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Contents

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Unveiling Jocasta. The Brave Queen of Dryden and Lee

Abstract

To better appreciate the daring originality of Dryden and Lee's *Oedipus. A Tragedy*, it is useful to begin considering the three authors discussed by Dryden himself in the Preface to the play: Sophocles, Seneca and Corneille, whom he acknowledges to have used only as partial sources, while in more cases than one his reluctance to admit their true influence is evident. In this perspective it is perhaps even more interesting that Shakespeare, whose relevance is perceivable everywhere, is never mentioned. Looking closer at Dryden's critical attitude, there seems to be at work a peculiar consistency in passing over in silence not only trivial factors, but also the most innovative and subversive issues that identify the uniqueness of the play. As, for instance, the disruption of the Cadmean myth, which allows Dryden and Lee to empower Oedipus and Jocasta to be the ultimate protagonists of a long and ominous story, enabled in their suicide to paradoxically reconcile all tensions and assert their right to preserve their passionate bond, whatever that love may be.

Keywords: Sophocles; Dryden and Lee; Oedipus; incest; irony; sight

In the long story which began with Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and was handed down through the centuries by innumerable interpreters of the original myth (see Paduano 1994), Jocasta's identity keeps changing: determined by the function her character is called to fulfil on each occasion in the dramatic structure, she moves through diversified images of herself, often inert and ancillary, rarely involved and pre-eminent.

Since Dryden and Lee's *Oedipus. A Tragedy* is the object of the present investigation, decidedly relevant are three dramas in particular, focused on by Dryden himself in the Preface to the play: of their authors, Sophocles, Seneca and Corneille, he discusses merits and faults and indicates the quality of their partial influence, specifying his and Lee's modes of appropriation and reasons for rejection. Considering Jocasta's nature, a strong differentiating factor obviously depends on the position Oedipus occupies in the economy of each single text, and to get closer to the mother-wives one

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needs to inquire first who the son-husbands are. Very dissimilar figures indeed, whose characters, attitudes and values place them on very different levels in the scale of greatness – the cornerstone of tragedy, that is, both for the ancient founders and their seventeenth-century 'imitators'.

1. The French version

Furthest away from the Sophoclean source, Pierre Corneille writes his *Œdipe* (1658) preserving merely a general connection with the original story; in the dedication "Au Lecteur" ("to the Reader")[1] he states the fact himself, specifying the reasons for the radical changes made in the plot. Considering the Greek and Latin productions from a seventeenth-century perspective, he mentions two points in particular that need to be modified: first comes Œdipe's blinding, whose description would be offensive to the "délicatesse de nos dames qui composent la plus belle partie de notre auditoire" (Corneille 1987: 18-9; "delicacy of our ladies, who make up the nicest part of our audience"). Following, and again focused on the feminine, comes Corneille's remark on the inadequacy of plots disregarding the amorous motif, and consequently depriving the stage of the female presence: both essential factors, "principaux ornements" (19, "principal ornaments"), to gaining public approval (cf. Avezzù 2008).

Basing his work on these objections to the classics, and on a few further critical notes, Corneille overturns the keystones of the myth itself: displacing the tragic couple from its leading position, he constructs a system based on wholly different foundations. Parricide and incest are deprived of their tragic standing while Œdipe and Jocaste move to the background, unexpectedly replaced by the scenically dominant couple of Thésée and Dircé; on the one hand the mythical killer of monsters, on the other an alien female character – a figure relatively unknown in the mythical context[2] but crucial in Corneille's revisited dramatic pattern. Supposed to be Laïus and Jocaste's firstborn, Dircé is actually Œdipe's younger sister, and stepsister of Œdipe and Jocaste's offspring: Antigone and Ismene, young women likely to get married in the near future; Eteocles and Polynice, young men already engaged in their fatal conflict.

Removing from centre stage the former protagonists and concentrating on the passions and values of the new ones, Corneille identifies a very suitable opportunity to gratify the *dames*, leading them along the genteel deli-

[1] All translations from the French are mine.

[2] Her mythical existence is vaguely associated with Thebes, since Dircé is King Lykos' wife; punished for mistreating her niece Antiope, she is tied to a wild bull and torn limb from limb.

cacies of the *préciosité*. He strikes the keynote right from the beginning, allowing Thésée and Dircé the privilege to open the play with a passionate *tête-à-tête,* in which they mutually try to persuade their partner to fly from the plague devastating Thebes. The pre-eminence of their romantic attachment is constantly confirmed in the course of the play, and the distribution of the scenes underlines their lofty position in the dramatic hierarchy. Measuring the characters' presence on stage, that is, it is quite clear where the emphasis falls: Œdipe comes first with fifteen scenes, followed by Dircé with fourteen and Thésée with twelve; last comes Jocaste with a mere ten. Getting closer to the subjects discussed in the various situations, it is rather amazing that Œdipe and Jocaste are mostly concerned with the position of Dircé and Thésée, whose stubbornness and determination forcefully involve their own reactions and decisions.

For the younger couple the sentimental and political levels are strictly interdependent and crucial for the progression of the action. From the outset the issue of power shapes the conflicting relationship between Dircé and Œdipe: convinced she is Laïus' only daughter and heir, Dircé is fiercely aggressive against the king for having usurped her throne and against her mother for having betrayed Laïus' memory – and she is never inclined to relent, even if confronted with Jocaste's tenderness. A target of her hostility are also the Thebans, guilty of handing over the kingdom to the usurper of her rights – and vanquisher of the Sphinx. Interwoven with the theme of power is the sentimental motif, with Dircé again occupying the leading role, legitimized by her royal blood to aspire to the throne: Thésée, besides being the object of her love, as prince of Athens also embodies the ideal of a great and shareable sovereignty, which Dircé is nowise disposed to renounce. Therefore Œdipe's plan for her marriage with Jocaste's nephew Hémon is inevitably bound to be rejected, a plan that also serves to disclose the king's weakness: first of all because, since the plan is doomed to failure, it proves Dircé's supremacy over him, and then because it is a product, as Œdipe himself admits, of his fears. His anxiety in fact envisages Thésée's possible claims to the throne if married to the legitimate heir, while the inoffensive Hémon represents a definitely reassuring and encouraging choice.

It is unnecessary to go into further details to realize what Corneille is aiming at in *Œdipe*. Interestingly enough, he does not expand the dramatic framework applying the traditional method, i.e. including a subplot mirroring the main action – Dryden and Lee's mode. He subverts the original balance instead, reducing to a subplot the main action: a skilful strategy to deactivate the awful Sophoclean crescendo in the unveiling of parricide and incest, and to shove its feeble remains into a marginal area. The most neutralized item is quite obviously the couple's emotional involvement: no hint at sexuality occurs, and also love is very sparingly mentioned – and only

by Jocaste.[3] Given these premises, Dircé's remark in the fifth act does not sound particularly surprising: "Phorbas m'a tout dit en deux mots" (5.5.1791, "Phorbas told me everything in two words"). She does not apparently need more than two words to know the tragic events that occurred before.

Viewing Jocaste in Corneille's altered context, it is amazing how little of her previous existence survives. Looking closer at her presence on stage, it emerges clearly how consistently she is kept in the background: she appears late, in the fourth (penultimate) scene of the first act and is totally absent from the second; when allowed to the front, as in Acts 3 and 4, she is generally concerned with Dircé and Thesée's situation[4] much more than with her own ill-fated life. The fifth act, from which she is totally banished, is revealing: in accordance with the classical rules her suicide takes place offstage and is narrated to the young protagonists by her lady-in-waiting. But the words that accompany her act are worthy of notice, exclusively focused, as Nérine relates, on her daughter's glorious future in Athens. Her past with Œdipe is silenced, whom she is apparently bent on sweeping away from her thoughts, as the answer to Dircé's question clarifies, leaving no doubt in spectators and readers. The question regards her mother's last words for the king; Nérine answers that being afraid to fly away with the shameful memory ("la honteuse mémoire", 5.8.1951) and not daring to call him either son or husband, she devoted all the tenderness to her daughter.

The queen's quiet leaving is consistent with her subdued theatrical existence, while Œdipe – the supposed protagonist – is allowed to remain on stage as long as Act 5.6; he takes his leave after the mysteries have been unravelled and a fit ending has been predisposed. Once the dramatic tension has been displaced and the tragic core neutralized, in harmony with Corneille's plot the conclusion only vaguely recalls the ancient pain, and opens the way to a predictably prosperous future; significantly, all conflicts are silenced while Dircé and Thésée abruptly change their minds and honour Œdipe, turning to admiration their previous contempt. Œdipe himself leaves the scene announcing a visit to the queen ("Adieu: laissez-moi seul en consoler la Reine", "Farewell: leave me alone to comfort the Queen", 5.6.1878), a secret encounter ("secret entretien", 1879) to encourage her by showing his own strength; but the meeting does not take place, as the two culprits presumably need to be kept apart to exorcise their transgression. Not only is Jocaste forbidden to meet Œdipe: she is also, symbolically, ex-

[3] Only three times, once in 1.4 and twice in 4.5.

[4] The characters' thoughts and intentions derive from the response of the oracle, that makes the end of the plague dependent on the sacrifice of Laïus' blood. Dircé is therefore determined to die, convinced she is the only person concerned, while Thésée, to save her, pretends to be Laïus' surviving son and thence of Cadmean blood.

cluded from his final act, the self-inflicted blindness which he no longer effects with the golden brooches of her dress; to tear his eyes out he now relies on his hands only – like Seneca's Oedipus. Removing the violating memory of his mother-wife, the king acquires the sacred healing power that enables him to defeat the plague; just a few drops of his blood suffice to save the dying Thebans and to bring them suddenly back to life. A glorious deed which cooperates in the restoration of order and eventually appeases Laïus' ghost, leaving the lovers to entrust their future to the gods.[5]

2. Oedipus in London

Corneille, Dryden observes in his Preface to *Oedipus*, attributes the great success of his play to the "heureux épisode . . . de Thésée et de Dircé" (Corneille 1987: 19, "the felicitous episode . . . of Thesée and Dircé"), an approach that he finds simply wrong, as if the subplot could be the predominant feature of a play, to the detriment of the main action:

> The truth is, he miserably fail'd in the Character of his Hero: if he desir'd that *Oedipus* should be pitied, he shou'd have made him a better man. He forgot that *Sophocles* had taken care to shew him in his first entrance, a just, a merciful, a successful, a Religious Prince, and in short, a Father of his Country: instead of these, he has drawn him suspicious, designing, more anxious of keeping the *Theban* Crown than solicitous for the safety of his People: Hector'd by *Theseus*, contemn'd by *Dirce*, and scarce maintaining a second part in his own Tragedie. (Dryden and Lee 1985: 115-16)

Despite the severity of this and other opinions on the French dramatists, during the 1660s Dryden's theatrical production is unmistakably indebted to them: in particular his work on the heroic genre is mostly structured on the same dialectic of love and honour highlighted by Corneille in *Œdipe*. After emphatically exploring for some years the world of Indian Queens, Emperors, Conquests and Martyrs,[6] Dryden eventually lands on his last heroic experiment: *Aureng-Zebe* (1675), a play interesting for itself and maybe even more for the present discussion. The plot revolves in fact around the same crucial issues dealt with three years later in *Oedipus*, centred on incest;[7] a motif even amplified here, in the longed-for sexual transgression

[5] Gambelli 2013 interestingly details conventionalities and flaws in *Œdipe*, identifying relevant merits as well.

[6] From 1664 onward Dryden worked rather keenly on the heroic genre, with plays like *The Indian Queen*, *The Indian Emperor; or, the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards*, *Tyrannic Love; or, the Royal Martyr*, *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*.

[7] Incest is also central in *The Spanish Friar; or, The Double Discovery* (1680), a comedy where the sexual relation of brother and sister is hindered in extremis, while it occurs

involving both the old Emperor yearning for his son Aureng-Zebe's betrothed, and his wife attempting to seduce the stepson, i.e. Aureng-Zebe himself. Neither is parricide missing, though again planned only and not carried out. Incidentally, it is worthwhile considering that the stepmother's attraction to her husband's son once more intersects the English and French dramaturgies, both engaged with the myth of Phaedra and Hyppolytus: it shapes the connection of Nourmahal and Aureng-Zebe, and becomes in two years' time Racine's subject for his *Phèdre* (1677). Again, although appreciating the neoclassical theories,[8] Dryden sharply criticises the French dramatists for their "nicety of manners" (Dryden 1991: 12) that undermines the plausibility of characters and the outcome of their plays, *Phèdre* included.[9]

Very probably, Dryden's sharpness derives from his changed critical attitude, already expressed in the Prologue to *Aureng-Zeb*e in dismissing his "long-lov'd Mistris, Rhyme" and returning to blank verse and to "Shakespear's sacred name" (Prol. 8, 14). The new perspective unfolds in 1677 in *All for Love* written "in Imitation of Shakespeare's Stile", as acknowledged on the title page of the play (Dryden 1985: 2). And although in his version of *Antony and Cleopatra* Dryden maintains some distinctive signs of the heroic experiment – such as the intricacies of love and honour – at this point, 'imitating' Shakespeare means most of all renouncing the reassurance of poetic justice and accepting the great tragic past, where injustice may triumph and not only villains are doomed to die (cf. Sestito 1999, 2008).

Nathaniel Lee's perception of the heroic genre is also peculiar, since it is progressively reshaped with a constant eye on the Elizabethans; like Dryden, in the late 1670s he spoils tragedies of peaceful outcomes and happy endings, and takes the love and honour motif along unfamiliar ways, disclosing the excess and darkness of human nature. And even if in many respects the two dramatists move on different grounds, the interplay of

in *Don Sebastian, King of Portugal* (1689).

[8] Kramer 1994 convincingly shows that toward the French drama there is on the part of Dryden a very skilful – unacknowledged – appropriation technique.

[9] Cf. the Preface to *All for Love*: "Their heroes are the most civil people breathing, but their good breeding seldom extends to a word of sense; all their wit is in their ceremony; they want the genius which animates our stage; and therefore 'tis but necessary, when they cannot please, that they should take care not to offend. But as the civilest man in the company is commonly the dullest, so these authors, while they are afraid to make you laugh or cry, out of pure good manners make you sleep. . . . Thus their Hippolytus is so scrupulous in point of decency that he will rather expose himself to death, than accuse his stepmother to his father . . . Where the poet ought to have preserved the character as it was delivered to us by antiquity, . . . he has chosen to give him the turn of gallantry, sent him to travel from Athens to Paris, taught him to make love, and transformed the Hippolytus of Euripides into Monsieur Hippolyte" (Dryden 1991: 12-3).

their talents and projects produces fertile forms of cooperation. For instance, their common interest in inquiring into the variety of womanliness is stimulating, as well as in exploiting the female rivalry to reach the dramatic climax through the vehemence of jealousy. It occurs when Lee brings Roxana and Statira to fight for the affection of Alexander the Great;[10] it also occurs a few months later when Dryden – probably inspired by Lee – forces Cleopatra to confront Octavia, aggressively asserting her rights as wife and mother. Shortly afterwards, sharing views and purposes, Dryden and Lee compose *Oedipus*, radically reinterpreting the myth, and bringing their single contributions to merge in the stylistic harmony of the whole.

The method employed by Dryden in his Preface is worth considering: on the one hand quoting sources (Sophocles and Seneca) and possible competitors (Corneille), discussing merits and faults, and acknowledging borrowings;[11] on the other hand never, not one single time, mentioning Shakespeare, whose influence is perceivable everywhere and from the very beginning contributes in displaying the mastery of his 'imitators'. In fact, considering their predecessors' openings, Dryden and Lee's difference is quite striking: both in Sophocles and Seneca it is Oedipus, i.e. the protagonist, who opens the play, and Corneille, as it were following the same course, reserves the first scene of his play to Dircé and Thésée, i.e. to 'his' protagonists. Dryden and Lee move along divergent lines delaying Oedipus' entrance and reproducing memorable Shakespearean beginnings, where the protagonist comes onstage after other, usually minor, characters have introduced some of the main issues.

The Shakespearean influence is pervasive:[12] the presence of *Julius Caesar* is easily identifiable, in the fickleness of the people and the oratorical talents of the persuaders; of *Hamlet*, in the painful search for truth; of *Macbeth*, in the frequent visionary and dreamlike allusions. The figure of Richard III is also fundamental, whose physical deformity and moral depravity shapes the features of Creon. What Dryden and Lee attain in their play is to blend the legacy of the classics with the great English tradition, producing something new and daring: though deeply admiring Sophocles, Dryden leads the way to the free interpretations of his epigones. He asserts the relativity of taste that promotes differences and hinders intimidating ef-

[10] See *The Rival Queens; or, The Death of Alexander the Great.*

[11] Most admired is Sophocles, imitated "as close as possibly we cou'd" (Dryden and Lee 1985: 116); Seneca is refuted for his pomposity but considered useful for the episode of Tiresias raising the ghost of Lajus; Corneille, rejected for the predominance of Dircé and Thésée, is nonetheless followed in accepting the necessity of a subplot. The edition of Oedipus I refer to throughout is Dryden and Lee 1985.

[12] In particular for the influence of *Macbeth* and the construction of Creon, see Bigliazzi 2014.

fects of the past, no matter how glorious: a way, that is, to allow boundless experimentation. Of their own play, Dryden anticipates very little, simply underlining the care in conceiving the subplot and in making it strictly dependent on the plot. Again, as with Shakespeare's concealed influence, he omits to mention the daring choices that render *Oedipus* unique, and allow Jocasta to play an exclusive role.

3. Iocaste, Iocasta, Jocasta

Widely different are the two Greek and Roman characters in terms of attitudes, reactions and actual presence on the scene. Sophocles' Iocaste enters the stage rather late, after fundamental issues have been introduced, such as Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx, the Oracle's response on the plague caused by Laius' unavenged death, and Oedipus' mistrust of Creon and Tiresias. But once there, she authoritatively shares the central part of the play (amounting to approximately one third of the whole), showing at once a sharp command of the situation: she succeeds in stopping Oedipus and Creon's dispute, comparing the pettiness of their private complaints with the ruin of the city devastated by the plague. Besides her determination, Iocaste also demonstrates sensitivity and emotions, first remembering the unfortunate son whom she supposes to have died in his infancy; and later, as the awful truth is gradually disclosed, trying to protect him from knowing himself and expressing her readiness to be the only sufferer. The stage is for Iocaste the place to express the care of a mother, while her sexual violation is removed offstage and entrusted to an external narrator; it is in fact the second messenger who relates, as far as he remembers and as far as he knows, what happened to the queen, after she rushed in desperation into the royal palace. His narration is partial, being limited to what he can hear behind the barred doors: it is her voice invoking Laius and cursing the nuptial bed and the awful births. As the narrator himself specifies, he does not know what happened next, and only at last, after Oedipus has thrown the doors open, can he see the queen hanging from a noose, and at that point follow in detail Oedipus' words, gestures and self-blinding.

Definitely dissimilar is Seneca's Iocasta, brought onstage thrice, but only for a reduced period of time. The dominant feature seems to be her mundane attitude, which she displays from the start in contrasting Oedipus' anguish over the havoc wreaked by the plague, and his fears to be somehow responsible for it; not capable of grasping his despair, she describes the ideal figure of the king, bound to be steady against adversities. With the same state of mind, she later briefly answers Oedipus' enquiries concerning Laius' death; and her poised manner does not change after the dawning of truth, when she exhorts him to keep a middle course between the public

good and his own, waiting quietly for the unravelling of fate. The tragic dimension abruptly and rather improbably becomes part of her experience only in the end, during her last dialogue with Oedipus, when she decides to stab herself in what she calls her too capacious womb.

Compared with the classical sources, a totally different Jocasta enters Dryden and Lee's stage, a leading figure granted an equal status with Oedipus; hers is a new and engrossing role, heightened by a sort of amplification of femininity, worth scrutinizing before analysing Jocasta in depth. Two other female figures reflect the queen's tragic core and expand the theme through striking incestuous nuances. The first is Eurydice, whose identity immediately associates her with Corneille's Dircé, and makes Dryden and Lee's borrowings seem easily discernible: Eurydice has a name that clearly recalls Dircé's, and like her is Lajus' supposed only daughter; her betrothed, Adrastus king of Argos, like Thésée, is a powerful prince, and both are the protagonists of the subplot. What actually happens, as often is the case with Dryden's 'quotations', seems to me to be the opposite, since Eurydice is endued with an autonomous function that marks Dryden and Lee's difference. Thus, even if the two characters' γένος is the same and their names sound similar, Eurydice is a refined choice, suggestive of an ironic overtone if referred to Sophocles' *Antigone*;[13] of a tragic allusion, if referred to the myth of Orpheus.

Far away from *délicatesse*, the subplot of *Oedipus* is structured on the principles discussed in the Preface: the dramatic hierarchy of main and under-plot is strictly preserved, and the links between the two levels are carefully developed. This means working on consistency and well-grounded connections, expressed by Dryden through the simile of the chambers all opening onto the same gallery: and this implies the substitution of Corneille's relief with Eurydice and Adrastus' tragic end, consistent with Jocasta and Oedipus' death. The same method applies to the incest motif, used to evoke Corneille's device in order to overturn its meaning: while Œdipe tries to force Dircé into a consanguineous marriage with her cousin, Oedipus is horrified by the incestuous implications of Eurydice's possible marriage with her uncle, Jocasta's brother Creon.[14]

The second female figure introduced into the play is Manto, Tiresias' daughter, who performs on stage what in Seneca is reported only, helping to officiate the rites required for raising Lajus' Ghost, and lending her vision to the father's blind eyes. Blindness is the keynote resounding in the very first lines Tiresias speaks, and it spreads through the play eventually

[13] In *Antigone* she is Creon's wife, while in *Oedipus* she hates him, and the violence of her language constantly emphasizes it.

[14] See 1.1.546-59.

landing in Act 5 on Oedipus' fearful loss:

> Tiresias A little farther; yet a little farther,
> Thou wretched Daughter of a dark old man,
> Conduct my weary steps: and thou who seest
> For me and for thy self…
> (1.1. 192-5)

Tiresias' words are part of a far-reaching process, that extends the map of blindness, weaving similes and metaphors into the text and beyond it; the blind prophet's lines powerfully evoke other rueful lines in transparently quoting blind Milton's blind Samson asking for help:[15] "A little onward lend thy guiding hand / To these dark steps, a little farther on" (Milton 2007: 1-2). The opening words of *Samson Agonistes* are addressed to an anonymous guide, while Tiresias speaks to his daughter. Introducing Manto, Dryden and Lee bring another actress onstage, i.e. a welcome female body to look at; but most of all, they have the chance to involve a third couple in the perturbing net of incestuous allusions. Manto plays diversified roles: she is a silent presence in Act 1 when Tiresias faces Creon manipulating the people against Oedipus; she is absent from the whole of Act 4, as it were leaving her father alone, and reappears in the last act just to lead him away. She is present during the raising of the Ghost in Act 3, and briefly intervenes to describe the sudden darkness fallen on the grove of the Furies. The most important occurrence is however in Act 2 when Tiresias, requested by Oedipus to reveal Lajus' killer, asks his daughter to ingratiate Apollo with her song.

The juxtaposition of Tiresias' words and Manto's song is difficult to decipher: it apparently manifests a strange tension between father and daughter, which could somehow reproduce, reversing it, the disturbed relation of mother and son. Captivating and bewildering is the picture Tiresias draws of himself, of his body transformed by the simile into a tree, shaken by the god growing within and fighting to surface. The cleaving of the trunk, its releasing of what is constrained inside, seems to imply an allusion to Tiresias' mythical female nature, enabling him to bring forth new forms of life – both letting the god emerge and allowing his own self to be reborn in a young body:

> I feel him now,
> Like a strong Spirit Charm'd into a Tree,
> That leaps, and moves the Wood without a Wind:

[15] See Sestito 2010 for a discussion on the unexpected relation of Dryden and Milton. Given the direct relationship with Milton, it is more than likely that the quotation of Samson's words is ascribable to Dryden alone.

> The rouzed God, as all this while he lay
> Intomb'd alive, starts and dilates himself;
> He struggles, and he tears my aged Trunk
> With holy Fury; my old Arteries burst,
> My rivel'd skin,
> Like Parchment, crackles at the hallow'd fire;
> I shall be young again. *Manto*, my Daughter,
> Thou hast a voice that might have sav'd . . .
> (2.1.135-45)

And yet the metamorphosis seems too painful and Tiresias invokes Manto's enchanting voice to "Charm this God, this Fury in my bosom . . . / Sooth the unruly God-head to be mild" (2.1.148, 151), apparently giving up the vision of rebirth and youth. But images and metaphors open up again to ambiguous hypotheses bordering on incest, when Tiresias asks Manto, his "lovely child", to "lull" the god, echoing Jocasta's profession of love: "when I have you in my arms, methinks / I lull my child asleep" (1.1.535-6). And Manto does not help to dissolve ambiguities: instead of appeasing Apollo, in the last part of her song she spurs him on to inflict pain to bring forth the prophecy – and maybe also her father's youth:

> With Chariots and Horses all o' fire awake him,
> Convulsions, and Furies, and Prophesies shake him:
> Let him tell it in groans, tho' he bend with the load,
> Tho' he burst with the weight of the terrible God.
> (2.1.165-8)

A further step might be taken remembering the excruciating metamorphosis of incestuous, pregnant Myrrha, transformed into the myrrh tree and enabled to give birth to Adonis through the portentous splitting of her trunk.[16]

4. Trespassing

Incest, vaguely introduced into Eurydice's envisaged future with Creon, and obscurely alluded to in the attachment of Tiresias and Manto, is implied from the beginning in Oedipus and Jocasta's relationship. The first to step on the dangerous ground is Creon, sarcastically commenting on his sister's attraction to a young and vigorous partner, and her reluctance to sleep in her solitary bed: "The Queen my Sister . . . / Fear'd to lye single;

[16] Dryden translated Ovid's account of Myrrha in *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, his collection of translations of classical and medieval poetry, published in 1700, two months before his death.

and supply'd his place / With a young Successour" (1.1.58-60). The would-be usurper and his followers use no cryptic hints to suggest possible links between Jocasta's two husbands; they openly stress, and insist on, their physical likeness, while Creon emphasizes women's lust:

DIOCLES He much resembles
Her former Husband too.
ALCANDER I always thought so.
PYRACMON When twenty Winters more have grizzl'd his black Locks
He will be very *Lajus*.
CREON So he will:
Mean time she stands provided of a *Lajus*,
More young and vigorous too, by twenty Springs.
(1.1.60-6)

The early reference to the enigma apparently widens the gap between Oedipus' unexhausted search for truth and the audience's pre-existing knowledge, as if dramatic irony were set to work from the outset; a strategy that, being too overt, may somehow appear ingenuous, the more so considering that shortly afterwards Creon's topics are resumed and refined by Oedipus and Jocasta themselves. In fact, meeting after the king's victorious return from war, on the one hand their dialogue focuses on his resemblance to Lajus, on the other the depth of their love is defined through the relation of mother and son – presumably favoured by their different age, if Creon's comments come to mind:

JOCASTA The more I look, the more I find of *Lajus*:
His speech, his garb, his action; nay his frown;
(For I have seen it;) but ne'er bent on me.
OEDIPUS Are we so like?
JOCASTA In all things but his love.
OEDIPUS I love thee more:
So well I love, words cannot speak how well.
No pious Son e're lov'd his Mother more
Than I my dear *Jocasta*.
JOCASTA I love you too
The self-same way: and when you chid, methought
A Mothers love start up in your defence,
And bade me not be angry: be not you:
For I love *Lajus* still as wives shou'd love,
But you more tenderly; as part of me:
And when I have you in my arms, methinks
I lull my child asleep.
(1.1.522-36)

Much later, when Oedipus begins foreseeing the truth and wants to know

what Lajus was like, Jocasta's description again startlingly ends on their perfect likeness: "bate but his years, / You are his picture" (3.1.537-8).

As the play unfolds, the reader's doubt on the possibly naïf use of irony is progressively removed as Oedipus and Jocasta's passion, whatever it may be, incessantly reveals its strength, thus elevating their mutual devotion over all the rest. Unlike the characters that have preceded her, 'this' Jocasta, present on stage whenever possible, is passionate, endearing and careful. When Oedipus conceives the idea of sacrificing his life to save Thebes from the plague, her passion evokes Niobe and the slaughter of her children:

> Her stiff'ning grief
> . . .
> Was dull to mine: Methinks I should have made
> My bosom bare against the armed God,
> To save my *Oedipus*!
> (2.1.96, 98-100)

And later: "Consume whole years in care, so now and then / I may have leave to feed my famish'd eyes / With one short passing glance, and sigh my vows" (284-6). She soothes and consoles, implying a possible falseness of the oracle and confirming her belief that a band of criminals murdered Lajus; eventually, blissful and overjoyed in reassuring him, she wants to be the one to announce to Oedipus the death of his Corinthian 'father'. And in the end, when she suddenly realizes the truth, ready to take all the pain on herself, she desperately tries to stop Oedipus from encountering Phorbas and knowing who he is:

> once more, by the Gods,
> I beg, my *Oedipus*, my Lord, my Life,
> My love, my all, my only utmost hope,
> I beg you banish *Phorbas*: O, the Gods,
> I kneel, that you may grant this first request.
> . . .
> O, *Oedipus*, yet send,
> And stop their entrance, e're it be too late:
> Unless you wish to see *Jocasta* rent
> With Furies, slain out-right with meer distraction,
> Keep from your eyes and mine the dreadful *Phorbas*.
> . . .
> Prepare then, wretched Prince, prepare to hear
> A story, that shall turn thee into Stone.
> (4.1.401-5, 412-6, 422-3)

Throughout the play Jocasta is Oedipus' anchor, and their bed is the fortress that defies prodigies ravaging the earth and ghosts hovering in the air:

Jocasta Oh my love, my Lord, support me!
Oedipus Call louder, till you burst your aiery Forms!
Rest on my hand. Thus, arm'd with innocence,
I'll face these babling *Daemons* of the air:
In spight of Ghosts, I'll on.
Tho' round my Bed the Furies plant their Charms;
I'll break 'em, with Jocasta in my arms:
Clasp'd in the folds of love, I'll wait my doom;
And act my joys, tho' Thunder shake the room.
(2.1.420-8).

More than the incest taboo other grounds set irony to work; the process is particularly marked in the gradual disclosure of the cruel wrong suffered by Oedipus, whose rectitude and valour are paradoxically the best proof of his innocence. The intentional obscurity of Apollo's oracle is misleading as it favours unawareness of his origin and misunderstanding of his future. Even more so, considering that his experience seems to be cut off from 'inherited' faults: no mention is made of the crimes committed by Lajus – either the rape of Chrysippus, or the conception of Oedipus in drunkenness – and the chain of blood and hate crossing the Theban generations since the foundation myth of Cadmus is also passed over in silence. But since an external cause for Oedipus' suffering is not provided – such as the sins of the fathers visited upon the sons –, the injustice of his fate is even more glaring: persuaded as he is of his innocence, he cannot call to mind in his whole life "a Crime by me committed, / For which the awful Gods should doom my death" (2.1.84-5).

Dramatic irony emphasizes the oracle's arcane words, and moreover prevents Oedipus and Jocasta from seeing and interpreting the signs scattered on their path. If perceived, the prodigies in Act 2 would be revealing: they both contemplate the majestic figures in the sky as long as a cloud veils their heads; but when it dissolves and the names of Jocasta and Oedipus drawn upon them identify the apparitions, other courtiers read and comment while the royal couple falls silent, probably looking elsewhere. And yet their prodigious doubles enact the enigma of their existence, the tragic births described but not deciphered by Oedipus:

Why from the bleeding Womb of monstrous Night,
Burst forth such Miriads of abortive Stars?
. . .
She's all o're Blood!
. . .
A vast Eclipse darkens the labouring Planet.
. . .
And beat a thousand Drums to help her Labour.
(2.1.35-6, 39, 41, 44)

Visions and dreams do not help him to understand: Oedipus' nightmare – with Merope melting into Jocasta: "I dreamt, *Jocasta*, that thou wert my Mother" (388) – is terrifying but unprofitable in furthering his knowledge. Neither does Jocasta's answer help: disregarding the dream, she focuses on the grievous difficulties Oedipus has to face – presumably considered by her the causes of the nightmare.[17] His incomprehensible "fears in pleasure" (80), the "unusual chillness" (292) that transform the sexual act in violation remain startling but ineffectual.

The use of irony is pervasive in the figures of speech, in similes and metaphors that weave a net of perturbing images around the protagonists: the idea of disorder and confusion spreads through the play, and Oedipus more and more works out the figure of monstrosity eventually landing on his own self: the blind monster infected by sin, gazed at by onlookers, confronted by the horrible "Medley of Creation" that are his and Jocasta's children (5.1.155). The existence of the royal progeny offers Dryden and Lee the occasion to exert their creativity, and to thoroughly reshape the myth, representing an unexpected form of motherhood embodied by Jocasta. True and loving mother to Oedipus, she is a rather oblivious mother to his and her other, unnamed and unmentioned children; significantly, neither is the number of sons and daughters specified nor are their names uttered. Their 'invisibility' again favours a refined use of dramatic irony; while some characters intentionally refer to the royal progeny,[18] Oedipus and Jocasta do it as well but unknowingly: as Oedipus when cursing the children of Lajus' killer, or quoting the response of the oracle. Only after their death in Act 5 is their existence acknowledged, when a Captain describes the little victims of Jocasta's violence, the girls hanged and the boys stabbed: female and male bodies, deprived of their names – Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, Polynices.

Discussing the radical refiguring of the mythical events, the main question regards Jocasta and her awful deed: what impulse drives her, one wonders, after leaving Oedipus and rushing to their bedroom "swift and wild, / As a robb'd Tygress [of her son?] bounding o're the Woods" (5.1.402-3). Gone insane out of terror at the appearance of Lajus' Ghost, it is likely that in killing she pursues the suppression of the most palpable evidence of incest, thus executing the Ghost's implicit will: more than anything else, in fact, it is Oedipus and Jocasta's sexuality that provokes Lajus' unrelenting hate against his son. In this sense the anxious description of his under-

[17] Sophocles' Jocasta reassures Oedipus worried by the prophecy of incest, considering that men frequently dream of lying with their mothers.

[18] Like Creon's supporter Diocles (1.1.53), Tiresias (3.1.438) and Oedipus (1.1.498, 4.1.306).

world experience is cogent, marked by shame and hunted down by scornful infernal spirits, grinning and chattering at his wounds (3.1.352-3). Even admitting his son's virtue and his own guilt, his resentment is implacable and his desire for ruin is ruthless: "From *Thebes*, my Throne, my Bed, let him be driv'n; / Do you forbid him Earth, and I'll forbid him Heav'n" (376-7).

The timing of the Ghost's appearance is telling, overtly aimed at interrupting the most subversive and eroticized *tête-à-tête* of the whole play, with Jocasta seeking blind and desperate Oedipus for a last farewell. After first rejecting her he eventually listens and believes, persuaded of the injustice of Fate and their own innocence. In spite of everything Oedipus is longing for her and Jocasta is ready to receive her 'husband':

> Swear I am,
> And I'll believe thee; steal into thy Arms,
> Renew endearments, think 'em no pollutions,
> But chaste as Spirits joys: gently I'll come,
> Thus weeping blind, like dewy Night, upon thee,
> And fold thee softly in my Arms to slumber.
> (5.1.220-5)

The terror of the Ghost tears Jocasta away from Oedipus and his desire, pressing her into madness and back to licit grounds. while the renewed legitimacy demands the children's lives:

> cruel Gods . . .
> [I'll] Drive you all out from your Ambrosial Hives,
> . . . unless you shew me *Lajus*,
> My dear, my murder'd Lord. *O Lajus*! *Lajus*! *Lajus*!
> (5.1.265, 270, 272-3)

But Jocasta does not pause long in her devotion to her first husband, and becoming suddenly aware of her "dear Babes'" death (416), she treads again on apparently forbidden paths,[19] where Oedipus' name, not fortuitously, resounds again:

> O let me run and seal
> My melting Soul upon their bubling wounds!
> I'll Print upon their Coral mouths such Kisses,
> As shall recall their wandring Spirits home.
> . . .
> Help, *Oedipus*!
> (416-9, 421)

[19] It is significant that she mentions the "bubling wounds" (417), therefore referring to the boys whom she stabbed, not to the girls whom she hanged.

And Oedipus, in a way, helps, manifesting in death a consonance reflecting their closeness in life. In the last words of both of them neither contrition nor remorse resound; they are paradoxically at peace with what has gone before, with acts inflicted first by the cruelty of fate, and in the end chosen and craved. Jocasta, seeing Oedipus above, at a window:

> Mount, mount, my soul;
> I'll wrap thy shivering Spirit in Lambent Flames!
> And so we'll sail.
> But see! we're landed on the happy Coast;
> And all the Golden Strands are cover'd o're
> With glorious Gods, that come to try our Cause:
> *Jove*, *Jove*, whose Majesty now sinks me down,
> He who himself burns in unlawful fires,
> Shall judge, and shall acquit us. O, 'tis done;
> 'Tis fixt by Fate, upon Record Divine:
> And *Oedipus* shall now be ever mine. (*Dyes*)
> (428-38)

Oedipus answers:

> *Jocasta*! lo, I come.
> O *Lajus*, *Labdacus*, and all you Spirits
> Of the *Cadmean* Race, prepare to meet me,
> All weeping rang'd along the gloomy Shore:
> Extend your Arms t'embrace me; for I come.
> May all the Gods too from their Battlements
> Behold, and wonder at a Mortals daring;
> And, when I knock the Goal of dreadful death,
> Shout and applaud me with a clap of Thunder.
> Once more, thus wing'd by horrid Fate, I come
> Swift as a falling Meteor; lo, I flye,
> And thus go downwards, to the darker Sky.
> (*Thunder. He flings himself from the Window*)
> (450-61)

In a sort of metaphysical theatre Oedipus entwines present and past, enclosing mother-wife, father and Cadmean ancestry in the same visionary sphere: it is a dimension where Jocasta embodies her dual identity of mother and lover, and he can proudly proclaim his legitimacy and right as descendant of the Theban kings. In his lofty theatre, Oedipus erases guilt and hate, establishing alliance in place of anger and pain; it is an ambitious performance whose spectators are the gods, urged by Oedipus to applaud his final glorious act. Flying down to "the darker Sky" he reaches Jocasta, sanctioning the end of the Labdacids tradition, and cancelling the future: Oedipus' wanderings to Colonus or Antigone's defiance of Creon are no longer

feasible. In the two bodies lying close to each other, joined in death as they were in life, all stories end.

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