

Refiguring Jocasta's Desire

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For at least the past 60 to 90 years, scholars of all commitment have been able to think, not only about the reasons for the dream of central presence, the desire for a governing law that will make all known and knowable, but also about the processes, justifications, and apparatuses of this dream, about, as Derrida has written, “the processes of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence.”¹ A cursory look at the history of Western philosophy will show us that this has not always been the case. But because of our ability to critique the terms and institutions of the “entrenched centuries-old oppressive power realities, early-on incorporated into language,” feminism itself could develop as a critique and feminist thinkers have since been raising “difficult and profoundly perplexing questions about the ethical implications of our otherwise unquestioned aesthetic pleasures” and our otherwise unquestioned ethical systems themselves.² Feminist scholars have often relied upon the figure of Antigone to embody, as Judith Butler writes so succinctly, “the transgression of both gender and kinship norms” for the sake of a feminine ethic.³ These studies, many using Hegel’s analysis of the Antigone drama as a backdrop for their work, have been tremendously helpful in suggesting enriched readings of the Sophocles trilogy and providing models for subversive and ethical social action.⁴

Such studies must often call upon Freud – responding to his theories of the unconscious and object relations – and I’ve often wondered, in our dependence upon “the cult of the son’s mother” to explain so many things, how and why Jocasta’s place in the story that theoretically represents the psycho-social order is given such short shrift.⁵ Feminist theorists rightly lambaste Freud’s Oedipal theory for its focus on the sexual desires of men alone, and for just getting women, as folks around here might say, *plumb wrong*. But if we are to take Catherine Clément seriously when she writes in *Newly Born Woman*, “Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is in that zone we

must try to remember today,” we must go back and look for Jocasta.⁶ To return to Derrida, we believe it possible to go beyond the order of fraternity, even bound as we are to historical patriarchal imperatives, and, as Clément instructs, we must. Derrida writes:

the features of the brother – who is critically at stake in this analysis – seems spontaneously to belong to a familial, fraternalist and thus andocentric configuration of politics [...] Let us dream of a friendship which goes beyond this proximity of the congeneric double [...] Let us ask ourselves what would then be the politics of such a ‘beyond the principle of fraternity.’⁷

Let us attempt to *refigure* the excluded, then, and recognize an historical and phantasmatic identification, a symbolic *imaginary* of women and the woman-as-subject which might elucidate a “newly born” social system, a politics, and the articulation of a woman’s *ethic*. Will we, finally, find a way to *read* Jocasta regardless of the way we have been taught to read this story?

Why have the questions surrounding Jocasta’s crucial role gone relatively unmarked in this tragedy that has been claimed as defining our psycho-social reality, the paradigm for kinship and social action? I think there are probably many answers to this question, but Teresa de Lauretis provides a powerful insight to all such inquiries when she contends that even when traditional philosophy must attend to the clear and obvious presence of woman, it is often by way of a paradox, one that is solved by hegemonic structures which limit or forbid woman’s right to “speak, desire, or product meaning.” Lauretis writes:

Lévi-Strauss’s paradoxical thesis that women are both like men and unlike men: they are human beings (like men), but their special function in culture and society is to be exchanged and circulated among men (unlike men) [...] Nevertheless, he cannot exclude women from humanity or “mankind.” He therefore compromises by saying that women are also human beings,

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although in the symbolic order of culture they do not speak, desire, or product meaning for themselves⁸

Regardless of the hegemonic assignment of women to a voiceless category of the (merely) human, it seems particularly incoherent, when considering the Oedipal story, to exclude consideration of Jocasta as an ethical agent. Jocasta is the *person* whose very being defines every action, and yet she somehow does not figure prominently in accurate descriptions and analysis of this family's psycho-social drama. One might say that the person of Jocasta has been very well repressed from Hegel to Freud to Irigaray. Perhaps, once we have begun to seriously interrogate whether/how Jocasta desired, whether/how Jocasta *knew*, whether/how Jocasta acted, we might then ask how women defied and continue to defy systems that relegate them to anti-ethical objects incapable of making their own meaning. In that very defiance woman has inserted the details of a socio-symbolic ethic around, between, and on top of the massive machinery necessary to "produce the means of the reproduction" of androcentric ideologies.⁹

It seems to me that one of the simplest and yet most profound ways of performing the sort of "resisting readings" articulated by Annette Kolodny in *Dancing Through the Minefield*, is, as a woman, reading and listening carefully and respecting one's own internal reactions.¹⁰ More specifically, listening with respectful attention to moments in the text where one's intuition responds quietly or fiercely, "wait a minute, *that* doesn't make any sense." But, women readers and feminist thinkers have long enough stumbled around within the Sophocles trilogy, to know that something profound is wrong either with the story itself, or with the traditional (conservative/classic/Freudian) interpretation and *application* of the theory, or some combination of all. I have become convinced, that alongside Antigone's defiant act/s, Jocasta herself plays a radically subversive, and yet completely unheralded role in this story that we've been told represents the psycho-social economy. Let my story here then stand, not as mere addition, but as a counterpart to feminist readings of Antigone.

Let me answer to one obvious alternative before going any further. Perhaps we would

be better off rejecting the initial premises all together – to simply aver that the "Oedipal story" does not govern the psycho-social order in any way meaningful and Freudian theory is simply too phallogocentric itself to be of any use to us. I won't take that radical step here, partly because I believe this is a too-simple way out of a complex question, partly because I'm unwilling to completely abandon aspects of Freudian theories of the unconscious and object-relations which have contributed to our understanding of subjugation narratives, and partly because, like Butler, Clément and others, I find it important to seek within the "imaginary zone for what it excludes." There is no sense, to paraphrase Derrida's description of the ability to think outside the discourses that insist upon a universal central presence, there's no sense in doing without the concept of a guiding psycho-sexual narrative in order to shake the idea of the guiding psycho-sexual narrative.¹¹ After all, we take note that not only is Freud's theory an interpretation of a model, but it is also a *model of interpretation*. So, if we are to look for woman in this story, we may not find her amid the interpretation, but we may find her within the story itself.

Working within the story then, we can take Judith Fetterley's advice as she asks the woman reader "to 'resist' the sexist designs a text might make upon her."¹² My initial "disjunctive moment" in rereading the trilogy arose in a sense that Derrida would call the "classic way," that is, my critique arose in as a concern with the foundational concepts of the Oedipal cycle itself. Namely, my hold-on-a-minute-moment initially arose when I suspected that key characters within Jocasta's and Oedipus' story did not demonstrate the envy/desire, aggression, and guilt necessary to fully postulate the "patricidal primal horde." The second critique, dependant upon a deconstitution or even a deliquescence of the classic Oedipal cycle itself, is much more radical. It is "the other" reading; a "sallying forth" such as that suggested by Cixous in "Sorties."¹³ This critique asks whether it is possible, even probable, that Jocasta knew of her kinship relation with Oedipus even-when/even-if/even-though she determined to remain queen under these circumstances, circumstances that would, in an alternate psycho-social economy, circumscribe

the phallogocentric kinship system. If so, I suggest that Jocasta's action – Jocasta's position as subject of her own sexuality and personhood – exposes the limits of, interferes with, remakes and *refigures* the story of the psycho-sexual symbolic. In such a refiguring of Jocasta as a person in her own right, the mother represents, alongside but much more radically than Antigone, a woman's ethic that goes beyond an economy driven by aggression, shame, and guilt. *Jocasta refigured* suggests instead, the possibility of an underlying psycho-sexual order based in an ethic of consequence, altruism, and community.

Discovering Oedipus – Missing Jocasta

What, then, if Jocasta knew? What would it mean to us to discover that the psycho-social drama governing object relations theory and representing our emergence into the social order was not based in an economy of aggression, guilt, and shame? What if there is a woman's story to be told here – after all it is the female sex who have indisputably served family and polis simultaneously, taken their place proudly as the sacred ground and the sacred source of sex, love, relationship and the ethical community. Here, the masculine may provide protection from other male fear and guilt (and may not) and may foster aggression (healthy or not) in the symbolic and in the world, but these are secondary to the life-giving, protective, and ameliorative forces of the maternal. What if we have missed Jocasta because of Freud, or because of Oedipus, or even, because of Antigone (speaking from the subaltern, Antigone represents a position only possible within an andocentric system)? What do we make of ourselves as a community of inquirers that somehow, coerced, bamboozled, or converted have accepted Sophocles' story as one of male agency and male hubris and male morality and then accepted Freud's adoption of this story (to one degree or another) for his own purposes without so much as having really *missed* the woman's story in Jocasta? Cynthia Enloe has reminded us that if what we see and therefore accept at face value "can be shown to be the result of someone's decision and has to be perpetuated, then it is possible to imagine alternatives [... and] 'What if' can be a radical question."¹⁴ How

do we miss Jocasta and not *miss* her at all?

So, *what if* Jocasta is a "civil person in her own right," as Luce Irigaray would say, not merely an object of desire?¹⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, in *Alice Doesn't*, pinpoints the conundrum that feminist theory faces when attempting to regain the woman as subject within the traditional stories of social self consciousness and political theory when she observes that "patriarchy exists concretely, in social relations, and that it works precisely through the very discursive and representational structures that allow us to recognize it, is the problem and the struggle of feminist theory."¹⁶ Further, we recognize that the stories we tell about the family and individuation, and the interpretations that we assign these stories, determine the systems of justice under which we labor. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, it is the work of feminist analysis, then, to "uncover alternative, non-identical histories which challenge and disrupt the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic history."¹⁷ Women's voice has certainly been lost beneath the roar of the patriarchy, women's agency denied by way of the phallic economy, women's sex subsumed by an ethic of unidirectional "honor" and "purity." Adrienne Rich, Butler, Irigaray, Cixous and Clément, and the women they represent in their mytho-poetic language (us all), admonish women to "write our bodies," to write women's realities and women's truths through the body.¹⁸ In an attempt to uncover a better account then, to disrupt the story already told, we might now tell, Jocasta's story, writing her woman's body, seeking new truths about a symbolic, and imaginary that may define a psycho-social economy independent of aggressive envy, the shame of the body, and the shame even, of love (especially if that love has anything at all to do with sex), write as a woman.

But what do we make of the idea that stories, "myths," reveal a subconscious social economy? Freud claimed that the story of Oedipus explains or makes explicit that which is only known by the subconscious but which, revealed, explains psycho-social realities that cannot be explained in other ways. It seems, for one, that the story of Oedipus, *de facto* within an andocentric social consciousness and *de facto* within a medical community highly aroused by the potentialities

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of the phallus *and* the penis, provides a view into a pattern of meaning that elevates items crucial for understanding/justifying social relations and social imperatives (primarily, the incest taboo and the exogamy injunction). By way of review then, according to tradition, Oedipus – desiring his mother and destroying his father in an effort to gain full ownership rights – is the paradigm by which to understand kinship, and, thereby, the social structures of human interaction. This re-memorized story of the origin of social self consciousness describes how the patriarchal order comes to us by way of an unavoidable and natural family dynamic. One may cull from the Sophocles trilogy to discover the necessary Freudian elements, and each must obtain as the dynamic unfolds: desire (for the mother), aggression (against the father), guilt (for both the desire and the aggression), and then repression – in that order, one building on and from the other. Freud's articulation of the unconscious is a powerful and necessary addition to our understanding of human behavior; repressed guilt, for example, certainly does seem to be a trigger for some aggressive behaviors, and this insight helps unravel and perhaps mitigate destructive *aggressivity*. But what is found specifically within the Oedipal story, of course, is the theory of "object relations," the story of the ambivalence that a (boy) child must feel for its father and the process of the break that he must eventually make with his mother. Within this story of murder and incest, we find the only human dynamic that psychologists, and social contract theorists, and ethnologists, and anthropologists, and sociologists tell us is universal – the exogamy injunction – the belief that one must not choose sexual partners within one's own tribe.

This finding may or may not be "true," and it is probably more true than untrue in many senses, except for that test to which all theories must ultimately be put: is it helpful? I'll save this question for another day as well, because "the fact of the matter" is of no real importance to this essay. What *is* relevant to the present concern, however, is that the exogamy injunction *cannot be understood outside its own frame of reference*. Exogamy, as many social theorists have demonstrated, is not universal in its understanding of familial relations, either in its agreement

about who is inside and who outside the tribe or about who seeks sex and who does not. What *is universal* about descriptions of the exogamy injunction is that it can only be understood as a system, a taboo, an injunction, from within the phallogocentric order. This universal human behavior can only be understood, as Cixous writes of any phallogocentric mythology, through the "dual, hierarchical opposition," and this zero-sum epistemological game should itself give us pause:

Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Everywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatale, dialectical). And all these oppositions are *couples* [...] And the movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose. Death is always at work [...] Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity [...] Either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought. Which certainly means that she is not thought, that she does not enter into the oppositions, that she does not make a couple¹⁹

Freud's interpretation of the Oedipal story is so powerful, because it has been told and retold, repeated and replayed, re-memorized and re-memorized both in the story and in life.

Through its systematic reproduction, the Oedipal story validates the very system from which it springs; it is active in reestablishing the "means of the reproduction of the conditions of production" as Louis Althusser would remind us; it is used to "reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large," as Kolodny would say; because within the very language of the story (incest, exogamy, guilt, aggression) lies the theory itself, unable and unwilling to separate itself from itself because, as Derrida illustrates, any reassuring certitude beyond the reach of (the) "play" itself, expresses the force of a desire.²⁰ But "now," Cixous writes,

it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and

phallogentrism – bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial – to threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural, by conjuring up from femininity the reflections and hypotheses that are necessarily ruinous for the stronghold still in possession of authority.²¹

So, *what if* the very ideas of incest and the exogamy can be understood only in terms of their opposites, as both Derrida and Cixous affirm? *What if* they are merely patriarchal apparatus and not at all “universal” in the usual sense? *What if* seeking a universal in terms of human behavior and ethical self actualization tells us more about the seekers than that which is sought? What would it mean about the possibility of a women's social ethic if we understood that exogamy and incest themselves can only be understood in an economy in which women must be traded like goods and their “purity” enforced for the sake of preserving a *visible* and *viable* patriarchal lineage, giving “honor” to the name of the all mighty name of the father?

These radical “what if” questions seem to me to sneak in through the open front door – by way of the very idea of the idea of *desire*. But what shape does this desiring take, who does the desiring, and how does it necessarily trigger aggression? In whose world? In the traditional telling of the Oedipal story, the son must first desire the mother and the son must wish the father ill (dead, specifically) in order to clear the way to the object of his desire. Ambivalence, guilt and repression inevitably follow. As we know, woman is gone completely missing (except as an object of desire, but this is not a position much less a person) from the Freudian economy of desire-aggression-guilt-repression. As a first critical move one must simply asks if this telling squares with the story itself.

Reading Against the Oedipal Economy

I'll turn first to the second element in Freud's story, reserving the primary term until last. That is, I want to consider whether it's fair to posit a universal jealousy integral to the son and by which he defines his relationship to the father. It seems necessary to question the plausibility

of this reaction before considering the form that elicits its response. When we question whether the next in line is jealous of the king's position, as readers of the play, our first encounter with the possibility of jealousy and rage against the father/king is in the person of Creon, the first in line to the king's throne. Within this dynamic Oedipus is not “son” but *king*, here, then, representing the father-figure whom Creon must usurp in order to gain access to the throne (and the queen, of course). Creon, likewise represents the Freudian “primal horde,” because it is he who would gain access to all that is theoretically desirable with the death of the father/king, Oedipus.

Creon, however, claims that he does *not envy* Oedipus nor wish him harm. When Oedipus learns of Teiresias' prophecy that he himself killed Laius, he is enraged that the “rascal prophet” would accuse him of such an act, and in his anger and frustration, Oedipus accuses Creon of plotting against the throne (through his act of soliciting the prophet's help).²² Creon answers the charge by proclaiming that he would never aspire to “hunt down royal power” in a speech that may be the most interesting and yet overlooked of those in the entire trilogy (lines 583-615). In fact, Creon stakes his life on a claim that he considers the plain and unavoidable fact: that he should not, will not, and does not desire that which the father/king possesses *and that to do so would go against all reason*. And, as we know, Creon, in fact, did not plot against Oedipus the king. Creon testifies about the natural desires which are met by *not* assuming the role of patriarch, of not owning what the patriarch owns. He argues that anyone might see that “the hunt” ending in “the capture of the crown” is not inevitable, nor even *desirable* as it may seem in some world views:

Not if you will reflect on it as I do.

Consider, first, if you think any one would choose to rule and fear rather than rule and sleep untroubled by a fear if power were equal in both cases. I, at least,

I was not born with such a frantic yearning to be king – but to do what kings do.

And so it is with every one who has learned wisdom and self-control. As it stands now, the prizes are all mine without the fear.

But if I were the king myself, I must

do much that went against the grain.
How should despotic rule seem sweeter to me
Than painless power and an assured authority?
I am not so besotted yet that I
Want other honours than those that come with
profit.
Now every man's my pleasure²³

In Creon's argument we have the abnegation of that which Freud regards as the "central" or "nuclear" complex: The hatred of his father arising in a boy from rivalry for the mother.²⁴

The assertion that men invariably and naturally compete with each other for the possession of a *certain* woman seems to ignore the fact that a man in any sort of power – that is, men themselves within an androcentric community – may fuck any woman they please. As a man, Creon is not merely a wealthy and well connected hedonist (after all, such contextual details have never been taken into consideration when interpreting the story; we see here only the primal son and the primal father), he is a man within a patriarchal community who knows his rights and his power and they are certain and without challenge. It seems, in fact, that aggressing against the father/king would be *contrary* to the "pleasure principle." He is assured of his pleasure without aggressing against another man. Within a patriarchal ideological structure, men merely require they be submitted to like gods by an indeterminate number of women and deferred to by some quantity of men. As Althusser has shown, the difference between an ideology and repressive power is that the ideological "apparatus" does not function by *violence*.²⁵ Clearly, our concerns here, as were Freud's, are ideological. Freud's "science" posited envy and violence as the *sin qua non*, the "nuclear complex" because he himself could only function within the terms of the dominant ideology itself. Which, if everyone from Levi-Strauss and Derrida to Irigaray, Cixous, Rich, Woolf, and Butler, and so many others have "dreamt" are correct, we can interrupt and transgress even if we cannot escape the universal problematic of language completely. In any case, there certainly seem to be other important stories to be read here, stories perhaps not based on that which the alpha male already possesses.

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There are many, not only suggestions, but explicit articulations within Oedipus the King that support the idea neither the trajectory nor the spirit of the story is merely one of male aggression, but that sort of exegesis will have to wait for another day. It is enough for now to be free to read this psycho-sexual drama outside the boundaries imposed by classic "Oedipal" interpretation, and to explore a woman's story intervening in texts heretofore "hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings."²⁶ If men can live peacefully among women of the same totem, accepting varying positions of power and inferiority to the patriarch, the totemic system must be infinitely more nuanced than Freud's theory would allow and must ultimately account for behavior not *governed and determined* by extreme ambivalence toward the father. And that's just putting it within androcentric terms. What we are really here to read is Jocasta's own story, traces, perhaps, of a woman's symbolic mediation of kinship, family, community, and ethic – that is to say *a new imaginary* – within a story whose fulcrum is indeed woman.

To begin, we would note that very early on the story, Jocasta is presented as an equal to her husband Oedipus. Her action in the play should be read as such. Antigone herself reminds us of how central and historically near is the presence of the matriarchy and a woman's order. For instance when Creon defends himself against Oedipus' suspicion and the erroneous charge brought against him, he characterizes himself as being "thirdsman" and "rated equal of you two."²⁷ Creon acknowledges that Jocasta-the-queen is on equal footing with the king, according to Creon's own perception, and according to public perception as well – public perception of private events being a very important measure in this story. Perhaps, as Irigaray has suggested, we are missing the story of the way "our society and our culture operate on the basis of an original *matricide*."²⁸ But, still desirous of proceeding here outside of the ethic of violence (and believing we have good cause to do so) as we attempt to transgress the boundaries of an androcentric imaginary, we will ask two questions of and about Jocasta. First, does Oedipus the son desire

Jocasta as mother (or even demonstrate violence against his father-as-father)? Second, we ask whether it is possible that Jocasta *knew*, that is, whether Jocasta (wife, mother, wife, queen) eventually, at one time or another, knew, in different degrees of consciousness, that Oedipus-the-king was once, in fact and in person, Oedipus-the-son. If Jocasta did recognize Oedipus as son, it seems that this story may tell us more about the possibility of a woman's ethic than it could ever tell us about a male sexual economy.

It is beyond doubt that Oedipus did not marry his mother believing her to be his mother any more than he killed Laius believing him to be his father. Laius, rather, was merely "Laius, son of Labdacus," "the dead king," and "this dead man;" for Oedipus, "Polybus was my father, king of Corinth | and Merope, the Dorian, my mother."²⁹ We recall, further, that when the oracle foretold that Oedipus would "kill his father and sleep with his mother," Oedipus abandoned his parents, family, country, and fortune, by fleeing Corinth, never to return. In order to believe that Oedipus acted out of repressed aggression to his natural father who had sexual access to his natural mother, we are asked to ignore the fact that he *could not have* recognized these strangers to him, certainly not as mother and father. Demonstrating further hubris on the part of the traditional theory, we are asked not to notice or care that there is a difference between knowing and unknowing, acting in full knowledge and acting without knowledge. Further, we are asked to believe that no one can be true father except the father that is father "by blood." Without regressing into a full analysis of the ideas of "bloodline" and the "name of the father," and "imaginary" constructs that support this sort of patriarchal imperative, it should be enough here to note that, given the fact that only the mother's parentage is ever fully assured at the birth of a child, male anxiety about paternal parentage is always at a level that requires strong ideological apparatus to assure.³⁰ That is, andocentric imperatives require a guarantee that a father is always and only a biological father. Women, however, know better. Healthy triangulation, for instance, may take place between and among many combinations of individuals, father-figures and mother-figures alike. Precisely, in fact, as it

did for Oedipus – biology playing only a small part, if any, in psych-social maturation.

If Oedipus did not kill him-who-is-father nor sleep with her-who-is-mother, is there anything at all left to Freud's oedipal economy? We can acknowledge that there certainly seems to be an economy of psycho-social desire within family dynamics. But, it is a dynamic, as Irigaray has been bold enough to remind us these past twenty years, which begins with the extraordinary bond between the mother and her children (particularly, according to Irigaray, between the mother and daughter). This is a bond so intense that it can only be relaxed through some sort of intervention, some sort of "mediation" as Hegel would name it, some sort of tragedy that may lead to "supersession" from the psycho-social drama into public socialization, civic responsibility, and eventually the child's position within the community as an ethical agent.³¹ These are truths of maternal existence that are in no way reserved for the relationship with the son alone. But, given that the story gives us a son to deal with here, we forego a discussion of the mother's daughter for the time being.

Let us, then, return to the story of Jocasta and the real possibility that Jocasta-the-queen – the central character in the drama of *Oedipus the King* – acted as a "person in her own right." First, we recognize that while Oedipus had both a she-who-is-mother and a he-who-is-father to abrogate any reason to *recognize* others as parents, Jocasta had no such substitute reassurance or filter. At the time of the crucial action of the tragedy, when the infant Oedipus is left to die with his ankles bound, Jocasta is a grown woman of the age of reason, a mother, a wife, and a queen. Before the action of *Oedipus the King* begins, we can also surmise that Jocasta knew of Oedipus-the-husband's injury – the scarring to his ankles, the pain from an old injury. Indeed, this current state in Oedipus-the-husband is made clear in the text itself; the pain and the injury are referred to directly. Early in the play Jocasta also consciously recognizes certain family likenesses, as when she answers Oedipus' questions about Laius-the-king and Jocasta replies that he was "in his form not unlike you."³²

However, also beginning early on in the narrative, Jocasta, whether consciously or uncon-

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sciously experiencing a budding recollection, always attempts to keep “family matters” within the realm of the private. This may, depending on the degree to which Jocasta is remembering and to which degree *repressing*, be evidence of her direct involvement, or it may be evidence of a much different interpretation, an interpretation which expands and takes anchor as the story progresses: Jocasta acts in her role as queen to a city in distress in a way that honors her role as queen more, her role as wife/mother less. So that when Jocasta asks the men with whom she shares her duties as ruler to keep family matters private, she is seeking less an action of kinship and more an action of the monarchy. Jocasta implores her partners in king-ship to reject the imperatives of the “kinship” (desire, guilt, shame) in favor of protecting the larger community. In lines 634-638 she upbraids Oedipus and Creon for forgetting the needs of the country in favor of their private battles, which she consistently characterizes as “nothing” –

For shame! Why have you raised this foolish
squabbling
brawl? Are you not ashamed to air your private
griefs when the country's sick? Go in, you,
Oedipus,
and you too, Creon, into the house. Don't
magnify
your nothing troubles.

At this juncture, it seems that Jocasta, at least consciously, does not know the source and matter of this “trouble,” only that in comparison to their duties to the state, an old family brawl is negligible. She does not yet know of the impending search for Laius' murderer and nothing yet of Teiresias' prophecy. She continues to display no conscious knowledge of the issue at stake even when she subsequently does determine the cause of Oedipus' discontent and the direction of his quest. Jocasta herself encourages Oedipus' pursuit of information and judges, in fact, that his interrogation of the events leading up to Laius' death will serve her in another purpose altogether. She hopes that Oedipus' quest will demonstrate that the prophecies of the oracles will bear up to any scrutiny and have no impact on their lives.

We might take a moment to note, in fact, that when Jocasta first hears of the worry brought

on by Teiresias' taunting, she attempts to assure Oedipus by telling the story of the casting out of Laius' and her own son. So, it is Jocasta who tells the story that sets the drama in motion. She can be confident of their innocence and masterful with normal reason because she is yet unaware of what the truth will bring and what their own implication in that “truth” will demand. But, there is a looming distinction between the famous hubris of Oedipus and that of Jocasta in that there is, again, a primary distinction between what the queen/mother could know of her son's infancy and what the Oedipus-the-king could know of his own infancy. The queen seems to beats Oedipus at the hubris game. Jocasta is a person in her own right, it seems, not only as an ethical agent, but as a queen – a human agent as full the fault of excessive pride and presumption and prone to error as any other. In any case, if either of the two key players in this tragedy had conscious or unconscious memory of the events of Oedipus' infancy and how such events might relate to their present reality, it is Jocasta. If either had the cause and the mature facility to repress a memory, it was certainly Jocasta.

As the truth of Oedipus' history slowly, though insistently, dawns upon Oedipus, the play demonstrates Jocasta's repression in comparison to Oedipus' unknowing. For Oedipus, the history builds with excruciating detail before he is fully able to comprehend the revealed implications. Jocasta, alternately, drew the story together in a moment of awful *recognition*, not revelation. When the Messenger from Corinth arrives with news that the king Polybus (Polybus-the-father to Oedipus) is dead, Jocasta interviews the Messenger about the details of the news along with Oedipus. Jocasta is reassured in Polybus' death, because this news proves the prophets wrong, but Oedipus continues to worry about his “mother's bed.” Even as Jocasta attempts to assure Oedipus of a certain comfort in the dismantling of the prophecy, he presses further. He continues to question the Messenger about his mother and about his own “origins” through another sixty-five lines of dialogue. It is impossible to tell precisely the moment, during these sixty-five lines, when Jocasta comes to know/remember and understand the historical truth, as she is silent throughout. However, there is no

doubt that by the time of its conclusion, she has not only remembered, but she has already determined her response: she will advise Oedipus to put the matter behind him, and she will attempt to preserve the state of the monarchy.

Why ask of whom he spoke? Don't give it heed;

nor try to keep in mind what has been said.

It will be wasted labour

[...]

I beg you – do not hunt this out – I beg you, if you have any care for your own life.

What I am suffering is enough.³³

This advice to “not hunt this out” differs significantly from that which Jocasta gave earlier when she simply ordered Creon and Oedipus to take the brawl inside the house. She begs Oedipus, and she claims that at stake is his very life. She suffers and is willing and able to suffer her knowledge alone – she will absorb the story with her own body if only Oedipus will let go the pride, the self involvement, and the drive for “truth.” Here, while the son/king worries about his private honor, woman demands her own desire; subverts the kinship order; heralds the need for a new imaginary, one that includes action as a condition of loving and community the basis of the family, not the other way around.

It is knowing, in many ways, that is at question in the play, specifically, whether it is better to simply “know the truth,” or to know and then to put “truth” into action. Jocasta, several lines earlier – and perhaps the gap between these two speeches tells us something about the moment of recollection – implored that Oedipus remain unknowing and proceed “unthinkingly” (if to “think” is to remain merely within the androcentric structure, then it is better to go forward “unthinkingly”). Jocasta the queen suggests that her king let unjust “truth” remain in the realm of dreams and fantasy, and if justice is “unreal” to proceed from that place:

Why should man fear since chance is all in all for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing”

Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.

As to your mother's marriage bed—don't fear it.

Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles, many a man has lain with his own mother.

But he to whom such things are nothing bears his life most easily.³⁴

Jocasta strives to shield Oedipus from knowledge, understanding this “knowledge” to be nothing in the final analysis, perhaps knowing by her own body's truth and in light of her children's health that the “incest taboo” may be no more than another method of assuring ownership and the right to trade women, in the same way as Carole Pateman, citing Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy*, reminds us that “paternalism [is] an unwritten contract for exchange.”³⁵ And here, Pateman reveals the ways that “kinship systems” have come to mean something very specific within patriarchal culture:

Modern society structured by universal, conventional bonds of contract, not the particular, ascriptive, bonds of kinship. In the modern world, ‘kinship’ is transformed into the ‘family,’ which has its own principle of association and its own social location in the private sphere, separate from public ‘civil’ society.³⁶

Jocasta doesn't seem to credit such a distinction. What, Jocasta asks for us, does the drive to know *objectively* have to do with knowing perfectly? What does this sort of “knowing” have to do with her and her family as it is now, as it was conceived? How does her private “choice” affect her larger responsibility to her family and her family that is the city of Thebes? Even the prophet himself, Teiresias, knows the danger of pursuing the objective “truth” with singleness of purpose, as he cries out when first summoned by Oedipus: “Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the man that's wise! This I knew well, but had forgotten it, else I would not have come here.”³⁷

In *The Sexual Contract*, Pateman notes that Freud did not allow woman a place in the symbolic ethical order, he has told us rather that, “The different journeys that little boys and girls make through the Oedipus complex means that women's super-ego is not as ‘independent of its emotional origins’ as men's so that women ‘show less sense of justice than men’”.³⁸ Perhaps Freud would have said that women show less sense of the patriarchal fantasies of “honor” and “purity” than men, had he been able to “think at the level of the firm”³⁹ Jocasta, able to read the apparatus, now in full consciousness, denies the imperatives of the phallogocentric condition, knowing

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Oedipus-the-son and yet still acting as queen. In the end, remembering, she must have known that to give in to the demand for male "objectivity" would only mean death for all involved, and a community abandoned. In "The Eternal Irony of the Community," Irigaray speculates that Antigone is driven by a desire to shield/protect:

Shielding him from the dishonoring operation of unconscious desires and natural negativeness – *preserving him from her desire, perhaps?* – she places this kinsman back in the *womb of the earth* and thus reunites him with undying, elemental individuality. To do this is also to reassociate him with a – religious – community that controls the violent acts of singular matter and the base urges which, unleashed upon the dead man, might yet destroy him. This supreme duty constitutes the divine law, or positive ethical action, as it relates to the individual.⁴⁰

But Antigone had only the individual to worry about – Polyneices, her brother. Jocasta knew the world around her to protect, individuals (husband, brother, son, king) and community alike. Jocasta, ultimately, is in the act of preserving Oedipus from "natural negativeness," returning him symbolically to the womb – as husband and as king. Returning to the womb of the earth for the Oedipus-son, the only ethical action available to her as a woman. The twice-powerful desire embodied by Jocasta, once for her sexual desire for her husband/king, twice for her desire to retain community as mother/queen, determines her action. Jocasta knows that her sometimes son/husband "might yet" be destroyed by the reaction of a violent and fearful community, implying that there is *yet* the possibility of forestalling, and perhaps completely avoiding, the tragedy of knowingness and the unhinged drive for "purity" and "honor" as separate from ameliorative ethical action. She engages in her only hope of "positive ethical action" to protect all. Jocasta's birthing/marriage bed may yet serve again as site of birth/repression/comfort/burial. Just as Antigone asserted positive ethical action by providing for Polyneices, Jocasta, in living out her life as queen, just as surely gave her husband Laius the burial rights he did not receive at the crossroads. By transforming Oedipus from son

to husband and from patricide to king, Jocasta sublimated or spiritually buried the life of Laius as husband and denied his death at the hands of his own son, transgressing against the aggressive and violent laws of the father in a bid to institute positive ethical action. As in Antigone's story, the only character capable of primary action is woman; the only character to act with finality is woman.

Jenny Sharpe has described the awkward choices offered to ethical woman within an andocentric community where they are confined to sex-specific roles and within which she must "negotiate for power within a finite range of gender roles that constitute the cultural norm."⁴¹ Perhaps Jocasta is one of the first examples of the repercussions of such colonialization of women's lives, but she may also be one of the first representations of woman "conjuring up from femininity the reflections and hypotheses that are necessarily ruinous for the stronghold still in possession of authority." Even as, Cixous continues in "Sorties," "woman's abundance [is] always repaid by abandonment"⁴² For Jocasta, as all women confined, these finite roles will never hit the mark, as they are not consecrated by the order of the "authority." Jocasta seems to recognize both the power and the plasticity of identity (within the limited logocentric realm), and she understands this action of the subject to be double-edged, in the way Judith Butler recognizes: "We take up identifications not only to receive love but also to deflect from it and its dangers; we also take up identifications in order to facilitate or prohibit our own desire."⁴³

If Jocasta knew that Oedipus was the murderer, by becoming wife privately she made him innocent publicly. If Jocasta knew that Oedipus was son, by making him husband privately she made him king publicly, in precisely the same way as she created her own identity and ethic as Jocasta-the-queen. This is a *coup*, according to Derrida in *Glas*:

From that moment on, death, suicide, loss, through the passage of the people-spirit as absolute spirit, amortize themselves every time, with every blow, with every coup, in the political: at the end of the operation, the absolute spirit records a profit in any case, death included.⁴⁴

It is not the case that women's love and women's ways of knowing are inevitably actions which drive women to self sacrifice and self destruction. This is not the natural state of love and knowledge. Rather, positive ethical action turns tragic when women's knowing and women's becoming and women's love come up against the all too powerful patriarchal imperative. The positive ethical action is an attempt to keep masculine guilt and aggression buried or to call on the subconscious action of the psyche in a very conscious way, especially when the guilt is merely a product of male irrationality and a male drive toward a "truth" which does not touch the deep knowing of the body and the life experience of the individual woman, the family, and the community.

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Notes

¹ All references to Derrida in this essay, unless otherwise specified, are taken from "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." I use Derrida, along with Kolodny, Rich, Cixous, and others, mainly as a justification for my reading methodology. Derrida's seminal essay in deconstruction theory was first published in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Eds. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970). The page numbers I use here are taken from the version included in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, Eds., Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1986).

² I use the work of Annette Kolodny in "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," to speak to the issue a "history of ideas" within feminist theory itself, in the same way that a look at the history of philosophy would demonstrate the moment, as Derrida writes in "Structure, Sign and Play" (see endnote number 1), when "language invaded the universal problematic." Kolodny's work in "Dancing" is itself a short history of feminist critiques within language studies since 1970. "Dancing" was first published *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980). Here I refer to Kolodny as she marshals Tillie Olsen to describe entrenched power in language from Olsen's *Silences* (New York: Delacorte/Seymour Lawrence, 1978). The Olsen quote is found on page 5 of Kolodny's text. The Kolodny quote is found on page 7 of "Dancing."

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴ For feminist readings of the Hegelian dialectic and Antigone, I'm thinking specifically of Butler's *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Luce Irigaray in many volumes but especially in *Sexes and Genealogies*, Gillian C. Gill, Translator (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). See especially Patricia Mills, editor, *Feminist Interpretations of Hegel* (College Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). And, in terms of wom-

en's ethical action within kinship structures, I refer especially to Susan Moller Okin's *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books/Perseus, 1989) and Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁵ In *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 3, Irigaray refers to the "Oedipal story," as the "cult of the son's mother."

⁶ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, Betsy Wing, Translator (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, George Collins, Translator (London: Verso, 1997), p. viii.

⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 160.

⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Ben Brewster, translator (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 162. There are two insights particularly profound and useful to feminist theory that have been most succinctly supplied by Althusser. First, he reminds us that Marxist theory demonstrates that not only must ideologies be reproduced in order to uphold the inequities of capitalist power structures, but that, first and foremost, the means by which the "conditions of the reproduction of production" must also be produced. Secondly, he teaches us that in order for these ideological structures to be effective, they must be invisible. That is, ideology itself represents "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."

¹⁰ Kolodny, p. 5.

¹¹ On p. 85 Derrida writes, "There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics."

¹² Kolodny, 5. Kolodny is citing Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

¹³ In "Sorties" Cixous's translator, Betsy Wing, does not herself use this particular translation of *sorties*.

¹⁴ Cynthia Enloe. *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 3.

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray. *Thinking the Difference for a Peaceful Revolution*, Karin Montin, Translator (New York: Routledge, p.74).

¹⁶ Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 165.

¹⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," *Destabilizing Theory*. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, Eds. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), p. 84.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender & Scholarship*, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, Translators; Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel, Eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986).

¹⁹ Cixous, "Sorties," p. 64.

²⁰ Louis Althusser. "Ideology." Kolodny, 4. Derrida, 84.

²¹ Cixous, "Sorties," p. 65.

²² All citations of the Sophocles trilogy are taken from *Oedipus the King* in the second edition of the David Grene and Richmond Lattimore edited *Sophocles I*, translated by David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Citations are marked by line number (l.) to accord with that volume. This current citation is from line number 705, or in future reference, l.705.

²³ l. 583-596.

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²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, 1918, A. A. Brill, Translator (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000).

²⁵ Althusser, p. 144-145.

²⁶ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1976), p. 15.

²⁷ l. 582-583.

²⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 11.

²⁹ l.226, 141, 313, 774-775.

³⁰For key threads in this discussion of myths of identity based in patriarchal and colonial imperatives see, for instance, Joan W. Scott's "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity," Kwame Appiah's "The Invention of Africa," Lawrence Wright's "One Drop of Blood," John D'Emilio's "Capitalism and Gay Identity," Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. The attendant issue, here, of course, is the imperative that women remain "pure," i.e., within the sexual ownership of a single male, to ensure that the patriarchal lineage is assured and without question (where male sexual experience remains unrestricted because it is only from within the body of the mother that parentage is guaranteed).

³¹ See especially Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

³² l. 743-744.

³³ l. 1056-1058 and l. 1060-1062

³⁴ l. 977-984

³⁵ Carole Pateman. *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 31, citing Gerder Lerner *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 10.

³⁶ Pateman, p. 30.

³⁷ l. 316-319.

³⁸ Pateman, p. 100 (see endnote number 4). Here Pateman is citing Freud in "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," in his *Collected Papers*.

³⁹ Althusser, p. 129.

⁴⁰ "The Eternal Irony of the Community" is a chapter within Irigaray's *Speculum of the other Woman*, Gillian C. Gill, Translator (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). This citation found on page 215.

⁴¹ Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 10.

⁴² This long essay, significantly translated variously as "Coming Out," "Out and Out," "Attacks," "Ways Out," "Forays," is found in Hélène Cixous' and Catherine Clément's *The Newly Born Woman*, Betsy Wing, Translator (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). The present citation is taken from page 75 of that volume.

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York, Doubleday, 1990), p. 334.

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, John P. Leavery, Jr. and Richard Rand, Translators (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 141.