

Oedipus Myth: The Story of Man's Life from Fertilization to Birth?

Decryption of the Oedipus Myth Using the Common Sense of Proper Names

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Abstract- Since Freud, it has become quite usual to utilize ancient Greek myths to name or to illustrate modern psychological patterns. This attitude seemed justified both by Sigmund Freud with what he called “archaic remnants” and by Gustav Jung with his “collective unconscious”, the substrate of “archetypes”. Jung considered these latter as the “innate universal psychic dispositions”. But a different reading of the myths enables to reveal a completely new meaning which appears very relevant in the lighting of actual scientific knowledge. The means to develop this reading is based on the literal translation of proper names of heroes and places.

For instance, this approach can successfully be used for one of the most popularized myths: Oedipus. Literally, it narrates the strange story of Oedipus (“Swollen Foot”), after his father Laius, “owner of a herd”, had abandoned him in “a place devoted to feeding” (mount Cithaeron), which is a close phonetic anagram in Greek of uterus (hystera), in brief: a matrix. After Oedipus had grown up, he accidentally met his father in a narrow gorge between Delphi and a place qualified as “secret, furry” (Daulis). Oedipus’ father and his servant, a “serial killer” (Polyphontes) tried to break through and the chariot rolled over our hero’s foot. Oedipus, angry, refused to let them pass and a fight ensued: he killed the servant, and his father died as his chariot overturned on him. Later, Oedipus arrived at a pass on mount Phycion (i.e. a pass related to female nature: the “cervix”) where he had to confront something that could strangle him (Sphinx = sphincter). She, the Sphynge, had a woman’s face, a lion’s body but with breasts and a snake tail. She had already devoured the “blood” of Jocasta (Heamon, Jocasta’s nephew’s name, means bleeding). As Oedipus answered her enigma, she jumped from the top of the mountain and died below.

Narrated as so, this story relates the conception, indicated by the cessation of menses, probably intercourse during pregnancy and finally birth when the placenta and umbilical cord (the snake tail) become useless. If this reading is relevant, it suggests that the ancient Greeks were aware of the psychological impact of foetal life before birth on the development of the human psyche and destiny. This possibility is in accordance with Stanislas Grof’s approach and other recent epidemiological and/or biological research on the impact of prenatal stress on the embryo’s development and future behaviour. To our mind, several other myths carry similar insights into the psychology of the ancient Greeks. According to Robert Graves, it can be thought that to explore the human psyche, the ancient Greeks used hallucinogenic plants and in particular mushrooms just as Stanislas Grof did but using LSD at the beginning of his investigations.

Keywords- *Oedipus; Mythology; Prenatal Life; Birth Trauma; Psychotropic*

I. INTRODUCTION

If Western philosophy has always expressed a steady interest in ancient Greek culture and claimed some inheritance of thought, most of it seems to have faded away either in dusty books or in museums. This movement started with the dawn of modern sciences a few centuries ago, and new and more credible sources of knowledge, based on experimentation and evidence. A recent example of this evolution can be found in present-day medicine with the famous concept: the evidence-based medicine. Its aim is to establish a descending order of proof that demonstrates that a treatment is efficient. A few decades ago in medicine, expert opinions occupied the very first place but today, they rank last, even behind case studies ^[1]. One of the last domains where this rule seemed not to apply, was psychology, and especially psychoanalysis, where the writings of Sigmund Freud are never questioned, except try to confirm that he was right. Happily, cognitive-behavioral psychology has gained sufficient strength to propose alternative theories and patient care. And lately, neurosciences have begun to revolutionize all the traditional approaches in this domain, alongside progress in human biology (role of neurotransmitters and hormones for example).

Freud’s work has nevertheless durably influenced our culture and one of the best demonstrations of this is the common use of Greek myths today, and mainly those popularized by Freud himself. Many different reasons are suggested for this popularity in human sciences. Among them, in the area of structuralism, Lévi-Strauss ^[2] considers myths as trans-cultural examples of how the human mind fundamentally organizes thought. Freud justifies the use of myths by what he calls “archaic remnants”. For Gustav Jung, myths echo “innate universal psychic dispositions”, which he defines as the substrates of “archetypes”, these being included in a larger entity that he called the “collective unconscious”. We will not discuss these points of view but we will develop another approach based on the notion that at all epochs, special knowledge was reserved to initiates, and same kind of means to conceal it were deployed. These means are described by Fulcanelli ^[3] and also by Aubier in her reading of

Don Quixote ^[4]. According to the latter, in the Spanish 17th century, discordant voices with regard to the Catholic authority were not tolerated, and Miguel de Cervantes, in order to protect himself from the Inquisition, needed to hide his real message with a sort of “cabala”. This novel gives an example of how this dissimulation works: in his title, the second volume refers to Don Quixote by the noun “Caballero” while in the first, the word “Hidalgo” was used. This is the first sign that another meaning is encrypted. The second is a sort of phonetic analogy: Caballero (horse rider) is equivalent to cabala. The name Hidalgo has also a meaning in Spanish: it means nobleman or lord.

In this chapter, we will apply a method along these lines to “translate” the Oedipus mythⁱ. It is a very good example to investigate because it contains many names of heroes and places. From their signification (mainly from Robert Graves ^[5], they appear in the text between brackets), a second meaning will appear without the need for deep interpretations and/or digression. Then we will consider present discoveries in biology and other life sciences in order to establish possible parallels between this new meaning and scientific outcomes. Finally, we will discuss the means that ancient Greeks used to collect their information and examine whether our modern psychology does better than the initiation ceremonies of the past or shaman sessions in the so-called primitive civilizations.

II. THE OEDIPUS STORY

Oedipus means “swollen foot”: this meaning can be recognized in oedema for example. He inherited this name immediately after his birth: because of an adverse oracle, his father Laius [owner of a herd] pierced his feet with a nail in order to tie him to a tree, and abandoned him on mount Cithaeron [a place devoted to feeding]. In Greek, Cithaeron is an anagram of hystera, the uterus, the matrixⁱⁱ. With very little imagination, this beginning could very well represent impregnation when the fertilized ovule fixes itself to the wall of uterus. Another version of the myth tells how he was put into a crate and thrown into the sea with a similar symbolism although less precise. Thanks to the help of Fates, the shepherd Phorbas [he that fosters, that feeds] finds Oedipus and brings him to the king Polybos [many oxen] and his wife Periboea [who is surrounded by oxen herds] who adopt him as they had no child. Interestingly, the names of both fathers (biological and adoptive) are almost alike, which could suggest they should be seen as one and the same, while all the names refer to food and feeding probably pointing to the period of the embryo’s growth. Oedipus’ biological mother, Jocasta [brilliant moon] is the queen consort of Thebes. Although she had strongly contributed to her impregnation by getting Laius drunk so that he would not refuse to make love to her, she surprisingly appears rather inactive when her husband disappears with her newborn. This also contributes to the idea that Oedipus has not really disappeared: in many other myths (for example Demeter and her daughter Persephone), when a child disappears, the mother leaves no stone unturned and in the end, the gods often have to intervene.

Oedipus grows well and thrives on his adoptive parents’ love. And when an oracle tells him he will kill his father and marry his mother, he decides to leave so that no such horror will happen. On his way into a narrow gorge that leads from Daulis [furry, secret] to Delphi [a dolphin carried Apollo to this city and Apollo represents the sun, the light], he meets his biological father Laius accompanied by Polyphontes [serial killer] in a chariot. They try to break through and the chariot rolls over Oedipus’ foot. Angry, Oedipus refuses to let them pass and they begin to fight: he kills the servant, while his father dies as the chariot overturns on him. We will discuss the meaning of this part of the story after Oedipus has met the Sphinge.

This encounter happens shortly afterwards on mount Phycion [nature and in particular female nature = female sex] as he walks toward Thebes. Sphinx means to strangle as in sphincter. This chimera has a woman’s face, a lion’s body but with breasts and a snake tale. Recently she has already killed Jocasta’s nephew Haemon [bleeding] as he wanted to deliver Thebes

ⁱ First text fragments mentioning the Theban king Oedipus date from the 7th century BC. But most tragedies about him were written during the 5th century BC, the most famous one being authored by Sophocles [497-406 BC]. Oedipus current myth results from these more recent writings. Interestingly for our topic, the beginning of the myth is rather similarly narrated by the various tragedians while most differences concern the reign of Oedipus in Thebes, that is after his marriage with his mother. The beginning of the myth can be summarized as follow: King of Thebes Laius recieved a prophecy saying his child, once grown up, would kill his father and marry his mother. Unfortunately his wife, Queen Jocasta, became pregnant as she bypassed her husband’s efforts not to have a child. A soon as Oedipus was born, Laius took his son to his mother, and abandoned him on a mountainside, after he had attached his feet together (in some version with a large pin). Some shepherds found the baby and brought him in the city of Corinth to King Polybus and his wife, Queen Merope, who could not have children. They decided to adopt Oedipus. Later at Delphi, Oedipus learned from an oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Desperate, as he thought the prophecy concerned Polybus and Merope, Oedipus left Corinth. Heading to Thebes, he met a chariot coming the other way on a narrow road carrying his biological father and his servant. They quarreled over who should give way. In the resulting battle, Oedipus killed the servant and the chariot toppled and crushed Laius who soon died. Continuing on to Thebes, he found that the city was terrorized by a chimera, the Sphinx, and that the hero that could free the city from it, would marry the Queen. Oedipus decided to face the monster. He defeated it answering its riddle correctly. So he married the widow, Jocasta (his biological mother) and became king of the city. Versions vary quite a lot about what happened to him after. According to some versions, he had two sons and daughters from this marriage while others let him have his two sons from another wife Euryganea. The discovery by Oedipus of the truth about his marriage, and the fact he had killed his father, is described in various manners. Some authors make him run away with his daughter Antigone after he had pricked his eyes (the version used by Freud) while others let him keep or win back his throne after many adventures.

ⁱⁱ *Hystera* has given in psychology the word hysteria. In ancient Greece, mentally ill women were treated using uterine enema.

from this daemon. The travellers who could not answer her enigma were strangled and devoured on the spot. Obviously, a pass related to female nature that can strangle corresponds to the cervix, especially at the moment of delivery when two possibilities of strangulation or smothering exist: either by the umbilical cord twisted around the baby's neck or because the cervix is too narrow and the baby cannot come through. The snake tail of the Sphinge seems more likely to represent the first circumstance.

This interpretation can be confirmed, to our mind, by the enigma of the Sphinge: "Which animal lives on all fours in the morning, on two legs at noon and finally on three in the evening?" If this question was asked of an adult, the answer could appear rather simple as he already knows the first two states. But from the point of view of a baby who has never walked and only knows weightlessness in the amniotic fluid, the matter is a completely different. We thus suggest the Oedipus myth refers to both conception and birth. According to this hypothesis, the death of Jocasta's nephew signifies the disappearance of menstruation [Haemon = bleeding] once conception has occurred. After the correct solution of the enigma is given by Oedipus, the Sphinge jumps from the top of the mount and dies below: possibly, this could represent the placenta (and the rest of the umbilical cord) which has become useless.

Of course, as Oedipus kills his father between his conception and his birth in a furry narrow pass, the encounter could refer to sexual intercourse during pregnancy. Because *Polyphontes* means "murderer several times", a question arises: did the ancient Greeks consider that having sex during pregnancy could either damage the baby or the father? In psychoanalysis, this question echoes the concept of the "primal scene". It is considered that if a baby witnesses the sexual intercourse of his parents, this can cause him fundamental trauma. But this concept seems awkward. Besides the difficulty for a baby to move in such a way that he can have a glimpse of what is happening aside, we might wonder why such a scene could cause him trauma, unless it occurs in a context of violence. Conversely, intercourse during pregnancy, especially at the end, could very well in some cases constitute some kind of a trauma for him. Of course, the placenta is supposed not to risk any damage from the penis in action. But depending on the way the mother feels about it, sex can perhaps be "perceived" as an aggression. On the other hand, intercourse can very well transmit disease which in turn may be fatal to the embryo (risk of miscarriage) or cause a premature birth^[6]. Some scientific articles document hereafter these possibilities.

To conclude on the Oedipus' myth, it is noteworthy that a large place is given to sexuality. Indeed, the myth reports a quarrel between Zeus and his wife Hera about the amount of pleasure felt respectively by men and women during sex. This quarrel was settled by the soothsayer Tiresias [who likes signs] who could effectively testify on this point as he had been successively a man, a woman and finally a man again^[5]. Tiresias stated that women's pleasure was ten times stronger than men's. We will not argue about this last statement, but to our mind it confirms that the Oedipus myth really refers to procreation, pregnancy, birth and the consequences of this period on future destiny, i.e. the psychic development of the individual. The next chapter will try in a few paragraphs, to illustrate the questions raised by this translation of the myth.

III. WHAT DO LIFE AND HUMAN SCIENCES BRING TO THIS DEBATE?

A. In the Domain of Psychology

The first author to have questioned a possible trauma related to birth is Freud himself^[7]: "birth, as the first danger that threatens life, is the prototype of all those that will follow, in front of which we feel anguish, and it is probably the experience of birth that has left us this manifestation of affects we call anxiety". His disciple, Otto Rank^[8], focused on that topic and emphasized the major consequences of this event for the human psyche: in 1924 he published "the trauma of birth" (translated into English in 1929). But after a first contributive interest in this theme, Freud distanced himself from what he called an "anti-oedipal heresy", as he came to believe no trauma could influence the psyche so long as the child was not yet able to handle language. Obviously, this belief appears not completely correct: we now know more about early interactions between the baby and his mother which begin even before birth^[9]. Interestingly, in his manuscript, Rank comments on a representation in Boehm of a man obsessed by the vision of an immense active penis hidden inside of the woman which can from one moment to the next spurt out: this could concord with the possible representation of intercourse by the fight of Oedipus against his father occurring in the narrow gorge.

After the rejection of Rank's notion by Freud, the "trauma of birth" theory was abandoned for decades until the researches by Stanislas Grof and his wife on LSD^[10]. According to them, birth is the corner-stone of the structuring of the future psyche: the way birth happens can produce four different patterns upon which mental disorders may develop. Closer to us, Imbert^[11] advances more audacious concepts: she suggests, based on her experience during therapy sessions, that very often problems originate before birth and solve themselves only when the right association is made with the corresponding in-utero trauma. Among these, she indicates abortion attempts, maternal trauma during pregnancy and even previous miscarriage which could leave some kind of imprint. To her mind, the fact that the baby is unwanted is also very disastrous for his mental development. She also suggests that the parents' desire for a child of a certain gender may cause deep psychological difficulties for the child if the gender does not match. Our experience meets some of these findings. Finally, other accidents have been considered to possibly impact the mental development of the fetus: the intrauterine death of the twin sibling^[12].

Besides separation from his mother, another trauma threatens the newborn: the severing of the umbilical cord. Leboyer^[13] was one of the first obstetricians to denounce the way this separation used to be performed in daily routine. According to his

experience, the cord is cut too early, and this causes a real suffering. This very great sensitivity in babies is confirmed by care delivered to preterm infants ^[14]. To our mind, the castration complex described in psychoanalysis for either sex, could more likely originate from this early event, rather than from a later realization concerning physical sexual differences. Otto Rank seems to be of the same opinion as he noticed that in dreams occurring at the end of the psychoanalytic treatment, phallus often symbolizes the umbilical cord.

B. Epidemiological and Biological Studies

Numerous discoveries have been made using surveys. Some concern the maternal events happening during pregnancy. Mazet et al. ^[9] with cohort studies, evidenced that strong psychic stress in mothers is able to influence the health of fetus before birth, but also, very likely his future psychological equilibrium. Today, we know how stress can be transmitted from mother to fetus: by hormones like corticosteroids that are exchanged through the umbilical cord. Besides the known effect of abnormally high levels of corticosteroids on the decrease of their neuronal receptors in the amygdalas and hippocampus ^[15] which will alter the future control of emotions, an interesting Australian survey ^[16] has shown that treatment of mothers with corticosteroids in order to prevent premature birth was responsible for a higher frequency of hyperactivity or aggressiveness in children at 3 and 6 years.

Serotonin, a ubiquitous hormone, is also known to intervene in the embryo's brain development: this hormon is necessary at the very beginning of its growth but no neurones can produce it during the embryo's first months. It is thus secreted by the mother and supplied to the embryo via the umbilical cord. Depressive or durably stressed mothers produce less serotonin and this may impact significantly on the way new brain structures form. Experiments in animals seem to confirm these findings: for example, stressors applied to female pregnant rats have a deleterious effect on neuro-genesis in their offspring ^[15].

Some surveys have tried to focus on the violence towards women and the consequences on their future infants. Such studies appear relevant, since violence towards women is a major public problem in many countries. Besides health implications (for example low birth weight ^[17], a woman's condition greatly impacts the embryo's development. The severity of violence tends to increase when women are pregnant ^[18] and it also becomes more likely because their sexual desire decreases as pregnancy progresses ^[19]. Miscarriages are associated with violence ^[20, 21] but another physical consequence is intrauterine growth retardation although the biological reasons are not clear. Similar consequences occur in women who have been exposed to physical abuses during their pregnancy, in particular an increased risk of preterm delivery, independently from other recognized determinants of preterm birth (poverty, low education, addictions...). Of course, violence (either domestic or other) against the mother also has heavy consequences on offspring who are already born ^[22] with a strong association between physical and sexual violence towards mothers and early mortality of offspring, which is more likely to result from maternal stress and altered care-giving behaviours than from the trauma itself.

We suggested a possible impact of the severing of the umbilical cord on newborns. A recent study has confirmed that cutting should be delayed a few minutes. Indeed, the blood that still flows in it from the mother to the baby has demonstrated its positive role in compensating for any failure in oxygen supply immediately after delivery ^[23]. And when it stops beating, its sensitivity becomes weaker and the cutting painless.

These findings of course do not indicate that normal and desired sexuality during pregnancy can alter an embryo's development or cause him a trauma: although beliefs and controversy concerning this topic are widespread ^[24], to the best of our knowledge, no scientific study has investigated this subject. The cited works only show that if the Oedipus story underlines the dangers that can face the embryo up to birth, there are multiple proofs today that indicate such dangers are real. There is converging evidence, either from psychological research or from epidemiological/medical ones, that pregnancy is a primordial time for the infant, impacting health issues and his mental development since it is the main period for neurogenesis. And via the physical and hormonal communication with his mother, the fetus may be influenced by what happens to her and probably, at the end of the pregnancy, he may be able to "feel" her stress and pains although he has not the necessary mental structures to cope with or simply process this information: moreover, it is possible that the consequences could be increased because of this lack of cognitive means. Delivery can be included among the stressors that the baby will face, especially if it is difficult. According to the Oedipus myth, it might even be of prime importance. This hypothesis is supported by Grof's writings and data from transpersonal psychology. As these findings are rather recent and have required complicated research, one could wonder how ancient Greeks investigated this domain. The possibilities are limited and a few suggestions about them are presented in the next chapter.

IV. HOW COULD THE ANCIENT GREEKS OBTAIN INFORMATION ON BIRTH AND THE EMBRYO'S LIFE WITHOUT SCIENTIFIC TOOLS?

This question is interesting, as modern science usually has a certain disregard for all ancient beliefs and corresponding "referential repertory"ⁱⁱⁱ. Robert Graves, from his wide reading of Greek myths, suggests a particular beverage was employed

ⁱⁱⁱ Referential repertory can be defined as the set of all items that describe ancient Greeks world including their beliefs and values. It comprises intra and extra-cultural references that can make sense for any experience. Our modern society has its own referential repertory that partially includes ancient Greeks' one.

by our ancestors to enhance their intuition and perception: namely the Centaurs' drink, or the drink of the gods, the ambrosia. According to him, the use of a specific mushroom was involved in the preparation of this potion, and probably two kinds can be envisaged as they were also used by Siberian shamans and European druids ^[25]; the fly agaric and the psilocybe. In Egypt, according to Puharich ^[26], the former was known and considered sacred because of the visions it induced, while the first report on psilocybe and its shamanic use in Mazatec healing sessions are from Wasson ^[27]. Both are nowadays classified as intoxicants. Although controversial, an article by Shanon ^[28], stating that hallucinogenic plants (a species of Acacia tree) were used during religious rituals at the beginning of Judaism, is also in favor of this idea. This professor of cognitive psychology also investigated practices of Amazonian shamans and his observations seem to corroborate his considerations on old Jewish texts.

This very brief incursion into this borderline domain of anthropology brings us back to Grof's work on LSD in the sixties. According to him, the use of hallucinogenic substances could catalyze the remembering of very old trauma, sometimes appearing in a symbolic form, and in particular those related to birth trauma. Some of his patients seemed to have recovered even earlier material. Other means are available to favor such emergences: Grof's holotropic breathing, for example, while painting may also help to foster this process. Hypnosis, correctly managed, seems also able to enable insights into very deep traumatic memories. Of course, such remembrances are often difficult to validate, unless special events have been noticed by witnesses, and especially mothers. We therefore suggest that the ancient Greeks possessed some "levers" to stimulate memories and insights (i.e. drugs), as psychologists do today by other means. Probably, these levers were used during initiation ceremonies, and a certain kind of consensus could be reached, as birth injuries were not rare^{iv}. Possibly too, the concordance found by authors ^[2] between trans-cultural myths could be based not on general thought structures but rather on common difficulties experienced in early life. Another way to present this can be that general thought structures in humans may derive from similar generalized early life traumas.

At present, one might ask if modern psychologists are not in arrears compared to the ancient Greeks: there are many impediments today that prevent researchers from investigating in these borderline domains, in particular the fact that psychotropic drugs are either the restricted domain of the pharmaceutical industry or that they fall into the domain of illicit substances. We question whether this attitude is solely related to necessary public safety concerns. Perhaps too, some cultural barriers remain behind the official discourse that comes from the old battle of Christianity against previous animist/polytheist religions: psychotropic plants have been condemned together with previous beliefs.

A last question remains: did mythographs try to conceal their secrets in their myths? The answer may appear simple. Reading and writing, as well as theater, in this early era was the privilege of the few citizens, while slaves were probably not allowed to share such information. For the elite, no translation of names was necessary (the meanings of names were implied) and direct experience was possible (and probably advisable) via initiation ceremonies which were included in the standard religious life (the same kind of ceremonies were found in ancient native American or African cultures). The appearance of secrecy merely arises from a lost skill, especially since dead languages are no longer taught at school and also since science is supposed to provide all the answers.

V. CONCLUSION

There are many different readings of Greek mythology, and it is likely that the one we propose here will merge into the many others, as knowledge of dead languages become more uncommon. Somehow, the understanding of the ancient civilisations cannot occur without a return to the sources, i.e. a mindful reading of the original texts. This effort is particularly necessary concerning the Greeks, because of the legacy they have done to our culture and thus their proximity. Today, psychology and more generally human sciences are the last domain where ancient and modern thinking can meet again. The type of decryption we have reported in this manuscript, can represent a complementary means to bridge the gap and also help realize that our ancestors possessed powerful tools to investigate the human psyche (and very likely with less prohibitions). A way to validate our approach can easily be found: it can be applied to the many other myths^v. If this sheds new light on them, in accordance with discoveries made by other sciences (archeology, anthropology), this kind of reading will possibly be generalized. This could favor new insights and we suggest modern psychologists a renewal of mythology study, more pragmatic by this method. Probably, this effort could be paid back by a widening of actual referential repertory of psychology and of the representations of the human psyche.

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^{iv} About any hypothetical common violence towards women at this time and although in myths, rape and kidnapping are not rare, the subject is under debate and there is no real argument in favor its high frequency [29]. This, of course, does not include possible violence applied to female slaves.

^v We will analyse the Icarus myth in a future article.

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