

Oedipus the King: Quest for Self-Knowledge

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Abstract: The theme of Oedipus the King is the conflict between Oedipus' desire to know himself and his opposing desire to conceal the truth that will bring disaster. It's his complex character and conflict over self-knowledge that makes the tragedy a rich source of inspiration for psychoanalytic concept formation and provides a deeper understanding of emotional and cognitive development.

Keywords: Oedipus the King; Self-knowledge; Sophocles

Introduction

The Oedipus complex is a cornerstone of psychoanalysis, and an essential concept in psychoanalytic theories of general psychic development and the development of neuroses. The story of Oedipus is part of ancient Greek mythology. Freud chose Oedipus as a metaphor for the passionate relationships in the family because he could observe cognate dynamics in his patients' – and his own – dreams and in the myth. The myth, in Freud's view, expresses a kind of proto-knowledge over family dynamics. He wrote:... the legend of Oedipus sprang from the same primaeval dream-material which had as its content the distressing disturbance of a child's relation to his parents owing to the first stirrings of sexuality.

To be more precise, his point of departure is Sophocles' version of the myth in the tragedy Oedipus the King. My aim in the present article is to show the complex character of Sophocles' Oedipus and to reflect on some aspects of its impact on psychoanalysis^[1]. In the tragedy, Oedipus represents more than the figure we all know, the protagonist of the Oedipus complex. He is also determined to discover the truth about himself. The main theme of the tragedy is this quest. This quest is, however, all but straightforward, and two contradictory readings have been presented. The traditional one emphasizes the truth-seeking Oedipus, forcing his way towards self-knowledge. The other gives the opposite view; the tragedy is a collusive cover-up of a truth that all or most of the characters in the play must know.

For a psychoanalytic reader of the tragedy, it is striking to see how closely linked the passionate relationships of the Oedipus complex are with Oedipus' conflict-ridden struggle to find out who he is. Sophocles attains this by the way he composes the play on the background of the myth, adding details, inserting changes and omitting themes. In Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus stands out as a very complex character, and his quest for self-knowledge is presented as a dramatic psychic conflict.

Steiner (1985) used this ambiguous nature of Oedipus' quest as an example of a special form of distortion of psychic reality, turning a blind eye. Inspired by the complexity in Sophocles' construction of the play, he developed his thinking about this mechanism. He perceived it as an intermediate misrepresentation of reality, a marked distortion, but less grave than a psychotic breakdown of reality. I will take departure in the same contradictions as Steiner did and expand his points of view along a different line of thinking. Sophocles used the myth as a background for his play and adapted it to his own aims. He transformed the myth's drama of fate to a psychological drama with a structure that shows the complex, deeply human nature of Oedipus' character. In that way, Sophocles has inspired psychoanalytic understanding both of emotional and cognitive development up to our own time. My aim is to trace some elements in this history of ideas. I will show how the union of the contrary readings into one coherent version highlights Oedipus' inner drama – his conflict over knowledge. To prepare the ground we have to look at the tragedy and its relation to the myth. However, before we start discussing the text, we have to decide what epistemological status Oedipus has in our analysis.

1. The Real Identity of Oedipus

Oedipus on the stage is not a real person, and he is not an analytic case. On the other hand, neither can he be dismissed as pure fantasy. That would make him less interesting for the audience and for our purpose too. So I propose that he is not real but he is potentially real. In Winnicott's (1953) language, he exists in transitional or potential space. Enckell^[2] (2010) argues that metaphor is the model of all fiction: "The truth of metaphor is not actuality, but possibility. The world of fiction is real as a potential". This means that Sophocles is not portraying a person but composing a person that could be. And he puts his knowledge about and comprehension of human nature into the character. This does not mean that he models the character after a theory. As an artist, his knowledge is certainly more intuitive than explicit. His act of creation takes place in transitional space. For this reason, it can be rewarding for psychoanalysis to examine characters like Oedipus and Hamlet, not primarily to apply theory to explain them, but rather to learn from them, and to

extract and make explicit the intuitive conceptualization of the author.

2. The Myth and Sophocles' Adaptations

The oedipal drama is the theme of the mythical story of Oedipus and his family. Sophocles' tragedy comprises only a couple of hours of this story. There are several variations on the myth,¹ which has developed over a long period. It is rooted in archaic vegetation rites and religious regulations. For example, patricide is related to the method of succession of priests in archaic religions such as the Diana cult in ancient Italy, in which the ruling priest was killed by his successor (Frazer, 1922)^[3]

There is a curse on Laius, the king of the city of Thebes, because he has abducted and abused the son of another king. Mourning his own childlessness, which he feels is a punishment for his abuse of the boy, Laius consults the Oracle of Delphi. She tells him that his childlessness is a blessing because his son will become his killer.

Laius rejects Jocasta without telling her why. Hurt and angry, she makes him drunk, seduces him and gives birth to a son. Laius seizes the newborn child from his nurse, pierces his feet and bids a servant put him out on Mount Cithaeron to die. Sophocles varies this in a psychologically highly significant way. In his version it is Jocasta who gives the baby to a shepherd with orders to take him to the mountain. The parents act together and the mother too rejects the child.

In the myth the child is found by a shepherd from Corinth and given the name Oedipus because his feet are swollen. (Oedipus can mean 'swollen foot'.) The shepherd takes him to Corinth where the reigning king, Polybus, and his wife are childless too, and are happy to raise Oedipus as their own son. In Sophocles' rendering the shepherd from Thebes gives the child to the shepherd from Corinth because he cannot bear to let the child die. And to economize on his dramatic means, Sophocles gives the two shepherds additional roles in the tragedy, the Theban as the survivor from the meeting at the crossroads and the Corinthian as the messenger announcing Polybus' death. In this way Sophocles condenses the background for the crucial scene where the truth is revealed, the meeting between the two shepherds.

3. The Myth and Sophocles' Transformation

The myth is a drama of fate. Laius has once abused a young boy. The gods punish him with infertility and the Oracle's threatening prophecy. When he begets a son, he attempts to avoid the fulfilment of the prophecy by putting the baby to death. And when Oedipus asks the Oracle about his origin, she adds another curse to the first. Thus Oedipus' punishment is secondary to that of the whole family. As in the words of the jealous God in the Old Testament: "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third or fourth generations of those who hate Me".

Oedipus tries to avoid his destiny but every step he takes away from it actually brings him closer. One aspect of the dramatic irony of the myth concerns the futility of fighting one's destiny. Destiny is decided by the gods. The prophecies foretell the future which, although the participants try to escape their destiny, is inevitable.

In the drama of fate portrayed in the myth, Oedipus appears as a pawn in a game played by the gods. Sophocles transformed the myth into a psychological drama. He is not concerned with the curse on the family. Oedipus is the protagonist who drives the play forward. But he is also his own antagonist. Tiresias says so directly: "Creon's no enemy of yours; you are your own". Tiresias, Jocasta and the shepherd do what they can to persuade him to desist from his investigation. Oedipus, however, insists on pursuing the truth – firstly, the real meaning of the Oracle's words, then, who killed Laius and, finally, when the evidence points in his direction, who he is.

The central elements of the myth, the killing of the father and the marriage with the mother, form a background for the tragedy that accompanies Oedipus on his progress towards self-knowledge. Oedipus the King is therefore not primarily a play about murder and incest. As Rudnytsky points out, the play can be conceived as an enactment of the riddle of the Sphinx. In his encounter with the Sphinx, Oedipus solves the riddle on an intellectual level. When faced with his past, he has to solve the riddle of his own life.

4. Truth-seeking of Oedipus

In the traditional reading, Oedipus the King is a play about the search for self-knowledge. The truth-seeking Oedipus has been vividly described by Hölderlin, who translated Sophocles' play into German in the 1790s. In his notes to the text he emphasizes Oedipus's "...desperate struggle to come to himself, the roughshod, almost shameless striving to become master of his own, the foolish-wild searching after a consciousness". Hölderlin's view of Oedipus is a romantic one. Oedipus is not merely a man who shows his superiority by answering the riddle of the Sphinx, nor is he merely a man who is resolutely seeking the truth about a murder. He is also involved in a passionate search for knowledge about himself.

Freud does not refer to Hölderlin but he was well aware of this interpretation of Oedipus' character. Jones retells Freud's remembrance how, as a student, he had strolled around the arcades of the University of Vienna, looking at the busts of old and famous professors, and had had a fantasy about a similar bust to himself inscribed with a line from the final speech of the chorus in Oedipus the King: "Who knew the famous riddle and was a man most mighty".

When Freud chooses Oedipus as one of his intellectual heroes, he is in impressive company. Again, I am referring to Rudnytsky's monograph. Aristotle^[4] considered Oedipus the King to be a model tragedy, a family drama arousing both pity and fear in the spectator and portraying the very movement from ignorance to knowledge that marks the fully developed tragedy. After Aristotle, however, the rendering of the myth became diluted. It was Lessing, in Germany, who around 1770 re-established Oedipus the King as a play concerned with self-reflection. He thereby marked the beginning of a movement in the history of ideas that Rudnytsky terms 'the age of Oedipus'. The expression refers to the fact that Oedipus was regarded as a major intellectual figure throughout the 19th century in Germany, and many of the central philosophers and authors of German romanticism and idealism were preoccupied with the character of Oedipus. Thus Schiller, Hölderlin, von Kleist and Hegel, and later von Hartmann and Nietzsche, produced either interpretations similar to Sophocles' play or their own interpretations of his character. In these works Oedipus was portrayed in the same way as the protagonist of Sophocles' play – the truth-seeking Oedipus, the man who wanted to know himself.

However, Freud did more than borrow a popular theme. He raised the oedipal drama from a descriptive level (the myth) to a

dynamic and structural level. He gave oedipal dynamics a central place not only in personality development (the Oedipus complex), but in cognitive development as well. For example, in discussing the case of ‘Little Hans’, Freud writes: ... his sister’s birth stimulated him to an effort of thought which, on the one hand, it was impossible to bring to a conclusion, and which, on the other hand, involved him in emotional conflicts. He was faced with the great riddle of where babies come from, which is perhaps the first problem to engage a child’s mental powers, and of which the riddle of the Theban Sphinx is probably no more than a distorted version. And in the introduction to the case he writes: “Thirst for knowledge seems to be inseparable from sexual curiosity. Hans’s curiosity was particularly directed towards his parents”.

In 1915 Freud added a section to *Three Essays on Sexuality* under the heading ‘The sexual researches of childhood’, where the first chapter concerns “the instinct for knowledge” (1905, p. 194). In the ‘Rat Man’ and in *Introductory Lectures* (Freud, 1917, p. 327–8), this need to know has been translated into English as the epistemophilic instinct. This is also the concept used by Melanie Klein in the English translations of her early writings, for example, in *Early stages of the Oedipus conflict*: The early connection between the epistemophilic impulse and sadism is very important for the whole mental development. This instinct, roused by the striving of the Oedipus complex ...

Thus both Freud and Klein connected oedipal dynamics with the urge to know, and both conceived of this urge as an instinctual force. Green (1969) has taken this perspective on oedipal dynamics and its relation to cognitive development a step further. In his book, which in the original French has the cryptic title *Un Œil en Trop* [An eye too many], he quotes the lines by Hölderlin that gave him the title of the book: King Oedipus has an eye too many perhaps.^[5] The sufferings of this man, they seem indescribable, unspeakable, inexpressible.

In Hölderlin’s view, Oedipus’ suffering and fall are closely related to his efforts to find Laius’ killer. The Oracle’s prophecy does not mention Laius explicitly. If Oedipus had been satisfied with the notion of a killer who had to be punished, the story could have ended there. Instead he takes the matter further and in this way prompts Creon’s thoughts on the death of Laius: Before the city passed into your care,

My Lord, we had a king called Laius.

5. Cover-up for Oedipus

Vellacott (1993, see also 1971) has argued that Sophocles invites two contradictory readings of *Oedipus the King*; the traditional one and one where all the central participants know the truth from the beginning and try to prevent it coming out. This interpretation means that behind the story that seems to be taking place on the stage – Oedipus’ determined quest for the truth about himself – another, more hidden drama is unfolding: the truth is being covered up. Vellacott supports his view by pointing to the inconsistencies and overlooked facts in the description of the events following the killing of Laius. According to Vellacott there is a conspiracy of silence around Laius’ death. Oedipus at first joins the conspiracy, but later engages in a “painful pilgrimage from pretence to reality”.

Although Vellacott’s interpretation of the tragedy has not been met with much enthusiasm by scholars in the field, it makes sense to the general, or at least the psychoanalytic, reader. Steiner (1985) has further developed Vellacott’s view of the drama as a cover-up operation for Oedipus and discussed the implications for the understanding of mechanisms resulting in the pathological resolution of the Oedipus complex.^[6] Steiner maintains that Jocasta, Creon, Tiresias, the chorus and not least Oedipus himself are all ‘turning a blind eye’ to reality, a reality they must be aware of and must have realized when Oedipus first arrived in Thebes after killing Laius. In my recapitulation I have noted a number of events that either point directly or hint indirectly at the truth. They are registered by Oedipus, he reacts to them, but he does not draw the obvious conclusion. For example, the comment by the Corinthian youth on Oedipus’ lack of resemblance to his parents, his parents’ irrational response to his question and the Oracle’s clear and ominous reaction. Further examples are the circumstances around his murder of a man: the closeness in time with Laius’ death and the lack of investigation of this crime, and also Oedipus’ striking ignorance of the murder and his efforts to avoid facts connecting his encounter at the crossroads with Laius’ death. Finally, he ignores Tiresias’ direct statement of the truth.

The denial of the truth about oneself as a force in the human mind was also expressed by a playwright who was a contemporary of Freud, Henrik Ibsen. In his tragedy *The Wild Duck* there is a dialogue between Dr Relling, the sensible physician, and the idealistic and bombastic Gregers Werle, old friend of the grandiose but miserable Hjalmar Ekdal:

Gregers: And what treatment are you using for Hjalmar?

Relling: The usual one. I am trying to keep up the self-deception⁴ in him. [...]

Gregers: Doctor Relling, I won’t give in till I have rescued Hjalmar from your clutches.

Relling: So much the worse for him. If you take away self-deception from the average man, you take away his happiness as well. (Ibsen, 1884, Act V, p. 158–9)

Including Vienna, before and after the turn of the 19th century, and Freud makes several references to them. One reference that is directly relevant here is his dream about an essay written “in a positively norekdal style”. “Norekdal” is a (derogatory) adjective coined from the names of two of Ibsen’s characters: Nora from *A Doll’s House* and Ekdal from *The Wild Duck*. In the dialogue quoted above Dr Relling dispassionately refers to Ekdal’s self-deception or life-lie, to his ordinary human need to avoid the unwelcome, the painful or the shameful truth, to cover up harsh facts and turn a blind eye on reality and the truth about himself.

6. Conclusion

Aristotle considered *Oedipus the King* to be the model tragedy, almost perfectly in accordance with his own thinking about tragedy. However, it should be borne in mind that *Oedipus the King* played a part in Aristotle’s conceptualization of tragedy, and thus influenced his thinking. And Sophocles took a remarkable step. Only 50 years after the birth of tragedy when Aeschylus introduced a second actor on the stage, Sophocles wrote a masterpiece that has preserved its impact to this very day.

In order for a tragedy to move us, it must take place among close friends or in a family, says Aristotle. Furthermore the story must

culminate in recognition, in a transition from ignorance to knowledge. Green takes the thought further. The family is the primary scene of tragic events – this is where love and hate are at their most intense – and the tragic space is a space for disclosure. Self-knowledge becomes problematic when something stands in the way of the process. The barrier is repression, which forms a demarcation between the conscious, which we know, and the unconscious knowledge against which we defend ourselves. The Oedipus myth concerns a central arena of repression of consciousness: incestuous desire and murderous rivalry with the parents.^[7] The stage where the struggle for self-knowledge takes place is the sexual and aggressive ties within the family. Sophocles was a highly conscious dramatist when he composed his tragedy.

Furthermore it was in the self-analysis he began in 1895, and in which the death of his father a year later played an important role, that he became aware of the general nature of the Oedipus complex when he encountered it “in my own case too” as he wrote to Fliess. In his conceptualizations, both of the unconscious and of the Oedipus complex, he accomplished a transformation that extended the concepts from a purely descriptive to a dynamic and structural level. Freud did more than interpret the character of Oedipus. He placed oedipal dynamics in a theoretical context and attributed to it a decisive role in the development of the personality as well as in reality testing, symbol formation and thinking.

The theme of this paper is the complexity of Sophocles’ vision of man as he presents it in the character of Oedipus. This wisdom is to some extent already present in the myth, in which the family is the arena for passionate interaction. But Sophocles developed this further. The complex character of Oedipus and the intensity of his conflict-ridden struggle for self-knowledge is Sophocles’ work. It is Sophocles’ conception of man – the way he expresses a deeply human dynamics – that makes this tragedy valid for all times and such a rich source of inspiration for psychoanalytic thinking and understanding.

References:

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