

After Oedipus: Laius, Medea, and Other Parental Myths

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This paper is an effort to correct the child-centered bias of much of developmental theory, a bias which is itself a consequence of recent changes in social attitudes toward childhood. The present model adopts the historically older view of children as born into the world in the service of parental needs, as the consequence of a developmental process initiated by adults. The psychological themes in the drama of Oedipus Rex are reconsidered with special attention to the sexual and murderous passions of the parental figures in the drama; the tragic heroine Medea is viewed as an illustration of the unconscious conflict between the needs of the self and the needs of the children, and the willingness of parents to sacrifice children in the service of the self. The contemporary value of this re-reading of ancient drama is underscored by reference to current research on incest and child abuse; the implications of this revisionist contribution to developmental theory include a recognition of the need to incorporate the dark passions of adults and the mastery of these conflicts into the study of individual and family development.

This essay is based on data which are 2500 years old, and on some observations about adult developmental dynamics which are familiar to social workers and police officers, as well as to developmental psychologists who read the morning paper with their coffee. My purpose is to bridge the gap between what is taken for granted in the daily newspaper and theories of individual development which continue to ignore parental contributions to the conflicts and tragedies of the family life cycle.

Developmental psychology, child-centered until fairly recently, reflects concurrent changes in attitudes toward childhood. As Aries (1962) has pointed out, the awareness of childhood is relatively recent; historically, children were viewed as small adults, and psychoanalytic theory is among the forces which led to the recognition of the child and the study of child developmental processes.

An historical perspective suggests, however, that present views of child development are incomplete. In its careful consideration of childhood, much of developmental theory has not only given relatively little attention to the parents, but has ignored the historical transformation in attitudes toward children. Our contemporary view of parental roles, in which the mother and father nurture and further the child's development, is a very recent view. Over

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the history of humanity, children have come into the world sometimes by accident and sometimes on purpose; they have been cared for, surely, or they would have died; but they have come into the world to serve their parents' needs.

The model of development in this essay takes as its starting point the transition to parenthood, and views child development as a consequence of a developmental process initiated by adults. Thus I borrow the traditional view of children as the outcome of, and in the service of, the needs of adults, and apply this view to the parents whose passions move the tragedies of Oedipus Rex and Medea.

The actions which form the dramatic points of these two tragedies, incest in Oedipus Rex and filicide in Medea, are not at all unfamiliar to the modern reader. Yet what follows is not logical: the actions are condemned, but the actors are tragic heroes—a paradox dependent for its resolution on our recognition that the audience applauds the motives unconsciously, seeing the deeds safely muted and sublimated, and just distant enough for comfort. The boy Oedipus—who fled his home to avoid the prophecy of incest and murder—gives his name to the first stirrings of sexual and jealous passions which move small children: but Oedipus the King, who in his blind despair clings to his daughters, and Medea, driven by jealous rage to murder her sons, are conspicuously absent from our developmental mythologies.

In this essay, I shall seek places for Oedipus, Laius, Jocasta, Medea, and Jason in a model of the developmental dynamics of parenthood which explores the interactions between self-love and the love of another. I shall suggest that these interactions have some relationship to the conflict which is inherent between the struggle for individual survival and the survival of the species.

Oedipus Rex: A Summary and Some Reconsiderations

Let us begin with a summary of Oedipus Rex which does Sophocles a great injustice, but which serves to expose some of the themes in the drama which have received less attention than they deserve. As the play opens, we find the city of Thebes stricken by plague. Oedipus speaks his first words to the chorus of suppliant citizens: "My children . . ." and the audience—for whom the play holds no suspense, since the myth is known to all—is alerted to the slow ironic unveiling which is to come. Oedipus tells his citizens that though each man among them suffers, his own suffering as king is greater, for he suffers on behalf of the population, each individual, and himself.

His brother-in-law Creon brings a message from the Delphic oracle: the plague of Thebes is punishment for the fact that the murderer of Laius, king before Oedipus, is still unpunished. Oedipus, who ascended to the throne of Thebes after successfully answering the riddle of the Sphinx, asks how the

city could possibly have neglected this crime at the time of Laius's death, and Creon replies that the Sphinx herself instructed the Thebans to leave this question unanswered. To this Oedipus declares that he will avenge the murder of Laius "as though he were my sire."

Oedipus summons the prophet Teiresias, who has served the kingdom since the time of the reign of Laius. But Teiresias declares himself unwilling to speak on the matter, though in his reluctance he hints that Oedipus himself bears some of the guilt.

To this Oedipus responds with rage, insisting that the prophet speak, and Teiresias replies that Oedipus himself is in fact the murderer. This charge Oedipus denies, and Teiresias repeats it a second and a third time, adding,

"I say thou livest with thy nearest kin

In infamy, unwitting of thy shame."

We note that although Teiresias has declared repeatedly and explicitly the fact of Oedipus's guilt, Oedipus rejects the accusation, countering with the deed by which he delivered the Thebans from the Sphinx, answering her riddle and thereby coming into a kingdom.

It is not the accusations of Teiresias but the reassurances of Jocasta which initiate foreboding in Oedipus, notwithstanding her intention to affirm his innocence. Jocasta tells him of the oracle which forecast that Laius would be slain by his own son, who would wed his wife: since he is no son of Laius, she tells him, he is guiltless.

But Oedipus replies with intimations of recognition of Laius himself and of the site where the murder occurred. And he goes on to tell of a slur he met as a youth—"Thou art no true son of thy sire"—which caused him to seek out the Delphic oracle. Although he was not told whether Polybus and Merope were his true parents, the oracle told him he was fated to kill his father, wed his mother, and bear children with her.

A messenger from Corinth brings the news that Polybus has died of old age; but as Jocasta reassures Oedipus that he has now finally been proven altogether guiltless, he demurs: "Must I not fear my mother's marriage bed?" No, he need not have such fears, Jocasta tells him: "How oft it chances that in dreams a man has wed his mother! He who least regards such brainsick phantasies lives most at ease."

The messenger from Corinth interrupts, declaring that Oedipus was not blood kin to Polybus, but was given over as a baby, bound, by a shepherd from the house of Laius. Oedipus seeks to call the shepherd in as witness, but Jocasta abruptly begs him to abandon his quest, saying, "Ah mayst thou ne'er discover who thou art!" she exits.

Summoned at last by Oedipus, the shepherd denies the messenger's claim that Oedipus the King is the baby once given him in trust. Over his protests Oedipus continues to question him, and finally, at Oedipus's insistence, the shepherd admits that he had been given the baby of whom prophecy told that

he was to kill his father, but out of pity defied King Laius's command to kill the child, giving it into the hands of the messenger instead, thinking that distance would suffice to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Oedipus, his knowledge complete, declares:

"I stand a wretch, in birth, in wedlock cursed,

A parricide, incestuous, triply cursed,"

and exits. The chorus echoes his despair:

"Thy cradle was thy marriage bed:

One harborage sufficed for son and sire. . . .

The son and sire commingled in one bed."

A palace messenger comes to tell that Jocasta is dead in her bridal chamber, her last word this:

" 'Laius,' she cried, and called her husband dead

Long, long ago; her thought was of that child

By him begot, the son by whom the sire

Was murdered and the mother left to breed

With her own seed, a monstrous progeny.

Then she bewailed the marriage bed whereon

Poor wretch, she had conceived a double brood,

Husband by husband, children by her child."

And with her death, the messenger continues, Oedipus burst into the bridal chamber, crying,

" 'Where is the wife, no wife, the teeming womb

That bore a double harvest, me and mine? "

and taking Jocasta's brooches, blinded himself.

Blind Oedipus returns to the stage and cries out once more in despair:

" 'O fatal wedlock, thou didst give me birth,

And, having borne me, sowed again my seed,

Mingling the blood of fathers, brothers, children,

Brides, wives and mothers, an incestuous brood. . . . "

Jocasta's brother Creon enters, and Oedipus, soon to be exiled from Thebes, begs for his daughters:

" 'But my unhappy children—for my sons

Be not concerned, O Creon, they are men,

And for themselves, where'er they may be, can fend.

But for my daughters . . .

O might I feel their touch and make my moan.

. . . What say I? Can it be my pretty ones

Whose sobs I hear? Has Creon pitied me? "

Creon replies:

" 'Tis true; 'twas I procured thee this delight,

Knowing the joy they were to thee of old.' "

And Oedipus turns to his daughters:

“ O children mine,
 Where are ye? Let me clasp you with these hands,
 A brother's hands, a father's . . .
 Hands of a man who blindly, recklessly,
 Became your sire by her from whom he sprang. ”

He foretells that his daughters will live unwed and childless because of their father's crime; it will be said of them that:

“ Their father slew his father, sowed the seed
 Where he himself was gendered, and begat
 These maidens at the source wherefrom he sprang. ”
 Such are the gibes that men will cast at you,
 Who then will wed you? ”

And, at Creon's command, Oedipus releases his daughters and goes into exile.

This summary of the drama, whatever its injustice to the poetry of Sophocles, is faithful to the plot and may be surprising to the reader, particularly the psychologist whose familiarity with *Oedipus Rex* comes by way of the study of the Oedipus complex. Perhaps most startling is the explicit treatment of the incestuous tie. The discovery itself occurs through Jocasta's hints: what the prophet declared, Oedipus denied, but what his wife/mother denied, he nonetheless guessed must be the terrible truth, in an unravelling of hints which Freud has compared to the course of a psychoanalysis.

Jocasta herself, moreover, is the first to realize that the prophecy has come to pass. That is to say: the wife/mother is the first whose knowledge is complete, and the first to pass on knowledge to the son, a dramatic mirror for the transfer of carnal knowledge. Furthermore, the incestuous sequence of matings is described in repeated detail, first by Oedipus as he uncovers the meaning behind Jocasta's hints, a discovery echoed by the chorus; next by Jocasta as she takes her life; once more by Oedipus as he discovers her and blinds himself; finally, once again by Oedipus as he caresses his daughters, foretelling that his crime, retold once more, will leave them forever barren and unwed. In this dramatic telling and retelling, the deed of Oedipus, done unknowingly and despite all human efforts to prevent it, is perhaps less significant than the covert relish with which the sinning mother and son review their horror over and over.

Although Sophocles exonerates Oedipus of premeditated parricide, we might surmise that the family dynamics of incest, which has been shown to be transferred from generation to generation, underly the final embrace Oedipus offers his daughters: describing at length once more his own shameful deeds, he tells them that his own disgrace will keep them forever unmarried—and forever his own.

We come last to Laius, dramatically the least interesting of this tragic family: a sensible patriarch who, forewarned of a threat, tried to dispose of

his son. Erik Erikson finds nothing at all unusual in this act:

A new generation, for us, always seems to start again with Oedipus. We take it for granted that King Laius knew what he was doing—for could he not count on the authority of the Oracle when he left his baby boy to die, taking no chances with the possibility that a good education might have proved stronger than the oracular establishment? From what we know today, however, we might be inclined to ask: what could you expect of a little boy whose father felt so bound by phobic traditionalism? Yet, theory has confirmed the oracle, each new child appears to be a new example of the racial heritage, and parricide remains a much more plausible explanation of the world's ills than does filicide. (1970, p. 22)

I am not so easily persuaded that Laius can be excused. More to the point, I do not think Erikson's claim can be defended against the staggering statistics on child abuse; and I do not think contemporary developmental psychology can be defended against the charge of a peculiarly selective perception. With just a little queasiness, the aspiring five-year-old criminal—who turns out upon examination to be seeking to flee his fate—has been absorbed into our developmental mythologies, and the name of Oedipus is on the shelf in Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*, while his murderous father and seductive mother have been forgotten, as has Oedipus the father, prepared to pass the incestuous legacy on for one more generation.

To sum up: the drama which has provided psychoanalysis with its archetypal parricide is seen upon examination to show instead that a deliberate attempt at filicide led to inadvertent parricide. It is not my intention to suggest that the complex of pregenital desires and resentments associated with the name of Oedipus are insignificant—quite the contrary: Freud's claim that the dramatic appeal of the tragedy can be traced to the audience's unconscious recognition of their own incestuous desires is the point of departure for my own reconsideration of the Oedipal tragedy. I suggest, however, that the motives of these passionate parents have been too long neglected by developmental psychologists—who like myself are perhaps uncomfortable seeing themselves through the eyes of Sophocles.

Medea and Motherhood

The fate of Oedipus was sealed before his birth, and though all the house of Laius including Oedipus himself sought to prevent it, the prophecy was fulfilled: the drama of Oedipus Rex is the slow disclosure of inevitable doom, Oedipus the tragic hero unable to flee his fate. Medea, the mother of tragedy, is another matter entirely: her drama, like her fate, is of her own making:

The play opens as the Nurse of Medea's children reveals that Jason, Medea's husband, has turned traitor to her and their sons, and plans to wed the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. In an anticipation of the fury of Medea as well as the play's climax, the Nurse declares that she might harm herself, Creon, or Jason,

“ ‘And get herself some doom yet worse thereby;
For dangerous is she . . . ’ ”

Creon knows well Medea's power; he plans to exile her and her sons for the sake of the safety of Jason and his daughter. Medea, despite the fears of Creon and the Nurse, enters not in a rage but lamenting.

Creon tells Medea that he fears her vengeance and must therefore exile her; but she begs him to grant her delay in the order of exile as an act of compassion. He consents most reluctantly and exits. And then Medea reveals her plot to kill Jason, Creon, and Creon's daughter:

“ ‘On to the dread deed! Now is need of daring.
. . . I prove me woman indeed!

Men say we are most helpless for all good,
But of dark deeds most cunning fashioners.’ ”

Jason enters and offers Medea both gold and his protection; but Medea reminds him that it was she who won him the Golden Fleece and many succeeding feats, and that for his children's sake he owes her not gold nor even protection, but his loyalty. To this Jason replies that his forthcoming wedding would bring him wealth, and thus bring wealth to her; he calls the gods to witness that though he has offered her help, Medea has rejected him; and exits.

Aegeus, King of Athens, enters to seek Medea's aid: his marriage is childless, and he seeks sons. Medea strikes a bargain, promising fruitfulness in exchange for sanctuary for herself after Creon exiles her. Aegeus agrees, and his promise is sealed with his oath. He exits; and Medea at once declares her intention to murder Jason's new bride and all who touch her—and to slay her own sons.

The chorus of Corinthian women asks:

“ ‘Woman, wilt have the heart to slay thy sons?’

‘Yea; so mine husband's heart shall most be wrung.’

‘But thou of wives most wretched shouldst become.’

‘So be it: wasted are all hindering words . . . ’ ”

responds Medea, and summons Jason. She offers him her apology and reunites him with their sons; then she sends the boys to bear a bride-gift to Jason's new wife. As they return, she falters briefly, seeing their smiles, then hardens her sense of purpose.

A messenger enters to report the death in torment of the daughter of Creon; and when Creon himself embraced her dying body, declaring,

“ ‘Ah me, would I could die with thee!’ ”

seeking to rise, he found his wish was granted: he was trapped by Medea's charmed gift, and perished embracing his daughter.

Once more Medea steels herself to the murder of her children, all the while recalling how dear they are, borne of her own flesh. Then she exits, and her voice is heard summoning them to her: over their screams, she murders her sons.

Jason enters: having discovered his bride and her father dead, he has come to rescue his sons from the vengeance of the house of Creon. But the chorus informs him that he is even more wretched than he has guessed, for his sons are already murdered by their mother.

Medea appears in the chariot of the Sun, shouting in rage that Jason is to blame for the tragedy which has come about, as he blames her. He begs for the privilege of burying his sons, but Medea departs, taking their bodies, to bury them herself.

Superficially, the domestic tragedy of Jason and Medea is almost trivial: it is elevated to the tragic stage through the climactic murder of sons by their own mother, done over their screams of protest, within the audience's hearing. Like *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy of Medea revolves around the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children. However, the timing of sin differentiates the dramas: the sin of Oedipus has taken place long years before the play, and its dramatic tension lies in the slow disclosure of the deed, already known to the audience, to the doer. The sin of Medea requires her preparation and the audience's suspense for most of the play; and it is rage, not horror or repentance, with which the play concludes. For their sins Jocasta takes her life, Oedipus his sight, while Medea and Jason conclude their tragedy in a counterpoint of accusation and counteraccusation, and depart—angry and grieved, but alive and whole.

However, the character of Medea, although crafted by the relatively modern and sophisticated hand of Euripides, represents a myth which is a remnant of a tradition older than the issue of a son's succession to the throne, the issue which lay behind the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*. Medea, sorceress, procurer of charms of fertility for King Aegeus, giver of life and death to her own sons, victorious over her powerful husband, is an echo of Astarte, the mother-goddess whose worship antedated patriarchal gods in Greece as well as the Fertile Crescent of the Mediterranean. As we shall see, this difference will be reflected in the dynamics underlying the two mythic parents.

Medea and Oedipus: The Evolution of Parenthood

For the developmental psychologist, this overview of Greek drama is a vivid reminder that the passion of five-year-old boys is not the only lesson to be learned from the past: Oedipus the father is fully as interesting as Oedipus the son. The parents who people these tragedies represent a range of adult passion, from those ruled by self-interest, as are Laius and Jason, through those governed by love (or lust) for another, as are Oedipus and Jocasta, to the most complex: Medea, who, when her love of Jason is betrayed, responds to the blow by regressive destruction of the sons she loves, in defense of her own self-love.

The myth of Medea recalls the most ancient form of worship, that of the

goddess of birth and death. Dynamically as well, Medea represents the primitive: when Jason repudiates her, love wars with vengeance and vengeance wins; that is to say, with the loss of one love object, she devours and destroys those remaining, claiming even their dead bodies. Freud (1962) has suggested that narcissistic motives—which here I refer to as self-love—are phylogenetically and ontogenetically the more primitive, and gradually in individual development the capacity for object-cathexes—that is, the love of another—is learned, a progression seen too in the evolution of civilizations, where self-interest precedes the sense of social consciousness and mutual responsibility. Models of child development discuss the progression from infantile narcissism to the object-cathexes of the Oedipal stage. But the conflict between self-interest and the love of the child which is felt by the parent, which is no simple reawakening of infantile narcissism but a conflict accompanied by the capacity to destroy the child—for the parent possesses the power the infant dreams of—is a conflict unrepresented in developmental models of the transition to parenthood.

Like Laius, Medea is a primitive parent: a threat to her self-love causes her to destroy her children, just as the prophecy of doom caused Laius to set his infant son out to die. But it cannot go unremarked that both playwright and audience disregard Laius as incidental to the tragedy of Oedipus, and side with Medea, the heroic murderess. If Oedipus appeals to the dark incestuous underside of our selves, then surely Medea speaks to the murderer within us; the unexamined tragedy in both these dramas is the unspoken unwillingness of the audience to agree that they too understand when children might be killed in defense of the parents' needs.

Let us return to the fates of the parents. Although Medea murders in vengeance, both she and Jason go unpunished, while Jocasta takes her life and Oedipus his sight for a crime committed unknowingly. We might speculate that the consequences of sin are perhaps to some extent proportionate to the magnitude of the transgression and independent of the intentions of the sinner. If this is so, it would appear that to kill a child to avenge a husband's betrayal is forgivable, while the murder of a son to evade a prophecy is not, though both are acts of destruction in the service of the self. But Medea is avenging a husband's wrong, Laius seeking to escape the inevitable succession of the generations; and just as Oedipus cannot escape his doom, neither can his father, who is not only destined for death but for obscurity.

Let us also consider that in the tragedy of Oedipus, the incestuous parricide lives, while the mother who lay with her son dies. I first interpreted this as a mother might, speculating that violation of the incest taboo by the parent is a graver offense than violation by the child, even when incest is compounded by murder. However, Bruno Bettelheim has suggested to me another possibility: Jocasta has lain with the father and with the son; she has

had all life can give her. But Oedipus lives, and his tragedy ends as he caresses his daughters: he has their love yet to live for. In either case or both, it is clear that the Oedipus complex involves the desires of parent as well as child. And if we take Greek tragedy seriously, as I suggest we should, we learn that the more powerful parent is the more easily roused to desire—and the more guilty in the event of transgression.

It is easy enough to see the potential criminal consequences of unbridled adult passions; but before we pass judgment on those who act out these passions, or attempt to deny them in ourselves, I would like to make my final point, and to suggest that parenthood represents a conflict of interests between self-love and the love of another—the conflict between self and species. Until quite recently, human childbirth often brought infants into the world at the expense of their mothers' lives, and death in childbirth is, though rare, not unknown in the most modern societies up to the present day.

We should be prepared, then, to find that the biological conflict inherent in parenthood finds expression at the psychodynamic level also. A rereading of the ancient Greek tragedy which has achieved immortality as a stage in child psychosexual development shows us clearly that desire and murderous passions are found in adults as well, a thesis which finds support not only in the tragedy of Medea but in contemporary criminal statistics. Although the majority of us have succeeded in mastering and resolving the dark passions of Oedipus and Medea, it remains a task for developmental psychology to integrate these conflicts into our model of adult development.

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