those with different beliefs, to be labeled as heretics by the official religion, thus leading to the existence of dozens of heresies in Christianity and Islam. The ancient Greek playwright or poet is free to present the legend in a way that suits him. An extreme example is that of Euripides’ “Helen”, where the queen of Sparta does not even go to Ilium during the Trojan war that was fought over her, but instead spends a decade in Egypt, immaculate, pure and innocent.



Patricide and incest, a custom of the gods

Things are very different in modern times to how they were when Oedipus was written. The stern warnings of the oracle towards Laius and Oedipus concerning patricide and incest do not resonate with the debauchery in the lives of the gods. According to Hesiod, the genogram of the gods begins with patricides and incest. Their first ruler, Uranus, has married his own mother Gaia. His son Cronus fights him, wins, and being unable to kill his immortal father, does something even worse: he castrates him. He marries his own sister, Rea. Cronus' son Zeus starts the Titanomachy, wins and as he is unable to kill Cronus, he casts him to Tartarus. Zeus then mates with his sister Hera. Leto, the mother of Apollo who was responsible for the prophecies condemning incest, was made pregnant by her own cousin Zeus.

This does not mean that in ancient Athens patricide and getting married to one's own mother were permitted. It means that the emotional and cultural effect of these things was of course negative, it lacked, however, the depressive weight and the sacrilegious feeling that is born within the spectators or readers of Freud's era and of our own. The men of ancient Athens view the tragedy through different lenses than today's Christians. The lives of Jesus and the Saints are so different that the orgies of the ancient gods.

For today's reader, it is the gods and the oracle that are responsible for the dramatic development, not Oedipus. They had plotted an evil scheme at the Theban king's expense. As the Australian professor of English Literature at the University of Sydney A. Waldock writes in his book "Sophocles the Dramatist": "Nothing can justify the gods and Sophocles knew that all too well...there is no meaning in Oedipus Rex; there is merely the terror of coincidence". G.M. Kirkwood from Cornell University notes in his book "A Study of Sophocles on Drama": "Sophocles has no theological pronouncements to make and no points of criticism to score."

Sophocles does not incriminate the gods, neither does he acquit them. He does not express an opinion; he lets the spectators make a judgment. He believes that the word of the gods must be respected, whether it be just or unjust. Otherwise, there will be punishment. That is also the perception he bestows on Oedipus. From a certain point of view, it is a play reminiscent of Socrates' fate in his trial for being disrespectful towards the gods of Athens. He knows all too well that he is not guilty, he accepts the death verdict by the institution of the Athenian court, he does not propose an alternative solution, like exile that could have been an option, and he refuses to escape as his disciples had advised him. "But I do know that it is bad and shameful to do injustice and to disobey one's better, whether god or human being" (Plato, Apology of Socrates, 29b6-7). Oedipus blinds himself, Socrates drinks the conium.

Oedipus' resistance to patricide and incest

Freud, on the other hand, views Oedipus as thoroughly guilty: "The guilt of Oedipus was not palliated by the fact that he incurred it without his knowledge and even against his intention", he writes in "Totem and Taboo" in 1913, and in other writings. This opinion is absolutely contradictory to the basic principles of Justice.



Freud considers the Oedipus complex to be a basic element of the unconscious: He does not consider it a feature of conscious actions. Cases where a person consciously attempts to murder his father or mother are not for psychoanalysis to study, but rather for forensic psychology.

Sophocles does not refer to Oedipus' unconscious. He refers to his conscious. Oedipus does not suffer from extreme anxiety about danger from his dreams, from childhood phobias or from inner drives, but from an event that shocked him. Discussing with Jocasta, when things in the palace had started becoming crucial, he narrates an event that happened during dinner in his adoptive parents' palace in Corinth: "At a banquet, a man drunk with wine cast it at me that I was not the true son of my father. And I, vexed, restrained myself for that day as best as I could... I went to Delphi without my parents' knowledge, and Phoebus sent me forth disappointed of the knowledge for which I had come, but in his response set forth other things, full of sorrow and terror and woe: that I was fated to defile my mother's bed, that I would reveal to men a brood which they could not endure to behold, and that I would slay the father that sired me" (lines 779-793).

Oedipus, not only did not accept, did not approve, did not tolerate the oedipal complex, but dared the bravest most radical step against it that anyone could have imagined. In an instant, he abandons those he believes to be his parents, Polybus and Merope, forever. From the luxuries and the comfort of the palace, from the golden prospect of becoming the king of the mighty city of Corinth, he finds himself wandering in the streets; a tramp, a beggar, a pauper, drifting aimlessly. Oedipus, with a clear conscious, and an unconscious free of turmoil and ambiguity, is the most important symbolic opponent of the Oedipus complex, even calling it: "all the foulest deeds that are wrought among men!" (line 1409).

Maybe the same is not exactly true for Jocasta. Oedipus knew nothing... she, on the other hand, might have known something. If the oracle had said that Laius would be murdered by his son, shouldn't she have investigated in every way possible who the murderer was? If she was to be re-married, shouldn't she look closely at the face and bearing of her new husband in case that he had common features to Laius or herself?

Jocasta on dreams

There is a special common element in Freud and Sophocles: Dreams. Regarding Freud, it is common knowledge. The first mention of the complex, and an extensive one at that, is in "The Interpretation of Dreams", where it is referred to as "Oedipus dream".

Surprisingly, a reference in the play resonates perfectly with Freud's analysis, as he repeatedly notes. The messenger from Corinth brings the news of king Polybus' death. Instead of mourning, everybody is happy because it has been proven that Oedipus can no longer murder his father. During the temporary, unexpected, relaxed conditions, and with the part of the prophecy concerning marrying his mother still open, Jocasta tells Oedipus: "But fear not that you will wed your mother. Many men before now have slept with their mothers in dreams" (lines 980-982). She does not speak about one man's dream. "Many men before" refers to a collective feature.



Dreams are not a rare feature of ancient Greek literature. They first appear in Homer with the dreams of Nausicaa and Penelope. Impressive dreams also appear repeatedly in Herodotus and in tragedies. The main characteristic of dreams and their interpretation is foretelling the future. A kind of prophecy for the ancient Greeks, like omens, oracles and astrology. The soothsayers try to unlock their meaning.

The dream that Jocasta mentions, however, has a unique feature we do not meet in other writings of the era. It is a type of dream not of one person, but of nearly all men, about an inexplicable, covert process of their psyche. The word “unconscious” does not yet exist in the Greek language. It is coined by John Chrysostom in the 4th century A.D. and refers to loss of consciousness. Sophocles, two and a half thousand years before Freud, “unconsciously” touches on the modern psychoanalytic concept of the “unconscious”. He does it again. In the surviving fragments of his lost play “Phaedra” he says: “You should help a woman to conceal a woman’s shame” and “No mortal, o women, can avoid shame” (lines 678-679). “Shame” is not a conscious choice, but a strong internal impulse of the psyche.

And since we are on the topic of Phaedra, yes, there is a tragedy where the hero, or rather the heroine, desires incest, or something resembling incest, which is something that is not even close to Oedipus’ intentions. In Euripides’ “Hippolytus Stephanophoros”, Phaedra, Theseus’ wife, pursues her step son’s, Hippolytus love interest like crazy.

The previous part of the trilogy “Hippolytus (Kalyptomenos)”, whose subject is the impetuous love of the step mother towards the step son, has not survived. In the surviving part, “Stephanophoros”, whose subject is the suicide of the queen of Athens and her step son’s fatal accident, the echo of Phaedra’s frenzied lust is still evident: “I shall tell you also the road my thoughts took. When love wounded me, I considered how I might bear it most creditably...I knew that both the deed and the passionate longing for it were discreditable, knew besides that I was a woman, a thing all men hate. Damnation take the woman who first began to besmirch her marriage-bed with other men!” (lines 391-393, 405-409). Sophocles does not even come close to making Oedipus utter a phrase of similar meaning or even something suggestive or covert to the same end.

Vernant’s and Dodds’ view of the Oedipus complex

It is worth noting that from the point of view of classical studies, there has been a general indifference towards the psychoanalytical conception of Oedipus. There are, however, two interesting cases; that of professor of history and anthropology in College de France J – P. Vernant, and that of the Irish classicist in Oxford, E.R. Dodds.

In his paper “Oedipus without the Complex”, Vernant, utilising a compelling argument, attempts to deconstruct psychoanalysis. He believes that Freud did not perform any valid, in depth analysis of the tragedy, and that psychoanalysts have generalised the model of incest in Greek mythology considering that Oedipus’ unconscious antennae would identify the Theban king and his wife as his parents, despite his adoption by the Corinthian couple.



He writes: «Relations of an "Oedipal" type, in the modern sense of the expression, between Jocasta and Oedipus would have been directly in conflict with the tragic intention of the play that is centered on the theme of Oedipus' absolute power and the hubris that necessarily stems from it. But where is this "meaning" to be found - the meaning that is supposed to be immediately revealed in this way to Freud, and after him to all psychoanalysts as if they were latter-day Tiresiases with a gift of second sighten a bling them to reach beyond mythical or literary forms of expression to grasp a truth invisible to the profane? ...as Freud does, by successive simplification and reduction - of all Greek mythology to one particular legendary schema..."

Vernant also mocks Freud, suggesting that he had a lack of in depth knowledge of ancient Greek literature: "But let us see how the psychoanalyst forces the legendary material to fit in with the demands of the model that, even before embarking on his study, he carried in his mind as a magus carries the truth..." He is, however, wrong. In a research and exhibition by the Freud Museum in London, in 1998, around 300 books on mythology and ancient history from Freud's library were presented, and most of them had multi-coloured notes in them. Among them, there were the complete works of Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Aristotle's Poetics, and Artemidorus' Oneirocritica.

In his most famous publication "The Greeks and the Irrational", Dodds refers to and utilises favourably several Freudian concepts, in connection with the Plato's daemon that is the superego, the dreams, the secondary dream process, the ego-centrism of the dream world, the connection of passion and libido. In his paper "On Misunderstanding Oedipus Rex", he includes a substantial difference to Freud regarding what the Theban king really was.

He notes: "But Freud did not ascribe interpretation of the myth to Sophocles, and it is not the interpretation I have in mind". The Irish professor suggests another alternative to Oedipus' and his complex mental pathogenesis: "Certainly the Oedipus Rex is a play about the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the condition: in a sense every man must grope in the dark as Oedipus gropes, not knowing who he is or what he has to suffer; we all live in a world of appearance which hides from us who-knows-what dreadful reality. But surely the Oedipus Rex is also a play about human greatness. Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position-for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream-but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at what ever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found. 'This horror is mine' he cries.' and none but I is strong enough to bear it' (1414). Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible, though subjectively innocent".

Through the Oedipus complex, the tragic story of the king of Thebes became universally known and entered every form of art. Its presentation is not always faithful to Sophocles' play, but often has alterations to the plot, the historical era, the ending, the formation of personal situations not found in the tragedy but inspired from it. In H. D. Lawrence's book "Sons and Lovers", the protagonist, who is attached to his mother, gets into relationships with two women, and when these fall apart, he returns to his mother until her death. Pasolini's movie "Edipo Re" ends with Oedipus wandering in a



modern rural landscape. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's script "Elpido Alcade" the story takes place during modern Colombian civil wars.

The Oedipus complex and systemic thought

Gregory Bateson approaches the ancient Greek legend in a different way than Freud. He does not just approach the individual and the personal relationship but also the group and the genogram.

The family of the Labdacids (of which Oedipus is a member), had a severely burdened past, just like the Atreids in Mycenae. Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, after killing Ares' dragon, sowed its teeth in the ground, as instructed by Athena. From that sprang a race of men, Spartoi, which Cadmus tricked into killing one another, thus causing a mass genocide, from which only five people survived. Jocasta's grandfather, Pentheus was dismembered by Bacchic Maenads that included his own mother Agave. Laius' father, Labdacus met the same fate. Laius, who was a guest of Pelops abducted and raped his host's son, Chrysippus, thus becoming the founder paedophilic rape. Laius also obeyed the oracle and did not resist murdering his own son at all, and according to Sophocles, made his wife Jocasta an accomplice in infanticide along the way.

Bateson, utilising his anthropological knowledge, comments on the chaotic circumstances after World War I and the treaty of Versailles, referring to the house of Atreus. Everything he says also holds true for the house of Labdacus. "We are, in fact, like members of the house of Atreus in Greek tragedy. First there was Thyestes' adultery, then Atreus' killing of Thyestes' three children, whom he served to Thyestes at a peace-making feast. Then the murder of Atreus' son, Agamemnon, by Thyestes' son, Aegistheus; and finally, the murder of Aegistheus and Clytemnestra by Orestes. It goes on and on. The tragedy of oscillating and self-propagating distrust, hate, and destruction down the generations. I want you to imagine that you come into the middle of one of these sequences of tragedy. How is it for the middle generation of the house of Atreus? They are living in a crazy universe. From the point of view of the people who started the mess, it's not so crazy; they know what happened and how they got there. But the people down the line, who were not there at the beginning, find themselves living in a crazy universe, and find themselves crazy, precisely because they do not know how they got that way".

Let us think of this final sentence specifically in regard to Oedipus. Freud approaches antiquity mainly in connection to personal relations. Bateson does so in connection to collective circumstances. A combination of the two is more appropriate. Mythology and ancient history must be approached through a multidimensional and multifaceted psychological perspective, and not through a one-dimensional point of view. It is not fitting that our psychological approach to a tragedy or a classic poem is limited to an individual or a single personal relationship. It should rather be able to see the social collective and the circumstances in which it takes place as well as the past leading up to it. At the same time, the approach should also take into account, draw from and utilize the deep knowledge of the analysis of expert classicists and historians.

The Oedipus complex was not part of the first phase of the formation of systemic therapy. Later on, it was gradually incorporated with several differences in its elements.



Sebastian Kraemer, a psychiatrist in Tavistock Clinic in London, writes in a paper about the oedipal triangle and family therapy: “The double bind was originally a feature of a two-person relationship but, within a few years, Haley had extended its remit beyond psychosis, and added a third person... It was a leap from a fascination with communication to a fascination with structures. This was a paradigm shift that brought the Oedipus complex into the heart of systems theory... Though they worked in different ways, both Haley and his colleague Minuchin framed the presenting problem in a young person as a challenge to the power of arrangements between the parents. The child is out of control but the couple cannot act together to contain him, because one of them is in covert coalition with the child. Crediting Haley’s influence, the Milan associates fearlessly brought this out in the open by asking in therapy sessions ‘where is the marriage in this family?’ Their technique of circular questioning (Selvini-Palazzoli et al. 1980) exposed family members’ constant monitoring of others’ relationships, which usually goes beyond awareness”.

The main feature of systems theory though, is the opposite of mother-child incest. It is John Bowlby’s “attachment theory”. Its roots lie in the views of Freud’s colleague Carl Jung, who disagreed on the mother-son incestuous relations and instead suggested that the mother is the basic producer of love and protection towards the child. With this, we end our diversion.

Sophocles and Freud: the self-revision of their opinions

Sophocles presents “Oedipus Rex” in 429 B.C. In 406 B.C., he writes “Oedipus at Colonus”, and dies the same year. The play was produced and presented by his grandson, who bore the same name, in 401 B.C. at the Festival of Dionysus. The protagonist of the second play is the same, but also different: He defends himself, he fights for his right, he questions his guilt.

In the first play, he assumes responsibility for his actions, but not for the intentions: “Now I am found to be evil and of evil birth” (line 1397). There is only one mention of the responsibility of the gods, instigated by the Chorus of Elders: “What divinity urged you on?” And the king replies: “It was Apollo, friends, Apollo who brought these troubles to pass, these terrible, terrible troubles” (lines 1328-1330).

In the second play, he does not hesitate to openly accuse the gods of being guilty, and to openly discuss his innocence: “For this was dear to the gods, who were angry, perhaps, with my race from of old. Taking me alone, you could not find a reproach for any crime, in retribution for which I was driven to commit these sins against myself and against my kin” (lines 964-968). And also: “Such then were the evils into which I came, led by the gods; and in this, I think, my father’s soul, could it come back to life, would not contradict me” (lines 997-999). In “Oedipus Rex” Sophocles presented a self-destructive, painfully bereaved person. In “Oedipus at Colonus, he presents him as a heroic individual fighting for his innocence to be accepted. Theseus, the king of Athens does accept it: “I am persuaded” (line 1516) he tells him, and he agrees for him to be buried on the sacred land of Attica that could not have any miasma on it.

Freud’s final mention of Sophocles’ play is also very interesting. It is included in his short work “An Outline of Psychoanalysis” that he began writing in July 1938,



immediately after arriving in London (just before he died), that was published posthumously in 1940. It is a final, somewhat hasty, condensed will of testament concerning his whole life's psychoanalytic ideas. The Oedipus complex has a central role in the overview of his theories: "I venture to assert that, if Psycho-Analysis could boast of no other achievement than the discovery of the repressed Oedipus complex, that alone would give it a claim to be counted among the precious new acquisitions of mankind".

He also notes: "The Oedipus complex, so named because it's essential subject is found in the Greek myth of King Oedipus, which our good fortune has preserved for us in a version from the hand of a great dramatist. The Greek hero killed his father and married his mother. That he did so unknowingly, since he did not recognize them as his parents, constitutes a deviation from the analytical subject matter which is easily intelligible and indeed inevitable". And later on: "One hears the objection made that the legend of King Oedipus has in fact no connection with the construction made by analysis: the case was quite a different one, since Oedipus did not know that it was his father whom he killed and his mother whom he married. What is overlooked in this is that a distortion of this kind is unavoidable if an attempt is made at a poetichand ling of the material, and that there is no addition of foreign subject-matter but merely a skillful employment of the factors present in the theme".

"Unknowingly...", "deviation", "distortion". At the end of his life, Freud, the honourable, sincere and deep thinker, fully releases Sophocles' Oedipus from the shadow of the Oedipus Complex.

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