

The Myth of Oedipus From Another Psychoanalytic Vertex: The "invisible large group" and its psycho-dynamics

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ABSTRACT

In the present study the author has tried to shed light on the Oedipus myth using Bion's (1961) ideas on group. He argued that the tragedy in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex is the result of the group mentality and culture (Bion, 1961; Hafsi, 2001) prevailing at that period in Thebes. These were characterized by what Bion called a "conspiracy between the Work Group (WG) and the Basic Assumption of Dependency (baD). Unable to contain the baP and baF, considered as bad and unwanted parts, the Theban group first resorted to such defence processes such as splitting and projective identification. The baP and baF (with their inherent emotions and behaviors) were split-off and projected onto Oedipus, making him fulfil the function of a Specialized Work Group (SWG). However, Oedipus failed in this function or role; he acted out the baF by killing Laius his father, and the baP by solving the Sphinx riddle -- a symbol of the mystery of man and his birth -- and marrying Jocasta, his mother. As a result, unable to contain the baP and the baF, the Theban group resorted to their suppression. The author postulated that this suppression is at the roots of the plague which devastated Thebe. The essential implications this study has for the understanding of the Oedipus myth and the Oedipus complex are also discussed. The author argued that the Oedipus complex is not solely an intrapersonal experience; it an interpersonal experience involving the whole family-group. He tried to show how the family-group culture and mentality prevailing during the Oedipus Complex stage bears a striking resemblance with the Theban group's one, concluding that the thesis developed concerning the Oedipus myth can also be applied to the understanding of the Oedipus complex from another vertex.

Key Words: *Oedipus Complex, Basic assumption Group, Work Group, Specialized Work Group*

Mythology, literature and the figures they put into play embody a plethora of human facets, and provide us with opportunities to discover, observe, and eventually understand various aspects of human *psyche*. The Oedipus Rex, as employed in psychoanalysis, is an example of those myths that have served as models for the understanding of some of our unconscious desires and phantasms. Freud, based on his own self-analysis, was the first to use one aspect of the myth to understand the child's relationship to his parents, namely his libidinal desires of and link to his mother (in the case of the boy), and parricide desire of his father. Following Freud, there have been also other psychoanalytical interpretations and usages of the myth emphasizing other aspects than

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Oedipus's incestuous and parricidal desires. The purpose of the present paper is to present the reader with a new interpretation of the myth by shifting from the vertex focussing on Oedipus as a person to another vertex which emphasizes rather the group aspect of the myth. Based on Bion's (1961) group theory, I developed the hypothesis that 1) the Oedipus myth depict not only an individual but a large group tragedy; 2) that Oedipus failed in his role as a Specialized Work Group and its inherent containment function, and that 3) the cause of the different tragic events depicted in the myth are rooted in the group-as-a-whole matrix and its protomental contents. Before discussing further this hypothesis, I will first briefly summarize the Oedipus myth, and then discuss the principal psychoanalytical references made to the myth, especially by Freud, Klein, and especially Bion's ones. I will then conclude by discussing the implications the present hypothesis might have for the understanding of the oedipus complex.

The Oedipus Myth

There are a number a versions of the myth, which differ in important details. Therefore I will confine myself principally to the story as told by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* performed in Athens for the first time in about 425 BC. The story begins by the following oracle. A childless Laius, ruler of Thebes, is told that he will be have a son who will kill him, and marry his wife. Following the birth of the baby, Laius and his wife Jocasta had the baby's ankles pierced with nails and gave him to a servant (a shepherd of Laius' flocks) to be "exposed" on nearby Mount Cithaeron until his death. However, the servant takes pity on the baby, and instead of leaving him to die, handed the boy to a fellow-shepherd from Corinth (a city located on the other side of the mountain) who presented the baby to the childless King of Corinth, Polybus and Queen Merope (or Periboea). The latter brought him up as their own, naming him "Oedipus" (Swollen Foot) because of his feet deformity.

Eighteen years (or so) later, someone at a party thrown by King Polybus called the young Oedipus a bastard - and the insult rankles. Not believing the man, Oedipus left Corinth for Delphi, to confirm his parentage at the oracle of Apollo. However, instead of revealing to him his parentage, the oracle told him the same prediction that he will kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid this, Oedipus sets off in the opposite direction to Corinth, and heads towards Thebes. As he descends from Parnassus towards the foothills, he met an old man riding a waggon with a retinue of servants at a place where three roads meet. The man, a rude and aggressive person, ordered him off the road and insulted him. As Oedipus refused to budge, the man lashed out with his goad, hurting Oedipus. In an attempt to defend himself, the latter killed the man and his guards, with the exception of one servant who managed to escape. He then continued to Thebes, unaware that the man he killed was King Laius, his biologic father.

At that time, Thebes was terrorised by a monster — the Sphinx (a hybrid creature, with a

woman's, head and a lioness's body and wings), who killed those who failed to solve her riddle. Sophocles doesn't refer to the detailed content of this riddle, however, according to other writers, the Sphinx asked people "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?". Oedipus solved this riddle by answering "Man"; as a baby man crawls on four legs; as an adult walks on two legs; and when old, man uses a cane. His answer led to the Sphinx self-destruction, and consequently saved the people of Thebes. The latter welcomed their saviour and they offered him the vacant job of King, and the hand of Laius' widow, Jocasta, his real mother, as a reward. Oedipus fathered four children with her.

During Oedipus's reign, Thebes gradually succumbs to a vile plague, which killed animals, children and crops alike. At that time, plagues were believed to be caused by pollution resulting from sin; and only gods can reveal their causes. Oedipus promised his people to save the city and sent his brother-in-law Creon to consult the oracle at Delphi. Creon returned with the gods' answer that the cause of the plague was the unpunished murder of the former king, Laius. Oedipus places a terrible curse on the killer, and turned to the prophet Teiresias for help. The latter told Oedipus that he himself was the killer, and hints at even worse crimes. Enraged by these accusations, Oedipus accused Teiresias and Creon of fabricating the story to dethrone him. He thus ordered Teiresias to depart with dire threats, and was going to have Creon executed, but, thanks to Jocasta's intervention, he spared him that fatal experience. Jocasta reassures Oedipus, arguing that oracles do not reveal the truth. For although she and her late husband Laius were also told that they will be killed by a son born to them, the latter was killed by robbers at a place where three roads meet, and the son died an innocent baby. In stead of reassuring Oedipus, this awakened in him an old memory of a man he killed at such a place, and the torturing thought that the man may have been Laius and he himself would be the cursed polluter of Thebes. Jocasta tried to reassure him again saying that that can not be true, because a witness, who escaped and was living now in the countryside and working as shepherd reported that it was robbers who killed Laius. But Oedipus's fears did not dissipate; it could only be laid to rest if the witness is found and interrogated. He therefore asked his servants to bring the witness to him.

Meanwhile, a messenger arrived from Corinth, to tell Oedipus that he was chosen as the King of Corinth because Polybus, his father had died of natural causes. Oedipus reacted saying that he can never go back to Corinth while his mother is alive. Then, the messenger told him that there's nothing to fear," for she wasn't his real mother, nor was Polybus his father, explaining how as a baby Oedipus was given to him by a shepherd from Thebes. It was now clear to Jocasta that Oedipus is her son; she then rushed out, waiting for no further explanation. Oedipus thought she was embarrassed to learn that her husband might have been an unwanted child, perhaps a slave's.

When the witness arrived at last, he is very reluctant to say anything to Oedipus. But under threat of torture, he revealed that he was the shepherd to whom the baby was given by Jocasta to be killed, and that he had passed it on to a Corinthian out of pity. It is then that Oedipus realised

the whole truth that he was really the son of Laius and Jocasta, and that the prophecy had indeed come to pass. He then rushed off to find Jocasta who had already hanged herself. He thus took the brooch pins from her dress, and forcefully blinded himself and went wandering accompanied by his daughter Antigone.

Oedipus in Psychoanalysis: Freud's contribution

Drawing from the myth of Oedipus Rex, Freud coined the term of "Oedipus complex" and used it for the first time in his article titled: "Contribution to the psychology of love" (Freud, 1910). Freud had a reductive interpretation of the myth. He referred only to Oedipus's patricidal and incestuous acts and used it as a model to illustrate the child's feelings towards his/her parents at a certain period of his/her development. He first referred to these feelings as "nuclear complex" and "paternal complex", before he finally opted for Oedipus Complex.

The history of Oedipus Complex is associated both with the Freudian theory and the history of psychoanalysis as a whole. At a very early stage Freud provided us with the theoretical foundations of the Oedipus Complex, when he defined it as the child's desire for the parent of the opposite sex and hostility towards the parent of the same sex. In 1889, he confessed to Fliess that he has discovered in himself love feelings for his mother and jealousy of his father which are common to all young children. Later he further elaborated, giving to these feelings the name of Oedipus Complex and made of it a normal stage in the child's libidinal development. Concerning the child's libidinal development, psychoanalysis distinguishes three fundamental stages: Oral stage (with its phases and positions), anal stage, and phallic stage. It is in the latter stage, which occurs between the age of 3 and 5, that Freud situated the Oedipus Complex. He finally conceived of it as a structured and structuring set of love and hostile desires experienced by the child towards his parents at this stage. In its positive form the complex looks like the Oedipus myth in the sense that it is characterized by a wish of the death towards the parent of the same sex, and a sexual desire towards the parent of the opposite sex. In the negative form those feelings are inverted: love for the same sex parent, and hate and jealousy towards the opposite sex parent. Of course these two forms of the complex are not completely independent. Both can be found to a certain degree in the so-called complete form of the Oedipus Complex.

Freud considered the Oedipus Complex and its resolution as the cornerstone of the superego and the nucleus of all human relationships. It plays a fundamental role in the structuration of the personality and the orientation of the human sexual desire. Nevertheless, it remains also one of the most contested Freudian concepts.

The Oedipus Complex After Freud

The Oedipus survived after Freud inspite of the criticism from different disciplines (psychology, sociology, anthropology, religion, etc.), and some reforming attempts within psychoanalysis itself. For it still occupies a pride of place in the psychoanalytic body. Reviewing the different criticisms addressed to the Oedipus Complex as conceived by Freud goes far beyond the purpose of the present article. I will thus confine myself to a brief introduction of the attempts to reform the Oedipus Complex made by Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion.

Klein's Early Oedipus

Klein was the first psychoanalyst to challenge the Oedipus Complex theory. Unlike Freud who, as mentioned above, traces this complex back to the phallic stage, Klein holds that it is experienced by the infant at an earlier stage. According to her, the infant experiences an early form of the complex in the oral stage when it is going through what she calls the "depressive position" (Segal, 1974; Britton, 1989; Stein, 1990). At this stage of its development, the infant commences to perceive its mother as a whole object. He also recognizes her as a separate person having gratifying relationships with others, especially the father. The parents are phantasied as providing each other with oral, urethral, anal or genital gratifications, and as engaged in a continuous intercourse. This stirs in the infant jealousy and feeling of deprivation and envy, and pave the way to an early pre-oedipal situation. At this stage the infant, under the influence of envy and projection, reacts by attacking and destroying in his phantasy the parents and their relationship. As a result, the infant finds itself with destroyed objects (parents) to introject as part of its internal world. Thus, as put by Segal (1974), "in the depressive position the infant has not only to deal with a destroyed internal breast and mother, but also with the internal destroyed couple of [this] early oedipal situation" (p. 104).

As a defence against the feeling of deprivation, jealousy and envy of the parents, the infant resorts to denial of the parents sexual relationship, and splitting between good asexual parents and bad sexual ones. Segal (1974) compares this form of splitting with later or genital Oedipus as described by Freud, save "for the extreme idealization of the desired parent and extreme hatred and persecution experienced in relation to the rival parent" (p. 106). For in the early oedipal situation, the infant's hatred, love, and idealization shift from one parent to another.

Klein (1946) described also another defensive procedure against the parental couple which she called the phantasy of the "combined parents". In this phantasy the parents are perceived as a combined parental figure. The mother is phantasized as comprising the father and his penis, and, owing to her idealization by the infant, as containing all the good and desirable things: breast, babies and penises. This combined parental figure will be experienced as a threatening persecutor due to the infant's jealousy and projection of its own aggressive impulses, and is therefore

attacked. In this early oedipal stage, the expectation of retaliation intensifies the aggressive, sadistic impulses against the parents. However, as the infant begins to move in the direction of the depressive position, the sadistic impulses and feelings of omnipotent triumph over the "bad" objects come to be complicated by growing sadness at the loss of what are increasingly also recognized as the "good" parents who have been injured in these attacks. Thus, the early oedipal period that begins with envy, denial, splitting, and sadistic attack upon the parents evolves into a more complex and ambivalent mix of envy, jealousy and aggression accompanied by sadness, guilt and loss. According to Segal (1974), "nothing in the development of the individual is ever fully overcome or ever fully lost, so that the genital oedipal situation will bear traces of earlier desires...incorporate...all earlier forms of relationship" (p.112). In other words, Oedipus Complex is not, according to Klein, an independent developmental phenomenon. It is a continuous process rooted in the infant's early oral object relations.

As shown by this brief introduction, in spite of their differences, Freud's and Klein's have a lot in common. Like Freud, what Klein kept from the Oedipus myth is essentially Oedipus's relationship to his parents. Although Freud used the myth to illustrate the infant's experience of the parents at the phallic stage, and Klein used it as a model for the infant's oral experience of them. Hence, like Freud, Klein also, although not intentionally, reduced the Oedipus tragedy to a personal (Oedipus') one.

Bion's contribution

Like his two predecessors, Wilfred Bion also attributed an important function to the Oedipus myth and Oedipus theory, but did not write any detailed work on the subject. Bion (1963) wrote, in a condensed way, that "the Oedipus myth may be regarded as an instrument that served Freud in his discovery of psycho-analysis and psycho-analysis as an instrument that enabled Freud to discover the Oedipus Complex" (p. 92). Compared with Klein, Bion was more challenging to the Freudian interpretation of the Oedipus myth. He suggested that the myth can be apprehended from various vertexes when he wrote, "the oedipal situation, or its even more primitive roots, would have a different configuration according to whether the vertex of the group was psycho-analytic, religious, financial, legal, or some other..." (p. 92).

According to Bion, too much weight have been attributed to the sexual element in the Oedipus myth. He argued that the development of psycho-analysis has now reached a point where other elements can be also apprehended. The sexual element, writes Bion (1963), "can be comprehended save in its relationship with other elements; for example with the determination with which Oedipus pursues his inquiry into the crime despite the warnings of Teiresias. It is consequently not possible to isolate the sexual component, or any other, without distortion" (p. 45-6). This led the latter to tackle Oedipus myth and its subsequent Oedipus theory as a multiple and complex compact of many functions of the mind (attention, notation, action, inquiry, etc.,)

described in his Grid and theory of thinking.

Using the horizontal axis of the Grid and its categories, Bion (1963) interpreted the Oracle's account of the narrative of the Oedipus myth as "definitory hypothesis" (column 1), and Teiresias's warning as a false hypothesis (column 2) used as a defence against the anxiety generated by the different incidents in the myth. The Sphinx and its riddle, which constitutes at the same time a threat and stimulation to curiosity, corresponds to the functions Freud's attributed to "attention" (column 4). Oedipus's persistent investigation of the truth can be considered as an expression of column 5, or inquiry. The different disasters (Laius's killing, the Sphinx and Jocasta's suicides, the plague, and Oedipus's blindness) correspond to elements pertaining to column 6, or action. Finally, Bion interpreted the whole myth as an element for the Grid's third column, or notation.

Moreover, applying his theory of the development of thinking to the myth, Bion (1963) postulated that Oedipus myth can be understood as a twofold myth: a private side, or a *private myth*, and a public myth. The private myth represents the individual and private (internal) experience of the myth. The public myth corresponds to the account communicable to the public. In Bion's (1963) words, the private myth "is the means, the pre-conception, by virtue of which the infant is able to establish contact with the parents as they exist in the world of reality" (p. 93). If this oedipal pre-conception is mated with a realization of the actual parents, a conception of the parents and their relationship is thus born. This will make the oedipal situation possible. If however this pre-conception is mated with a negative realization this will give rise to a kind of "non-oedipus" (as the equivalent of non-breast in the theory of thinking) or, to use Bion's terminology, "the place where Oedipus might be".

In this case, the oedipal situation can neither be experienced by the infant, nor found by the analyst, regardless of any possible defect in his psycho-analytical knowledge or training. When the oedipal pre-conception is thus not mated with its realization, and the infant is unable to tolerate the parental relationship, the oedipal pre-conception itself is destroyed, and "the infant loses the apparatus essential for gaining a conception of the parental relationship and consequently for resolution of oedipal problems" (Bion, 1963; p. 93), for the infant has failed to reach them. In this case, what appear to be oedipal material is not more than fragments from the destroyed oedipal pre-conception. The latter need to be differentiated from the fragments of the oedipal situation.

As revealed by this summary of Bion's ideas, Bion has in fact attempted to grasp the Oedipus myth and complex from a different vertex. However, in spite of his awareness of the complexity of the myth, he did not go, like his predecessors, far enough beyond the perception of the myth as an individual phenomenon. Therefore, the author will, following Bion's advice to change one's vertex in order to have a different vision of the phenomenon at hand, try, hereafter, to shed light on the myth from a group vertex, applying some of Bion's ideas on group.

The invisible group and its matrix

Trying to look at the myth from the group vertex, has enabled the author to switch his attention from the core of the myth, namely Oedipus the man, to its background, namely the Theban group. He resorted thus to, in Bion's (1963) terminology, a kind of "reversible perspective". This consequently led him to ask himself the following questions: What was the dominant group mentality and "matrix" (Bion, 1961) of the large group, the Theban people; "What function did Oedipus fulfill for his group"; what does the Sphinx symbolize?"; What was the meaning of the different disasters (killing of Laius, suicide of the Sphinx and Jocasta, the plague) described in the myth? From the vertex focusing on Oedipus the man, these questions are not only unthinkable, unimportant, but also unanswerable. In the following the author will thus try to provide answers to these questions, shedding thus light on the invisible large group beneath the myth.

The Theban Group Matrix

According to Bion (1961), the activity of any group, whatever its size, comprises two coexistent mental activities: one conscious, and reality-based, and one unconscious and phantasy-based. The former is referred to as "work group" (WG). The latter which is referred to as "basic assumption group" (baG), includes three types of groups: the basic assumption of dependency group (baD), the basic assumption of fight/flight group (baF), and the basic assumption of pairing group (baP) group. The term "group" used here designates not the members constituting the group, but rather the mental activity the group is indulged in. Discussing these groups in details goes far beyond the scope of the present paper; the reader should refer to Bion's (1961), and, among others, the author's (e.g., Hafsi, 2000; 2002) works for a detailed description of these groups.

Suffice thus to say that these two group activities are not independent. The WG activity coexists always with only one baG (Bion, 1961); with which it can have three different types of relationships (Hafsi, 2003 and 2004): *integrative relationship*, *obstructive relationship*, and *rigid relationship*. In favorable conditions, it is the *integrative relationship that prevails*. In this case, the WG will, with the help of what Bion (1961) called the "specialized work group" (SWG), make use of the "spirit" or the mentality of the baG coexisting with it for further progress and development of the group. Like the WG of which it constitutes a part, SWG refers to a function and its bearer, namely a person, or a subgroup within the group (Hafsi, 2003; 2004). Its function consists in neutralizing and containing the baG in a way that it is neither completely inhibited nor strong enough to overwhelm, or obstruct the work group activity of the whole group. This containment function involves translating action into baG mentality or spirit. This corresponds to the opposite of the WG function which consists essentially in translating ideas, thoughts and feelings into action. To put it differently, in an integrative relationship, the SWG filters the baG, keeping

only its feelings and thoughts, and other mental aspects which will be made available to the WG. According to Bion, "it must be regarded as a failure in the specialized work group if the dependent or fight-flight group activity either ceases to manifest within the specialized groups or else grows to overwhelming strength (p. 157). There are as much SWG as baG; each SWG being specialized in a specific baG. Hence, this type of relationship is characterized by flexibility and tolerance towards the baG.

In the second type of relationship, called *obstructive relationship*, the baG activity prevails over the WG one and obstructs it. When this kind of relationship is established, the group will function under the influence of the mentality proper to the baG in question, and will therefore lose its "sense" of the task and reality, shifting from one baG to another.

The third kind of relationship, to which Bion (1961) has principally paid attention and which pertains to the present article, describes a *rigid relationship*, or to use Bion's words, a "*conspiracy*" between WG and its coexistent baG. The relationship between the two is so rigid that the other two baG are not allowed to be expressed, and are thus 1) denied (denial), or split-off (splitting) and projected (projective identification) onto in-group (SWG) or out-group objects in order to have them neutralized and contained by them, or are 2) suppressed and confined to what Bion (1961) calls the "protomental system" (PMS). Bion originally proposed this hypothetical entity to shed light on the whereabouts of the inoperative two baG. There these two baG will remain as protomental or undifferentiated (neither physical nor mental) phenomena, constituting thus a group matrix from which flow the emotions proper to the different baG, and spring group diseases. "*These group diseases, writes Bion, manifest themselves in the individual but they have characteristics that make it clear that it is the group rather than the individual that is stricken...*" (p. 102). Moreover, they also can manifest themselves in physical or psychological forms.

Let us now turn to the Theban group depicted in the Oedipus myth. Apprehending the latter from a large group vertex has led the author to postulate that the mental activity displayed by the Theban group was characterized by the third kind of relationship adumbrated above. That is, as indicated in Figure 1, the myth describes a large group functioning under the influence of a rigid relationship, or, to use Bion's terminology, a "conspiracy" between work group (WG) and the basic assumption of dependency (baD) and a resulting group matrix constituted by protomental pairing and fight/flight. This hypothesis will be discussed now.

One of the elements that sticks the reader of the Oedipus myth is the role played by gods, oracles, and prophetes. The gods, especially Apollo is depicted as omnipotent and omniscient. They are believed to know everything, determine and manage the faith of each citizen, and the whole Theban group. For instance, to confirm his parentage, Oedipus went to consult gods at the oracle of Apollo and learnt of his destiny. Before the birth of Oedipus, his father, Laius and his mother Jocasta knew also, through gods, of the birth of Oedipus and his faith. Gods and their prophetes are wise and powerful; they can help people and punish them. The Theban group, with the

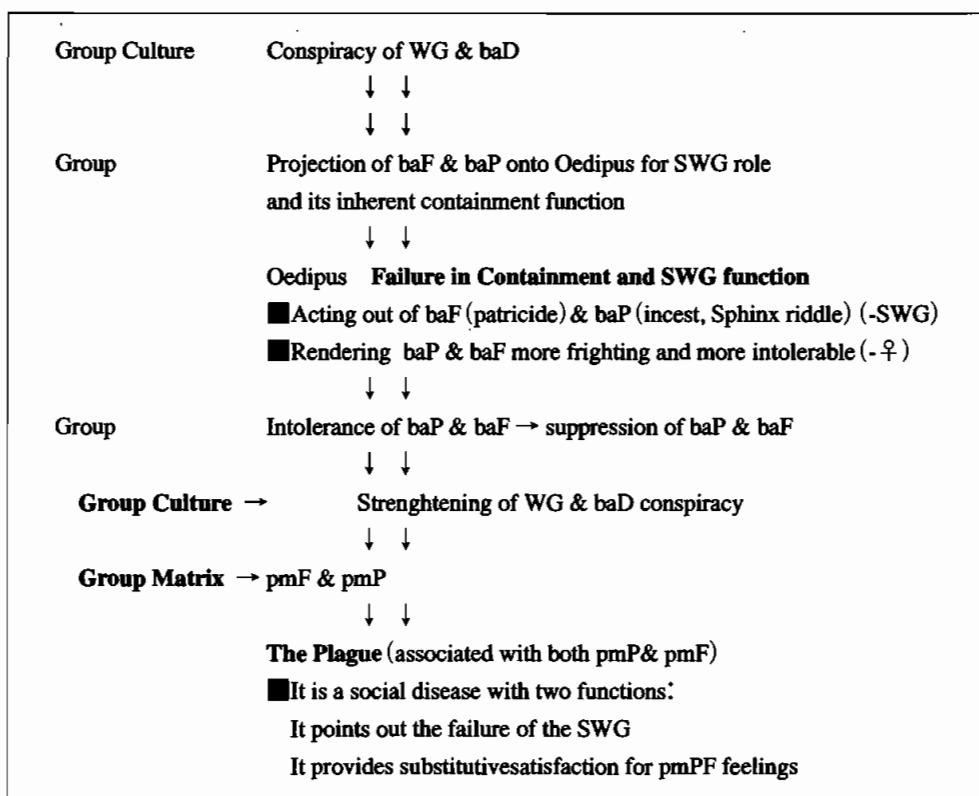


Figure 1. A Flow Chart of The Psychodynamic of the Tragedy in The Oedipus Myth

exception of Laius and Jocasta, is depicted as obedient, powerless in front of gods. In fact, at the very beginning of the prologue in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the latter listens to suppliants before the palace who implore him to save the city from the plague. Responding to their demands Oedipus proclaims he is grievously aware of his people suffering and has already sent Creon, Jocata's brother to Delphi to seek Apollo's directive. Oedipus's response can be interpreted as an another attempt to reaffirm for the people the omnipotence of gods and the weakness and of nothingness of man, including Oedipus himself, the noblest and the wisest one. Gods can become severe, strict and sometimes cruel, and without mercy, when their power is challenged. Laius and his wife Jocasta were the first to challenge Apollo, by ignoring his warning of not having children. As a punishment they were made to have a son whose fate was to kill his father, and marry his mother. Thus, the gods are not only venerated but also feared. The Oedipus myth reflects the ancient greek belief in the man totally submitted to the power of gods and kings and their sacred laws and rules. In other words, obedience to, and reliance and dependency on gods is regarded as a determinant factor of a harmonious relationship between gods and the people, and of the prosperity of the city. Hence, the gods' omnipresence and omnipotence is such that the Oedipus myth presents like a play directed by the gods.

This illustrates perfectly what Bion (1961) has described as a group experiencing a conspiracy between WG and baD. As shown by a number of elements from Oedipus Rex, this conspiracy is so rigid that any expression of the two other basic assumption groups, namely the baP and baF, is discouraged, prohibited and suppressed. Oedipus Rex is pervaded by examples illustrating the suppression of these baG. As examples of suppression directed towards the baP group, we can cite, among others, Apollo's warning to not father, addressed to Laius, the fact that the King of Corinth, Polybus and Queen Merope (adoptive parents of Oedipus), were made childless, Teiresias's blinding because he watched snakes copulation, the sphinx riddle as a symbol of sexual curiosity, primitive scene, and as a path to death (the sphinx's death). All these examples are related to sex which is an essential element of the baP group.

Concerning the discouragement of the baF, it is reflected principally in the god's negative reaction to the murder of the King Laius and his company during their pelerinage trip, and to Laius's challenge to and disregard of their laws, commandments, and authority. According to what the oracles revealed to Creon, it is for these two baF-related crimes that the people of Thebes was punished by gods. Returning from his trip to the city of Delphi to seek the oracles help to save the city from the plague, Creon reported to Oedipus and the people, with a troubled expression in his face saying: *"The god commands us to expel from the land of Thebes an old defilement we are sheltering"*. At Oedipus' urging to continue Creon revealed the meaning of the defilement saying: *"It was murder that brought the plague-wind on the city"*. Moreover, in the first anti-strophe in Sophocles's play, the chorus warns the tyrant against becoming drunk with hybris, recklessness and vanity (which constitute features of the baF) because these are vices which will bring about fall from power. The second strophe of the ode expresses also outrage at the hybriatic impulse and flagrant self-assertion against both the divine and the community (the large group). The strophe suggests that a person displaying these vices *"will be caught in a net of pain"*. Hence, the implication of these examples is that revering the gods and their words and actions (baD), and refraining from fathering (suppression of pairing) and from hybris, recklessness, self-assertion (suppression of baF), are the *sine qua non* for equilibrium in of the relationship between humans and gods, and for social stability and prosperity. These examples illustrate clearly the rigid interaction (or conspiracy) of the WG and the baD, and the inability of the Theban group to tolerate the baF and baP, regarding them as bad and harmful. In spite of the importance of these baG, the Theban people has, consequently, tried to deal with them, resorting to splitting and projection (projective identification). They were split off, and projected outward, in order to find them a container, or a specialized work group who will contain them.

Oedipus as a Specialized Work Group

It is Oedipus who was targeted by the Theban group's projective identification as discussed by Klein (1955), Bion (1970) and the author (Hafsi, 2006a). The two unwanted group parts (baF

& baP) were projected on him; he was thereby pressured to contain them by fulfilling a SWG function. The Theban group projected thus these baG onto Oedipus so that he contains, detoxifies, renders them less frightening, or to use Bion's word, "alphabetize" them by means of his alpha-function. For, as shown by the following passage from Kaës's (2005; p. X) book, such is one of the different effects the group has on its individual members.

It [group] prescribes also emplacements and functions to wherein the subjects become submitted and can realize some of their desires: for example, the functions of a common Ideal, the Ancestor figures, the Child King, the Dead, the Hero, the Leader, the Scapegoat, the Spokesman, the One with the Symptom, the One-having the dream, etc. Here again the double logic functions: the subjects occupy these positions for personal reasons, and to fulfil simultaneously the functions to which they were assigned by the group-as-a whole (my translation).

Therefore, it should be remembered that the choice of Oedipus to carry this containment task was not a random one. As shown by the prophesy told to Laius and Jocasta, he was in fact selected by the gods to fulfill it on the behalf of the Theban group. For Oedipus is depicted and addressed to, by the elder priest, as "Wisest in the ways of God", and his intelligence (and the validity of his alpha-function) was confirmed when he resolved the riddle of the Sphinx. Here is how Tiresias describes him: "Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: this was Oedipus, Greatest of men; he held the key to the deepest mysteries; Was envied by all his fellow-men for his great prosperity..." (Sophocles, 1947; p. 68). As a result of projective process, Oedipus found also himself attributed the role of a SWG for both the baP and baF.

As shown by his reaction to the provocation by Laius, his confrontation with Creon and Tiresias, Oedipus has a quick temper, and his high self-confidence and self-esteem which are a characteristic traits of the fight valency as conceived by the author (Hafsi, 2006b). His preoccupation with his birth and origin are traits of the pairing valency. All these traits suggest, according to the author's conception of valency, that Oedipus has, a fight valency as a dominant or "active valency", and a pairing valency as his secondary or "auxiliary" one. All these elements, his active and auxiliary valencies, and his aristocratic origins predisposed Oedipus to the role of SWG for baP and baF. Through this role and its inherent containment function, Oedipus was thus unconsciously expected by his group to neutralize the baP and baF by inhibiting their enactment (and acting out) and encouraging or emphasizing only their mental aspect.

The assignment of this role to Oedipus, was made possible by the establishment of an "unconscious alliance" (Anzieu, 1975; Kaës, 2004) between the latter and the Theban group. According to Kaës (2004), "an unconscious alliance is an intersubjective psychic formation built by the subjects of bond to reinforce in each of them some processes, functions, and structures, born from

repression or from denial, or from disavowal, and from which they get benefit...the unconscious alliance preserves the subjects from knowing nothing of their own desires and the bonds linking them" (*my translation*, p. 100). The unconscious alliance includes, writes Kaës, the notion of "narcissistic contract", which corresponds to the attribution to each member a determined place, role, and function in the group, and its result, namely a "narcissistic pact".

Oedipus's Containment Failure

This assignement of the SWG role to Oedipus corresponds to a first step in the Theban group's healthy attempt to deal with the baP and baF. However, as shown by his actions and their effect upon the Theban group, Oedipus could not succeed in his role of SWG. Unable to accept his fate, Oedipus left Corinth to confirm his parentage and decided not to return there to save his love for his parents from destruction. In more psychoanalytical terms, he ran away from Corinth in order to avoid acting out the baF and baP by committing the patricide and incest to which the oracles has predestinated him. Running away from and fighting against his faith to preserve one's beloved objects corresponds to expressions of the mentality of respectively the baF and the baP. Hence, at this point, Oedipus is still in command, that is, able to carry out his SWG role.

Oedipus's failure and consequently the group's real tragedy began at the point where the three road meets. There Oedipus met his faith and ceased to function as SWG, by doing the opposit of what he was elected for, namely translating impulses and emotions into baG actions. Under the influence of his quick temper and his fight valency (Hafsi, 2006), Oedipus cruelly killed Laius and his company, acting out thus the baF. The second sign of his failure was when he acted out the baP by challenging the Sphinx and solving her riddle, knowing thus the secret of man. However, the third and most tragic sign of his failure to contain the baP is his marriage to Jocasta, his mother. Owing to this failure, the whole Theban group became overwhelmed again by these baG which were frightening and intolerable, and Oedipus's containment failure has rendered them even more meaningless, frightening and intolerable. They are henceforth no more than beta-elements the group has to protect itself from them. To defend against them the group had no other means but repressing and confining them again to a proto-mental existence. This led to the constitution of a group matrix where lies undifferentiated pmF and pmP.

The Plague As a Group Disease

The repression of these baG and the formation of a group matrix was what triggered another aspect of Theban group tragedy: The plague. A priest in Sophocles's play speaks urgently, informing the King Oedipus that the city of Thebes, once prosperous, is now in ruin, because a mysterious and unnatural plague has settled on the countryside, causing unborn children to die, and the cattle to get sick. "The plague is killing us! Thebes is dying of the plague ! Save us from the plague", shouted the chorus in the play.

In spite of the pride of place it occupies in the myth, the plague has not been sufficiently discussed, especially by psychoanalysts. As suggested above, apprehending it from a group vertex, the plague appears as a group disease in Bion's (1961) definition of the term. As such, it is the result of the suppression of the two inoperant baG. In other words, it has for psychological cause the rigid interaction of WG with baD and the intolerance of and suppression of the baF and the baP into the "protomental system" (PMS). It has thus a direct affiliation with both baP, and a matrix constituted by pmP and pmF. As discussed above, although it is the individual that displays the symptoms of the plague, there are numerous indices showing that it is essentially the whole Theban group that is stricken by it. "Deliver the city from the plague of which Thebes (group) is dying" cried the chorus in the play.

Bion was the first to point out at the group protomental origin of some physical diseases, but he did not develop his thinking further so as to shed light on the function fulfilled by these diseases for the group-as-a-whole. Therefore, the author postulated that, in spite of their tragic character, group diseases, such as for instance tuberculosis (Hafsi, 2004), provide secondary benefits to the group wherein it spreads. In a last attempt to be able to express the repressed or protomental baG (pmbaG) again, the group-as-a-whole will thus unconsciously resort to physical (group) diseases as a bodily means to be able to contain the pmbaG. In this sense, like the symptom for the individual, those group diseases indirectly provides the whole group with momentarily and costly (in terms of mental energy) satisfaction of the emotions and desires associated with the repressed baG. Therefore, suppressing and eliminating totally the baG from the group activity is, as discussed previously, an indicator of the SWG failure which will hinder the group development and social and mental stability. For, the baG is also an essential and indispensable element of the group activity, if used to enhance and support the WG like in a transformation relationship discussed above.

As a group disease, the plague in the Oedipus myth fulfills also this function. It allows the group to regain a momentary ability to express unconsciously both baF and baP, and satisfy the needs associated with both of them without the risk of being overwhelmed and inhibited by them. Like any social disease, the plague split the Theban group into those suffering from it and those not. Considering the way it spread and its social representation, we can speculate that the plague is affiliated with pmP, and that those suffering from it are group members with a pairing valency (Hafsi, 2006). Owing to their pairing valency, these members would suffer more from the suppression of baP. Of course, people with fight valency would also suffer because the baF is equally suppressed. However these members would display symptoms characteristic of other diseases, not mentioned in Oedipus Rex. Discussing further this problem goes beyond the purpose of the present study; let us thus concentrate on the plague only.

Thanks to the split between sick and saine group members, the Theban group was provided with the opportunity to fight against the plague by isolating, fleeing from, and burning the former.

As can be easily guessed this activity is closely associated with the baF mentality; it could not be carried out without the Theban group's unconscious resort to baF. This baF activity was carried out without guilt, because of the people's conscious belief that they were doing it for the sake of the group-as-a-whole, including the gods.

The plague provided also the Theban group with an opportunity to express baP mentality for the benefit of the group-as-a-whole. One of the essential characteristics of the baP is the atmosphere of expectancy and hope that a messianic savior will come to the rescue of the group. Through the experience of the plague, the Theban group could regain thus the hope that gods will save it again from this calamity, as they did with the Sphinx through Oedipus's heroic behavior. Hence, the plague can be understood as having a two-fold function for the Thebes group. It points out the group-as-a-whole (Thebes group)'s failure to contain the baF and baP, and provides it with an opportunity to temporarily contain and unconsciously express them, regaining thus a momentarily and precarious mental and social stability.

Discussion and Implications

Since Freud's first reference to the Oedipus myth, there have been almost no fundamental and challenging interpretations of the myth in psychoanalysis. Freud saw it as a personal tragedy (Oedipus's), and used it as a model to describe the child's unconscious reaction to his parents, coining thus what he called the Oedipus Complex. Those who, after him have contributed new ideas, like Melanie Klein, and Wilfred Bion, still share their predecessor's vision of the myth as a personal tragedy. Klein's contribution was more about Oedipus Complex than about the myth itself. She adopted Freud's interpretation of the myth, and challenged only his idea concerning the chronology of Oedipus Complex and its consequences, which she believes emerges earlier at the oral stage when the infant is experiencing the depressive position. Bion tackled the myth from a completely different vertex, namely thinking and the mind with its various functions (attention, notation, action, inquiry, etc.), focusing also on the Oedipus the man, but pointing out at the possibility of apprehending the myth from different vertexes.

In the present study the author has tried to shed light on the myth from the group vertex. Thanks to this vertex change, the large group, which was until now invisible in Freud's work, became the leading actor in the myth, and the tragedy is no more a personal, namely Oedipus's, but a collective one, or the one of the group-as-a-whole, the Theban group.

Using Bion's (1961) ideas on group, I have argued that the tragedy in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex is the result of the group mentality and culture (Bion, 1961; Hafsi, 2001) characterizing Thebes at that period. To put it more concretely, the socio-cultural background of Oedipus Rex is characterized by what Bion called a conspiracy between the WG and the baD. Unable to contain the baP and baF, considered as bad and unwanted parts, the Theban group first resorted to such

defence processes such as splitting and projective identification. These baG and their inherent emotions and behaviors were split off and projected onto Oedipus, making him fulfil the function of SWG. He was unconsciously expected to contain them, that is render them less frightening, more tolerable, and usable for thinking during the WG activity. To put it differently, as a SWG and container Oedipus's function consisted in transforming these unbearable and unwanted baG or beta-elements into alpha-elements, and attenuate the group's anxiety associated with them. However, Oedipus failed in his SWG role. Instead of translating action into baG mentality, he did the opposite; he acted out the two baG. He acted out the baF by killing Laius his father, and the baP by solving the Sphinx riddle – a symbol of the mystery of man and his birth – and marrying Jocasta, his mother.

Oedipus's containment failure put the Theban group again in front of their unwanted baF and baP which were rendered even more frightening and unbearable by Oedipus's patricide and incest. The Theban group were left with only one issue to defend against the fear of baF and baP: resorting again to denial and suppression of these horrible self-parts and strengthening the group culture and mentality with its rigid WG/baD interaction. The baF and baP were suppressed to form a group matrix constituted by the prototypes of these unwanted and now undifferentiated (neither physical nor mental) group self-parts.

It is with this group matrix that the plague, a social disease, is associated. It is affiliated with baP, and displayed principally by members with pairing valency (Hafsi, 2006). Given their strong need for pairing, these individuals tend to be more sensible to the suppression of baP than members with a other valency types. In spite of its disastrous consequences, the plague fulfilled two functions for the Theban group: It served to point out Oedipus's failure, and provide the Theban group with an opportunity to temporarily contain the suppressed baG or pmPF. Which helped the Theban group to reach, through its handling of the plague, a transitory and precarious stability. For a real and lasting stability depends on the availability of a healthy SWG with a good enough containment capacity, and neither Oedipus, nor his successor Creon, had this capacity. That is why history had to repeat itself, and the tragedy of the Theban group did not end after Oedipus.

What are the implications this vertex change and reexamination of the Oedipus myth have for the understanding of the Oedipus complex? There are a few but essential ones. Let us now discuss them.

The first implication is that like the Oedipus myth, the Oedipus Complex is not only an individual but a group, or a family matter. That is, like the Oedipus Rex, the child entering the phallic stage is confronted with a family culture where dependency, with its inherent laws and object relations, reigns in company of the WG. This family culture is concomitant with the end of the anal stage, and is strengthened further at this stage. The infant is expected to learn from and obey the parents, and follow the family rules set by the latter. Any disobedience to and transgression of

these rules is reprimanded by the parents resorting to educational, and, sometimes, corporal means. The child is scold for any aggressive behavior displayed towards the parents or siblings. Any direct (behavioral or verbal) expression of sexuality is avoided (in the case of the parents), and discouraged when the child is concerned. Similarly, the child's sexual curiosity and the concomitant masturbatory games are often unwelcomed and perceived as bad practices. Sexual modesty is highly evaluated, encouraged and demanded of each member at this stage. The child's questioning about birth is often counteracted by the parents resorting to evasive means and fictive stories. The family-group at the phallic stage bears thus a striking resemblance to the Theban group in Oedipus Rex. That is, like the Theban group, the family-group is characterized by a culture where baD and WG coexist in a rigid relationship. Unable to tolerate the baP and baF, the family-group, like the Theban group, resorts, as a defensive means, to splitting and projective identification to get rid of these unwanted and bad baG. It is also the child who, like Oedipus, will serve as a the receiver of the projective identification. Like Oedipus, the child will be made to play the role of SWG and container for the baP and baF for the whole family-group. For, as discussed by Freud (1914) in his study on narcissism, the parents make the child carry their dreams and unsatisfied desires, allowing him to found his primary narcissism on the parents' own narcissism.

Under favorable conditions the child will succeed in its SWG and containing function. He will neutralize the baF and baP by refraining from acting them, and translating them instead into emotions and feelings (love for the mother, and hate and fear of the father, love for the spouse, and hate for the son, love for the son and hate for the spouse, etc.); the latter being less frightening and consequently more acceptable and tolerable than acts. It is only under these conditions that the normal or, in Freud's terminology, positive oedipus is possible. In other words, the whole family can experience and work through the oedipus complex only if they have succeeded, through the child, to contain the baP and baF in a Bionian sense,.

In this sense, the pathological (including the negative) Oedipus is a result of the child's failure in his SWG and containment function. In this case, the family-group found itself again overwhelmed by and unable to contain the unwanted and intolerable the baP and baF. Consequently, the family-group will thus lose contact with reality and tend towards self destruction. The child will be deprived of the possibility to 1) have his oedipal pre-conception mated with a realization (Bion, 1963), 2) have a conception of the family (parents), and, therefore, 3) experience Oedipus Complex in a Freudian meaning of the term. When confronted with the baP and baF, the family-group may also resort again to their suppression and confinement into the PMS.

This would lead to a family-group culture which will generate what is known as negative Oedipus. Like in the case of the Oedipus Rex, this suppression and "proto-mentalization" of the baP and baF may be expected to give rise to various physical, mental or psycho-somatic diseases. which at first appear -- on a psychological and in the light of psychological investigation -- to be

discrete feelings only loosely associated with one another" (Bion, 1961, p.102). Since these diseases are always displayed by the child, they are rarely recognized as proper to the whole family. They are thus dealt with and treated as individual diseases by those displaying them, as well as by physicians and psychotherapists. Like the plague in Oedipus, the child's disease(s) also springs from the family-group's matrix itself. Therefore, when examined closely, it is found that the(se) disease(s) includes elements which show clearly that it is not the child alone but the whole family-group that is affected by it. In other words, the cause of some of the diseases displayed by the child in, at least, the phallic stage, should not be searched for within the child, but in the family-group's matrix. It is true that a technique for investigating the matrix or content of the family-group's protomental system remains to be developed. However, as suggested by the present study, it is meanwhile necessary first to refrain from looking at the child as the center of his/her own diseases, and keep an eye on the invisible group lying beneath some of his diseases. Only then one can be said to have what Bion (1962) calls a "binocular vision" of the "dis-eases" our clients and patients bring to us in therapy. Finally, apprehending Oedipus from the family-group vertex will allow the therapist to interpret any expression of oedipal feelings and acting-out using mainly terminology specific to group dynamics, which will be therefore less resisted and more welcomed by the group.

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