

Bringing the Plague I: Oedipus

Paul Kellett van Leer (June 2025)

Reference: Kellett van Leer, P. (2025). Bringing The Plague I: Oedipus.
Retrieved from <http://www.psychamerica.me/resources>

*Para Gorgoo
mi pequeño pirata
que puso el viento en mis velas*

Abstract

Born of a return to Freud's Oedipus Complex, this paper adopts the metaphor of a plague to refound the cause of that which awaits interpretation in psychoanalysis.

As a result of a review of the Oedipal myth, the author proposes that Freud's interpretation is deployed defensively, as is the manifest content of a dream, or a screen memory, and that a more fruitful interpretation follows from an inversion first suggested by Fliess and later elaborated by Lacan. The Derridean *ou pas* is consequently adopted as the metaphorical *princeps* of psychoanalysis, that which ties the (k)not of the subject, thus (re)presenting that which is to be interpreted.

*And I saw the mother of Oedipus, beautiful Epikastê.
What a monstrous thing she did, in all innocence
she married her own son ...
Who'd killed his father, then he married her!
But the gods soon made it known to all mankind.
So he in growing pain ruled on in beloved Thebes,
Lording Cadmus' people – thanks to the god's brutal plan –
While she went down to Death who guards the massive gates.
Lashing a noose to a steep rafter, there she hanged aloft.
Strangling in all her anguish, leaving her son to
bear the world of horror a mother's Furies bring to life.*

Homer, The Odyssey, Book 11: *The Kingdom of the Dead* (trans; Fagles, 1996: 258)

Introduction

"They do not know that we are bringing them the plague" Freud is reported to have quipped to Jung on their boat to the new world in 1909. While we understand that Freud was referring to the good news of psychoanalysis, a plague of which heathen America had heard but a distant rumble, do we also not hear echoes of Homer's old-world myth?

After all, while Oedipus' conjuring of the master signifier solved the riddle of the Sphinx, thereby delivering the believers of Thebes from Hera's plague – just as Freud (1895) once hoped that the cypher of psychoanalysis might salve the curse of neurotic misery – Oedipus' arrival in Thebes also heralds the ongoing "brutality of the gods", plaguing all "to bear the world of horror a mother's Furies bring to life".

Perhaps Freud was indeed referring to this latter aspect of his favorite tragedy in his wry aside to Jung, if only unconsciously so. After all, Freud had been convinced from the

opening of his self-analysis that a *certain* moral to be drawn from Oedipus lies at and in the heart of every man, and by the time he set sail, Freud had anchored Oedipus at the heart of psychoanalysis.

As he declared to Fleiss on October 15th, 1897, "I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case ... and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood ... If that is the case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible ... the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. ... His conscience is his unconscious feeling of guilt" (Freud, 1954: 223-4).

Freud's reading of the Sophoclean dramatization of Oedipus represents the first of his analyses of historical texts; there are three in total, including the diary of President Schrieber, of course, but also that of Leonardo da Vinci, a selection of whose diary entries Freud interpreted in 1910 as belieing Leonardo's homosexuality, the very converse of the proof he had forged for himself and every man via his "dream of Oedipus" (Lacan, S17).

Freud bases his interpretation of Leonardo on a memory-as-diary-entry in which the tail of a nibbio alighting upon Leonardo's crib strikes him upon the mouth. Freud draws upon Maria Herzfeld's 1904 translation of "nibbio" as "geier", "vulture", and goes on to refer to the Egyptian hieroglyph characterizing the deity Nekhbet as a vulture-headed maternal deity embodying breasts as well as an erect penis. The penis of the Nekhbet, Freud argues, is surely represented by the vulture's tail, therefore Leonardo's account represents a screen memory for an infantile fantasy regarding the father, or at least a member of the paternity that Leonardo must have come to repress. *Ergo, homosexual ego sum!*

Alas, nowhere could Freud find Leonardo revealing an acquaintance – let alone an association – with Egyptian hieroglyphs, nor indeed with any form of trans. Furthermore, the Nekhbet is a symbol of *motherhood*, occasionally depicted as the nursemaid of the pharaoh.

None of this deterred the self-characterized archaeologist Freud, who was finally forced to abandon his interpretation only when Maria retracted her translation of 'nibbio'. A nibbio is, rather, a small hawk-like bird of prey, common in the Vinci area. Maria's correction pulled the rug from under Freud's association with the Nekhbet, and later he confesses to Lou Andreas-Salomé in his letter of May 9th, 1928, almost a decade later, that while he had regarded his Leonardo essay as "the only beautiful thing I have ever written ... its beauty is now spoiled".

To what beauty might Freud refer? One possibility is that Freud saw his interpretation of Leonardo as counterbalancing his earlier interpretation of Oedipus, thus aspirationally

functioning as a 'semlance', confirming the complex that has come to anchor the subsequent development of psychoanalysis.

Freud never doubts his dream of Oedipus, cementing it in his debut solo magnum opus, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1904) with little further elaboration and so distilling the feverish revelation of his self-analysis into the cypher that se/cures his project.

The Complex thus comes to form as a singularity - a hole - around which the whole of psychoanalysis will come to orbit, exerting a gravity that henceforth determines the trajectory of our entire system. From this conviction, one in which "repression always proceeds from the female side and is directed against the male" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973:283) an event horizon forms, beyond which psychoanalysis can no longer see, just as Oedipus prophetically blinds himself with Epikastê's brooch.

Henceforth, Freud will come to insist upon a "first formulation ... [of] a myth transcending the history and variations of the individual life-experience" (*ibid*), one that elides a compatible account of 'what a woman wants', representing the first manifestation of the rock (bottom) Freud would come to articulate as a castration beyond which he finally admits his psychoanalysis cannot venture (Freud, 1937).

I am not saying that the Oedipus Complex is of no use ... It is of no use for psychoanalysts (Lacan S17: 112-113)

By Seminar 17 Lacan admits that he is "improvising" regarding the question of Oedipus, though he also acknowledges that he is "telling ... [us] ... simple things", wishing "that someone should make some progress, make a trace" with regard to this conundrum of uselessness. Let us take up this wish-as-invitation. Proceeding from Lacan's following comment, "What is a myth? Don't all answer at once. It's a manifest content", let's first interrogate what presents as *latent* in the dream of Oedipus.

The Myth of Oedipus

After the death of Labdacus, the Cadmean King of Thebes, his son and too-young heir, Laius is raised by a regent (Lycus) in accordance with the convention that the royal line continue. A couple of pretenders to the throne, Amphion and Zethus kill Lycus in an attempt to depose Laius, and so the good citizens of Thebes smuggle Laius out of the city and take him to neighboring Pisa, where the King, Pelops, graciously adopts him.

Pelops already has a son, Chrysippus, and as he and Laius grow up together, they also grow together, falling in love and eventually eloping to Thebes. Laius and Chrysippus are of similar age, widely observed as inseparable, riding chariots together, that sort of thing. Well, boys will be boys after all, especially in ancient Greece where, as Oscar Wilde famously noted at his trial for indecency in 1895 (April 3rd) – the very year Freud and

Breuer publish their hysterical adventures – “pleasure is the only thing one should live for. ... I am, on that point, entirely on the side of the ancients – the Greeks.”

Lacan would have been proud! I nominate Oscar as an honorary Lacanian; after all, do we not find here the very root of what one of his disciples, Sergio Benvenuto (2020: 65) has characterized as Lacan’s Dionysian bent?

Pelops, however, sees things rather differently (which may well raise an analytic eyebrow). He accuses Laius of abducting and raping his son, and demands that the goddess, Hera, punish Laius. Pelops’ appeal thus presents as a perversion of the law, as is so fated Oedipus’ accusation of first Creon, then Tiresias-as-assassin of Laius, and indeed as was Oscar’s trial.

Hera

What does Hera make of Pelops’ *cri de coeur*? Hera; goddess of love and marriage, sister and wife of Zeus, and thus Queen and powerful matriarch of the divine Olympian family. Zeus seduces and rapes his sister Hera, as he frequently does with his mortal belles, by disguising himself as an animal. In Hera’s case, Zeus disguises himself as a magpie, the thief of the avian kingdom, and one with a famously large tail, one that Freud might have delighted in as a fix for his not-so-beautiful fantasy of Leonardo.

Hera is the mother of Hephaistos (the god of metallurgy), and Ares, the god of war, something of which Freud (1915) echoes in his Tiresian assertion that where there’s love there’s hate, something we have seen demonstrated in the Chrysippus-Laius vs Pelops schema. Our divine mother further illustrates this vicious circle, if not tangle, since she conceives Hephaistos out of wedlock as retaliation for Zeus’ similarly out of wedlock siring of Athena. Hera then casts her in-fans from Mount Olympus because she finds him ugly, and Hephaistos henceforth holds a grudge against his (m)Other, imprisoning her on a throne from which she can only be released by promising him the hand of Aphrodite (as a route, presumably, to another Imaginary organ [her heart] if not indeed that which remains [the Real of her body, including more specific organs]). In the meantime, however, Hephaistos has taken a lover, Peleus, who famously sired Achilles who in turn, like Oedipus, is fated to be led astray.

A complex complex, perhaps. Regarding our interrogation, however, we might simply note primarily that while Hera is the totemic goddess of love etc., her nature is, like Pelops, full of love and attendant hate, envious and vengeful; she is consumed with her consumated’s lovers, and her story orbits a sexually-charged murderous entanglement with her queer son.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Hera identifies with and thus obliges Pelops’ entreaty, and demands the subjects of Thebes hand over Laius, upon whom she may well project her complex envy with all the fury of a woman scorned.

It should also come as no surprise that the Thebans are unbothered by Laius's relationship with Chrysippus. They have their phallus back and Laius has taken a queen, Epikastê, in obedience to the royal requirement to sire a son. The Thebans' thus decline Hera's demand, and, enraged she sends the Sphynx to lay siege to the city. If visitors to Thebes cannot answer a riddle the Sphynx cribbed from the Eumenides, she eats them.

Let us take stock at this point. Our four agents of divine retribution are unequivocally depicted as wo-man, 'of-man'. Like Hera, the Sphynx is wo-man, a monster depicted as having the face of a woman. Eumenides is the collective name for the Furies, the Greek goddesses of vengeance. And let's not forget Lady Justice, who was summoned to tame the Wilde.

As I said, in order to fulfill his duty as King, Laius marries Epikastê and sires a son *while drunk one night* (another detail that might raise an analytic eyebrow or two, and one to which I've no doubt Oscar would raise a toast).

Shortly after Oedipus' birth, Laius and Epikastê consult the Oracle at Delphi, as is custom, regarding Oedipus' fortune. The Delphic Oracle just happens to be a former Heralean high priestess named Pythea; that is, also wo-man. Here, Hera seizes upon an opportunity to exact revenge for, well, all manner of perceived slights and transferences to date. As the mouthpiece of the goddess of love, the oracle utters a prophetic perversion.

And the rest is his story; the story of Oedipus, a history that Sophocles dramatizes, and upon which Freud seizes, founding a project that is fated to founder.

A Complex Oedipus

It is from this assembled lot, then - Laius, deposed bisexual lover and anxious father; Pelops, father envious of gay lovers; Hera, vengeful Lady Justice (and mother envious of lovers of indeterminate sexual orientations); the Sphynx, Eumenides and Delphic oracle all Hera's fearful mouthpieces; and finally "beautiful" queen Epikastê and the orphaned rake Oedipus, "innocent", law-abiding mortals who are pressganged into functioning as playthings for the enjoyment of a divinely "brutal" matriarchy - it is from this wretched knot that Freud declares, "I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case ... and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood" (*op cit.*).

Surely an *example par excellence* of the kind of wild analysis on which Freud was later to base his dire warning; interpretation-as-projection in order to render 'intelligible' "the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible." (*op cit.*).

What are these "rational objections" to which Freud alludes? One month after writing to Fleiss about his "discovery", Freud complains that Fleiss has "said nothing about my interpretation of Oedipus Rex" (Freud, 1954: 229).

Yet Fleiss has indeed said something, enjoining Freud to consider a converse hypothesis, that it is the wo-man's desire regarding the child that is at stake in the Oedipal myth. And while Freud recalls that, "Last year you turned down a number of my ideas, with good reason", (*ibid.*) nonetheless he appears to have quite forgotten Fleiss' proposition.

At the same time that he is insisting upon his wild interpretation of his dream of Oedipus, Freud declares as significant the kind of forgetting he himself demonstrates yet never comes to acknowledge with regard to Fleiss. Surely a declaration that is not without a certain Oedipal blindness. Crystallized in his 1899 paper on Screen Memories, something that Bernfeld (1946) points out is based on Freud's self-analysis, and so is aligned with his interpretation of Oedipus as essentially autobiographical, Freud characterizes the forgetting of "something important" as "surprising" (SE 3: 303), going on to assert that, "The process which we see here at work – conflict, repression, substitution involving a compromise – returns in all psychoneurotic symptoms" (*ibid.* p. 308).

All men, Freud claims of Oedipus. *All* neurotic symptoms, he now asserts. Yet he appears to exempt himself regarding the latter prophecy.

Given his forgetting of Fleiss' intervention, Freud's outline of the mechanisms of neurotic symptom formation thus reveals something of that *against* which his interpretation-as-symptom is deployed to defend, *just as he had gone on to assert did Leonardo*.

"... the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself." (*op cit.*)

The myth may well seize upon that which already lies at/in the heart. In the light of the defense of inversion, an invariable sleight of hand in operation in all neurosis, Freud's seizing proves to be a lie.

What is this lie Freud's interpretation of Oedipus is deployed to elide? "Traces of a compulsion" ... A compulsion, all traces of which are destined to be forgotten. A compulsion embodied and exemplified by Oscar, by the Hephaistos-Peleus and Laius-Chrysippus romances? That which arouses a paternal envy (Pelops)? That which is cast out as ugly in the eyes of the (m)other (Hera), arousing the fury of wo-man scorned?

Surely homosexuality, the exemplar of Greek enjoyment, is the logical modernist answer to the riddles that follow from Freud's Oedipus, thus echoing the effects of what Layton (2002) has articulated as resulting from a heterosexist unconscious.

We appear to have reached an impasse, perhaps. An aporia that, from a post-modern perspective, conjures the Derridean "ou pas", an aphorism that may well "show a little path" (Lacan, S17: 113).

A Nom du Pere, et du fils, et de la ...

Lacan's return to Oedipus, as such as it has occurred by Seminar 17, resurrects the spirit of Fleiss' foreclosed challenge to Freud's interpretation. Lacan's translation of Freud's Complex explicitly recognizes that the category of neurotic homosexual object choices – *Les Noms* – represents a fundamentally normative response to the threat of castration equal to that proposed by Freud (that is, homosexuality as a *simplex* of heterosexual normativity). Since the queer movement has comprehensively critiqued this formation we need not consider this fallacy further.

Rather, it is in Lacan's reconceptualization of *castration*, and that to whom this threat is *directed*, that we find a transformative refounding of the Symbolic phallic function. Effecting an inversion in the axis of parental desire, as Fleiss had suggested, Lacan declares that the *Non du Pere* is aimed *not* at barring the in-fans desire for the mother, but the reverse:

The mother's role is the mother's desire. That's fundamental. The mother's desire is not something that is bearable just like that, something to which you are indifferent. It will always wreak havoc. A huge crocodile in whose jaws you are [trapped] – that's the mother. One never knows what might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap. That's the mother's desire. (Seminar 17: 130).

How might we represent this devouring Sphynxian threat? Well, here I'd like to refer to one of Freud's most famous and metaphors for the truth as revealed by the joke. Concluding his sermon on a final aphoristic note (if not one Aphrodite might have found chuckle-worthy), a priest utters what Freud would no doubt have coined a "beautiful" parapraxis:

For verily I say unto you; it is easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a camel to...

The assembled dearly beloved laugh, believing the joke to have been revealed.

But has it? Does this inversion not also speak?

The priest-turned-prophet triumphantly reiterates:

Than it is for a camel to.

A Nom du Pere, et du fils, et de la ...?

In the name of the father, of the son and of the ..?

et de la ..?

... et de la!

... and of *that*; a divine rage, a Eumenidean fury, the desire of the (m)Other!

Here is our Oedipal complex; the phallus, the in-fans, and La!

Lacan puts it thus: “It’s not just a matter of talking about prohibitions, but simply about a dominance of the wo[-]man as [(]m[(]other ... as a mother who says ... a mother who gives orders [who makes demands] and who thereby establishes the child’s dependence.” (S17: 78)

Ou Pas – the (k)not

Ironically – not least since Freud, from the start, models the Tiresian/unconscious insight to which the implications of this series of papers is oriented – Freud points directly at *that* in his Project of 1895(1950); Emma Eckstein! La! Emma’s *la, ou pas*, an enigmatic splinter under the skin (as Lacan’s disciple, Jean Laplanche, 1987, coins it), an inadmissible, unspeakable desire that returns only *nachträglichkeit*. We can also detect the gravitational waves of the *ou pas* in Freud’s (1901/5) encounter with Dora, a pull Freud’s revisionist apology acknowledges.

A *(k)not* that is exorcised from the neurotic structure yet insists as an embedded and embodied splinter, that which, as Freud shows us with illuminating blindness, is to be put out of mind yet returns as a ghost to haunt our civilized masquerade, an *infini/rien*, as Pascal wagered, the very definition of the Unconscious-as-singularity.

The (k)not thus stands as the singularity, an irreducible remainder of polymorphous perversity that comes to lie at the heart of all wo-man.

ΠΑΣ

Following in the footsteps of Freud’s Project we might use the Greek letters Pi, Alpha, Sigma to denote the *(k)not* as formula for this irreducible remainder, (Π); of the Other, ‘wo-man’ (Α); that always/already plagues the phenomenology of the infected subject (Σ). Ergo sum? *Ibi ubi!*

Pi originates from the Phoenician letter pē, meaning mouth. The source, that which speaks. Its lowercase case representation (π) denotes a rather famous mathematical function; *an endless irrational remainder* (calculated to 202 trillion decimal digits as of July 2024), one that (1) never repeats and (2) anchors countless essential functions.

Alpha, the first letter of the alphabet, ‘numero uno’; that which so many anxious men aspire also represents the source and instigator of a sequence, the circumscribed sequence of signs from which language flows; *wo-man*.

Sigma denotes (1) *the sum* as well as (2) *function of standard deviation* in mathematics, sum and deviation, both essential concepts.

The formula $\Pi A \Sigma$ thus articulates our interpretation of the Oedipus myth as *the* central psychoanalytic *princeps*:

Π , an infinite, non-repeating irrational divine source of the Drive that; A, speaks from the beginning via the (m)Other, constituting; Σ , the subject-as-sum, a (standard) deviation.

Further Thoughts

Lacan recognizes that Freud's Oedipus Complex is of no use in psychoanalysis. Laplanche (1987) says Freud went astray. We have seen here that Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth *led psychoanalysis astray*, as does the manifest content of a dream; that is, it strays to the extent that it represents a defense that belies that which is meant to be hidden.

As such, Oedipus presents a *latent* metaphor that, in the light of the interpretation outlined above, articulates the *ou pas*, the *not* of Oedipus as the *knot* that binds the subject.

The queries to which I have subject Freud's Oedipus Complex do not effect a *return* or a *restoration*, but rather a *complex queering* of our singular concept, and thus how we might conceive the subject of analysis and that which is to be interpreted. The validity of the concept for which Freud pressganged the myth of Oedipus remains to be interrogated. Lacan indicates an unwavering skepticism, if not wholesale rejection of the notion of developmental theory, though his articulation of the function of the symbolic in the formation of the structure of the subject bears an uncanny resemblance.

Over the course of the three following three papers, I will argue that formations of gender identification, sexual orientation, the sexual drive and object choice do not follow the wake of a guilty conscience as Freud seizes.

While this paper has focused on Oedipus as anchor of the *princeps* of the subject of psychoanalysis, the next paper reviews Laplanchean dynamics of the intergenerational transmission of the (k)not in line with Lacan's elaboration of the unconscious as "a perfectly articulated knowledge for which ... no subject is responsible" (S17: 77), a review that lays the foundations for a refounding of the Janus-like concepts of both transference and transmission.

The third paper will discuss the implications of this queering for several Freudian concepts that, Lacan asserts in Seminar Seventeen, Freud abandoned, concepts including

those of jouissance, the lost (or rather re-found) object, and the vexed question of sublimation.

The fourth and final paper will contemplate the construction of the analyst's intervention as potentially effecting a Teresian in(sight), an intervention as foil to the gods' brutal plan.

References

- Benvenuto, S. (2020). *Conversations with Lacan: Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan*. Routledge: London & New York.
- Bernfeld, S. (1946). *An Unknown Autobiographical Fragment by Freud*. *The American Imago*, 4(3): 3-18
- Freud, S. (1887 - 1902). *Letters to Fleiss*. Trans. Mosbacher, E. & Stachey, J. Basic Books (1954).
- Freud, S. (1895). *Studies in Hysteria*. SE 2
- Freud, S. (1899). *Screen Memories*. SE 3
- Freud, S. (1905). *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. SE 7
- Freud, S. (1910). *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*. SE 11
- Freud, S. (1915). *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*. SE 14
- Freud, S. (1937). *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*. SE 23
- Freud, S. (1950/1895). *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. SE 1
- Herzfeld, M. (1904). *Leonardo da Vinci, der Denker, Forscher und Poet*. E. Dierderichs Verlag
- Homer, trans. Fagles, R. (1996). *The Odyssey*. Penguin Classics.
- Lacan, J. (1969-70). *Seminar 17: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Grigg, R. (2007). W. W. Norton & Co. Inc.
- Laplanche, J. (1987). *New Foundations in Psychoanalysis*. Macey, D. (Trans.) Basil Blackwell
- Laplanche, J. & Pontalis, J. B. (1973). *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Nicholson-Smith, D. W. W. Norton & Co. Inc.
- Layton, L. (2002). *Cultural Hierarchies, Splitting, and the Heterosexist Unconscious*. In *Bringing the Plague: Toward a Postmodern Psychoanalysis* (195-223). Fairfield, S., Layton, L. & Stack, C. (Eds). Other Press, NY