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The Voices of Jocasta

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The poem contained in the Lille Stesichorus papyrus presents several features that can be usefully compared with aspects of characterization and theme in the *Oedipus Tyrannos* of Sophocles. If we assume that an Athenian audience in the later 5th century knew the Stesichorean composition, the dramatic choices made by Sophocles take on new meaning. This paper is forthcoming in the proceedings of the International Conference on Ancient Drama held at Delphi, Greece (July 2002).

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For the past quarter-century, one of the most fruitful projects within literary study, around the globe, has been the recovery, re-reading, and renewed appreciation of the voices of women. Even the notoriously conservative tribe of Classical philologists has become highly conscious of the crucial rhetorical and psychological differences that can be refracted and stylized through the medium of gender. This new perspective has energized and improved our understanding of a number of ancient texts, whether epic, lyric, or dramatic.¹

Given this scholarly milieu, it is somewhat surprising that one ancient female voice has received a good deal less attention than it deserves. Ironically, it is a rather recent ancient voice, recovered from obscurity at exactly the time when feminist-inspired philology first began to make an impact. It occurs in an intriguing poetic text that is, at one and the same time, epic, lyric, and dramatic in structure and quality. Finally, as I shall argue in this short paper, it is a voice that must have had a significant (yet quite neglected) influence on one of the most famous dramatizations of the myths concerning the Delphi conference topic of Thebes—namely, the *Oedipus Tyrannos* of Sophocles.

At the turn of the 20th century an Egyptian mummy and its case were delivered to an institute at the University of Lille. It was not until 1974 that scholars discovered that the papyrus packing material, or *cartonnage*, of the mummy case was covered with ancient

¹ It is impossible to list even the most important books and articles. Extensive updated bibliography is available at the Diotima website: <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/>.

Greek script. Not only legal documents but also fragments of previously unknown Greek poetry were contained on these so-called Lille papyri.² Some of the poetry, although written down around 300 BC, clearly came from a much earlier period. Three larger scraps preserve four columns of a poem composed in triadic stanzas—like the choral odes of tragedy. Marginal signs indicate that we have about 120 lines of what must once have been a 700-line composition. Although neither title nor author are recorded on the remaining papyri pieces, the Doric poetic dialect, details of meter, and overall style make it almost certain that this was a dramatization of Theban myth by the well-known western-Greek poet Stesichorus.

Since Stesichorus lived in the last quarter of the 7th century BC and the first half of the 6th, this nameless poem is most likely 150 years earlier than the *Oedipus Tyrannos* of Sophocles. The discovery of the Lille Stesichorus lets us see all the more clearly how the later Sophoclean drama—according to Aristotle, the perfect tragedy-- has tyrannized critical appreciation of the Oedipus myth.³ This is apparent even on the basis of the scrappy lines of the earlier text. In the mythological life of Thebes, the story of Oedipus overshadows most other tales. And even within his story of parricide and incest, there are some figures who seem reduced to lesser figures, when compared with Oedipus himself. This is especially true because our consciousness is inevitably shaped by the profound dramatic treatments of Sophocles. At the same time, because we have so few fragments

² The first edition of the text is by C. Meillier and G. Ancher in *Cahiers de recherches de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille (CRIPEL)* 4 (1976) 287-360.

³ For Aristotle's treatment see *Poetics* 1452a21-53b7.

of any earlier versions of the story, no other figures are prominent enough to provide a counterbalance against the powerful pull of Oedipus himself.⁴

One such figure is that of the hero's mother and wife. It is perhaps iconic for our knowledge of this woman that the earliest allusion to her in mythic tradition, found in the eleventh book of the Homeric *Odyssey*, gives her a name that is different from the one she bears later. In Homer, she is "Epikasta" (*Od.*11.271), apparently a version of Jocasta, who is named for the first time in Sophocles. Furthermore, the brief Homeric version does not give her a voice—she is merely one of the renowned ladies of the past whom Odysseus sees in his journey to the underworld. Unlike some of the others, Epikasta does not speak to Odysseus to tell her own story. Instead, we learn from the narration of Odysseus that the gods revealed her incestuous marriage to her son *soon after it occurred*, and that Epikasta in consequence hanged herself (*Od.*11.274-78). Already in the second century AD, the antiquarian and travel writer Pausanias noted the essential difference between the Homeric and Sophoclean versions—namely, that Epikasta, having died so soon after her marriage, could not have produced the four children of Oedipus who were famous from other stories: the brothers Polyneikes and Eteokles, the sisters Ismene and Antigone (Paus. 9.5.1). Instead, relying on the epic poem *Oedipodea* and a painting (both now lost), Pausanias claimed that Oedipus stayed at Thebes, marrying

⁴The full dossier of ancient evidence on Oedipus is examined by L. Edmunds in "The Cults and the Legend of Oedipus," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 85 (1981) 221-238.

again, and that the second wife, Euryganeia, was the one who bore any children he may have had.⁵

All this is relevant because the Lille Stesichorus offers us the voice of the mother of the children of Oedipus. She is not named in the portion of the poem that we possess. Anne Pippin Burnett has argued convincingly, however, that the woman who speaks must be Jocasta, the mother of Oedipus, and not some second wife.⁶ What this unnamed woman says—whatever her position-- is what should compel our attention. As can be seen in what follows, the female speaker of Stesichorus' poem responds to a prophecy, taking a stance that will look oddly familiar:⁷

“Do not add to my woes the burden of worry,
or raise (*prophaine*)grim prospects for my future life.

For the immortal gods

Have not ordained for men on this holy earth

Unchanging enmity for all their days,

No more than changeless love;

They set men's outlook for the day.

As to your prophecies (*mantosunas*), I pray the lord Apollo

Will not fulfill them all;

⁵ For the few remaining fragments of the *Oedipodea*, see M. L. West, *Greek Epic Fragments*, Cambridge, Mass. (2003) 38-42. The painting of a grief-stricken Euryganeia viewing her warring sons, done by the 5th c. BC artist Onasias, presumably was still visible to any members of Sophocles' audience who travelled to Plataia, the Boiotian state friendly to Athens. Although Pausanias does not specify its location in the city, the temple of Athena in Plataia featured a wallpainting of the Seven Against Thebes expedition by the same painter (Paus. 9.4.2) completed at Athenian expense after the famous battle against Persia in the area (479 BC). The Euryganeia figure may well have been a part of this same depiction. On the significance of the evidence in Pausanias, see A. Gostoli, "Some Aspects of the Theban Myth in the Lille Stesichorus," *GRBS* 19 (1978) 23-27 esp. p.25 and n.8.

⁶ A.P. Burnett, "Jocasta in the West: The Lille Stesichorus," *ClAnt* 7 (1988) 107-54. See also the fuller arguments by E. Tsitsibakou-Vasalos, "The Homeric *aphar* in the Oedipus Myth and the identity of the Lille mother," *Glotta* 67 (1989) 60-88.

⁷ Translation here by M.L. West, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford 1993) 92-94.

But if I am destined to see
 My sons slain by each other, if the Fates
 Have so dispensed, then may
 Death's ghastly close be mine straightway
 Before I can ever behold
 The terrible moaning and tears of such woes,
 My sons killed in the house
 Or the city fallen."

When the first continuous lines of the papyrus begin, we are in the midst of a speech that replies to an earlier piece of character language, now lost in this fragment. This continuous section must be the mother's answer to Teiresias, who seems to have prophesied that it was fated for her sons and those of Oedipus to kill one another. In her response, the mother makes two wishes: that Apollo not fulfill the prophecies Teiresias has voiced (lines 209-10) and, if it is indeed fated, that she be allowed to die before she sees her children involved in fraternal slaughter.

Her two prayers juxtapose divine powers in an interesting way. Apollo may or may not carry out the *mantosunas*---technically, these are the human interpretations of the gods' will, what Tiresias says the god wants. But the Fates---the *Moirai*---seem above this, unquestionable and unswerving. If they have determined that her sons will die, then all that this Jocasta-figure can beg for is the grace of being spared that sight. It is because the mother views Apollo's word as variable that she implores Teiresias not to add to her sorrows and not to "raise grim prospects" for her future (as she does in lines 201-3). And for the same reason, she introduces a long gnomic statement: "the immortal gods did not

for all time alike establish over the holy earth strife unending for mortals, no nor friendship either, but the gods establish within one day a different mind.”⁸ The logic seems to be that because the gods change the minds of people, involving them now in strife, now in friendship, they themselves can be seen to change their minds. Such logic is a perfect expression of Greek anthropomorphising tendencies in the realm of religious thought. The Fates, however, are another story.

In the antistrophe of her speech, at lines 218-31, Jocasta (let us call her that for the sake of argument) surprisingly comes up with an alternative destiny. She even uses the language of powerful words and prophecy to describe her *own* language.⁹ At 219, most agree that the half-missing verb is the first-singular *prophaino* which means “I show forth or I declare prophetically.” Her solution would evade the death of her sons by having them cast lots while alive—*klaropalêdon* (223). The Moirai would still be in charge (line 224) but whichever of her sons got first pick by lot could choose to have the kingship and palace at Thebes or go into exile with all the wealth of Oedipus, both flocks and gold. Such a lottery, she asserts, could be a *lutêrion potmou*, “a release from the evil doom” that Teiresias mentioned, provided that Zeus puts off the day of destruction.¹⁰

So much for the readable portion of the Lille papyrus. The few legible remaining phrases seem to indicate some resistance—perhaps by one of the sons. Eventually we hear another prophecy of Teiresias, assuring Polyneikes that he will in exile find a royal

⁸ This is the more literal translation by D. Campbell, *Greek Lyric*. Vol. 3 (Loeb Classical Library) Cambridge, Mass. (1991) 137, reading *noon allon* for the end of line 207. Current consensus, however, reads *noon andrôn* “mind of men” (as in West translation above): see R. Tosi, “Note al nuovo Stesicoro,” *Museum Criticum* 13-14 (1978-79) 125-142, esp. p.130 and P. Judet de la Combe, “Abstraction et récit dans le poème Thébain de Stésichore, in L. Dubois ed. , *Poésie et Lyrique Antiques*, Villeneuve d'Ascq (1995) 11-27 esp. p.16

⁹ As noted by G. Massimilla, “Un sogno di Giocasta in Stesicoro?” *PP* 45 (1990)191-199 esp. p. 196, with further bibliography.

¹⁰ On the lottery motif and its relation to the Aeschylean version of the myth, see W.G. Thalmann *Hermes* 110 (1982) 385-91.

bride from Argos. As the fragment tails off, we see Polyneikes, the “man of many quarrels,” as he takes to the road (lines 291-302). Although this poem of Stesichorus seems to have focused on a later moment in the Theban myths, any reader of the *Oedipus Tyrannos*, a drama about earlier events in the saga, must immediately recognize some striking similarities. In both, the mother of Oedipus’ children takes a stand against the oracles of the god Apollo. In both, she has her own way of proceeding, based on a practical and rationalizing intelligence. In the Sophoclean drama, it is Jocasta who again and again doubts the veracity of Apollo’s prophets. To a distraught Oedipus, she asserts that mantic art does not belong to mortals (*OT*, lines 708-25):¹¹

“Listen to me, and take comfort in learning that nothing of mortal birth shares in the science of the seer. I will give you a pithy proof of this. An oracle came to Laius once--I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers--saying that he would suffer his doom at the hands of the child to be born to him and me. And Laius--as, at least, the rumor goes--was murdered one day by foreign robbers at a place where the three highways meet. And the child's birth was not yet three days past, when Laius pinned his ankles together and had him thrown, by others' hands, on a remote mountain. So, in that case, Apollo did not bring it to pass that the child should become the slayer of his father, or that Laius should suffer that which he feared, death at the hands of his child: thus the messages of the seer's art had mapped out the future. Pay them no regard. Whatever necessary event the god seeks, he himself will easily bring to light.

¹¹ All translations of the drama are from *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles*, ed. with introduction and notes by Sir Richard Jebb, Cambridge, 1887.

After all, Jocasta notes, the oracles foretelling how Oedipus would slay his father were proven wrong. At line 857 she reasserts her disregard of oracles, and at line 946, after Oedipus has heard that the man he considered his father has died at Corinth, Jocasta even appears to mock the oracles:

“Oracles of the gods, where do you stand now? It is this man that Oedipus long feared he would slay. And now this man has died in the course of destiny, not by his hand.”

She refers to the “prophesizings” of the gods, *theôn manteumata*, using a new-fangled noun formation that implies a sort of suspect sophistication.¹² We should notice that it is specifically Apollo, his seer and his oracles, upon which Jocasta casts her doubts. Of course, she will be the one who turns out wrong—something to be discussed later.

Not only is this main theme—the objection to oracles—shared by Sophocles and Stesichorus. The dramatic situation in which the earlier Jocasta appears also strongly resembles her role in the later poet’s plot. It has been conjectured, from the few words preceding her speech, that the sons of Oedipus are already quarrelling in the house. Thus, the Jocasta figure in Stesichorus enters the conversation in order to intervene and stop the fight or *neikos*. In Sophocles, as well, Jocasta makes her entrance in order to stop a quarrel (at line 634). But significantly, it is the dispute between her brother Creon and her husband Oedipus, who believes Creon is after his throne. Finally, while noting similarities, we should observe the close resemblances in poetic diction between the Stesichorean and Sophoclean compositions. The following lines from the *Oedipus*

¹² On use of *-ma* and *-sis* noun forms in Sophocles, see A. Long, *Language and thought in Sophocles: a study of abstract nouns and poetic technique* (London, 1968).

Tyrannos should interest us with reference to the Stesichorean lines they resemble. Both poems speak of *algos*—pain.¹³ In Stesichorus, Jocasta is first heard asking that pains (*algea*) not increase, just as in Sophocles she begs both men not to make “a nothing pain” (line 638, *to mêden algos*) into a major one. Both poems speak as well of revelation, using the verb *phaino*—as we have seen already used by both Jocasta and Teiresias in Stesichorus (lines 202, 219). We might compare *Oedipus Tyrannos* lines 724-5 where Jocasta says the god will reveal what he needs to reveal (*khreian...phanei*). Both poems describe their respective situations as one of expectations. Oedipus uses the word at 771 (*es tosouton elpidôn*, “to such a pitch of hopes”), Jocasta in the Stesichorus papyrus at line 203 (*elpidas bareias*, literally “heavy hopes”).¹⁴

Perhaps most strikingly, even the rhetorical habits of Jocasta in the *Oedipus* drama are anticipated in Stesichorus. I refer to her use of gnomic utterance, a generalizing statement, to dismiss the fears generated by oracles. Her statement “Whatever necessary event the god seeks, he himself will easily bring to light” closely resembles the strategy of the female speaker in Stesichorus, about the gods not always making quarrels for mankind. I am reminded also of her further dismissive utterance in Sophocles, when she asserts that “men often dream of sleeping with their mothers.”¹⁵

If we agree that plot, point of view and attitude, dramatic situation, poetic diction, and rhetoric all make the Jocasta of Sophocles recall the unnamed mother in Stesichorus, what is the gain for interpretation of the drama? Let me close by suggesting three things. I

¹³ Interestingly, the pains that Epikasta left for her husband/son Oedipus are emphasized by repetition of the word *algea* at *Od.* 11.275 and 279, and the same passage includes a phrase (“the gods made for men,” *theoi thesan anthrôpoisin*, line 274) almost exactly repeated in the Lille papyrus (line 205-6: *theoi thesan ... brotoisi*). On the close but innovative relationship between Stesichorean diction and formulae, and Homeric and Hesiodic examples, see A. Maingon, “Form and Content in the Lille Stesichorus,” *QUCC* 31 (1989) 31-56.

¹⁴ On the tragic coloration of this word as opposed to its use in Homer and Hesiod, see Maingon (above n.13) 43-44.

submit 1) that the audience for the *Oedipus Tyrannos* in 425 or 424 BC would have known the Stesichorean treatment of the Theban myth; 2) that they would therefore anticipate the result of Jocasta's appearance on stage in the theater of Dionysos given their long-range knowledge of this figure; and 3) that by her appearance the audience would automatically be reminded of the ultimate *end* of the Oedipus cycle—the expedition of the Seven, and the mutual slaughter-- even though Sophocles never goes into detail about this in the play. In a continuous poetic tradition such as Greece gloried in for a millennium, the merest hint or allusion brings a wealth of rich resonance.

For point #1, I rely first on the fact that ancient critics recognized that Aeschylus borrowed widely from Stesichorus, especially in his *Libation-Bearers*.¹⁶ The dream of Clytemnestra, employed by both poets in the stories of Agamemnon's death, may be a motif that Stesichorus also used in introducing Jocasta in the Lille poem, as has been suggested by Giulio Massimilla.¹⁷ We also know that even though he lived in western Greece a century earlier, songs of Stesichorus were sung in Athens in the 5th century BC.

¹⁸ Sophocles and his audience would almost certainly be aware of the details of Stesichorean poetry.

As to point #2—we might ask: why does Sophocles choose a particular bit of dramatic structure, making Jocasta intervene in the dispute with Creon? If it is because an audience is bound to recall the intervention scene in Stesichorus—and thus would be keyed into this important predecessor intertext—we still have to ask, what does an

¹⁵ On the significant use of *gnômai* by female figures in tragedy see R. Martin, "Gnomes in Poems: Wisdom Performance on the Athenian Stage," forthcoming in the *Festschrift for J. Papademetriou* (Athens).

¹⁶ For the evidence, see A. Garvie, *Aeschylus Choephoroi*, Oxford (1986) xvii-xxiv.

¹⁷ Massimilla (above n.9) esp. 192-95. For the dream sequence in the *Oresteia* of Stesichorus see fr.219 PMG, and Campbell (above n.8) 132-33.

¹⁸ See A. Barker, "La musica di Stesicoro," *QUCC* 67 (2001) 7-20 esp. n.2.

audience make of Jocasta's outburst against oracles? In Stesichorus, what is clear from the compressed narration is that it was Jocasta's own anti-oracular solution which ended up bringing on an even greater disaster. Instead of the purely domestic tragedy of her two sons slaying one another in a quarrel, a bigger political tragedy ensued when Polyneikes led an Argive army against Thebes. Therefore, if an Athenian audience recalls the Stesichorus intertext, it hears, as soon as Jocasta intervenes, the peal of doom. This woman's rationalizing theology, her advice to take all things easy, to make purely human solutions, is not to be trusted. She will cause the downfall of Thebes.

What this means further for our interpretation of Sophocles is that Jocasta's point of view is not a real alternative to that of Oedipus, as it is sometimes seen to be in modern criticism of the play.¹⁹ As tragic as his relentless self-investigation turns out, her refusal to press for truth is all the more destructive. Perhaps her motivation in Sophocles is clearer, however, to an audience that recalls Stesichorus. For they would then remember that a mother's love lay at the root of her attitude in the earlier poem. A mother's love—for her son Oedipus this time—may be at the heart of her dramatic action in Sophocles. At any rate, if she retains her Stesichorean meaning, and the Sophoclean audience recognizes her, Jocasta and her attitude are entirely compromised from the moment she appears.

Finally, on point #3: we might gain a new appreciation of the artistic technique and economical means of Sophocles by observing how a figure with a poetic past (Jocasta) evokes a mythic future. In Sophocles, even though her intervention is placed at an earlier mythic moment, in the quarrel with Creon, when she enters the scene, the audience

imagines the end of the whole affair. Tied as she is in Stesichorus to the lottery that eventually brought her sons to war, Jocasta is a pivotal figure in the entire saga. It is to the genius of Sophocles that we owe a dramatic voicing of her psychology, which itself becomes metonymic for the 5th century sophistic attitude. But it is to the genius of Stesichorus—and ultimately to that of the ancient and fertile Greek poetic tradition—that we owe the mood, the dramatic stance, the very grain of voice that comes from this doomed Theban queen.