
Reflections on the Analytic Mirror

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Abstract

The Myth of Oedipus may be regarded as the founding myth of psychoanalysis. Jungian contributions to the Oedipal literature remain less well known than contributions from Freudians. This paper attempts to survey some of the more important contributions by Jungian authors including Jung, Neumann, Campbell, Edinger and Gee as well as the Freudian psychoanalyst, Parsons, writing in a Jungian journal. It is hoped that this introduction to Jungian ways of appreciating the Oedipal myth may encourage dialogue between the two branches of psychoanalysis.

I have a special interest in optics and especially in mirrors; I am intrigued with how light can be brought into focus with a mirror to create an image that we perceive as having form and colour.

The psychology of perception attempts to understand how our sensory stimulation at such a focus comes to be *experienced* as an image.

We are all in a sense *blind*, feeling our way through sensory ambiguity, perceptually *creating* images which we then *reify*; perception is however ultimately an *illusion*. Perception can play tricks with light and with our experience of reality.

If *perceived* reality is highly subjective at a *sensory* level the picture becomes truly challenging when we venture into the domain of *psychological* reality. How do we come to *reflect* upon and see who we are? How do we develop an *imaginal* sense of ourselves? What does the Self *look* like? What mirrors are available to *mirror the Self*?

Archetypes

Early in the history of psychoanalysis Jung proposed that there are *archetypes* that *pre-pattern* our perceptual experience. Archetypes may be understood as the psychic analogues of behavioural instincts. They are deeply unconscious but may be *inferred* from analysis of dreams, transference, patterns of behaviour,

art, folk tales, legends and myths. Psychoanalysis has traditionally made use of *myths* to give us images of these typical patterns of experience (Jung: 1912/1976).

Oedipus

One such archetypal myth is expressed poignantly in the plays of Sophocles. It seems fitting that in the dawn of the new millennium we reflect on what might be regarded as the founding myth of psychoanalysis: the myth of Oedipus, his mother and wife Jocasta, his father Laius, his two sons and two daughters. In addition to Oedipus and his family, we will mention two other characters, Theseus and the blind seer Teiresias.

Oedipus has been analysed from many perspectives for nearly a hundred years within the psychoanalytic tradition, and for over two thousand years before that within the thespian tradition. Clearly this is a story of epic proportions with themes of territorial rivalry, hubris, superstition, parental neglect, infanticide, adoption and discovery of birth parents, road rage, castration, patricide, homosexual love, betrayal, maternal suicide, filicide, father/daughter bonding, and blindness.

Oedipus is a myth whose core theme is, as Gee says 'the need for, but resistance to, consciousness' (Gee: 1991: 193).

Since Thespis fathered drama in Greece, tragedy was performed every March at a festival of Dionysus in Athens or in Dionysia. Sophocles won the prize for his Oedipal work, defeating his mentor Aeschylus who wrote the first Greek tragedy (Howard: 1984).

Summary of *Oedipus* [adapted from Hugh Gee]

Laius seeks refuge in the court of Pelops.

Laius, the world's first pederast, seduces Pelops' young son Chryssipus. Apollo is not amused; Pelops curses Laius, that his son would murder him and marry his wife.

Years later:

Jocasta pregnant with Oedipus, son of Laius, King of Thebes.

Apollo's oracle predicts this son will one day kill his father and become his mother's husband.

Oedipus born.

Laius and Jocasta plot infanticide.

Oedipus given to a shepherd with orders to abandon the infant Oedipus on a mountain side; his feet to be pierced with an iron pin to prevent him from crawling away [and to protect the murderer from being haunted by the ghost].

After piercing Oedipus' feet the shepherd does not have the heart to carry out the order so gives Oedipus to a Corinthian shepherd asking him to take Oedipus beyond the borders of Thebes and rear Oedipus as his own.

The Corinthian shepherd takes the infant to the King of Corinth, who is childless and adopts him, giving him the name Oedipus [swollen foot].

Oedipus as a young man hears a rumour that he had been adopted. His foster mother dissembles, saying only that she loved him.

Oedipus goes to Delphi and is told by the ministers of Apollo that he will kill his father and marry his mother.

Oedipus tries to avoid the prediction by deciding not to return to Corinth but to go to Thebes.

Road rage: Oedipus and Laius meet on the road. The driver of Laius' carriage tries to force Oedipus off the road. In the ensuing fight Oedipus kills both the driver and his father Laius.

Oedipus reaches Thebes which is in the grip of a deadly monster, the Sphinx. Creon, the governor of Thebes following the death of Laius, promises the crown and the hand of Laius' widow, Jocasta, to the man who can rid the city of the Sphinx.

The Sphinx poses a riddle: Which is the animal that has four feet in the morning, two at midday and three in the evening?

She kills anyone who can not give the right answer.

Oedipus gives the correct answer: 'man', because in infancy he crawls on all fours, walks upright on two feet in maturity and is supported in old age by a stick.

The Sphinx tries to fly away but Oedipus kills her.

Oedipus is crowned King of Thebes and marries Jocasta.

Oedipus and Jocasta have two sons and two daughters.

The gods can no longer tolerate the hidden affront of this patricide and incest and bring pestilence and famine to Thebes.

The Thebans consult the gods. Apollo, through the oracle at Delphi, replies that these scourges will not cease until they have driven out the murderer of Laius.

Oedipus investigates the murder and through the blind seer Teiresias learns that he, Oedipus, is the murderer.

Oedipus realises that he has married his mother, Jocasta.

Jocasta in shame and grief hangs herself.

Oedipus blinds himself with Jocasta's pin.

Oedipus goes into exile accompanied by his daughter Antigone. He eventually takes refuge in Colonus requesting Theseus to secretly bury him in Athens.

Psychoanalytic commentaries

Many analysts have reflected upon Oedipus and have written from their unique perspectives. McClean has recently summarised much of this rich psychoanalytic literature, including synopses of Freud, Klein, Bion, Britton, Devereux et al..

It is interesting to reflect on the missing voices in the extensive Oedipal literature. One would be hard pressed to find any reference to Jung or Jungians in the psychoanalytic literature on Oedipus. Jung's pre-emptive introduction of the concepts of the collective unconscious and of archetypes seems to have been dismissed by the patriarchal Freud as an Oedipal challenge to his authority, and so Jung, like Oedipus, was ostracised and left to die.

Freud however clearly saw the *archetypal* significance of Oedipus. McClean quotes from Freud's letter to Fliess in 1897 in which Freud states that there is:

...an unmistakable indication in the text of Sophocles' tragedy itself that the legend of Oedipus sprang from some *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 (Cited in McClean: 1999: 4).

After briefly considering the themes of blindness, castration and personal growth we will consider contributors to the Jungian literature, including the views of Neumann, Edinger, Campbell, Parsons, and Gee.

Blindness

I would first like to reflect on the symbolic meaning of blindness, as *Oedipus* begins and ends with the image of blindness. There is the blind seer Teiresias who brings the drama to its turning point in revealing that Oedipus has murdered his father and married his mother as prophesied by Apollo's oracle.

According to Kallimachos, Teiresias was blinded for having seen the naked goddess Athena but was given the gift of prophecy in recompense. Both Ovid and Apollodoros state that he was first changed into a woman because he saw two snakes copulating but was changed back to a man when he saw the two snakes again. His blindness was caused by Hera who punished him for siding with her husband Zeus in their debate over which gender enjoys sex more. Zeus said women do and Teiresias agreed (Buxton: 1980: 22-37).

Teiresias is said to be the only shade in the Underworld whom the gods allowed to keep his intellectual faculties. He seems to stand for *consciousness*, for *reflective insight*, as well as for the *foresight* of prophecy. His special vision was the result of transformation from *having seen the forbidden*, whether we think of gazing upon the naked Athena as seeing the naked mother, or if we regard seeing the copulating snakes as viewing the primal scene. Teiresias seems to stand for man's struggle *to know secrets*, to assert consciousness over unconsciousness.

The story of Oedipus is therefore prefigured in the character of the blind Teiresias. Oedipus blinds himself when he realises the terrible truth of having murdered his father and entered into an incestuous marriage to his mother Jocasta. This realisation plunges him into *introspection*, an inner looking, that compensates his heroic focus on *outer* events. This inward looking equates with *insight* and with *reflection*. He becomes introspective, a *blind seer* in the tradition of Teiresias.

Clinically, visual symptoms such as partial sightedness or blindness may carry psychological meaning.

A 30-year-old woman experienced transient myopia that was correlated with *reflection* on her having been sexual abused between the ages of 6 and 8 by her father. Over the years, whenever she had recalled the trauma of her father's abuse, she developed severe myopia and had to wear glasses. When she entered analysis her myopic symptoms disappeared. It seemed to us that her near-sightedness led her into introspection, imposing an inward looking at suppressed traumatic memories. When she finally *looked* at the earlier abuse her myopic symptoms were no longer needed.

Castration versus Sacrifice

Freud primarily focused on the theme of erotic and aggressive triangulation that he saw in *Oedipus Rex*, emphasising father-son conflict and mother-son bonding. He went on to embellish the story with his own myth of castration

anxiety and identification with the aggressor-father as the prototype for male psychological development.

The castration theme is first encountered in Sophocles' play with the staking of Oedipus' foot to the ground where he is left to die, and later with Oedipus' symbolic castration of his father in the infamous road rage incident where Laius is not only killed by Oedipus but has his sword and belt taken from him, symbolically emasculating him.

What are we to make of the Freudian castration motif? Jung preferred the term *sacrifice* to *castration*. Gee states:

...in addition to 'fear' the sexual wishes can be sacrificed out of 'love'... the inner strength needed to make this sacrifice is in part gained by the son identifying with his father in a positive way... the transforming effects of identification can only be experienced if there has been a 'good-enough' relationship between the father and son (1991: 207).

However from a Jungian point of view, the question of *castration* of the male goes back further than the conflict with the father. The problem it would seem is the boy's emasculation, not by his father, but by the Sphinx.

The Sphinx is a mythical creature, who is the product of incest between her mother and her mother's son. Jung says the Sphinx symbolises *mother/son incest*; she is an archetypal image of the *Terrible Mother*.

Neumann

Jung's view of Oedipus was further developed by Neumann in his major work, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*:

Oedipus becomes a hero and dragon slayer because he vanquishes the Sphinx. This Sphinx is the age-old foe, the dragon of the abyss, representing the might of the Earth Mother in her uroboric aspect. She is the Great Mother whose deadly law runs in the fatherless earth, threatening destruction upon all men who cannot answer her question...[Oedipus'] heroic answer, which makes him truly a man, is the victory of the spirit, man's triumph over chaos. ... Here where the youth becomes the man, and active incest becomes reproductive incest, the male unites with his female opposite and brings to birth a new thing, the third: a synthesis arises in which for the first time male and female are equilibrated in a whole. The hero is not only conqueror of the mother; he also kills her terrible female aspect so as to liberate the fruitful and bountiful aspect... Oedipus was only half a

hero...the real deed of the hero remained only half accomplished: though Oedipus conquers the Sphinx, he commits incest with his mother, and murders his father unconsciously (Neumann: 1954: 162-3).

Neumann emphasises the *heroic failure* of Oedipus, the failure to sustain his heroic position of triumph over the devouring maternal. He sees Oedipus' self-blinding with his wife/mother's brooch as indicative of Oedipus being overtaken by fate, a return to the unconsciousness of the Great Mother. Oedipus failed by unconsciously acting out as actual incest what *should* have been an *inner symbolic* marriage of masculine and feminine. In this sense Neumann sees in Oedipus at Colonus

...an old man finding rest and deliverance at last in the grove of the Erinyes, representative of the ancient mother power... Blind and infirm, he vanishes mysteriously into the bowels of the earth, guided by Theseus, the ideal hero of a later age, who refused to succumb to his stepmother, the sorceress Medea. The Great Mother takes Oedipus, the Swell-foot, her phallic son, back into herself (1954, 164).

Neumann believes Oedipus failed as a hero because he was not a hero born under the protection of a deity who could have empowered him in his fight with the Terrible Mother and helped him to identify with a strong father principle.

Translating Neumann's archetypal/mythic language into more familiar psychological language:

The young Oedipus was able to develop a functional ego but lacked good-enough fathering to consolidate a true sense of Self. The trauma of suddenly becoming conscious of the unbearable truth about himself overwhelmed his false-self, regressing him into an early dependent state wherein he acted out his infantile incestuous instincts.

In characterising Oedipus as a failed hero Neumann is perhaps overstating the case to make his point about what he calls the *Dragon Fight*, the boy's fight for differentiation from the devouring mother.

In *Oedipus at Colonus* the old Oedipus ends his tragic life with *lofty, mystical solemnity*; he has matured, is wiser and more contemplative, but he has not *fully* transcended his personal tragedy.

However Neumann neither acknowledges Oedipus' relationship with his dutiful daughter, Antigone, nor sees in Oedipus' blindness and regression a potentially *redemptive* retreat from false-self heroism.

The Oedipus plays may be construed from a Neumann's Jungian perspective as being about how hapless Everyman attempts to become conscious, how he tries to transcend his fate, rise above his tendency to regress into unconsciousness, and arrive at something like mature wisdom and equanimity.

Personal growth, individuation and transformation

Clinically, Oedipal issues are transformed by gradually bringing the complex into consciousness and seeing how its tentacles permeate one's life. The complex may be imaged in several ways during the course of an analysis, primarily through the analysis of transference patterns, dreams, fantasies and memories. Especially within the transference an analysand experiences how he blindly projects onto others.

For there to be a more or less complete resolution the Oedipus complex must be transformed under the aegis of the integrative archetype of the *Self*. This is the missing *protective deity* Neumann refers to.

In myth this is represented as the aegis of a god or goddess. The heroic Perseus is able to slay his *Terrible Mother* by *reflecting* her image in a shield given him by the goddess Athena. She gives him the transcendent quality of cool-headedness and introspection, symbolised by *reflective visioning* of the *Terrible Mother* seen in the *mirror* of her sacred shield.

In the analytic transference, the *analyst* often temporarily holds such a projection of the *Self* until it is re-owned by the analysand. This experience of the archetypal *Self* provides the missing aegis that facilitates resolution of the complex.

Campbell

Campbell, relating the story of Oedipus to myths and legends of *Infant Exile*, cites Rank's categorising of such myths into five essential themes:

1. The infant is the offspring of noble or divine parents, or of a deity and earthly maiden.
2. Extraordinary difficulties attend the birth, occasioned commonly by the malice of either the father himself or some father surrogate such as a cruel uncle or king.
3. The infant is exposed (like Romulus and Remus, or like Oedipus), or otherwise sent or carried off, either alone or (as in the legends of Perseus and Danae, the child Jesus and Mary) together with his mother.

4. The rejected ones are rescued, either by animals or by simple, usually rural, folk (in the Christian legend by both: the little donkey and the humble carpenter, Joseph).
5. In the end, the hero, now a youth returning to his proper home, either overthrows the father and sets himself in his place (Oedipus, Perseus, Christ's New Testament supplanting the Old), or becomes reconciled with the father and completes the father's work (the New Testament as fulfilment of the Old) (Rank: 1974: 44).

Campbell further includes the myth of the birth of Zeus whose cruel father Kronos is warned that a son will overthrow him. According to one version his mother Rhea gives birth to Zeus and flees to a cave in Crete where the earth goddesses protect the infant Zeus. A stone wrapped in swaddling clothes is given to Kronos. Campbell cites Strabo's account of another version of the myth wherein young warriors dance about the birth scene making noise with drums and the clashing of arms to screen the child's cries from his father's hearing before it is taken to Crete to be cared for by nymphs.

Campbell also chronicles the birth of Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, as a further example of the Infant Exile motif (1974: 44).

Parsons

The London psychoanalyst, Parsons, provides us with another interesting perspective on *Oedipus at Colonnus*. Writing in the Jungian *Journal of Analytical Psychology* he points out that

In...*Oedipus at Colonnus* the ruler of a city is confronted with a stranger: a dangerous figure, imbued with sacred meaning, who demands recognition (1990: 39).

This is the dying Oedipus who dialogues with Theseus, the ruler of Athens. Theseus acknowledges his similarities to Oedipus' life. Although in his case incest and parricide were near misses, he sees himself *mirrored* in the tragic fate of Oedipus.

Oedipus wants Theseus alone to secretly bury him in Athens explaining that he will thereby bless and protect Athens. Parsons suggests Sophocles portrays in Theseus

... a man faced with the need to acknowledge a denied aspect of his own self... What confronts Theseus in Oedipus is something he has been warding

off throughout his life, with some success—he has not, after all, done what Oedipus did—but which has persistently tried to break through and is now finally demanding recognition. ... He might... intensify the splitting, emphasise all that makes Oedipus different from himself, and use projection to insist that Oedipus must inhabit someone else's territory... Theseus [however] can accept the stranger... He can integrate the opposing feelings which Oedipus arouses, as well as the aspect of himself which Oedipus represents. Thus the split both in the object and in his own self is healed (1990: 35).

Theseus is able to *reflect*, to *recollect* Oedipal projections and so integrate *his* Oedipal Complex. Whereas Oedipus is an archetypal caricature, Theseus is more like *Everyman*.

Theseus saves Athens, his Polis, because he sees himself *mirrored* in Oedipus and so avoids Oedipus' fate. His *insight* into himself is seen in the *mirror* of Oedipus' blindness. He shows the way to redeem himself from Oedipal fate but perhaps as importantly his self-awakening has important implications for the Polis. Social ecology begins with such individual awakenings.

Theseus reminds us that Oedipus is about *awakening*—seeing with wide-awake eyes, just as it is—without denial.

Edinger

Edward Edinger examined archetypal Oedipal themes in *alchemy* referring to them as *the lesser coniunctio* [a conjoining or integration of psychic opposites]:

...the lesser coniunctio is pictured as killed, maimed, or fragmented... For example, referring to the marriage of Mother Beya and her son Gabritius, a text reads:

But this marriage, which was begun with the expression of great joyfulness, ended in the bitterness of mourning. 'Within the flower itself grows the canker: Where honey is, there gall, where swelling breast, the chancre.' For, 'when the son sleeps with the mother, she kills him with the stroke of a viper.' (Edinger: 1985: 212).

Edinger acknowledges the Oedipal imagery but says that '...for the alchemist, the mother was the *prima materia* and brought about healing and rejuvenation as well as death' (212). There is risk here, as the alchemical text vividly portrays. Edinger states 'the immature son-ego is eclipsed and threatened with destruction when it naïvely embraces the maternal unconscious' (1985: 212).

Gee

The London Jungian analyst, Gee, bridges the classical Jungian and object-relations perspectives in his analysis of the Oedipal Complex. Gee begins with the theme of *abandonment* in the Oedipus myth. While acknowledging the remarkable resilience of the psyche's response to early traumatic abandonment, Gee believes there are limits to the reparative capacity of the archetype of the Self. He says in relation to the infant abandonment of Oedipus:

...in the case of the consequences of a traumatic abandonment, we may be witnessing the psyche making the best of what will be the permanently damaging effects of object loss (1991: 196).

Gee points out that, clinically, analysands are more often struggling with their *sense* of abandonment, the sense that parental objects failed to meet infantile needs. He quotes Winnicott who observed that 'the idea that the mother does not have what is needed is for the child an unthinkable thought' (Cited in Gee: 1991: 196).

Gee says:

...the archetypal image of the withholding mother is a defence ... for it is easier to cope with 'frustrated hope' than 'no hope'... With the growth of the infant's awareness that the parents have each other, we see an update on the 'withholding mother', namely the fantasy that the parents are giving to each other what is needed by the child. With this fantasy comes murderous rage, the wish to divide the parents, and also the sense of being unwanted and abandoned (1991: 196).

Oedipus therefore begins life with a sense of abandonment that predisposes him to splitting in his object relations and sets the stage for him to do heroic battle with an outer-projected archetypal *Terrible Mother*, while preserving the longed-for archetypal *Good Mother*. His heroism gives him an inflated illusion of conquest over the Terrible Mother, giving him a spurious sense of independence.

Gee goes on to say: 'Oedipus, with his heroic ambition to become godlike, maintains a conviction of independence while unconsciously yearning and striving for the lost object' (1991: 197).

He further characterises Oedipus as in denial of his aggression. Gee states that such denial of aggression, guilt and isolation combine to form an *innocent victim psychology* which he sees as the *empty child* aspect of the *Child* archetype. He writes:

Wherever there is a hero you will find an 'innocent victim' and, of course, it is the 'innocent victim' part of the self that the hero is trying to rescue...the 'innocent victim' denies all... aggression, and the hero justifies his aggression by his conviction of having 'a good cause' (1991:197-198).

Gee discusses growth as experienced by many adolescents. He sees adolescent heroes as frustrated with the slowness of their development. The spiral like progress they make is experienced as 'a maternal circle in which [they feel] trapped'. A sudden solution to their feeling of stuckness '...provides the hero with the exciting illusion that difference means emotional growth and separateness'. Such heroic changes are defensive against 'accepting that some of our hopes are forlorn'. Gee sees that 'the heroic part cannot accept this, so remains in battle with reality' (1991: 200).

In his combat with Laius, Gee suggests:

...Oedipus is not, at this stage, concerned with true separation but is still largely concerned with removing any object or process that is preventing him from remaining in the safe paradise of the mother-unconscious (1991: 201-2).

Killing his father does not make Oedipus into a man, nor does his answering the riddle of the Sphinx. Gee sees the Sphinx as a *Trickster* whose aim is to bring about incest. Paradoxically, by 'defeating' the Sphinx Oedipus unwittingly comes under her incestuous influence and seals his fate.

Gee writes:

This results in a precocious identity, as if manhood could be arrived at overnight by the mere solving of a riddle... The overcoming of the sphinx and then becoming king is a view of growth that many adolescents hold... In the Oedipal play we see that it is the killing of Laius that preoccupies Oedipus and activates change, whereas the mother-son incest, although disturbing, is not seen as the main cause for concern (1991: 202).

In the eventual return of the Sphinx to Thebes Gee sees the symbolic 'eruption of unconscious guilt' in Oedipus (203).

Gee argues that Oedipus is by now locked into a losing battle with becoming conscious. He says:

Although in the collective unconscious the hero represents *nascent* consciousness, this is not to be confused with actual consciousness with which the hero cannot cope. His reality is very partial. He identifies with

those parts of himself that are seen...as good, and the characteristics that interfere with this self-view are projected (1991: 203).

Gee sees in Jocasta the personification of the archetypal *negative mother* that would induce Oedipus to *resist* consciousness. He quotes from the play as Jocasta speaks

Think no more of it...Best live as best we may, from day to day. Nor need this mother marrying frighten you; many a man has dreamt as much. Such things must be forgotten if life is to be endured (Cited in Gee: 1991: 204-5).

Conclusion

The evolution of post-Jungian thinking about the myth of Oedipus spans classical archetypal theory and more clinically grounded developmental theory. The central theme running through this literature derives from Jung's analysis of the salience of the archetypal mother in providing a matrix of unconsciousness in the male psyche that initially must be heroically transcended. The integrative archetype of the Self is seen as important if this heroic emergence into consciousness is to become consolidated. The more traditional Freudian emphasis on father/son power rivalry may obscure the more fundamental resistance to consciousness that is better understood in mother/son terms.

The seemingly peripheral figure of Theseus appears to be important in more fully understanding the Oedipal myth as he represents the way beyond the complex. Whereas Oedipus seems to be an *Everyman* Theseus is perhaps best characterised as an *Every Analysand*. By overcoming his resistance to consciousness he succeeds where Oedipus stumbled.

While the Oedipal myth can be adapted to provide a model for similar dynamics in understanding female psychology, other myths are arguably better suited for this purpose. It should also be noted that although the resistance to consciousness motif in the Oedipal myth is archetypal and therefore 'universal' there are important cultural colourations that must be considered in adapting this myth to non-European cultures.

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