

A post-Kleinian Oedipus

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Sophocles' Oedipus cycle consists of 3 plays written some 15 years apart, but all part of his mature oeuvre. They do not follow the chronology of the myth – the last part of the story comes first. There *is* a chronology however: it is the story of Sophocles' exploration of what constitutes a thinking person. He uses as vehicle for this exploration an Everyman whom we first meet as a king, a tyrannos – and who ultimately ends a beggar, a blind suppliant at the shrine of his internal Fury-gods, and in the process completes his journey of self-knowledge.

I shall be talking here about the middle play, the Aristotelian model for tragic form, in both Kleinian terms of a mother-baby relationship, in which it can be seen as a weaning story, and also in post-Kleinian terms of how ideas are born from a context of emotional conflict. In the *Tyrannos* we can see in the protagonists of the mind-city an externalised representation of the internal dialogue between mother and child, and the way a new thought is 'suffered', that is to say, gets in to the mind and finds a symbol for its existence. It is an internal journey – as represented by the way the protagonist stands still and holds centre stage whilst figures from his 'past' or inner world are called up for confrontation. This is co-extensive with the formal structure of the play itself, which is not something superimposed on the myth, but evolves according to its internal logic or organic form – the dramatist's unconscious commitment and exploration of his theme.

Whereas Freud saw theatre as sublimation, in the post-Kleinian view the mind – like the play – is made by its thoughts as they well up from their unconscious roots and find a symbolic form, rather than the other way round. Bion coined the term 'catastrophic change' after Aristotle – to denote how the thinking process changes the existing structure of the mind.

Sophocles recognized, as did Aeschylus before him, that those 'dread goddesses' – the 'Furies' of man's primeval nature – were significant forces in the mind, and both society and the individual needed to pay them their due. Aeschylus, like Freud, envisaged a type of secondary process or Athenian law that could contain and civilize these mysterious dark forces – forces which are generally associated with femininity as well as emotionality and the underworld or under-conscious world. Primary processes need to be shaped and ordered by secondary processes of rational or conscious intentionality lest they break out in the form of action and pollute civic life. In Bion's post-Kleinian philosophy, however, love, hate and dread are fundamental to any symbolmaking process, and need to be embraced not curbed or denied. The focus is on weathering the inevitable turbulence of this emotional confrontation – a process that Bion terms 'suffering', again following the classical etymology of 'passion'. In this way a thinking capacity is gradually established in the growing mind.

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Sophocles differs from Aeschylus rather as Bion differs from Freud. He saw that simply holding disturbing forces in check or deflecting them through sublimation is a very partial solution to the pressures of unconscious phantasy and its gods. Creon in *Antigone* failed to do this and his alternative method – to try to expel them – resulted only in setting the familiar revenge cycle in motion, a type of stupidity that is depressingly familiar, particularly in the case of world leaders. In his two subsequent *Oedipus* plays Sophocles looked for a constructive alternative – a way to *think through* the kind of emotional disturbance that presents itself as a plague or sickness in the mind or city of the personality.

The *Oedipus Tyrannos* is about two kinds of thinking – the first represented by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, a childlike but arid cleverness appropriate to a latency phase of development. The mystery of life is reduced to a linear pattern of 4, 2 and 3 leggedness. It was necessary at the time, like passing your school exams. It got him into the palace. Oedipus is a clever boy as everybody in his family-city-country agrees. But he has got to a point where it is time to make contact with deeper internal forces – not so much repressed, as latent: for there are many linguistic indications that Oedipus with one part of his mind knows very well who he is all the time, but has not been able to make use of this knowledge in his personal development.

What is now to be put to the test is his capacity to ‘remember’ the source of all his passionate attachments – his babyhood – in a way that overwhelms him with emotional turbulence and shakes his mental constitution to the core. It is an entirely different type of thinking from that which so impressed the Sphinx. To underline this fact, the two types of thinking are carried on simultaneously and this is what constitutes Sophocles’ famous dramatic irony. It is really an irony about levels of knowledge and how they dance in and out of one another. On the one hand Oedipus is searching for the ‘facts’ about his birth, in the purely rational and detective sense; but on the other, the quest of his internal *daimon* or soul, is for the mystery of his growth and identity, something which cannot be understood without re-engaging with the passionate baby that he once was. Unlike Creon in the *Antigone*, Oedipus accepts from the beginning that his kingship has to be earned not just once but repeatedly: the city, he says, contains his ‘children’ (ll. 1, 69) – his mental fertility – and is not merely evidence of his authority over others and himself.

Oedipus’ famous anger (*orge*) is a manifestation of his *daimon*, his Promethean fiery spirit, and is as essential a tool for his investigation as his *gnome*, his faculty of recognition. His anger comes from the emotional depths, his cool reasoning logicity from his willpower. Yet they work together, moving in a type of counterpoint alongside the rhythmic ‘lunge’ of a *daimon* (immortal spirit) who pushes him towards the *catastrophe*, in the classical sense of climax and revelation. The *daimon* strikes from both inside and outside the protagonists; and the idea of ‘doubleness’ recurs continually, impressing on us that there is more than one layer of meaning involved at each point. The entire play is a minefield of puns and ambiguities. Another group of words links, and at the same time separates, different types of knowledge – matter-of-fact understanding, conscious investigation, oracular ‘seeing’, and the type of knowing most characteristic of Oedipus – *gnome*, innate intelligence or power of recognition (sometimes translated ‘mother-wit’)¹. In addition Sophocles frequently puns on another word for knowing, *eidōs*, that through its sound echoes the name of Oedipus, who is thus both swollen-footed and knowing-footed – one who painfully pursues a path to knowledge. There are puns throughout on ‘feet’ as stepping towards a truth, and as being cruelly hounded by a truth.

From the very beginning Oedipus seems to guess instinctively that Thebes’ disease has some intimate relation to his own birth and identity, as when he says, with the play’s characteristic ambiguity, that there are ‘None as sick as I’ (l. 61). He then considers what tools he has for dealing

¹ See E.F. Watling, transl. *Sophocles: the Theban Plays* (Penguin, 1947, p. 38; D. Taylor, *Sophocles: the Theban Plays*, Methuen, 1986, p. 21. On the significance of *gnome* (thought) and its relation to *gignoskein* (recognition) see ed. Gould, p. 63; on its contrast with the *phronein* (prudence) preferred by Creon, see pp. 80-81. Gould writes: ‘Oedipus’ *gnome* is a mystery to the Chorus. They do not really know how he arrives at his decisions.’ (p. 74).

with this sickness of the absence of self-knowledge and recognises that “Alone, had I no key/ I’d lose the track”. He is searching for a key (a *symbolon*) – literally a symbol to contain the idea of his identity – and this is found when he reviews his relationship with Jocasta, the mother whom he regarded as his wife.

First however there are two cognitive temptations to be overcome. One is represented by Teiresias, whose knowledge, like all superstition, is always of ‘dreadful secrets’ (l. 374)². He does not tell lies about facts, but about their meaning. For Teiresias, any increase in knowledge must be turned into a misfortune. He tells Oedipus that his ‘birthday’ (the day he discovers the mystery of his birth) also marks the day of his death (l. 499): implying that, as the Chorus will say later, there is no point in facing life at all. It is better not to be born than to know the full extent of one’s sinfulness. However Oedipus recognises that Teiresias with his intimidatory tactics is another version of the Sphinx, and that he – ‘Oedipus the ignorant’ – is once again required by the city of his mind to establish contact with his innate ‘intelligence’. He does not know the Answer, but he has reached the stage where ignorance is no longer a viable state of mind. Teiresias can only win if Oedipus should balk at the threshold of this present developmental disturbance and turn his back on the investigation.

The second temptation comes with Creon. Where Teiresias made Oedipus feel weak, Creon makes him feel contemptuous and stimulates another unprofitable tyrannical outburst. Oedipus recovers his self-restraint, and when he releases Creon from being scapegoat, he knows very well that it signals ‘my ruin, my death or my disgrace’ (ll. 742-743). This is the point of Oedipus’ commitment to the internal investigation which forms the central section of the play – he is now prepared to face the type of humiliation that feels like death. This constitutes a type of dream-analysis and it is conducted with the help of Jocasta as mother, muse and psychoanalyst.

The sensitive relationship with Jocasta, whom he says he respects ‘more than all these men here’, is instrumental in the process of ‘remembering’, ‘this is as much an imaginative reconstruction in the present as a literal recollection of past trauma’. Oedipus ignores everyone else and enters a dreamlike state:

Strange,
hearing you just now... my mind wandered,
my thoughts racing back and forth. (ll. 800-802)

Responding to the urgency of his desire to know, Jocasta conjures back into his consciousness two old ‘shepherds’ who looked after him as a baby – the two breasts of his infant mind who fed him on the high pastures of the mountain. The story which Jocasta helps to evoke in him to remember goes something like this:

Oedipus, a child of two cities – Thebes and Corinth – was conceived by parents of whom he has a ‘drunken’ dream and in this sense ‘remembers’ his birth origins. These parents were tempestuous and passionate in character – so much so that he abandoned them as an infant for more equanimical ‘foster-parents’ who then brought him up in princely comfort, with doting indulgence. They could not bear to tell him the ‘truth’ themselves, but gave him the strength and independence to leave them when the time came and return to his first home. At the disturbing ‘crossroads’ where he overcame his father’s hostility to him in a rocky passage underneath Cithaeron. There is a link between the meeting of the three roads and the tripartite riddle of the Sphinx, which (because of the topography) becomes associated with Laius: the host of a riddling, teasing mentality which never wanted the queen’s son to be born, and tried to bar his entrance to life, at the expense of a curse on the city.) Oedipus felt that the wit given him by his mother enabled him to conquer (‘kill’) this mentality, which he then interpreted as meaning that he should be her husband and king of her city. Now, to his horror, he begins to learn

² One story was that Teiresias was castrated or blinded after watching snakes copulating; another that he was blinded by Hera after saying that women enjoyed sex more than men. His blindness is thus associated with knowledge-as-castration (ed. Gould, p. 50).

that his mother was instrumental in his original ‘expulsion’: it wasn’t simply that he chose to exchange a Theban breast for a Corinthian one; in fact they both belonged to one mother – ‘The child she bore!’ – an internal object now evoking both love and hate together. Jocasta then introduces Oedipus to the two old shepherd-breasts (one Theban, one Corinthian) who had passed him from hand to hand on the mountain of Cithaeron when he was an infant. Having done this, she goes indoors to hang herself – as the mother may be said to hang up the breasts on weaning. Her suicide symbolises the end of her function in aiding Oedipus’ self-revelation. Oedipus is now ready to internalise the concept of his mother.

The discovery of the two shepherds thus represents the climax of the play – the genuine classical ‘catastrophe’ when the symbol is formed and sheds light on all the parts which make its whole. Oedipus now sees his mother in a different light. Jocasta becomes the earthy mediator of a higher power – Tyche, Chance or Destiny:

I must see my origins face-to-face...
I count myself the son of Chance,
the great goddess, giver of all good things –
I’ll never see myself disgraced. She is my mother!

Chance or Tyche he says is his *real* mother. This is not merely defiance – it has a psychic reality and a sense of revelation. Tyche has the significance of an internal figure or deity rather than a person – an internal object. At the very moment of this speech, which is a type of joyous Tychean Magnificat, Jocasta is hanging herself in her chamber in the house, offstage. The phase of motherhood in which she was split into good and bad, in the infant’s kingly possession, has been surpassed; Jocasta has demonstrated to Oedipus that she was both the one who fed him and who caused him pain. She was party to the rivets in his ankles, the sharp nipples in the caring breasts – the wild, dark powers of Cithaeron who coexist with the homely shepherds, sharing their territory. Through a triumph of integration, these opposing attributes or agents of Oedipus’ internal mother have been returned to their source in Tyche. Unlike the literal breasts this force of nature will never run dry.

This dynamic weaning process has been painful for Jocasta too, and there were times when she would have liked to ‘call off this search!/ My suffering is enough.’ She, like the shepherds who are part of her, makes attempts to deflect the process – yet knowing, all the while, that Oedipus’ desire to discover the ‘mystery of his birth’ is by now overwhelming and will carry him through to the end. Jocasta does not have to do much, simply allow the facts to appear before him – her experience, like his, is essentially one of ‘suffering’. His self-blinding, like her hanging, and like the birthmark of his ankles, is an act of recognition. He uses Jocasta’s doubleness – her two-pronged brooch (recalling the two-pronged fork of Laius) – for this stab of recognition, reinforced by his parents as combined object. It is described as ‘digging the twin points down into the sockets of his eyes’ (l. 1405), and the word used for sockets (*arthra*) is the same as that for the joints of his ankles.

This language is linked with the stab or lunge of Destiny ‘over and over, the stabbing daggers, stab of memory/ raking me insane’. The stabbing represents the internalisation of his new knowledge as the pattern of his life takes shape:

O triple roads – it all comes back, the secret,
Dark ravine, and the oaks closing in
Where the three roads join... (ll. 1530-1532)

The crossroads has now become the landscape of the birth canal. After ‘drinking his father’s blood’ in gestation, he ‘came here’ to the house of his kingship, the ‘harbour’ of his mother’s body³,

³ The metaphor of a ploughed field or harbour is used frequently in the play for Jocasta’s womb, home to father and son.

and 'did it all again' – now drinking his mother's milk. 'Apollo ordained it' – he says – 'but the hand that struck my eyes was mine ... I did it!' (ll. 1467-1471). The two types of *daimon* come into line – the daimon of the self and the daimon of the internal object. Oedipus has discovered that his *internal* parents are neither Polybus and Merope, nor Laius and Jocasta, but Apollo and Tyche – the genesis perhaps of the future goddess Psyche.

Oedipus is no longer *tyrannos*. He has been deposed, or rather he has deposed himself, just as the baby weans himself. He has been 'saved from death', he says, for some further unknown 'strange destiny'. But internally strengthened,

My troubles are mine

And I am the only man alive who can sustain them. (ll. 1547-1549)

It has been a story of 'catastrophic change' in the Bionian transcendent sense of moving onto the next phase of development – whether literally and physically, or in the sense of the next state of mind. It is significant that at the end of the play, Oedipus is allowed to briefly touch his two daughters, who will be his new eyes in this next internal landscape, crisscrossing his new mental territory until he finds another haven.

NOTE

Quotations are from *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, translated by Robert Fagles. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.