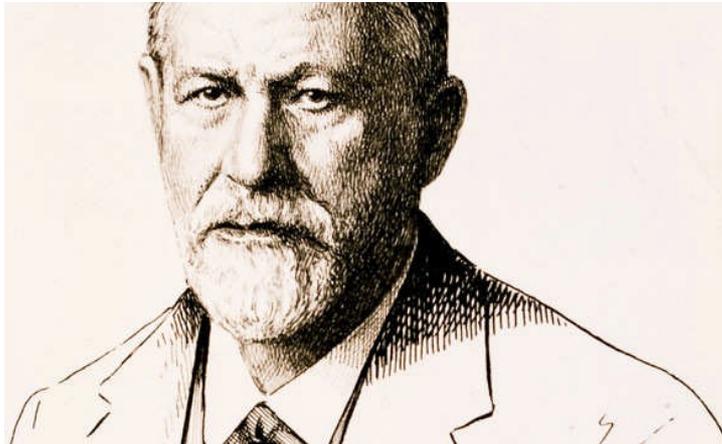


## Freud and Oedipus

*In choosing the Oedipus myth, Freud told us less which myth was the psyche's essence than that the essence of psyche is myth.*<sup>1</sup>



Freud suggested that biographers are fixated on their subjects because they have felt a special affinity for the core character. Their choice, conscious or not, of hero is selected by reasons in their own personal emotional life that are sympathetic to the biographers'. To some extent a participation mystique occurs with our own mythological heroes, perhaps as Freud had felt for Oedipus. Christine Downing whose mythological explorations have revealed her emotional life through her writings says: 'Myth study is never disinterested, objective; perhaps Freud's main contribution is this insight. The analysis of myths, of primitive thought, is always in part self-analysis, and self-analysis is always self creation, therapy.'<sup>2</sup>

Through his sympathy for Oedipus, Freud presented a new premise to psychology and this cornerstone code of belief resonated throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century psychoanalysis. Named after the central character in *Oedipus Rex*, the doctrine was christened the Oedipus complex. Sophocles, in his 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE tragedy, had left a literary legacy for Freud, who retold the archetypal tale from his own psychoanalytic point of view. But the frequently-told tragedy was analogous to Freud's own childhood fantasies and reveries that were summoned up during a period of self-analysis. Was it because of his own troubling identification with the story line that he assumed it was everyone's childhood pattern? Or was it through an enmeshment with the myth that he became its narrator. No doubt Freud's oedipal obsession was a great work of the imagination and a great example of archetypal patterning; however it does seem he remained unclear of the line between the personal and the archetypal. Even though Jung criticised the single and narrow focus of the Oedipus complex he did credit Freud with the detection of the first archetype in psychoanalysis. But to what extent did imaginative myth-making become reduced to a simple formula.

The question then is: did Freud mistake a personal pattern for a collective one? Or through his affinity with the myth, did he fashion his own childhood fantasies into a dogma that was limited or narrow-minded? While it may have some psychodynamic relevance, the myth may be appropriate only to a particular time, to a certain few under specific conditions, or as Hillman suggests: 'perhaps this myth only prolongs the illness of the ill view of the psyche'.<sup>3</sup> As we would suspect the Freudian legacy has been criticised for diminishing the fatality of family to a monomyth and for narrowing the focus of human pathology.

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<sup>1</sup> James Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis*, Harper Collins, New York, NY: 1978, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Downing, *Psyche's Sisters*, Continuum, New York, NY: 1990.

<sup>3</sup> James Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis*, Harper, New York, NY: 1992, 17.

Jung was an outspoken critic of the Freudian edict. He disapproved of the one-sidedness of the 'second generation' of Freudians whose psychology 'stopped short at a single archetype, that of the Oedipus complex'. Jung criticises the Freudian school 'who got stuck at the Oedipal motif', and their exaltation of the 'archetype of incest' whose focus remains 'predominantly sexualistic'. Failing to recognise 'that the Oedipus complex is an exclusively masculine affair' Jung stresses 'that sexuality is not the only possible dominant in the psychic process'.<sup>4</sup>

But however we view this, what is meaningful to me is that Freud's Oedipus becomes a prime example of how mythic motifs bring the patterns of the human soul to light. Like Oedipus, a heroic labour of being human is to struggle against our own blindness, often trying to solve the literal riddles of our life while being unaware of the deeper issues that underpin the mystery. We all become engulfed and entangled in our own archetypal storylines that are revealed through myth. If the course of living implies being possessed by a myth, to me consciousness implies being a willing or 'in-sighted' participant with the mythic material.

Freud's biography was oedipal; it had resonance with the mythic patterns in so many ways. But before we look at Freud's biography in relation to Oedipus', how might we 'read' this mythic participation mystique in another way. James Hillman offered the view that Freud's emersion in the myth was part of the psychoanalytic process: 'Of course Freud got it wrong – but I am not joining with his critics. Freud 'got it wrong' because it is the genius of psychology to get it wrong, to disturb, to pervert, dislocate, misread, so as to lift the repression of the usual sense.'<sup>5</sup> Through identification with the mythic pattern Freud gave it a psychic name.

Hillman saw classical mythology like a psychological textbook if only one could read it that way.<sup>6</sup> Jung too was conscious that psychology was a modern adaptation of mythic patterns.<sup>7</sup> In a way Freud was a lover of myth as well, at least when myths were symbolised in statuary. In over 40 years he collected a small museum of antiquities in the form of statues, vases, reliefs and papyri. And as a psychoanalyst, he likened himself to an archaeologist who kept exposing the layers of a patient's psyche until he unearthed the most valuable treasures. His statues were 'his old and grubby gods' who reminded him of his work excavating unconscious material. He had a vast collection of classical books; as a schoolboy Freud had read Oedipus Rex in Greek, and as a gifted student, he had been tested on it.<sup>8</sup>

As a collector of antiquities and fascinated with the oedipal story, it is not surprising that his collection included different images of the Sphinx. While surrounded inside his flat by a terracotta statute, vases and amulets of the sphinx, he also met her outside on his daily walks through Vienna guarding the Egyptian galleries or outside the Parliament<sup>9</sup>. Freud became immersed in answering his own riddle of the sphinx. On October 27, 1897 he wrote to his friend Wilhem Fleiss saying:

A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood.

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works (CW), Volume 10*, Princeton University Press: 1970, paragraphs 658-9.

<sup>5</sup> James Hillman, "Oedipus Revisited" from *Oedipus Variations*, Spring Publications, Dallas, TX: 1990, 99.

<sup>6</sup> James Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis*, 86.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Jung, CW 9i, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London: 1959, paragraph 302, says: 'Psychology therefore translates the archaic speech of myth into a modern mythologem.

<sup>8</sup> Peter L. Rudnytsky, *Freud and Oedipus*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY: 1987, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Janine Burke, *The Gods of Freud*, Knopf, Sydney: 2006, 204. 'Old and grubby gods' is Ms. Burke's expression.

Having generalised his 'single idea' he then endorses its archetypal power:

The Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality<sup>10</sup>

By the time Sigmund had published *The Interpretation of Dreams* a few years later, he had styled his 'single idea' into a psychic theory

The *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of fate....His fate moves us only because it might have been our own...It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers...King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is nothing more or less than a wish-fulfillment – the fulfillment of the wish of our childhood.'<sup>11</sup>

What if we thought of the riddle of the Sphinx as an oracular prophecy or having a deeper significance, not just a literal riddle to be answered by the intellect? Melbourne psychotherapist Bill Blomfield suggested that Oedipus was 'diverted from the real riddle, which is the Sphinx herself, the riddle of the complexity of being Female, of being Woman, of being Mother.' He argues that if the literal answer is 'Man' then the answer to the unobserved enigma presented by the Sphinx is 'Woman'.<sup>12</sup>

Jung also implied that the Sphinx was a mother image, saying: 'The riddle of the Sphinx was herself - the terrible mother-imago, which Oedipus would not take as a warning.'<sup>13</sup> In fact Jung was quite dismissive of Oedipus' lack of knowledge: 'This had all those tragic consequences which could easily have been avoided if only Oedipus had been sufficiently intimidated by the frightening appearance of the 'terrible;' or 'devouring' mother whom the sphinx personified.'<sup>14</sup> But then again Oedipus was still unable to see beyond the literality of the question, caught in the grips of his own psychic blindness.

Freud's riddle of the Sphinx also seems to have permeated his work. As his biographer Peter Gay says: 'Freud's professions of ignorance appear almost willful, as though there were some things about women that he did not want to know. It is telling that the only emotional tie Freud ever sentimentalized was the mother's love for her son. While every lasting intimate relationship, he wrote in 1921, whether in marriage, friendship or the family, conceals a sediment of hostile feelings, there is perhaps "one single exception", the "relation of mother to son which, founded on narcissism, is undisturbed by later rivalry.'" He characterized this maternal affection for the son as "the most perfect, easily the most ambivalence-free of all human relationships." This sounds far more like a wish than a sober inference from clinical material.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887 – 1904, edited by Jeffrey Masson, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA: 1985, 272

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated Dr. A.A. Brill. New York: The Modern Library, 1994, p. 159-61.

<sup>12</sup> Bill Blomfield, "Out of Phocis: Oedipus and Sphinx as riddle", *Psychoanalysis Downunder*, Issue #2, April 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Jung, *The Collected Works*, 5: 265

<sup>14</sup> Carl Jung, *The Collected Works*, 5: 264

<sup>15</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud A life for our Time*, 305-6

Earlier in his life Freud had fantasised about being admired as a man who knew answers to life's riddle; perhaps for him these riddles were the nature of psychological taboos. In 1906 on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday his colleagues gave him a medallion of Oedipus inscribed with words in ancient Greek from Sophocles: "who knows the famous riddle and was a man most mighty". On one side was a bust of Freud; on the flip side was one of Oedipus facing the Sphinx. Freud and Oedipus aligned. But Freud was shocked, described as 'pale and agitated' as this was very close to the earlier fantasy he had. When he was a student he used to admire the busts of famous professors and imagined one day he would be honoured in this way with the very words that now were on the medallion.<sup>16</sup> The confluence of his profile on one side of the coin and the words reminded him of his own fantasy. He had spent his adult life attempting to understand the riddles of the unconscious, but when an earlier reverie converged with his literal world at 50, I wonder if his oedipal destiny became more apparent to him?

At only three days old Oedipus was exposed on Mt. Cithaeron in the wild so that the curse laid upon his father, of being murdered by his own son, would not come to pass. Perhaps had Freud studied the ancestral saga for the Theban dynasty he may have been more informed about the family atmosphere that the soul of Oedipus inhaled at birth. Oedipus' father Laius had lost his own father early in life and was banished at a very young age to the house of Pelops. There he fell in love with the youthful Chrysippus before he was recalled to take the throne of Thebes. Yet Oedipus' father had been cursed by his host Pelops for the rape of his beloved son Chrysippus. Oedipus' grandfather Labdacus had also lost his father as a child and like Laius was too young to acquire the throne. In Laius' absence the Theban twins, sons of Zeus, had taken rulership, having rescued their mother Antiope from being brutally treated, originally by her husband and then brother-in-law.

Oedipus' mother Jocasta remained trapped in a loveless marriage to her husband Laius having given birth to her son who was then taken away from her and left to die on Mt. Cithaeron. Ancestrally the relationship between mother and son had been complex. Oedipus had four great aunts, sister of his grandfather Polydorus, and each one had a tragic relationship with their son.



*Detail of Fernand Khnopff **The Caresses** (1896)*

Even though Semele's son Dionysus was the latest-born Olympian god, she lost her life in the process of carrying him when she demanded to see the full power of her lover Zeus. The birth of Dionysus not only proved tragic for Semele, but also her three sisters, who were driven mad by the god when they initially refused to accept Dionysus' divine birth. Autonoe lost her son Acteon when

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud A Life for Our Time*, WW Norton & Company, London: 198, 154.

the goddess Artemis turned his own hounds on him after he transgressed the hallowed boundary of her sanctuary, witnessing the goddess bathing with her devotees. Agave, mother of Pentheus, became a follower of Dionysus, yet in a frenzied trance brought on by the god she tore her son to shreds. And Ino was driven mad by Hera for taking care of the child Dionysus. After she killed her son, she leapt into the sea with him in her arms; a tragic legacy for four sisters and their sons.

Like Oedipus, Freud's familial background must be taken into account, as each character in the theatre of the family is born into the system at a point in time influenced by the ancestral fate that lingers in its atmosphere. Dynasty becomes our fate but dynasty is also our destiny. Sigmund was the eldest child in his family of origin, the first-born son of his young mother but the third son of his father, Jacob who had previously been married twice with two sons from his first marriage. Therefore Freud had two adult half-brothers when he was born: Emanuel was two years older than Sigmund's mother, while Philip was one year younger. Emanuel had one child at the time of Sigmund's birth and therefore Freud became an uncle at birth to John, aged one. A niece, Pauline, was born six months after Sigmund. The confusing family picture placed Amalie, Sigmund's mother, in the same generation as his half-brothers. The family atmosphere that contained his parents' trans-generational marriage, spawned fantasies for Freud of his mother having a relationship with his half-brother, Emanuel. The situation also fed fanciful fantasies of his half-brother being his father.

The riddle of the sphinx asked what creature used four legs in the morning, two midday and three in the evening. Oedipus saw the metaphor of the morning, noon and evening of life, but did not recognise the pattern of the three generations that would become shattered by solving the riddle and taking the widowed queen as his wife. The generations of Oedipus' family line become psychically enmeshed when he married his mother and had four children who were also his half-siblings.

Freud too was caught up in a generational fault line with his half brothers being of the same generation as his mother. In Freud's publication, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, the book that inspired the popular phrase 'Freudian slip', he illustrates how forgetting and making unconscious errors reveal deep complexes. Freud describes two errors that he found after his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published. One of the errors was to incorrectly name Hannibal's father as *Hasdrubal*, who was in fact Hannibal's brother. Hence the brother was substituted for the father, fuelling a fantasy; as Freud says: 'how much pleasanter it would have been had I been the son of my brother instead of the son of my father!'<sup>17</sup> The other error was to name Zeus as the one who castrates Ouranus, virtually missing out one generation. How could this have happened when Freud consciously knew it was Chronus, Zeus' father, who castrated Ouranus? Freud explains that his half-brother had once admonished him in a way he never forgot. His brother had clearly pointed out that Freud belonged 'not to the second but really the third generation of [his] father'.<sup>18</sup>

Freud's first sibling Julius died at only seven months old. Many losses in the family coincided with the death of Freud's brother. Freud's mother also lost her younger brother, Julius, for whom the new baby had been named; therefore Sigmund lost a brother and an uncle, both named Julius, at the same time. These losses were compounded by the failure of Freud's father's business. A black hole appeared in the constellation of the family.

The birth of Freud's sister Anna was also significant for many reasons: she was the first of five sisters and the first surviving sibling to follow him. As the oldest male sibling to five sisters, Freud gradually displaced his weakened father, becoming their protector and adviser. Like Oedipus he became father to his mother's family. Freud directed most of his hostility towards his sister, Anna. She was his least favourite sibling. Whether this was because of her challenge for the mother or

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<sup>17</sup> Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. A. A. Brill (T. Fisher Unwin, London: 1928), 253.

<sup>18</sup> Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 253.

because of his guilt reaction to an erotic bond is not certain. However, the covert hostility between the two siblings remained throughout their adult years.

Anna is described in Freud's interpretations of one of his own earliest memories.<sup>19</sup> His father had allowed Sigmund, aged five at the time, and Anna, almost three, to rip up an illustrated book. He described tearing the book, leaf by leaf, like an artichoke. Paralleling this memory were fantasies of masturbation. Freud was to postulate later that these erotic fantasies felt guilt laden and therefore were converted into hostility. Freud's oedipal complex centred on the young boy's desire for the mother; yet sexual desire for the sister could be even more overwhelming owing to their closer proximity, equality and symmetry. Freud's adherence to the oedipal complex did not allow him to see the erotic impulses between brother and sister in their own right, limiting his vision into the abundant myths that told of the brother-sister marriage as well as the love and Eros between opposite-sex siblings. The triangle formed with sibling and partner was a blind spot. Nevertheless triangles formed with his sister and her husband as well as with his wife and her sister.

An interesting enmeshment between the siblings continued into their adult lives. Anna and Sigmund married a sibling pair. Eli Bernays, the older brother of Martha Bernays, married Anna three years before Freud married Martha, even though Sigmund and Martha were the first couple to be engaged. Eli and Martha, unlike Sigmund and Anna, had a close sibling bond. This intimacy was threatening to Freud, especially when his fiancée would seek the advice of her brother Eli. For reasons never mentioned, Freud did not attend his sister's wedding! He transferred much of his hostility and rivalry to Eli, twice a brother-in-law. When Eli died in 1923 in New York, Freud was bitter about their money and his sister Anna not helping out her four remaining sisters.

Another triangle formed part of Freud's marriage. In November 1895, nine years after Sigmund and Martha married, Minna Bernays, his wife's sister, came 'for a stay of several months'.<sup>20</sup> In reality, she lived with her sister and brother-in-law for the rest of her life. This arrival occurred a few weeks before the sixth and last child, Anna, was born. The sisters shared the management of the household. Martha knew little of her husband's vocation or seemed little interested, while Minna was actively involved and supportive of his work. Minna was intellectually aligned with Sigmund while Martha was more pragmatic, attending to the care of their children. Freud has referred to Minna as 'my closest confidante'.<sup>21</sup> Her presence was part of his daily life – he discussed his analytic practice with her, they spent evenings playing cards together and she accompanied him on his daily walk. In essence, Freud had two wives; his wife's sister became his spiritual wife. Yet his first sister remained estranged.

Anna was also his daughter's name. Freud named his children after his friends, but Anna was not named for his sister, but the daughter of a friend. Anna was the name of both sister and daughter, the daughter named after a friend's daughter. Like Freud Oedipus was also confused by the generational gap; Antigone was both sister and daughter to Oedipus.

In later life 'Freud liked to call his daughter Anna his Antigone'.<sup>22</sup> While Oedipus' children were all close to him it was Antigone who became his guide and helpmate just as Anna was for Freud. Over the years Anna became not only a secretary and nurse to him, but his voice reading his papers at congresses and ceremonies. Antigone was her father's eyes; Anna was her father's voice, when he suffered from the pain of throat cancer. As Peter Gay his biographer says: 'It is Antigone, who, in Oedipus at Colonus leads her blind father by the hand, and by 1923, it was Anna Freud who was firmly installed as her wounded father's secretary, confidante, representative, colleague and

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<sup>19</sup> Lucy Freeman and Herbert Stream, *Freud and Women*, Frederick Ungar, New York: 1981, 26.

<sup>20</sup>. *Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fleiss*, Jeffrey M. Masson (trans. and ed.), 152.

<sup>21</sup>. *Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fleiss*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud, A Life for our Time*, 442.

nurse.’<sup>23</sup> Anna had a place in her father’s heart and as the unmarried daughter, he like to call her his ‘dear only daughter’<sup>24</sup>. The father-daughter bonding of Oedipus and Antigone, Freud and Anna echoed the mother-son duality.

Like Oedipus Freud spent a short time before death in exile. Having been helped to flee Austria, Freud died in 1939 having escaped to England. His sister Anna was in America; his brother Alexander had relocated to Canada. But it was ‘the four old women between 75 and 80’<sup>25</sup> who were not as lucky. These were his four sisters; Adolfine died of starvation at one concentration camp while the others, Rosa, Marie and Pauline were murdered in 1942 at another, probably Auschwitz. Like the four sisters of Thebes, Freud’s quaternary of sisters met a fateful finale.



*Freud’s Sisters resonate with the tragedy of the Theban sisters*

To end, I return to Freud’s quote that ‘The *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of fate...His fate moves us only because it might have been our own...’<sup>26</sup> Mythic motifs flow beneath the course of our everyday lives and when we are closely identified with their patterns, we serve as living voices for the myths. Perhaps the choice we have is to reflect somewhat more consciously on the riddles presented in the drama of our lives.

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud, A Life for our Time*, 442.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud, A Life for our Time*, 431.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Clark, *Freud: the Man and his Cause*, Jonathan Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London: 1980, 521

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 11