

Sophocles' Diagnosis: Psychoanalysis and the Many Faces of Oedipus

*Marco Innamorati*¹

Abstract

The Oedipus myth has a special meaning for the history of psychoanalysis. An analysis of the historical variation of the myth treatment within the theatre gives new insights about the possible interpretation. Comparing the various psychoanalytic interpretations of Sophocles' tragedy also gives interesting indications on the same subject.

Key words: *Oedypus myth; psychoanalysis; theatre; interpretation*

¹ Dynamic and Developmental Psychology, Università di Roma Tor Vergata

Freud and Sophocles

In *Confessions of Zeno*, which is considered the first psychoanalytic novel (Esman, 2001), the protagonist Zeno Cosini tells the reader that his analyst applied on him *Sophocles' diagnosis*, meaning he suffers from the Oedipus complex. Somehow the reference to Freud's interpretation of the myth was already so obvious as to let the author Italo Svevo (2018) introduce a joke about it.

Actually the myth of Oedipus, as partially narrated and partially presupposed in *Oedipus Rex*, was, from the beginning, strictly related to the history of psychoanalysis. The choice of interpreting the story of the son of Laius was made by Freud in a crucial moment. He had just abandoned the infant seduction hypothesis when he wrote to Fliess, on October 10th, 1897, that in his self-analysis he had found love towards his mother and hate towards his father, and he suspected this could be a universal tendency of mankind. In this way, Freud (1897) observed, one could understand the interest towards Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, a tragedy that had kept his fascination intact through centuries. It had been considered a tragedy tied to inescapable destiny, when actually Oedipus achieves the main goals of a male infant: getting rid of his father and replacing him as the spouse of his mother. Two years later, the same considerations (including references to other plays) were included in the *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) and later became so famous that the concept of 'Oedipus complex' has become somehow pop culture.

Actually, on the surface, not much of *Oedipus Rex* seems to match Freud's ideas. According to the version of the myth that Sophocles and his first public knew, Oedipus has asked about his future to Delphi's oracle, and is told he is going to kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified by such an abomination, he does not come back to Corinth, where he has previously lived, with people he believed to be his real family. Unfortunately, only his adoptive parents live in Corinth, while his real father and mother are from Thebes, exactly the place Oedipus decides to go to. On his

way to Thebes he meets a stranger and has a fight with him, killing him in the end. The stranger was Oedipus' real father Laius, the king of Thebes, going to Delphi on his own. Approaching Thebes, Oedipus meets the Sphinx. This half-woman/half-lioness monster asked Thebans to solve a riddle and then killed whoever could not solve it. Oedipus gives the right answer, liberating Thebes from the malediction. Thebans have already decided that the liberator would be offered the throne of the city and the hand of Jocasta, the widow queen. Nobody knows who has killed the king (even Oedipus does not suspect the identity of the person he killed), as nobody knows that Jocasta is Oedipus' real mother.

At the beginning of *Oedipus Rex* all this has happened. The Choir ask Oedipus to help them understand the reason for a pestilence in the city, as he helped when he did not even know about them. Verses 14–55 do stress the unconsciousness of Oedipus, about the meaning of his actions and his regal destiny, before reaching Thebes. It is understood that the city is unholy because of the presence of a sinner: once he is banned from the city, the pestilence will come to an end. The tragedy recounts how Oedipus tries to solve the problem, with the reluctant aid of the fortune-teller Tiresias, who already knows the truth: the sinner is actually Oedipus, guilty of parricide and incest. The faults are so terrible that Oedipus, even if previously completely unaware, blinds himself and bans himself from Thebes.

Freud can read the story of Oedipus as the fulfillment of a desire, only specifying that the laws of formation of a mythical story are the same as the formation of a dream: the latent content is transformed in order to be accepted by the consciousness. Just a few verses can support his interpretation: those of Jocasta, consoling Oedipus who is preoccupied by the idea of marrying her mother, as previewed by the oracle: 'How oft it chances that in dreams a man/ Has wed his mother! He who least regards/ Such brainsick phantasies lives most at ease' (vv. 981–983).

Oedipus and psychoanalysis

Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of the story of Oedipus, even if it has been the most known, is not the only one. Somehow it is possible to say that this story, just considering the classic version by Sophocles, has had an effect similar to Rorschach's blot, that is, its meaning has been viewed very differently. It is widely known that the story of psychoanalysis has been, from the beginning, the story of how different theorists disagreed (totally or partially) with the Founder's ideas and tried to support their points of view with new clinical evidence. Discussions were of course complicated by the circumstance that it was impossible for different clinicians to cure the same patients (the idea of trials on a high number of patients is relatively recent and still almost difficult to apply). Interpreting the same myth could be, however, a way of verifying the heuristic power of a theory.

Of course there are authors, who have managed to confirm Freud's thesis, trying to find new clues to back up an idea that at first sight seems to be as simple and powerful as very poorly proved. For example, it was observed that in ancient Greek 'to ask an oracle' could be synonymous with 'to desire' (Van der Sterren, 1952). Possibly, Anzieu (1966) was the most strenuous supporter of Freud's interpretation, since he read as metaphors of intentional parricide and incest not only the story of Oedipus but also several cosmogonist myths: in a way, the entire Greek mythology could be transformed into a gigantic confirmation of the universality of the Oedipus complex.

Even maintaining Freud's ideas, it is possible to change Sophocles' diagnosis (or at least his prognosis). Considering *Oedipus at Colonus* as part of the same cycle of *Oedipus Rex* – which, incidentally, it was not – Mark Kanzer (1950) tried to show how the Oedipus complex of Oedipus was, at the end of his life, finally overcome. On the contrary, there are even 'Freudian' authors who have somehow modified the original interpretation. Among them it is worth noting that Otto Rank (1941)

saw Oedipus as a mythical example of a father reluctant to accept his role.

Adlerian variations

Adler's individual psychology and Jung's analytic psychology were the first challenges for classical psychoanalysis and it is therefore logical to verify how Adlerian and Jungian interpretations can fit the case of Oedipus. As is well known, Adler considered not sexuality but the will to power as the central motivation of human beings; consequently, the main cause of neurosis is not the Oedipus complex but the inferiority complex. Such a complex is, according to Adler, related to physical problems: bad functioning or abnormal dimensions of an organ or of the entire body. The complex often tends to be overcompensated, which means that a person seeks success so as not to feel inferior to others anymore. The myth of Oedipus was not considered by Adler but received Adlerian interpretations by Roy Huss (1973) and Frances Atkins (1966). Actually, the very name of Oedipus is tied to an organic problem and possibly to overcompensation. Oedipus probably means 'swollen foot' but, due to a strange assonance, could also mean 'knowing foot'. The feet of Oedipus had been punctured and tied together with a rope when, as a baby, he had been abandoned on a mountain near Thebes, where he had been found by a shepherd and brought to Corinth. His 'knowledge' led him to solve the riddle of the Sphinx: what animal walks with four paws when young, two when adult and three at the end of their life? Man, answered Oedipus, who crawls at the beginning, then walks on his legs and then, when old, needs a stick. Huss (1973) notices a relation between the ambiguous name of Oedipus and a possible specific aptitude to solve riddles based on limbs. It might also be noted, incidentally, that Oedipus did not follow the normal path of humans, since he probably needed a stick from the very beginning and, at the end of his life, the feet of his daughters as well, because he could not see (Gentili, 1986).

Often feet are considered phallic symbols. A wounded foot could mean a malfunctioning sexual organ. Consequently the inferiority complex of Oedipus could be related to sexuality. However, the 'swollen foot' possibly leads to other interpretations. According to philologist Bruno Gentili, the myth foreshadows Oedipus' hyper-sexuality, based on the ancient Greek proverb *árista cholòs oiphèi*, which means that a cripple is a very powerful lover (Gentili, 1986, p. 119). Another philological interpretation reinforces the idea of an incestuous destiny for Oedipus: other Greek sources connect being cripple to being sexually transgressive, meaning homosexuality or incest (Bettini & Borghini, 1986).

Jungian considerations

One of Jung's most discussed ideas is the existence of a collective unconscious, which explains the presence of mythical themes that show very similar content, even if they come from very distant cultures (in time and space). Freud had a very ambivalent attitude towards the possibility of a collective unconscious. He completely refused it, but held the idea of psychological heredity in many ways. The meaning of dream symbols is considered the same for all human beings (Freud, 1900), for example, and the taboo of incest is to be related to the unconscious remembrance of experiences that men shared at the dawn of humanity (Freud, 1913). Specifically, even if not necessarily 'inherited', the desire to marry one's mother and kill one's father is shared by every man.

In this sense it could be considered, from a Jungian point of view, an archetype of the collective unconscious. Actually, Jung thought that the idea of incest was an archetype, and possibly the only archetype discovered by Freud (Jung, 1977). However, from the very beginning of his turning away from Freud, Jung considered incest (and Oedipus' incest as well) to be a symbol of something else: the theme of the hero's sacrifice (Jung, 1912). In this sense, the story of Oedipus should not be considered in the

light of forbidden desires but as the path of a hero towards his complete success (meaning redemption, initiation or reaching immortality). The idea of Oedipus as a hero has been elaborated further by Hillman (1987), who also thought of *Oedipus at Colonus* as a completion of *Oedipus Rex* (or better, as further dreaming of Sophocles on the same theme), which was necessary to understand the real meaning of the story of Oedipus.

Oedipus, castration, insight and knowledge

According to Sophocles, in order to punish himself for his terrible sins, even if committed unawares, Oedipus blinds himself. This is taken by Freud to mean the equivalent of castration. However, Greek myths are usually not committed to decency. Robert Graves (1990) noted that the blindness of Phoenix, tutor of Achilles, was usually considered by Greek grammarians as a euphemism for impotence, and that the castration of Attis and Uranus was always mentioned in the known versions of the myths. Actually, the theme of incest needed no mask in Greek myths. Frequent and enthusiastic incest is enacted by Gods: Jupiter/Zeus had incestuous relationships 'with his mother, his daughter and his sister' (Rhea, Persephone, Juno/Era), as observed even by the Christian author Minucius Felix, without any hesitation (*Octavius*, 31, 3).

Therefore, it is possible that the dialectic of seeing/not seeing can be interpreted in relation to knowledge. Michels (1986) reads the vicissitudes of Oedipus as a metaphor for insight. It is worth noting that Tiresias, the one who can foresee, is blind. So Oedipus becomes blind like Tiresias when he understands the truth: somehow blindness could be the sacrifice (or the metaphor for sacrifice) that is necessary to acquire knowledge. This would be consistent with other Greek myths: Phineas, king of Thrace, is told to have waived sight to become a 'seer'; according to Euripides, Polymestor receives from gods the gift of foreseeing after

being blinded as compensation for his loss (which happens to Tiresias as well).

But if the myth of Oedipus is about knowledge, it is not obvious if knowledge should be considered a positive fact or not. Opposing ideas on this are held, for example, by Loraux (1987) and Fortes (1965). The former considers Oedipus to be a positive hero whereas the latter considers him to be an example of *hubris*, of human illegitimate aspiration going beyond his natural limits. Such an interpretation is possibly supported by the words Oedipus is told by Tiresias, who tries not to reveal the whole truth: ‘Alas, alas, what misery to be wise / When wisdom profits nothing’ (*Oedipus Rex*, p. 316–317).

Oedipus and the Sphinx

As has already been shown, if one chooses to concentrate on a specific element of the myth, the interpretation can change. In this sense, many authors have seen the Sphinx as a key character in the story of Oedipus, but they have seen her through different lenses. Jung (1912) saw her as the ‘terrible mother’, while Rank (1941) saw her as the symbol of a phallic mother. On the contrary, Balter (1969) considered the Sphinx as a giver of pleasure and a source of power; according to his Kleinian interpretation, the relationship with the Sphinx is a metaphor of the will to orally incorporate one’s mother. The perspective reversal is complete with Van der Sterren (1952), who considers Oedipus to have a sadistic and incestuous relationship with his mother: in a way, his story implies both a symbolic and a real matricide.

The Sphinx can be seen as an internal image: according to Huss (1973), the double nature of the Sphinx relates to adolescent bisexuality. Reik’s (1920) Sphinx is a symbol of the relationship with parents, whereas Róheim’s (1973) is a representation of the father as homosexual.

Kanzer saw the Sphinx as an allegory of the problems given to a male adolescent from feminine sexuality. A woman with a breast

and the body of a lion combines both the desirable and the feared sides of the female world, which the young man must reconcile to acquire genital power (Kanzer, 1950, p. 562).

Innocence of Oedipus

It has been widely noted that Oedipus, according to the Sophoclean version of the myth, was condemned by destiny even before his birth, since Laius had been warned not to have sons. Oedipus does not come back to Corinth from Delphi just not to kill his father and marry her mother. He does not feel love or desire towards Jocasta: because she was promised as the spouse of the killer of the Sphinx by his brother Creon, she is virtually Oedipus’ bride before he can even see her. Even when he speaks of her, in the dialogues of *Oedipus Rex*, he says that he satisfies Jocasta’s pleasure but never says he loves her, whereas she does say she loves him. So the Oedipal desire would be at the same time so universal and so unmentionable as to lead Oedipus on the path of achieving it in the name of humanity, being exactly the one who does not hate whom he considers his father and the one who marries whom he does not love and does not consider his mother.

The archaic version of the myth, which Homer refers to¹, purifies Oedipus from any sense of guilt, even after he has understood what has happened to him. The only one to feel guilty is Jocasta, who actually commits suicide. On the contrary, Oedipus keeps on reigning, marries another woman and has children only from her. In the end, he dies in battle leading his soldiers and is buried with every honour due to a person of his lineage. During the Middle Ages, according to Propp (2010), the myth of Oedipus is transformed into the legend of people becoming saints after committing great crimes, people such as Judas or Gregory. It becomes a myth of redemption.

¹ *Iliad*, XXIII, 679–680; *Odyssey*, XI, 271ff.

Versions of the myth: How Oedipus became a Freudian case (and Freud did not even know)

There is another story to tell: *Oedipus Rex* was an original subject that received many relatively less known elaborations² that Freud almost certainly did not know. Such affirmation is possible for two connected reasons: (1) there is no trace in Freud's works of other theatrical pieces related to Oedipus (the various editions of the *Traumdeutung* only refer to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a tragedy, whose content is somehow similar to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*); and (2) these different scripts of the Oedipus tragedy would have offered more confirmation of Freud's ideas than the original (he would have cited them if he had known).

A first remake is *Oedipus* by Seneca, which already has an important variation to the original. At the beginning of the tragedy in Sophocles' version, Oedipus is requested to help the city by his citizens and he is sure he will be able to achieve a positive result because he has not the slightest idea of being the reason for the pestilence. On the contrary, Seneca's Oedipus suspects he is guilty of something even though he does not know how or why. In *Edippo* by Giovan Andrea dell'Anguillara (1560), which uses both Sophocles and Seneca as sources, Tiresias is on the scene at the beginning and the unknown secrets of Oedipus are revealed to the public from the very first scene. In Pierre Corneille's *Œdipe* (1658), Oedipus feels anxiety for many reasons, including the problem of conserving power. He is also presented not as a just and impartial leader of the city but as a tyrant, and he does not hesitate to order a 'political' wedding for his daughter. In Emanuele Tesauro's *Edipo* (1661), when someone suggests summoning the shadow of Laius, Jocasta asks not to perform the evocation because she would feel adulterous and a bigamist (which somehow implies that the wedding with Oedipus is culpable). In *Oedipus* by John Dryden and

Nathanierl Lee (1678), the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta is marked by real love and knowing that she is his mother does not stop him from desiring her (like before, if not more than before).

At the end of the XVII century, then, theatrical variations had already developed the idea that Oedipus was somehow more 'guilty' than Sophocles had described. Subsequent versions of *Oedipus Rex* oscillated between more apparent guiltiness and more apparent innocence of the protagonist. More innocent was Voltaire's *Œdipe* (1718), for example, as the relationship between the main character and Jocasta was completely de-sexualized. In Bernard d'Héry's *Œdipe Roi* (1786), Oedipus is described as the ideal king. Even the title of the tragedy written by Nicolas Germain Léonard around 1793 suggests that only destiny is responsible for what happens to Oedipus: *Œdipe Roi ou la Fatalité* ('Oedipus Rex and Fatality').

On the contrary, the hardest sense of anxiety grips Oedipus in *Œdipe* written by the Jesuit Melchior Foulard (1722). An active role towards his tragic end is played by Oedipus in another French tragedy with the same title by Antoine Houdar de la Motte (1726). In this case, Oedipus never lives far from Thebes and ambition, not chance, leads him to his destiny. Another variation is offered in *Edipo* by Francisco Martínez de la Rosa (1828): here Oedipus' fault is his will to know the truth.

In some other variations, people and not destiny are responsible for what happens, but the original impulse towards the tragic end does not come from Oedipus. Incestuous love is an explicit theme in *Jocaste* by Lauraguais (1781). As suggested by the title, Jocasta takes centre stage and seems to fall in love with the stranger who has solved the riddle of the Sphinx, even if immediately some clues may suggest his real identity. In *Edipo Re* by Silvestro Centofanti (1829), Creon already knows from the beginning what Oedipus has done and he uses his knowledge to gain power.

² The main sources for this and the following paragraph are: Astier (1974), Frick (1998), Halter (1998), Dawe

(2014), Hamburger (1978), Müller (1980), Scherer (1987) and especially Paduano (1994).

In this context, an expression such as ‘strange destiny’ might seem a joke, but it is really worth using because the last theatrical variation on the Oedipus theme was written in 1897, the same year of the letter to Fliess, which contained the first reference by Freud to Sophocles. It is in *Œdipe et le Sphinx* by Joséphin Péladan, a tragedy, where it is possible to find other strange clues. The plot begins just after the answer of the oracle and the decision not to come back to Corinth. This gives us the chance of seeing Oedipus killing his father – and having second thoughts about it: something tells Oedipus to spare the Other but he eventually murders him. Just as Oedipus has a vague presentiment of Laius being his father, so also does Jocasta about him being her son. Oedipus resembles Laius and, seeing him, she also feels sad thinking about her lost son.

Freud as a new source

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955), certainly not a psychoanalysis supporter, wrote that eventually Freud should be considered a source for the myth of Oedipus, with the same dignity of the ancient and apparently more ‘authentic’ sources. Actually, Freud’s approach to Oedipus influenced a number of theatrical pieces written during the XX century.

In 1904, when just a few people had read the *Traumdeutung* and most of them were physicians in Vienna, Hugo von Hoffmanstahl wrote *Oedipus und die Sphinx*. Hoffmanstahl’s Oedipus falls in love with Jocasta as soon as he sees her, but in fact he was not drawn to any girl because none of them was a queen. In Gide’s *Œdipe* (1931), the main character is not even preoccupied by the reality of incest and parricide, with the voice of common sense played by Creon, Jocasta’s brother. In Cocteau’s *La Machine Infernale*, Oedipus is not a tragic hero but a despicable profiteer, as he is in Zerboni’s *Edipo* (1946), where his misery is underlined by the shift of the event’s setting to modern times. Somehow Pier Paolo Pasolini, with his movie *Edipo Re* (1967), goes beyond Freud

with Oedipus marked by libidinal pleasure in killing his father Laius, who is not specifically recognized but is seen by his son as representing a hated generation. Friedrich Dürrenmatt goes even further with *Das Sterben der Pythia* (‘The death of the Pythia’, 1976): for starters, the side of destiny is set aside, or at least ridiculed, because the oracle has predicted parricide and incest only as a terrible joke. Moreover, just as Pasolini’s Oedipus hates his father, Dürrenmatt hates both his father *and* his mother, whom he has several times impregnated just to punish her.

Provisional conclusions

Would it be inappropriate to consider the myth of Oedipus related to narcissism, to transgression or even to the ‘double’ (both for the two ‘mothers’, Jocasta and the Sphinx, and also for the two blind men, Oedipus and Tyresias)? Probably not, and the kaleidoscope of variations could keep on turning. The possible interpretations of the myth are so many that it would be difficult to discard one of them or to choose the one definable as the most correct.

Somehow it is ironic that the foundational myth of classic psychoanalysis is that of Oedipus, since his story is probably related to matriarchy, as Robert (1915) noted from outside the psychoanalytic world and both Fromm (1951) and Rank (1941) accepted from inside. Freud has in fact been described many times as a typical exponent of ‘patriarchy’.

It is also ironic, however, how the story of the various versions of Oedipus has become more and more compatible with Freud’s view and how Freud’s version has influenced subsequent developments. It can be said that the story of the reception of Freud’s psychoanalysis is parallel to the story of the reception of his interpretation of Oedipus. An incredible number of variations of Freud’s theory have been proposed, all criticizing classical psychoanalysis for many sound reasons. A comparable number of psychoanalytic, anthropological and theatrical variations on Oedipus have been

composed but no theory has reached the popularity of Freud's and no variation on the myth has been so widely known as that of the *Traumdeutung*.

Perhaps the psychoanalysis of the future needs another foundational myth as strong as Freud's. Jung thought something similar, asking himself 'What is my myth?' after leaving the psychoanalytic movement (Jung, 1963: he actually tried to build it on alchemy,

but maybe it was too esoteric an image to reach maximum popularity. Kohut (1984) started to criticize both the clinical and the 'mythical' image of human beings depicted by Freud but he probably died too young to definitively turn the history of depth psychology in another direction.

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