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Two Tragic Families

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Miasma is the curse that follows someone who performed a deed offensive to the gods. And as traditional families are linked across generations with intertwined responsibility and culpability, miasma can haunt a family for generations. The playing out of guilt and atonement, which to the Greeks meant a ritual appeasement or cleansing provides the material for many tragic dramas. Two family sagas dominate Greek Tragedy: the House of Tantalus (or House of Atreus, whose members include Pelops, Atreus, Thyestes, and Agamemnon) and the House of Labdacus (including Laius, Oedipus, and Antigone). The genealogical form of a particular myth or story shapes the dramas written about it, and so is the story changed by its retelling through dramatic conventions.

The House of Tantalus

(Background to Aeschylus' *Orestia* trilogy (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* (Choephoroi), *The Eumenides*) & Sophocles' *Electra*.)

For reasons never explained (hatred against the gods?), Tantalus wickedly served his son Pelops as the main course at a banquet of the gods. He was punished for this abomination by being relegated to the underworld, where he stands thirsty in a pool of water that laps his chin, but recedes as soon as he bends to drink from it, and hungry under a branch laden with fruit that recedes as soon as he reaches for it. Pelops was reassembled by the gods and emerged from the experience even more beautiful than before (except for his shoulder, which Demeter had already eaten).

But he was almost as wicked as his father. He won Hippodamia as his bride by cheating in a chariot race with the help of one Myrtilus; but after being declared the winner, he murdered Myrtilus, for reasons that vary depending on the source consulted. But Myrtilus before dying utters a curse that will bring disaster upon Pelops and his children.

Following the principle of "like begets like", Pelops fathered a number of children including a pair of sons named Atreus and Thyestes, all children of Hippodamia; but he also had a bastard son named Chrysippus, whom he preferred to his legitimate children. Sensing this, Atreus and Thyestes, with Hippodamia's encouragement, murdered Chrysippus; and this act earned them exile and Pelops' curse that they and their offspring should die at one another's hands.

After Pelops' death, Atreus and Thyestes, under the influence of the various curses whose accumulated force hangs over the family, fight over their father's throne. Among their crimes against one another, Thyestes seduces his brother's wife Aerope, and Atreus in retaliation serves Thyestes' children to him in yet another cannibalistic banquet. Thyestes in turn curses his brother, and in some versions of the story fathers a child, Aegisthus, on his own daughter, Pelopia, in order to exact revenge against Atreus and his descendants.

Atreus' sons were Agamemnon, king of Argos, and Menelaus, king of Sparta. It was Agamemnon who led the Greek expedition against Troy to take revenge on the abduction of Menelaus' wife, Helen, by the Trojan prince Paris, who had been a guest in Menelaus' house. When the Greek fleet was about to set sail for Troy, however, Agamemnon commits some transgression that incurred the anger of Artemis, who brought about unfavourable winds that prevented the fleet from departing.

An oracle revealed that the goddess' anger could be appeased only by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon obeys the oracle, enabling the fleet to reach Troy.

The war lasted ten years, ending in Greek victory; but the return of the Greek army was long and difficult as well. During Agamemnon's absence his wife, Clytemnestra, carried on an affair with Agamemnon's cousin, Aegisthus, with whose help she murdered Agamemnon upon his return to Argos (*Agamemnon*). Agamemnon's son Orestes killed his mother and her lover in revenge for his father's murder, but as a result was pursued and driven mad by the Erinyes or Furies, baleful goddesses whose function is to punish those who wrong their own kin (*The Libation Bearers* (*Choephoroi*)). But eventually Orestes was purified of the crime by the Athenian court of the Areopagus. (*Eumenides*)

The House of Labdacus

(background to the individual plays: Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* & Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, & *Antigone*)

This saga is part of an extensive cycle of myths pertaining to the Boeotian city of Thebes. Labdacus is a grandson of Cadmus, the legendary founder of the city, but is himself not a very well-developed figure in myth. Even his son Laius is rather ill-defined, at least in our surviving sources. Whatever else may have happened to him, he is supposed to have consulted the oracle at Delphi about his apparent inability to produce children, and to have received an oracle that if he died without issue, he would save Thebes. Subsequently his wife, Jocasta, became pregnant; and when her child was born, his feet were pierced and lashed together, and he was given to a servant to be exposed in the wilderness and left to die.

The servant did not expose the child, however; instead he gave him to an acquaintance from Corinth, who in turn gave the child to Polybus, King of Corinth, who named the boy, because of the wound in his feet, "Oedipus" or "Swel-Foot". Polybus raised Oedipus as his own, but as a young man Oedipus went to Delphi to ask the oracle who were his real parents. The answer he received was the famous prediction that he was fated to murder his father and marry his mother. On hearing this, Oedipus voluntarily exiled himself from Corinth.

At some point in his travels, Oedipus encountered some travellers at a crossroads. An altercation ensued in which Oedipus killed an old man in the other party. This man was Laius, his natural father, and the first part of the oracle was thus fulfilled. Later, Oedipus reached Thebes, which was beset by the Sphinx, a fantastic beast that was half lion and half woman. In addition to whatever other trouble the Sphinx brought to Thebes (usually a plague), it posed a riddle and killed any who tried unsuccessfully to answer it. The general form of the riddle is: "What goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening." Oedipus answered the riddle: "a person". This released the Thebans from the grip of the Sphinx and caused them to make Oedipus their king, as a sign of which he married Jocasta, Laius' widow and (unbeknownst to him) his own mother.

Eventually, however, another plague descended upon Thebes, and Oedipus was unable to dispel it. When he learned that he was the cause of it because he had polluted the city by killing his father and marrying his mother, he blinded himself and went into exile (the same news caused Jocasta to commit suicide) (*Oedipus Rex*). He wandered for years, dying in the district of Colonus, near Athens, but not before calling a curse down on his sons that they should pay for some transgression that they have committed against him by spending their dies fighting with one another (*Oedipus at Colonus*).

The curse is fulfilled when Eteocles drives Polynices into exile. Polynices enlists the aid of six allies who march with him against his brother -- these are the "seven against Thebes" --and, inevitably, in the war that ensues, the two brothers face each other in battle and kill one another

beneath the walls of the city. Their uncle Creon assumes control, and awards Eteocles a state burial as defender of the city, while ordering that Polynices' corpse be left to rot, since he is in Creon's view a traitor. But Oedipus' daughter Antigone -- who is engaged to be married to Creon's son, Haemon -- insists on burying both her brothers (perhaps over the objections of her and their sister Ismene), for which act Creon sentences her to death. When she dies, Haemon kills himself; and Haemon's mother follows suit, leaving Creon totally bereft (*Antigone*).

The Generational Curse in Aeschylus and Sophocles

Aeschylus' Oedipus Trilogy

If anything, the plays of Aeschylus' Oedipus trilogy (leaving the *Sphinx* out of account) seem to reflect the generational structure of the story even better than the "Oresteia". Each of the three plays, the lost *Laius* and *Oedipus* as well as the surviving *Seven against Thebes*, tells the story of one generation, but does so as part of a larger structure telling a larger story centring on a curse that works in successive generations. Although it is impossible to know much for certain about the lost plays and consequently about the trilogy as a whole, this much, at least, seems overwhelmingly probable.

Sophocles' Oedipus' "Trilogy" (?)

Three plays written by Sophocles and dealing with the House of Labdacus have come down to us; and partly because Aeschylus was so successful at dramatizing multi-generational sagas in the form of a tragic trilogy, there is a strong temptation to think of Sophocles' Theban plays as a trilogy of the same sort. They are often collected in separate editions under the title of "Sophocles' Oedipus Trilogy" or something similar. But we should be aware that the plays were not performed together or even written during the same period in Sophocles' career. (*Antigone* was probably written a number of years before *Oedipus the King*, which was probably written soon after the middle of the fifth century BC; *Oedipus at Colonus* was written late in Sophocles' life and first performed after his death in 401 BC). Further, while the plays are obviously not unrelated, they all deal with rather different themes; and one should consider the degree to which they emphasize the role of the individual as an independent agent, or portray the hero as someone whose circumstances are defined by his or her family history, the will of the gods, fate, and so forth.

Conclusion

Tragedy is one of our major sources of knowledge about the Greek myths. The dramatic requirements of tragic poetry are substantially different from the narrative requirements of epic or hymnal poetry, of the visual arts, and of other forms by which the myths are communicated. Even between individual tragedies there are differences of form and thematic emphasis that affect the ways in which a myth can be represented. A particular tragedy may represent a myth in its most familiar form, but such a form should not be taken to be definitive.