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***Oedipus Rex* and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis: A Tragedy of Desire and Otherness**

Keywords

Oedipus Rex, Sophocles, Freud, Lacan, desire, mythology, Otherness

Abstract

This article develops an analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in relation to the mythological and literary-theatrical place the play holds in the history of psychoanalysis from Freud to Lacan, not to mention Foucault's counter-psychoanalytic reading. How do we see the constitutive relation between this play and the Freudian complex? Does Lacanian psychoanalysis help illuminate the play as a tragedy of desire in alienation? The paper argues for a tragedy of desire's Otherness in Sophocles' play, showing how the parental alterity is configured in the shifting dynamics of paternal and maternal signifiers. Be it in the divine oracle or the chorus, the play accentuates the field of Other to activate the tragedy of desire and channelizes it through affects like guilt, shame and self-reproach, inscribed on the subject's body in the form of scopical and invocatory drives. The paper concludes by reflecting on the status of the unconscious as knowledge, complicating Foucault's interpretation and presenting a tragedy of the desire-to-know that produces existence without desire as an experience of suffering.

***Kralj Ojdip* in mitologija psihoanalize: tragedija želje in Drugosti**

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Ključne besede

Kralj Ojdip, Sofokles, Freud, Lacan, želja, mitologija, Drugost

Povzetek

Članek razvija analizo Sofoklovega *Kralja Ojdipa* v razmerju do mitološkega in literarno-gledališkega mesta, ki ga ta igra zaseda v zgodovini psihoanalize od Freuda do

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Lacana, če Foucaultovega protipsihoanalitičnega branja niti ne omenjamo. Kako vidimo konstitutivni odnos med to igro in freudovskim kompleksom? Ali Lacanova psihoanaliza pomaga osvetliti igro kot tragedijo želje v alienaciji? Članek zagovarja tragedijo Drugosti želje v Sofoklejevi igri in pokaže, kako se starševska drugost konfigurira v spreminjajoči se dinamiki očetovskih in materinskih označevalcev. Naj gre za božanski orakelj ali za zbor, igra poudarja polje Drugega, da bi aktivirala tragedijo želje in jo kanalizira prek afektov, kot so krivda, sram in samoočitki, ki so vpisani v telo subjekta v obliki skopičnih in invokacijskih nagonov. Članek se zaključi z razmislekom o statusu nezavednega kot vednosti, kar zaplete Foucaultovo interpretacijo in predstavi tragedijo želje po vednosti, ki proizvaja obstoj brez želje kot izkušnje trpljenja.



This article focuses on the relation between Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* and psychoanalysis, not only in terms of the possible psychoanalytic interpretations of the play but also in a constitutive sense in which the literary and the theatrical get caught up in the psychoanalytic process. As is well known, the Greek myth of Oedipus the king, who unknowingly murdered his father and shared a bed with his mother, is the figure Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalytic discourse, chose to ground the central "complex" of psychoanalysis, i.e. the Oedipus complex. It refers to a heterosexual child's desire to kill his or her same-sex parent (the father for a male child and the mother for a female child) in order to fulfil his or her sexual desire for the parent of the other sex. For Freud, the Oedipus complex marks a significant early stage of psycho-sexual development and its dissolution at a certain point marks a watershed for the human subject. The Oedipus myth is constitutive for Freudian psychoanalysis, and the play, based on this mythical account, has been a major reference point among psychoanalysts. For Jacques Lacan, myth is not a teleological origin-story but more like the *construction* of an origin in the retroactive logic of the unconscious. As he defines it, while constructing his myth of the "lamella"—the libidinal organ of loss in sexual reproduction, a myth "strives to provide a symbolic articulation for [something], rather than an image."¹ This semiotic conception of myth as a linguistic articulation (and not just an Imaginary phenome-

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¹ Jacques Lacan, "Position of the Unconscious," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 718.

non) places it in a narrative structure. Oedipus is one such mythological narrative structure for psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis enters into a foundational relation with literature when Freud invokes Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* alongside another tragedy from Renaissance England—Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—to make an interpretive point about the complex that he names after Oedipus. Lacan rightly notes this “equivalent” relation between Sophocles and Shakespeare in Freud.² In Freudian terms, Hamlet is in love with his mother Gertrude and when his uncle Claudius kills his father in conspiracy with her, Hamlet procrastinates in his revenge. He defers in his dilemma because Claudius has enacted his own unconscious wish of killing his father in order to have a sexual relation with his mother. In what follows, we will study literature's constitutive relation with psychoanalysis through *Oedipus Rex* and the Freudian clinical myth of the Oedipus Complex. I will show how Freud and Lacan's inroads into Sophocles' play carve out a path for the dream as an unconscious formation, incarnate the unconscious in the linguistic field of the Other, and concentrate on affects such as guilt and the position the body as a site on which the affective signifiers of the unconscious are inscribed. Cross-pollinating Lacan with Foucault on Sophocles, we will reflect on unconscious knowledge in the Other and see how *Oedipus Rex* represents the parental Others in its unfolding tragedy of desire. I will mark how the paternal and maternal functions in the play undergo a complex shift, becoming substitutable, if not unstable, in the process. The paternal and maternal signifiers circulate among multiple figures in the ever-complexifying metonymic flow of desire.

Freud's Tracing of *Oedipus Rex*: Dreams, the Unconscious, and Guilt

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud talks about the child's love for one parent and hate for another. Let us first note that he does not see this as plain and simple pathology. In fact, his clinical experience instructs that love and hate for one or the other parent is a psychic phenomenon, observed in most children, even so-called ‘normal’ ones. Freud makes a distinction of *scale* between “normal” children and “psychoneurotics” when he says that for some the hate might

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² Jacques Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 234.

become murderous and love might turn carnal.³ To support this theory, Freud uses the Greek legend and evokes Sophocles' play. Oedipus, the son of Laius, king of Thebes, and Jocasta, was abandoned as a child due to an oracle that the unborn child would go on to kill his father and marry his mother. The rescued child grew up to become a prince in an alien court. As he questioned his origins, an oracle hinted at the curse attached to his destiny. On a journey away from home, he met Laius and killed him in a sudden quarrel. Oedipus then went to Thebes and solved the riddle of the Sphinx. The grateful Thebans gave him Jocasta's hand. He married her, reigned long, and had two sons and two daughters with her. As a plague broke out in Thebes and the oracle was summoned again, the truth of the old guilt and the curse came out. It is around this plague situation that the play picks up the mythical narrative. The messengers bring back the oracle's response that the plague will only end if Laius's murderer is driven out from Thebes.

Almost like a detective story, the play traces this act of revelation and Freud likens this narrative of unfolding in the dramatic text with the clinical process of psychoanalysis.⁴ He claims a universal value for the subjective destiny of Oedipus because, for him, there is an Oedipus in all of us. Freud suggests that the play appeals not just to an ancient Greek audience but to a more modern audience too. We can identify with its tragic protagonist through the complex of love and hate that we feel for our parental figures: "It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so."⁵ Freud highlights the "tragedy of destiny" in Sophocles' play and supplements this idea of an external, objective destiny with a psychic and internal notion of subjective trajectory as destiny. This destiny is not pre-ordained but is the pathway of the unconscious mind, which often harbours instincts, desires, and emotions which contradict our conscious, intentional psyche.

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Freud draws our attention to the final words of the chorus that highlight Oedipus's transformation from powerful to miserable:

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 278.

⁴ Freud, 279.

⁵ Freud, 280.

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.
 He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
 he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
 Who could behold his greatness without envy?
 Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
 Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
 count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.⁶

As the above lines suggest, we cannot take anyone's happiness for granted until the final moment of his or her life. Oedipus once was the epitome of happiness but destiny had other ideas for him. Freud thinks that this last speech of the chorus truly universalizes Oedipus's character as an embodiment of our own tragic subjective trajectories. He speculates that the content of the myth itself was derived from dreams, i.e. from a formation of the psychoanalytic unconscious. As support for this conjecture, he quotes the following dialogue from the play. This is Jocasta trying to console Oedipus about a so-called meaningless dream, dreamt by many people:

Many a man before you,
 in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed.
 Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—⁷

Freud's point is that the text itself situates sexual desire for one's mother as the material of archetypal dreams. But, in the pre-psychoanalytic Greek world, dreams did not have any meaning as the unconscious was yet to be discovered. Such dreams were passed off as "shadows." Freud interprets the dream of having intercourse with one's mother together with the other archetypal dream of seeing one's father dead. He considers the entire play to be a response to these two generic dreams that often evoke disgust and indignation. Owing to this, the legend as well as the play include affective aspects like self-reproach, horror, and guilt.⁸ Oedipus blinds himself in self-punishment when he comes to know his act. There is another reference to dreams in the play that Freud does not quote. This is Tiresias's prophetic utterance on Oedipus's predicament:

⁶ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1984), 251.

⁷ Sophocles, 215.

⁸ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 278–79.

That day you learn the truth about your marriage,
 the wedding-march that sang you into your halls,
 the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor!
 And a crowd of other horrors you'd never dream
 will level you with yourself and all your children.⁹

The impending truth about Oedipus's marriage is compared with horrific dreams that are almost beyond the limit of dreaming itself. The levelling of the father with the children is the complex family scenario arising from sexual relation with the mother. Oedipus is technically a brother to his own children as they all share the same mother, Jocasta. Sophocles' Theban trilogy of plays shows that it is this curse of the Labdacus family that goes on to produce further tragedies in *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. In short, the doom falls not on Oedipus but on his entire family.

When Freud returns to Sophocles' play during his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, he underlines the "amoral" nature of the work: "It absolves men from moral responsibility, exhibits the gods as promoters of crime and shows the impotence of the moral impulses of men which struggle against crime."¹⁰ This is the radical edge to the tragedy of Oedipus that shows how the will of the gods can be completely "immoral." As the course of the play suggests, even if the divine wish is at cross-purposes with morality, it will be realized. Freud comments that unlike Euripides, who could have nurtured this radical angle due to his lack of religious belief, for a devout believer like Sophocles, the will of the gods is sacrosanct: "The will of the gods is the highest morality even when it promotes crime."¹¹ Freud adds that this moral conundrum does not take away from the effect of the play as the audience reacts to the implications of the play and how it taps into their own unconscious guilt:

Even if a man has repressed his evil impulses into the unconscious and would like to tell himself afterwards that he is not responsible for them, he is bound to be aware of this responsibility as a sense of guilt whose basis is unknown to him.¹²

⁹ Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 183.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 331.

¹¹ Freud, 331.

¹² Freud, 331.

Let us underline this unconscious permeation of guilt as a strong affect as we make a slow transition from Freud to Lacan vis-à-vis Oedipus.

From Freudian References to Lacanian Interpretations: The Corporeality of Guilt

If we follow Oedipus's reactions to this killing guilt, we see how it casts a shadow on his body in terms of self-punishment and horror:

I, with my eyes,
how could I look my father in the eyes
when I go down to death? Or mother, so abused . . .
I have done such things to the two of them,
crimes too huge for hanging.
Worse yet,
the sight of my children, born as they were born,
how could I long to look into their eyes?
No, not with these eyes of mine, never.
Not this city either, her high towers,
the sacred glittering images of her gods—
I am misery! I, her best son, reared
as no other son of Thebes was ever reared,
I've stripped myself, I gave the command myself.
All men must cast away the great blasphemer,
the curse now brought to light by the gods,
the son of Laius—I, my father's son!
Now I've exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt,
could I train a level glance on you, my countrymen?
Impossible! No, if I could just block off my ears,
the springs of hearing, I would stop at nothing—
I'd wall up my loathsome body like a prison,
blind to the sound of life, not just the sight.
Oblivion—what a blessing . . .
for the mind to dwell a world away from pain.¹³

¹³ Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 243.

To derive some important points from this long speech of Oedipus quoted above, first and foremost, it shows the *corporeality* of his guilt. The guilt embedded in his unconscious action not only leads to self-punishment in actuality but his imagination itself is heavy with thoughts of self-harm and auto-mutilation. His self-blinding, as he says, represents his wish not to face his parents with his eyes. The psychoanalytic idea of the gaze becomes important here. Freud only acknowledged oral and anal drives, but Jacques Lacan, his French successor, added two more drives to the kitty of unconscious pulsions: gaze and voice. Oedipus's corporeality of guilt invokes both these drives: the scopic and the invocatory. Guilt has a scopic context wherein the gaze of the Other frames the human self as a subject of the unconscious. In other words, we define ourselves with the help of the way in which our significant Others visualize us. What the Other's gaze frames is the subject-body, misrecognized in the mirror image. Oedipus blinds himself as he does not want to be subject to the gaze of the parental Others. As Lacan suggests in *Seminar X*, Oedipus's horror lies in seeing his own eyes cast to the ground. For Lacan, this image grounds Oedipus's anxiety: "It is the impossible sight that threatens you, of your own eyes lying on the ground."¹⁴ Oedipus's body is not captured by the gaze of the Other but his own gaze, separated from his body. This self-separated gaze causes horror by puncturing the body's Imaginary consistency. Oedipus eventually switches to his own role as a father—an Other to his children. He justifies self-blinding by the guilt that does not allow him to look into the eyes of his sons and daughters. Once again, the gaze's failure is marked therein.

To continue with the corporeal mapping of guilt onto psychoanalytic drives, other than the visual, we notice an emphasis on the auditory here: yet another subjective portal to the Other. Voice becomes an important object and invocation, a drive in Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is through the voice that the subject engages with the Other in the field of language. This bridge marks the Lacanian figuration of the unconscious as an intersubjective entity. It exists between the subject and the Other as a cut. Oedipus says that thanks to his guilt, he cannot face his parents, children, or countrymen. This facing the Other is not just visual but auditory as well. That is why for Lacan the unconscious as a discourse of the Other is structured like a language. Language in its function as speech is the locus of this Other. Stated differently, all our significant Others reside in language.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 162.

We bring them into existence by talking about them within the conversational space of speech. Oedipus is evoking these others in the quoted speech. It is in this context that he mentions his desire to stop his ears. He calls his body a prison. He wants to shut out the Other from his subjective space. This is a self-inflicted exile but also the inscription of guilt on his body. It is the guilt that writes itself on his body in the form of these mutilations both in thought and action. Oedipus connects the scopoc with the invocatory in his expression “blind to the sound.” If the Oedipal narrative offers a mythical structure for psychoanalysis in general, the scopoc and the invocatory drives incarnate another mythicity here. As Lacan agrees with Freud on this point, drives mythify the Real of the subject’s desire for the lost object.¹⁵

To probe further into the above speech, it blurs the mind-body distinction by foregrounding guilty corporeality as the index of a mental wound. Oedipus considers his self-exiled body the only way to keep pain from invading his mind. His body thus becomes a mouthpiece for his mind. He wants to alleviate his mental suffering by shutting out his body from both “sights” and “sounds” of life, as he says it. This is the life of the Other that animates his own body and mind. If we connect this with ultimately what happens to his body at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*, it registers the reaction of guilt on the body that vanishes. Oedipus’s death is nothing short of an enigma. We have no idea where he is buried, if at all. He vanishes from the surface of the earth. This dissolution of corporeality is the climax of his guilt, as it were. As Lacan highlights in *Seminar VI*, Oedipus considers his very birth to be insignificant. For him, Oedipus’s quest is for an existence beyond desire but he finds this existence unsustainable: “where existence, having arrived at the extinction of his desire, ends up.”¹⁶ When desire dries up, an existence that inhabits existence and nothing else becomes an experience of pain. In formulating this, Lacan echoes the choric reflection on an existence of suffering from *Oedipus at Colonus*:

Never to be born is the best story.
But when one has come to the light of day
second-best is to leave and go back
quick as you can back where you came from.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, “On Freud’s ‘Trieb,’” in *Écrits*, 724.

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Desire and Its Interpretation*, 91.

For in his giddy light-headed youth
 what sharp blow isn't far from a man? What
 affliction—
 strife death dissension the ache of envy—
 isn't close by? And in the end
 his lot is to lack all power:
 despised and cast out in friendless old age¹⁷

The chorus in itself is an incarnation of the Other in Sophoclean tragedy as it tries to articulate the divine will that remains so difficult to understand! To come back to the Other's field, the enigmatic and inscrutable will of the gods in Sophocles' play stands for the psychoanalytic locus of the Other. It is a gigantic, inanimate mouth from which emerges the divine language of accursed prophecy. For Lacan, speech acquires its truth value by being deposited in the locus of the Other, i.e. the Symbolic discourse of language. The oracle in Delphi in *Oedipus Rex* stands for this locus. It is noteworthy that the Delphic oracle is presented consistently through the metaphor of drive, as evident in the trope of the Other's voice:

Who is the man the voice of god denounces
 resounding out of the rocky gorge of Delphi?
 The horror too dark to tell,
 whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work?¹⁸

And again:

but he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi
 ringing out of the heart of Earth,
 the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom
 the doom that never dies, the terror—¹⁹

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The image of “the rocky gorge of Delphi” signals a lifeless mouth that emanates “the voice of god” resounding in horror and darkness. In the second passage quoted above, the chorus calls the oracle “the heart of Earth” that produces

¹⁷ Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 84.

¹⁸ Sophocles, 186.

¹⁹ Sophocles, 186.

“the dread voices of Delphi.” These voices, emblematic of the Other’s discourse, spell doom for Oedipus.

As the switching roles of mother and wife, on the one hand, and brother and father, on the other, signify throughout the play, Oedipus’s act of killing his father and “sowing” his mother²⁰ create a Symbolic entanglement for the linguistic register of the conventional familial taxonomy. This guilt-driven contamination of the Symbolic order is manifested in numerous hesitations while expressing the scandalously overlapping status of mother and wife, on the one hand, and father and brother, on the other: “Brother and father both / to the children he embraces,” “His wife and mother / of his children,” “Leaving / its mother to mother living creatures / with the very son she’d borne,” and again “His wife, / no wife, his mother, where can he find the mother earth / that cropped two crops at once, himself and all his children?”²¹ The strong affects of shame and the guilt, lying in incest, rend the Symbolic order and the chorus remains a special witness to this stumbling function of language, unable to express the entangled character of family relations, turned upside down by Oedipus’s unconscious acting out.

***Oedipus Rex* as a Tragedy of Desire: Substitutable Parental Functions**

While Freud’s major reference for Sophoclean tragedy is *Oedipus Rex*, for Lacan, the central work in the same Theban trilogy is *Antigone*. For instance, Lacan discusses *Oedipus Rex* in *Seminar VI*, primarily as a cross-reference for *Hamlet*. It is Shakespeare’s play that takes centre stage in this seminar. In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (delivered 1959–60), Lacan posits Antigone’s predicament as a psychoanalytic tragedy of desire and devotes a whole year to the reading of this play. Antigone’s death drive to save the honour of her accursed family and dead brother Polyneices embodies, for Lacan, the psychoanalytic ethic of desire, i.e. never to give up on one’s own desire. Though there is a supplementation of *Oedipus Rex* with *Antigone* in Lacan, I will use his lens to read the latter and to see if there are threads that can work for the former play as well.

If we import Lacan’s interpretive framework for *Antigone* for *Oedipus Rex*, we must begin by acknowledging the play as a tragedy of desire. This is the uncon-

²⁰ Sophocles, 248.

²¹ Sophocles, 185, 211, 236.

scious desire of the subject, alienated by the Other. For Lacan, human desire is the desire of the Other. He shifts emphasis from the Oedipal desire *for* the Other (sexual desire for one's father or mother) to the desire *of* the Other (especially the mother's desire) controlling the subject. This explains his gravitation towards *Antigone* instead of *Oedipus Rex*. We have already spotted the Delphic oracle and the chorus as potential sites from which the discourse of the Other operates in the play. This discourse brings in the desire of the Other that alienates the subject. The will of the gods is the desire of the Other that compels Oedipus to do what he does. Oedipus's own desire is alienated by this desire of the Other. In our Lacanian reading, instead of his desire for Jocasta and the desire to kill Laius, the core of his tragedy emerges from the fact that it is not his own desire but a desire imposed on him by the desire of the gods.

In *Seminar VII*, while identifying the trait of the Sophoclean protagonist as an intermediate position between life and death, Lacan reflects on Oedipus: "Sophocles represents him as driven to bring about his own ruin through his obstinacy in wanting to solve an enigma, to know the truth."²² To know what lies in the unconscious is Oedipus's psychoanalytic journey. On the one hand, unlike Hamlet, Oedipus does not know what he is doing, but on the other, this non-knowledge is itself part of an epistemological problematic, lying at the heart of the play. Lacan comments that although Jocasta warns him that he should not know more, Oedipus cannot stop his drive for knowledge. In Lacan's aforementioned view, Oedipus wants to know what existence would be without desire. Michel Foucault, in his lecture of 17 March 1971 at Collège de France entitled "Oedipal Knowledge," develops an inquiry into the status of the multiple knowledges at work in Sophocles' play. He argues that *Oedipus Rex* presents these knowledges in a logic of sub-divided halves that are fragmented like jigsaw pieces and only come together at the end. Though Foucault takes his examination in a historical direction of transition from oracular to judicial knowledge in ancient Greek society, his fundamental point about knowledge being the core of the play resonates with our excursus. He takes a strategic departure from the psychoanalytic unconscious as a heuristic tool for the play and observes the following:

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²² Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 272.

It is not so much Oedipus's "ignorance" or "unconscious" that appears in the forefront of Sophocles' tragedy. It is rather the multiplicity of forms of knowledge, the diversity of the procedures which produce it, and the struggle between the powers which is played out through their confrontation.²³

The paradox that Foucault's departure does not take into serious consideration is that the psychoanalytic unconscious is not ignorance but a form of knowledge. In a talk delivered in the same year as Foucault's, i.e. 1971 (November 4), entitled "Knowledge, Ignorance, Truth and Jouissance," Lacan clarifies that the unconscious is an "unknown knowledge" that is "well and truly articulated, that is structured like a language."²⁴ In this formulation of unknown knowledge, structured like a language, we hear the echo of the unconscious, structured like a language. For Lacan then, the unconscious is a form of knowledge with a linguistic structure. This is the knowledge that is aired by the Delphic oracles and yet there is no subject to know it at that point. This unconscious knowledge rests in the linguistic field of the Other without there being an Oedipus to know it at that historical moment. If the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, it cannot do without the question of the Other's knowledge. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan states: "If the unconscious has taught us anything, it is first of all that somewhere in the Other it knows (*ça sait*)."²⁵ He goes on further to declare:

"What is it that knows?" Do we realize that it is the Other?—such as I posited it at the outset, as a locus in which the signifier is posited, and without which nothing indicates to us that there is a dimension of truth anywhere, a *dit-mension*, the residence of what is said, of this said (*dit*) whose knowledge posits the Other as locus. The status of knowledge implies as such that there already is knowledge, that it is in the Other [. . .].²⁶

²³ Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know and Oedipal Knowledge*, ed. Daniel Defert, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 251.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Knowledge, Ignorance, Truth and Jouissance," in *Talking to Brick Walls: A Series of Presentations in the Chapel at Sainte-Anne Hospital*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 17.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore, 1972–73*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 87–88.

²⁶ Lacan, 96.

This idea of the unconscious as a knowledge in the Other anchors the epistemological crux of *Oedipus Rex*. Be it the chorus, the Delphic oracle, or divine will, there is unconscious knowledge in the Other. The play realizes Oedipus's acquisition of this knowledge. Oedipus presents a wanting-to-know of this supposed knowledge in the Other. What this knowledge leads to is a death-like crisis. It is ironic that the desire to know the truth eventually eclipses desire and produces an existence that can only inhabit itself as an experience of pain. But this existence is not sustainable, hence Oedipus's ultimate vanishing act.

Harold Bloom states that Oedipus's "necessity of ignorance, lest the reality-principle destroy us," is "the true force of Freud's Oedipus Complex."²⁷ Like Antigone, there is something akin to a desire for destruction in Oedipus that pushes him onward. The tragedy of desire culminates in a movement of desire towards the death of the *being-there*. As stated above, Oedipus does not simply die but vanishes: "He dies from a true death in which he erases his own being."²⁸ For Lacan, "Oedipus shows us where the inner limit zone in the relationship to desire ends."²⁹ This zone is a point "beyond death," as *Oedipus at Colonus* demonstrates. For the Lacan of *Seminar II*, if Oedipus has a psychoanalysis, it only ends with *Oedipus at Colonus* when he fulfils the *parole* of the Other's prophecy and evaporates from the surface of the earth.³⁰ In Shoshana Felman's words, "he [Oedipus] *assumes the Other*—in himself, he assumes his own *relation* to the discourse of the Other."³¹ Once he comes to know the truth, his race is run and he must disappear into the zone of existence without desire where pain prevails.

After he comes to know the truth in *Oedipus Rex*, we see the king repeatedly wanting to exist in the liminal zone between life and death:

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²⁷ Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase, 2007), 4.

²⁸ Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 306.

²⁹ Lacan, 306.

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York, W. W. Norton, 1988), 230.

³¹ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 133.

Drive me out of the land at once, far from sight,
where I can never hear a human voice.³²

Once again, we see the focus on seeing and hearing here. The desire to be in the zone of true death is complementary to the desire to be hated by the gods: “What man alive more miserable than I? / More hated by the gods?” and “Surely the gods hate me so much—.”³³ To conclude this thread, let me say that Oedipus presents a tragedy of desire insofar as human desire is distanced by the Other’s desire and in that lies its tragic dimension.

Following the footsteps of the Other—the Oedipal duo of the mother and the father, an examination of the role of the paternal and maternal functions becomes a psychoanalytic curiosity around Sophocles’ play. The paternal law prohibits incest and hence it takes an act of patricide to enable it. Let us recall the central lesson Lacan extracts from the Oedipus complex as a structure in *Seminar VI*: the Oedipus complex identifies desire with the locus of the law.³⁴ This point is made more resoundingly in *Seminar X*:

The Oedipus myth means nothing but the following—at the origin, desire, as the father’s desire, and the law are one and the same thing. The relationship between the law and desire is so tight that only the function of the law traces out the path of desire.³⁵

The question of desire in the field of the law introduces the law of the father. Pietro Pucci argues that the father has multiple functions in *Oedipus Rex* and they are represented by the voices of the gods. For him, there are four such paternal figures:

In *Oedipus Tyrannus* four figures of the father emerge each with its own ideal and imaginary foundations. We recognize (1) the king as a Father of his citizens, (2) Polybus as the provider of cares and affection for the son, (3) Laius as the biolog-

³² Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 245.

³³ Sophocles, 206, 250.

³⁴ Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation*, 341.

³⁵ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 106.

ical father, and (4) Apollo—and Teiresias, his priest—as a divine Father insofar as he gives an irrevocable *telos* to the son.³⁶

Pucci finds a logocentric aspect to each of these figures. The paternal function thus symbolizes law, authority, meaning—all properties of *logos* or knowledge. But is this *logos* stable? I would argue that there is a substitutability to the father-function in *Oedipus Rex*. To understand this, we have to go into certain modulations that this paternal signifier undergoes in the play.

The chorus is a site for observing the paternal signifier's changing trajectory. For example, it calls divine laws fatherless, declares that the "Olympian sky" is "their only father," and continues:

Nothing mortal, no man gave them birth,
their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:
within them lives a mighty god, the god does not
grow old.³⁷

This passage posits a god as the father who does not have a father. In other words, he is the self-created creator—a fatherless father. Father is thus a signifier that retroactively constructs a myth of origins. It is in this sense that it acquires legal authority and power. Unlike a god as the divine father without a father, all other fathers are replaceable in the play. Father, in a Lacanian sense, becomes more of a function than a figure. The function can change figures; it can go from one figure to another. For a substantial period of time, Oedipus thinks that Polybus is his father and when the messenger brings the news from Corinth that Polybus is no more, both Jocasta and Oedipus breathe a sigh of relief to note that Polybus was not killed by Oedipus. After this, the father function moves from the figure of Polybus to that of Laius.

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When the messenger tells Oedipus that Polybus was not his father, he reacts: "My father— / how can my father equal nothing? You're nothing to me!" This co-relation of the father with "nothing" by way of negation is reiterated: "Neither was he, no more your father than I am," and again "No more than I am. He

³⁶ Pietro Pucci, "What is a Father?," in Bloom, *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*, 144.

³⁷ Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 209.

and I are equals.”³⁸ To go back to Pucci’s central question: What is a father? The father has a Symbolic dimension insofar as his name is a signifier that centralizes the social discourse of patriarchy. In the above quotes, the important point is that the father is defined via negation, i.e. by saying what it is not. For example, the father is nothing or the father is not what the messenger is to Oedipus. The paternal signifier is indeed about to be trashed into nothingness by Oedipus’s patricidal act. The metonymic substitutability of the paternal signifier signals this impending annulment.

At another point, the chorus asks Oedipus who his father is:

Oedipus—
 son, dear child, who bore you?
 Who of the nymphs who seem to live forever
 mated with Pan, the mountain-striding Father?³⁹

Pan as the “mountain-striding father” echoes the references to the Delphic rock and its inanimate mouth that articulates the curse on Oedipus. The incest makes sure that the father and the son become replaceable signifiers:

One and the same wide harbor served you
 son and father both
 son and father came to rest in the same bridal chamber.⁴⁰

As Oedipus becomes the father of his own mother’s children, the son shares the same woman as his father. This is another level of metonymic substitution in a chain of paternal signifiers. When Oedipus punishes himself towards the end of the play, he gives the paternal responsibility to Creon: “Oh Creon, you are the only father they have now . . .”⁴¹ So, the paternal nomination once again shifts from Oedipus to Creon as an inhabitable function. Moreover, as mentioned above, thanks to the patricide, Oedipus the father also becomes brother to his children, thereby marking another complexity in the paternal position.

³⁸ Sophocles, 218.

³⁹ Sophocles, 224.

⁴⁰ Sophocles, 234.

⁴¹ Sophocles, 249.

This unstable father function is a crucial psychoanalytic insight to be gained from Sophocles' drama.

There is a similar instability in the maternal function as it moves from the figure of Merope to Jocasta. The metonymy is between the mother and the wife—two signifiers that generally do not meet on a plane of substitution due to the prohibition of incest. In this case, they become radically substitutable by one another. When Oedipus takes Merope to be his mother, he is still scared about crossing the line, as fated in the prophecy: “But mother lives, so for all your reassurances / I live in fear, I must.”⁴² The chorus calls Mount Cithaeron Oedipus's “mountain-mother.”⁴³ Calling the birthplace a maternal signifier further opens up the metaphorical field of language in which the mother, like the father, is a circulating signifier. At another point in the play, the mother is also likened metaphorically to the earth.⁴⁴ When the chorus wonders who Oedipus's mother could be, we have another substitutive speculation, this time, divine:

Who was your mother? who, some bride of Apollo
the god who loves the pastures spreading toward the sun?
Or was it Hermes, king of the lightning ridges?
Or Dionysus, lord of frenzy, lord of the barren peaks—
did he seize you in his hands, dearest of all his lucky finds?—⁴⁵

Let me mark the drift in this speech. From speculating if Oedipus has a divine mother, the chorus swiftly shifts back to the myriad of paternal signifiers here. This not only re-emphasizes my previous point about the metonymy of the father in the signifying chain of language, but also shows the patriarchal inflection of this language. The choric discourse abides by the law of the father and reduces the mother to nothing but a relational identity—“the bride of” either Apollo or Hermes or even Dionysus. This connects the metonymy of the maternal signifier with the metonymy of the patronymic function in the discourse.

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⁴² Sophocles, 215.

⁴³ Sophocles, 224.

⁴⁴ Sophocles, 236.

⁴⁵ Sophocles, 224.

When Oedipus articulates his tragic desire for self-punishment, his desire to go back to his maternal abode marks a Freudo-Lacanian signature of the death drive as the wish to return to one's mother's womb:

As for me,
 never condemn the city of my fathers
 to house my body, not while I'm alive, no,
 let me live on the mountains, on Cithaeron,
 my favorite haunt, I have made it famous.
 Mother and father marked out that rock
 to be my everlasting tomb—buried alive.
 Let me die there, where they tried to kill me.⁴⁶

It is interesting to note how Oedipus identifies the city with his fathers (the multiplicity of father functions, implied by the plural), while Cithaeron is first connected with the mother, and only thereafter the father. Cithaeron is a strange womb-tomb for Oedipus. That is the place where he was found. It is his birth-place and yet it is the same place where his biological father tried to kill him by abandoning him there. It is where Oedipus wants to go back to in his guilt and die. The mother's desire is operative here as the subject's wish to die and be united with the mother. Jocasta, Oedipus's biological mother, is dead by this point. The desire of the mother, controlling Oedipus's final death-wish in a patronymic discourse in which the paternal signifier is forever slipping away, is symbolic of *Oedipus Rex* as a tragedy of alienated desire.

To conclude, in this article we have seen that there exists a constitutive mythical relation between Sophoclean drama and psychoanalysis. I have navigated through Freud's use of *Oedipus Rex* to evoke the moral complexity, the dynamic of ignorance and knowledge, and the interiorization of destiny as an unconscious subjective trajectory. Building on Lacan, I have opened up the psychoanalytic dimension of reading Sophocles' play as a tragedy of desire that highlights affects of guilt, shame, and self-reproach by mapping them onto the body through invocatory and scopic drives. I have used the Lacanian lens further to draw attention to the alienation of human desire in the anchoring force of the Other's desire. I have grounded desire's alterity in the choric discourse as well as

⁴⁶ Sophocles, 246.

the Delphic oracles and demonstrated how the paternal and maternal signifiers in the play's discourse indicate instability through substitutions in the complicated metonymy of desire. Oedipus's desire to know finally produces existence without desire as an experience of suffering—and therein lies the tragedy of desire. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* offers psychoanalysis one of its constitutive myths and, in turn, psychoanalysis allows us to read the central question of desire in tragic drama, in all its knots and impasses.

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