

REVISITING THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX: THEATRICAL SPACE & THE SUBVERSION OF GENDER IN SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS REX* AND SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*

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Abstract

*My paper will focus on two plays, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in an effort to show how they structure and subvert traditional and stereotypical genderized roles of heteronormativity, even heterosexuality. By closely examining the main female characters in the two aforementioned plays, Jocasta and Lady Macbeth, I should like to show how they not only function as a complementary Other to the male psyche or Self, but also rewrite Judith Butler's notion of a heterosexual matrix on their own terms. For example, although traditionally – and pace Freud – the character of Oedipus has almost always been accorded primacy in Western philosophy and theory, hence marginalizing the position Jocasta occupies in the play as both mother and sexual partner, this paper attempts to show how she reclaims agency through the very real potency of her sexual power and dynamic relationship to her son-cum-lover-cum husband Oedipus. In a similar vein, it argues that Lady Macbeth does not simply subvert the typical gender-specific position of the oppressed female subject in patriarchal discourse by masculinizing herself, but also creates a potentially new space or symbolic realm with its own structuring processes, affording us with another reading where the female's role is wrested away from the maternal and notions of nurturance as a naturally feminine construct in phallic binarism and accorded its own agency. By drawing on theatrical conventions, as well as Amber Jacobs' formulation of a matriarchal law and a maternal structure with its own logic and structuring power that can also coexist within the Symbolic order, this paper seeks to examine how these female characters resist assimilation into the oppressive, dyadic binary of Lacanianphallogocentrism by opening up the interpretative field and laying claim to the possibilities of other discursive sites and symbolic structures within gender discourse analysis and on the stage.*

'The phobic object is [...] the hallucination of nothing: a metaphor that is the anaphora of nothing.' (Kristeva, 1982, p.42)

What Julia Kristeva describes in her book *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection* as a phobic hallucination is seen as being both a metaphor and an encapsulation of a drive which, according to Kristeva, 'has an anaphoric, indexing value, pointing to something else, to some non-thing, to something unknowable' (p.42). Paradoxically, it is precisely this reference to the phobic power of the 'non-thing' which serves to usher in not only its haunting power but also its ability to function as a 'something' which can be both symbolized and represented within a referential and spatial framework. This paper sets out to explore how this non-thing is a gendered entity which phantasmatically returns to haunt the male imaginary in various dramatizations of two canonical plays, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, within the performative space which is theatre. It is my contention that the woman's absence in theatrical performances, as a symptom of gynaecophobia, misogyny or more general fears of her ability to effeminize and emasculate male actors will, paradoxically, point to her very real spatial and performative presence both on and off the stage.

It is a well-known fact that there were no women actors in antiquity on the Ancient Greek stage and in Renaissance theatre. As Olga Taxidou notes in *Tragedy, modernity and mourning* (2004) there is a repudiation of the feminine on the Athenian stage, albeit a repudiation ‘that always returns to haunt [it]’ (p.174). The convention of employing male actors to play women is already well-established in the literature, although strong claims have been made for female members in the Greek audiences. Similarly, English Renaissance theatre also made use of this convention of employing male actors to perform female roles. Although Stephen Orgel (1996) tries to dispute this fact in his *Impersonations: the performance of gender in Shakespeare’s England*, he is willing to permit that there was a general tendency to exclude and even prohibit women from the stage. The reason he cites for this is an interesting one; women were prohibited on stage because ‘their chastity would thereby be compromised, which is understood to mean that they would become whores’ (p.49).

Thus the woman’s theatrical presence is seen as being dangerous precisely because it is inextricably linked to her sexuality, a sexuality which is envisioned in dark, negative terms. This is a similar move to the one Freud makes when he relegates women and their sexuality to some dark and obscure Minoan age of civilization. In order to keep the male subject’s phantasy of phallic power intact, the female body does not only disappear from the stage, but it also disturbingly acquires negative and sinister connotations. This is in keeping with Madelon Sprengnether’s view in *The spectral mother: Freud, feminism, and psychoanalysis* (1990) that for Freud the woman as mother is not only a procreative force associated ‘with the beginning of life but also with its end, so that the figure of the mother fuses with that of death.’ In order to avoid this, the male subject will strive for mastery over the female, maternal body, asserting his power in such a way as to kill, metaphorically and/or literally, the body of the mother which is associated ‘with the ultimate undoing of masculine striving and achievement’ (p. 5).

This struggle for mastery over the female body takes place within the actual and metaphoric space of the theatre. Yet the mother or female Other resists a literal effacement, and her presence is literalized even within her theatrical and performative absence. Incidentally, the ‘feminizing’ aspect of theatre itself can account for Stephen Orgel’s observations that several antitheatrical writers are afraid that theatre will lead to ‘a universal effeminization’ and arouse homoerotic feelings or sexual licentiousness in its spectators.ⁱ

Absence (such as spatial absence) does not necessarily imply non-presence. As Sprengnether notes, the mother ‘has a ghostlike function’ in Freud’s Oedipal theory, ‘creating a presence out of absence’ (Sprengnether, p.5). Thus although traditionally in Western philosophy and theory the character of Oedipus has almost always been accorded primacy, hence marginalizing the position Jocasta occupies in the play as both mother and sexual partner, I would argue that Jocasta reclaims agency through the very real potency of her sexual power and dynamic relationship to her son-cum-lover-cum husband Oedipus. She is ‘a figure of subversion, a threat to masculine identity as well as to patriarchal culture’ precisely because she refuses to go away but remains to ‘[haunt] the house of Oedipus’ (Sprengnether, p. 5).

As Oedipus points out, his ‘poor unhappy mother’ will return in the afterlife (l. 1373).ⁱⁱ Arguably, this is so because Oedipus has failed to kill the mother literally. And if we interpret the Sphinx as a metaphorical displacement of the maternal Other, as many critics have tended to do, then we can agree with Jean-Joseph Goux that Oedipus’ performative action of saying ‘man’ to the Sphinx as an answer to her riddle was ‘a heresy, an error, or an illusion’ since not only did it fail to kill the monstrous mother, but it also failed as ‘a radical gesture of anthropocentrism that suppresses her monstrosity and makes man the measure of all things’ (Goux, 1993, p.157).

In other words, Oedipus is punished precisely because he tried to foreclose the other in his answer to the Sphinx’s riddle. The m(other) resists erasure. She is needed in order to provide meaning to Oedipus’ history, in the same way as an audience is needed in order to provide interpretative

meaning to Oedipus' performative act of self-blinding. Man cannot act alone. Oedipus ignores this, and Freud follows suit. Indeed, many feminist and literary critics have pointed to the fundamental error Freud makes by foreclosing the other/mother and moving away 'from a Copernican, other-centred, exogenous model of traumatic seduction' towards 'a generalized Ptolemaic model of endogenous development' (Fletcher, 2007, p.26). Freud moves towards an endogenous model of selfhood by asserting that Oedipus – and by extension all of humanity – desires to kill the father and marry the mother. However, this model is fundamentally flawed from the outset since, as Rachel Bowlby(2007) astutely points out, Oedipus did not know his real parents. Thus he 'cannot have wished to do what he did, and the play gives no support to the idea of unconscious 'Oedipal' impulses in relation to parent figures' (p.174). This leads to the paradoxical situation where Oedipus becomes divorced from the Oedipus complex which Freud attributes to him.

What this means, in spatial and conceptual terms, is that Freud's schematic Oedipal phantasy and structure, which accords primacy to the male's unconscious wishes yet fails to take into consideration any references to matricide or even the very real and potent agency of the mother, can no longer serve as an adequate model of identity formation. This is precisely because this male-dominated and “phallogocentric mode of signifying the female sex,” as Judith Butler put it after [Luce] Irigaray, “perpetually reproduces phantasms of its own self-amplifying desire” (Schneider, 1997, p.96). Thus what is needed is the formulation of another structure to explain how Jocasta, and later on Lady Macbeth in turn, resists assimilation into the oppressive, dyadic binary of Freudian phallogocentrism. Amber Jacobs points to such a spatial model when she introduces a matriarchal law and a maternal structure with its own logic and structuring power that can co-exist within the Symbolic order.

Although, according to Irigaray, the woman is in an abandoned state of dereliction because she cannot express or have access to her own desire, Jacobs posits that by allowing the female subject to meet her structural desire it is possible to 'counter the domination of the patriarchal symbolic economy and provide her with a position within the social-symbolic world which would not reduce her to the state of dereliction that Irigaray has persistently diagnosed' (p.30). I would like to suggest that such a reading, which allows for the creation of a new space (through theatre) or symbolic realm with its own structuring processes, makes it possible for feminine characters such as Jocasta and also Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth to be accorded their own subjective agency by subverting traditional genderized roles of heteronormativity, even heterosexuality.ⁱⁱⁱ

The female's performative role is wrested away from the maternal and notions of nurturance, which are defined as naturally feminine constructs within the phallic binary system. As Mark Kanzer points out in his reading of *Oedipus Rex*, the blood which oozes out of Oedipus's eyes "like hail" is in reality the mirror image or double of the semen ejected in the act of coition, with Jocasta serving as an image of the phallic mother: 'in this fantasy of coitus and orgasm, the sexual act is depicted as a sadistic and castrating attack from the maternal phallus' (qtd. in Rudnytsky, 1987, p. 262). Although there is little, if any, evidence in the play to support Kanzer's reading of Jocasta as a phallic mother (indeed, she more readily represents the imago of good mother than anything else), he may not be completely wide of the mark in invoking 'the maternal phallus' as somehow implicated in Oedipus's act of self-blinding. Yet it is not Jocasta who takes centre stage 'in this fantasy of coitus and orgasm' (even though Oedipus uses her golden brooches to induce this 'orgasmic' hail of blood). If there is an 'attacking' maternal phallus, it is embodied in the figure of the Sphinx, 'the winged maiden' (l. 508) who, as Thomas Gould (1970) points out in his footnote to the line, with her deadly talons 'killed her victims in a sexual embrace.' While Oedipus destroys her by solving her riddle, that riddle is really the riddle of his own destiny: he will soon have three feet since his blinding shall cripple him such that he will need a 'third foot' or walking stick to support himself. Hence the Sphinx's riddle to Oedipus is an ominous warning, a prophecy which is effectually fulfilled at the moment of Oedipus's

blinding. If, in Freudian terms, blinding is the equivalent of castration, then it would logically follow that if the Sphinx blinds Oedipus she is the castrating mother in embodied form, significantly returning in metaphorical (if not visual) fashion to ‘attack’ him through Jocasta’s brooches (which can, perhaps, be read as displaced metaphors for the Sphinx’s talons) and thus carry out her prophecy.

Even if Jocasta is now dead, Oedipus finds himself yet again in a situation where the (m)otherfantasmatically returns to reassert her sexual desire. It is telling that this is done by evoking the Sphinx’s sexual and destructive powers. She is, after all, the phallic mother *par excellence*. This ambiguity is reminiscent of Lady Macbeth’s famous speech, in which the erotogenic zone of her breasts comes to stand as not only a liminal threshold of milky goodness and warmth, but also a violent one of deathly “gall”, a site of opposing tendencies: ‘Come to my woman’s breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers’ (I.V.46-7). She is the perfect image of that phallic mother if ever there was one, the mother who will give her breast willingly only to detract it. Like the Sphinx who suffocates her victims in a sexual embrace with her talons, Lady Macbeth will ‘love the babe that milks me’ before dashing its brains out (I.VII.55).^{iv}

I read this moment as an example of Lady Macbeth’s subversion of the typical gender-specific position of the oppressed female subject in patriarchal discourse. By masculinising herself and suppressing her maternal instincts, Lady Macbeth is able to open the space for a new symbolic and interpretative realm which can account for her own desires. As Stephanie Chamberlain (2005) points out in an interesting article entitled ‘Fantasizing infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the murdering mother in Early Modern England,’ the mother had an ambiguous gender status because she ‘could undermine patrilineal outcomes,’ a factor which ‘contributed to a generalized cultural anxiety about women’s roles in the transmission of patrilineage.’ Maternal agency engendered social and political anxieties because it could alter patrilineage ‘through marital infidelity, nursing, and infanticide’ (p.73). This led to fears and anxieties about the female body and wet-nursing in general, a dread ‘that breast milk could be tainted through bodily disease or ethnic impurity as well as economic deprivation’ (p.74).

Such contemporary anxieties and concerns are transferred on to the stage by Lady Macbeth. Additionally, very real anxieties about constructions of sexuality and gender are also brought to the forefront of the audience’s conscious perception. In material, aesthetic terms it must not be forgotten that men and young boy actors played female roles on the stage. Thus a young boy would have played the role of Lady Macbeth, a situation where a boy is playing a woman who is – at least in this instance – masculinizing herself in order to spur Macbeth to assert his ‘manly’ courage and determination and kill the king. Thus when Macbeth falters to commit the regicide, Lady Macbeth bursts out with, ‘When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And, to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man’ (I. VII. 49-51). Thus Lady Macbeth equates manliness with masculine prowess and violent, blood-thirsty murder; to kill the king is to become the man. That Lady Macbeth should show these qualities rather than her husband is heavily ironic, pointing to the blurring and fluidity of traditional and stereotypical genderized roles and conventions.

This fluidity is also typified in the very body of the actor playing Lady Macbeth, who must put on the clothing of a woman in order to enact a ‘masculinised’, performative role. This brings up all kinds of questions and fears about the tendency of cross-dressing and transvestism to emasculate the actor, together with anxieties relating specifically to homosexual desire. As Orgel points out, there were arguably very real fears that male spectators would be drawn to the male actors performing women’s roles. However, ‘English Renaissance culture [...] did not display a morbid fear of homoeroticism as such; the love of men for other men was both a fact of life and an essential element of the patronage system’ (pp.35-6). Indeed, it seems that the homosexual love displayed between men may have been normalized in the same way as the Ancient Greek concept of *philia*, a male conception of gender and sexuality that even serves to relegate heterosexual relations to a tainted, aberrant position.

The tension lies precisely in the fact that women could not be eliminated or effaced from this ideal, homosexual scenario. As Taxidou aptly points out, ‘the shift towards a more patriarchal-nuclear type of family model creates a crisis in systems of kinship, lineage and inheritance.’ Furthermore, such a ‘tension between the necessity of women as child bearers, and the power that that may (or may not) bring with it, and the predominantly male function of [homosexual and homosocial] desire create one of the most significant tensions within Athenian tragedy’ (p.173). Transposing such a formulated proposition onto the English Renaissance theatre, and particularly in relation to Shakespeare’s play, would certainly afford an interesting reading, not least because of the heavily inflected irony that dominates the play, considering which Macbeth continually misses and fails to see; the metaphorical message which Lady Macbeth is prophetically proclaiming to him in this maternal scene which involves the ‘dashing’ of the baby’s brains is precisely a literal rendition of the dashing of Macbeth’s hopes for a future son to carry on his patrilineage – a message Macbeth fails to pick up or consciously register. Lady Macbeth is barren; she will fail to perform her ‘maternal’ function and provide Macbeth with the son he so desperately craves for.

In such a way Lady Macbeth too, like Jocasta before her who metaphorically returned as the phallic mother, will open up the interpretative field and the possibility of another spatial and discursive site or symbolic structure within gender discourse analysis. In my view, both women reclaim their agency through the very real potency of their sexual power and overturn the typical, gender-specific position of the oppressed female subject assigned to them in patriarchal discourse. This subversion of gender will lead to madness, in Lady Macbeth’s case, and then death for both these female characters, but at least it allows them to die within their own terms, and having resisted the oppressive roles assigned to them within the male imaginary. Like Jocasta, it is Lady Macbeth who has the final word, and that final word, although it is not ‘woman’, is not ‘man’ either but death.

Notes

ⁱAs Stephen Orgelnotes in *Impersonations: the performance of gender in Shakespeare’s England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): ‘For such writers, the very fact that women are prohibited from the stage reveals the true etiology of theatre: what the spectator is “really” attracted to in plays is an undifferentiated sexuality, a sexuality that does not distinguish men from women and reduces men to women – the deepest fear in antitheatrical tracts [...] is the fear of a universal effeminization’ (p. 29). Such antitheatrical sentiments, of course, can be traced as far back as Plato.

ⁱⁱSophocles, *Oedipus The King*.Trans. by Thomas Gould.(New Jersey: Prentice-Hall(1970 [429-25?]), p. 154.

ⁱⁱⁱ What must be borne in mind is that such interpretations are modern and would have had little place in Sophocles’ tragic theatre. The notion of subjectivity was certainly unheard of in his time, yet it is my firm belief that if we are to appreciate the full richness of Sophocles’ tragedy, we should try to recuperate some of the performative magic of his play. In order to do this, we can only have recourse to theory. And, as Olga Taxidourightly points out, theatre is intimately linked to theory. ‘Tragedy is theatre and theatre is etymologically linked to *theoria* (*theorein*, to contemplate, to reflect)’(p. 34).

^{iv}*Macbeth*. Ed. by Bernard Groom. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1954 [c.1606]). All the textual quotations of the play were taken from this edition.

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