



Thierry Gaillard

Oedipus Reborn

Ancient Traditions and Transgenerational Perspectives



Translated by John Paval
ÉCODITION

The masterpieces which have triumphed over time contain secret wisdom. In their work, the authors include timeless messages addressed to History and to all mankind. So it is with the plays which Sophocles devoted to Oedipus more than 2400 years ago, which are still performed today. Their enduring presence testifies to the learning they contain which is no less worthy of interest because it goes beyond reason, on the contrary.

A new form of analysis, called transgenerational, enables us to penetrate behind the scenes, backstage in Sophocles' theatre. The discovery of a transgenerational structure underpinning Sophocles' work changes everything. This discovery invites us to reconsider the entire story of Oedipus in a different light, thereby unveiling a formerly unsuspected meaning. Paradoxically, such a rereading of the celebrated myth merely restores its traditional meaning, one which is more in line with the wisdom of Antiquity. By bringing out the unseen aspects of his work, we come to understand that Sophocles shared with the Ancients a veritable science of the "transgenerational." Through his *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, he passes on this knowledge to use in the manner of the great tragedians, philosophers before their time, who played an important role as guides of the collective awareness of their time

Thierry Gaillard is a psychoanalyst who draws upon and brings together various therapeutic and psychoanalytic schools in order to ally contemporary practices with traditional knowledge. This approach could be described as neo-traditional.



Oedipus Reborn

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Foreword by the Author

This book presents a part of my research on the myth of Oedipus according to Sophocles, the results of which represent a considerable modification of the most common ideas about it. By bringing together references to traditional knowledge with the functioning of transgenerational phenomena, my analysis reveals various messages which Sophocles introduced into his work on Oedipus. Among these messages, the most important concern the process of the rebirth of Oedipus, a theme which is very present in all the ancient traditions, but which has been forgotten by our civilization. For more than two millennia this aspect of Sophocles' work has never truly been given the recognition which it deserves. It was only with the emergence of knowledge about transgenerational phenomena in contemporary therapy that we could reconnect with the profound meaning of the myth of Oedipus. Then, the traditional wisdom which is to be found there could finally confirm and clarify modern discoveries. Thus this new understanding of the myth of Oedipus functions like the key to the vault which enables us to bring together two worlds, the world of the ancient traditions and the world of today. The results of such a discovery are numerous and promising, because they shed light upon a world which has for too long been hidden in the shadows.

Between 2004 and 2005 I presented the first results of this research in three French essays entitled *Sacré Œdipe*, *L'introjection et le transgénérationnel* and *Œdipe père*. In the five years thereafter, my analysis took several steps forward. The role of what I designated the "sujet" or the "sujet en soi", in French, corresponding to the "self" or the "true self" in English, took on greater importance, until it really deserved to be placed at the heart of the analysis. In 1993 I had considered

that Oedipus' incest represented a present relationship with the world (highly esteemed in the "Dasein Analysis" of Binswanger), here and now, which serves as the point of origin for the emergence of the self. This return to the question of the self could be the end of a research cycle. So I set about to reorganize the first series of essays in an improved format, published by Ecodition, so as to take into account the recent developments in my research.

Oedipus Reborn (originally *La renaissance d'Œdipe*) initiates this new series of books, proposing a transgenerational rereading of the myth in keeping with ancient traditions. This study, addressed to a mixed audience, has been freed as much as possible from any and all theoretical or therapeutic considerations.

The most in depth theoretical exposition of transgenerational phenomena was reserved for a second essay: *L'intégration transgénérationnelle* (of which a simplified version, for a larger audience, was published under the title: *S'enraciner dans l'instant présent*, that has been translated as *Rooted in the Present*). In this book, the primary reference to the Oedipal theme allows me to analyze in greater detail the mechanisms of the transmission of and the emancipation from transgenerational legacies. The text refers to examples of therapeutic situations found in the specialized literature to bring together ancient wisdom and contemporary knowledge.

The goal of my third essay, *L'autre Œdipe*, is twofold. First, it is about recognizing the meaning of the contributions which Sophocles personally added to the myth of Oedipus. Second, I thought it was important to explore in detail the place of this new understanding of the myth with respect to the structure of Freudian psychology and to view each interpretation in its own context. By returning to the ancient meaning of the myth, the limits of our patriarchal civilization become

apparent, as well as the limits of the Freudian interpretation of the myth Oedipus.

Finally, with *Sophocle thérapeute*, I have tried to encompass Sophocles' historical context. His time was distinguished in history for the birth of Athenian democracy. A genius in the field of tragedy, in his writing Sophocles did not fail to address questions relating to the passage from a traditional and religious culture to a more rational and philosophical culture which took place during this crucial period in history. While traditional culture was still highly aware of transmissions within families across several generations, the development of a new civilization would distance us from the wisdom of the Ancients. It is important to return to this period in history in order to arrive at a better understanding of the reasons why the ancestral science of transgenerational transmission was forgotten.

The discovery of transgenerational knowledge in Oedipus' plays thus restores the role of Sophocles and other authors of tragedies of his time, guiding the collective consciousness, mediating between the visible and invisible world. Four centuries before the Christian era the tragedians of Athens fulfilled an essential function for the community, synthesizing religion, art, knowledge and transmissions. Sophocles' message remains as relevant today as it was in his day. Faced with questions about what we are confronted with in life, the knowledge of Sophocles can provide answers full of wisdom if we understand their symbolic dimension. In his plays Sophocles incorporates knowledge about the causes of many current issues: infertile couples; antagonism between believers and atheists; limits of rational thinking ; sadistic abuse and the exploitation of written laws; the culture of a false self; the remoteness of the unwritten laws of life, the relationship with the nature (ecology), with the other

(humanization), about sexual differences, about self-knowledge and the consequences of loss of love for truth itself, *Aléthèia* (in Greek).

Even if it was centered on the Oedipal theme, the proposed approach in this series of essays is meant to be an invitation to a dialog with the word and with others about another level of meaning (symbolic and largely unconscious) than the one to which we are accustomed.

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I am deeply grateful to all my friends and acquaintances, close or distant, who have shown their support and interest in my work. I am also grateful to my translator, John Paval, for his talent and his editorial contributions to this second edition of *Oedipus Reborn*.

Thierry Gaillard, December 2013.

Preface

Summary of *Oedipus Rex*

One day, during Oedipus' reign as king of Thebes, his subjects gathered outside the palace to ask for his help. An epidemic of the plague was decimating the kingdom and rendering the crops, the livestock and the men and women of the city infertile. Oedipus replied that he too was troubled by these circumstances and that he was determined to cure his kingdom. He had already sent Creon, the brother of his wife Jocasta, to consult the oracle about the problem.

Upon his return, Creon repeats what the oracle told him: the plague was due to the unsolved murder of the former king of Thebes, Laios. So Oedipus commits to bringing to light the whole truth about this event. He decides to conduct an investigation to find and punish the guilty party. Then he summons Tiresias, the blind seer who, nonetheless, possesses the faculty of clairvoyance. At first, the seer refuses to tell Oedipus what he knows, on the grounds that it could provoke another tragedy. Angered, Oedipus threatens Tiresias and forces him to speak. Against his will, Tiresias gives in and reveals that Oedipus himself is the guilty man for whom he is searching. He explains that the guilty party is both the brother and the father of his own children, the son and the husband of the woman who brought him into the world...

Oedipus is far from being able to take in such a revelation, and instead suspects that Tiresias and Creon are conspiring to take his throne away. Jocasta tries to calm the rising conflict by minimizing the words of Tiresias: "No one is capable of correctly interpreting the oracles without the risk of making a

mistake." The proof, she adds, is the prophecy which announced that Laios would die at the hands of his own son, whereas in fact Laios was killed by highwaymen at the crossing of the roads to Delphi and Daulie, according to the testimony of a servant who escaped.

But Jocasta's arguments fail to calm Oedipus. He remembers an old story that circulated when a drunken man at a festival declared that Oedipus was a foundling. This announcement could not fail to surprise Oedipus, who had always been considered and treated as the son of Polybius and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth. And although they themselves denied the allegations, Oedipus was so anguished, so haunted by nightmares, that he went to consult the oracle. Instead of replying, the oracle predicted that he would marry his mother, bring a curse upon his descendants, and kill his own father. Overwhelmed, Oedipus headed off in the direction of Thebes instead of returning to Corinth and those whom he considered his parents, so as to avoid the fulfillment of this tragic destiny. Along the way a man started a fight with him about who had the right of way at a crossroads. In the ensuing struggle, Oedipus killed the aggressor and several members of his entourage, except for one servant who got away.

In order to bring this affair to light, Oedipus gives the order to find the escaped servant who saw the highwaymen that killed Laios. But just then a messenger from Corinth arrives and announces that king Polybius has died from illness and old age. This news comforts Oedipus, who believes that he has thereby escaped the prophecy: he did not kill his father - since he could not now kill his father. Then the messenger explains that this concern was misplaced inasmuch as Polybius was not the biological father of Oedipus. The messenger himself had received the infant Oedipus from the hands of a shepherd of the house of Laios whom he met on the slopes of

“Many things would become clear
if we only knew our genealogy.”
Gustave Flaubert

1

Introduction

The masterpieces which have triumphed over time contain secret wisdom. In their work, the authors include timeless messages addressed to History and to all mankind. So it is with the plays which Sophocles devoted to Oedipus more than 2400 years ago, which are still performed today. Their enduring presence testifies to the learning they contain which is no less worthy of interest because it goes beyond reason, on the contrary.

A new form of analysis, called transgenerational, enables us to penetrate behind the scenes, backstage in Sophocles' theatre. The discovery of a transgenerational structure underpinning Sophocles' work changes everything. This discovery invites us to reconsider the entire story of Oedipus in a different light, thereby unveiling a formerly unsuspected meaning. Paradoxically, such a rereading of the celebrated myth merely restores its traditional meaning, one which is more in line with the wisdom of Antiquity. By bringing out the unseen aspects of his work, we come to understand that

Sophocles shared with the Ancients a veritable science of the "transgenerational." Through his *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, he passes on this knowledge to use in the manner of the great tragedians, philosophers before their time, who played an important role as guides of the collective awareness of their time.

This essay presents a deeper study of Sophocles' version of the myth of Oedipus which teaches us about those phenomena which are known as *transgenerational*¹ and about the unwritten laws which govern them. As we will see, Sophocles' work illustrates the consequences of transgenerational alienations², as well as the processes which allow them to make their mark, in an exemplary fashion, explaining at one and the same time both the tragic destiny of Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* and his glorious end in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Given its thematic richness, the history of Oedipus has never failed to inspire creative minds thereafter. It has been with us since the 4th century B.C. and has been revived by the contributions of countless artists, authors, and philosophers. Sigmund Freud turned to it in 1897, when he recognized the value of a legend which, above and beyond the taboos attached to parricide and incest, deals with the limitations of rational thought and heightens our awareness of unconscious dimensions of the psyche.

Here it is worth noting the relationships which subsist between myths in general, the myth of Oedipus in particular,

1 In order to keep this discussion focused on the analysis of the myth of Oedipus, and to concentrate the text on this subject, certain definitions and concepts which characterize transgenerational analysis are to be found, instead, in the Glossary. In addition, certain therapeutic, theoretical and historical aspects of the subject are treated in greater depth in my other English book, *Rooted in the Present*, by Écodition.

2 Alienation : see definition in the Glossary.

and the unconscious strata of the psyche, as did the father of psychoanalysis. A classic example of this situation can be found in the correspondence between the myth of Oedipus and stories of love and intimacy: a woman complains about discovering that the man she has recently fallen in love with has a problem with alcoholism. Having already suffered through several relationships with alcoholics, she does not understand why this fate seems determined to pursue her. But then she explains that her father was an alcoholic...

The relations of men with their mother are just as present in the case of men who repeatedly fall in love with a certain kind of woman who, upon close inspection, exhibits common characteristics with their mother. As the saying goes, love is blind. The Oedipal experience (because that is what this is) forces us to open our eyes the better to see what the child could not perceive about his parents, who are often idealized, back in the past. Is it a curse to relive these situations or is it just the opposite, an opportunity to be free of them at last? It all depends on how we approach this phenomenon. By analyzing these situations from different points of view, it becomes possible to uncover in them new meanings which are more profound and to integrate this past which is not past. The analysis of these situations from diverse points of view uncovers new and deeper meanings, which serve to integrate this past which is not past. Otherwise, the unresolved issues of the parents which were inherited during childhood (i.e., faults, imperfections, problems) continue to weigh on the shoulders of the adult since they remain unconscious and thus timeless. The son too attached to his mother, or too alienated from her, has to play the role of his father instead of living his own life. By becoming the king of Thebes, Oedipus takes upon himself - without knowing it - the deficiencies of his father and finds himself in the bed of his mother Jocasta. The myth illustrates this alienation which leads Oedipus to be someone other than

himself. From Thebes to Colonus, Sophocles invites us to follow the history of the rebirth of Oedipus, a second birth, this time as his true self³.

The reader will understand that, in psychoanalytic parlance, the terms *incest* and *parricide* are not at all references to a truly incestuous relationship, and even less so to the commission of the crime of murder. These terms evoke a profound reality which is symbolic and generally invisible which relates to the absence or presence of a true self. Such language allows us to apprehend certain truths related to the life of the soul, to interpret situations whose meaning goes beyond the ability of reason alone. Transgenerational analysis shares this language with mythology in order to apprehend how certain unwritten laws in life function and what role they perform in the orientation of our destiny. The functioning of certain unwritten laws in life and the role they perform in the orientation of our destiny.

The Oedipus myth illustrates this unconscious determinism. It invites us to initiate ourselves into this symbolic science which belongs to the domain of mythology. Chaotic loves, unusual situations, symptoms, do not repeat themselves: they

³ [Translator's note] The original French text employs the word "sujet", literally "subject", to refer to this particular aspect of one's being, following French usage in the field of psychoanalysis. However, in English, the word "subject" appears sometimes to have a meaning which is quite different from what the author intends. Thus we have adopted the word "self" for "sujet" and "sujet en soi", sometimes modified as "true self" or "deep self" or "inner self". To quote the author: "This 'self' is different from any other forms of being that would result from external influences. It is the very core of ourselves, that which cannot be divided, possessing the inalterable quality of wholeness." In the context of the author's reliance upon classical Greek tradition, his use of the terms "sujet" and "self", seems to resonate with the pre-Aristotelian usage of the Greek word "psyche", which carried a distinctively spiritual meaning.

are and remain present, sometimes in the shadows, sometimes appearing in the light of day. But hidden away or denied, these experiences are an integral part of life. They remain present until the day they enter into the great book of a personal or collective history, close in memory, as a source of teaching rather than as a subject to be avoided. The un-integrated experiences are the source of questions which are recalled by our consciousness in order to invite us to a greater self-knowledge to grow as a true self. This is what the Oedipus myth evokes: an unconscious relationship to one's origins (that is to say, to one's parents and ancestors) which demands to be integrated and humanized. Although invisible to the eyes of reason alone, the reality which the myth makes clear is nonetheless very present. In the language of mythology, incest and parricide in a symbolic way betray the presence of transgenerational legacies, and thus the enslaving bonds which call out to be integrated and liberated. Fusion with the mother signifies the absence of a differentiated self, a return to the matriarchal⁴ regime which does not recognize the role of fathers in the process of reproduction. In other words, in that world, the father does not exist, as the myth represents with Oedipus' parricide. There is only the all powerful Mother (Mother Earth) and the children she brings to life.

Because it is unconscious and therefore not integrated, this matriarchal reality, always active behind the appearances of patriarchy, confers upon biological lineages their power of alienation. An other separate to one's self perpetually repeats the repressed Oedipal conflicts which have been transmitted through generations. Because it was repressed, the Oedipal

⁴ Indeed, the patriarchate has its origin in the realization that the sexual activities of men are responsible for the birth of children. I take up the implications of this transformation, and its relationship to the Oedipal theme, in my other works, in particular *Sophocle thérapeute, la guérison d'Edipe à Colone*.

problem remains present and continually develops an incestuous and parricidal position at the symbolic level.

The psyche manages these ties to its origins in a number of ways. All sorts of configurations come to the fore depending upon the circumstances and the characters, ranging from psychosis to perversion and from neurosis to hysteria. The most common "solution" consists of reinforcing the repression of one's Oedipus in the name of a so called reality principle, disenchanting to say the least. Freud showed in what way and under what circumstances a new entity, the *superego*, evolves in the mind which has repressed its Oedipus and which at the same time abandons the project of the development of the subject in one's self. The "normal" neurosis then sets in, leaving the person in a state of unconscious conflict, convinced by a certain representation of reality - inasmuch as it is shared by a majority of people - but condemned to keep sublimating or repressing those impulses which are the most unconscious, or which are kept a secret. Thus, the conditions are fulfilled for transmitting and delegating this problem to future generations who, in turn, will try to repress the problem following the example of their parents, thereby instituting an "Oedipus complex" in the form of a collective norm which is cultural and patriarchal.

In his version of the myth, however, Sophocles speaks to us about another possibility, inspired by the ancient traditions of initiation which correspond to today's models of personal or spiritual development. Sophocles proposes a solution to the repressions, denials, inversions (perversion) and other psychosomatic manifestations (hysteria) of Oedipal conflicts. It involves going through difficult times in order to be reborn