

### Freud's Oedipus Complex

Few Greek myths have permeated the popular culture as deeply as the story of Oedipus. We might not be familiar with the whole saga of the house of Labdacus, but we all know that Oedipus killed his father and slept with his mother. These ghastly facts can certainly make us shiver, but can the tragedy of Oedipus do more than simply horrify us?

For Sigmund Freud, the power of Sophocles' drama could be explained as an effect of our unconscious desire. The story disturbs us so much because we all harbour an Oedipus within ourselves: we all wish to supplant our fathers and have exclusive possession of mothers. These currents of our childhood are repressed in the unconscious, but they continue to shape us. As Freud pointed out, many of the great works of literature, from Shakespeare to Dostoevsky, deal with these motifs in one form or another. But the Oedipus myth illuminates much more than our unconscious wishes. It shares with psychoanalysis the themes of *agency and motivation*. Oedipus's story is that of a man whose life is shaped by destiny. It is prophesied that he will kill his father and wed his mother and whatever his conscious will or volition, he cannot escape this fate.

Oedipus is thus a tragedy of *self-knowledge*. He plays out a script that has been written before his birth without realising what he is doing. In this sense, his story is all our stories. We all create false narratives to explain our behaviour, just as we all unknowingly play out elements of the lives of our parents and ancestors. We think we act for certain reasons, when in fact we are often acting out scripts that may predate our birth, as Freud and later generations of analysts showed.

Over the centuries, writers and philosophers have tried to free Oedipus from the unpleasant straitjacket of fate. Pausanias claimed that Oedipus was not the son of Jocasta but of a previous wife of Laius, and Voltaire argued that Sophocles didn't say that Oedipus himself killed Laius, leaving ambiguous the author of the crime. The absurdity of many of these rewrites reinforces one of the central tenets of the myth: that our fate is unavoidable.

The story of Oedipus tells us that we are not masters in our own house. But there is also another, darker side to the story, one that psychoanalysis has less to say about. What, after all, has set the terrible chain of events in motion? Oedipus, as the son of Laius, has been cursed because of an act of transgression of his father. Laius had raped Chrysippus, the son of Pelops. So, before Oedipus's crime lies the sin of the father. A son's destruction of a parent echoes a parent's act of violence towards a child.

The myth shows us how the transgressions or tragedies of a previous generation will return to haunt those that follow. And in our modern age of forgetting, this is a lesson that we cannot ignore. It is often said today that we live in post-oedipal times: the Oedipal story no longer has any relevance since we are all familiar with the famous Freudian wishes. They have become banal and no longer shock. But the rewriting of the myth time and time again in cinema, art and literature - and the power of these works to move us - belies this view. Its ubiquity, in fact, suggests another interpretation.

Oedipus, perhaps, is less a source of true anxiety than a defence against it, stitching together as it does so many disturbing, ungraspable aspects of our experience into a coherent story. The enigma of our origins, sexual desire and violence are all bound together meaningfully. Children move through the

Oedipal phase not simply when this story is imposed on them but when they actively create it for themselves, turning an obliging father, for example, into a forbidding tyrant. They use the myth to order their reality. That's why, for Freud, the Oedipus complex has a certain pacifying effect.

In its Sophoclean version, this story has another special relevance for our time. The antique lesson of tragedy can be summarised in the formula *ta mathemata pathemata* - things learned are things suffered. In today's culture where information has become a commodity, we are supposed to have instant access to knowledge. And *self-knowledge* is taken to be a right rather than the result of a long and painful effort.

Yet the drama of Oedipus shows us that the movement from ignorance to a knowledge about our destiny and our origins involves an arduous and even unspeakable journey. How different this is from the contemporary cult of the self. Gone is the idea that we must pay a high price for knowing something about ourselves, as Oedipus did.

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