Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of English Studies and Culture**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 8, January 2020
Pp. 40-48
http://www.arsartium.org

Greek Oedipus's Story and the Ethiopian Skendes's story

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Abstract

Here is the comparison of two famous stories which narrate the most unheard of stories where the hero lies down with his own mother, of course, with various reasons for it and supported by different contexts. In the Oedipus story the hero by all the purity of his heart did want to avoid such heinous crime in his life but is almost predestined by fate and unconsciously and unknowingly Oedipus is led by the forces of fate to this hateful crime. Not only does he marry his own mother Queen Jocasta, but he also brings forth four children from her, all four of whom in fact become simultaneously his siblings as well as his children. In the case of Skendes of Ethiopia, the situation is totally different. Caught up in the mesh of the wisecrack that all women are prostitutes, Skendes coming back after the higher studies abroad wanted to probe and verify this statement with regard to his own mother. He bribes the housemaid of his mother with hundred dinars and conveniently arranges to sleep with his mother for one night in order to test her loyalty to her dead husband. He succeeds and sleeps with his mother and then only reveals his identity to the mother hearing which she commits suicide. Pondering over this tragic end of his mother, Skendes takes an oath not to speak any more in his life. His philosophical visions communicated in writing to the then King of Ethiopia have become great source of inspiration for the Ethiopians. An analysis of these two stories is proposed in this paper.

Keywords: Oedipus Complex, Incest, Experimentation, Hasty belief, Presumption.

Introduction

When we make a survey of the World Literature at large, there are at least two special stories where the hero is somehow or other destined to or occasioned to sleep with his own mother. With regard to the hero of the first one, the Greek story of Oedipus,

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it is conspicuously worked out by the mysteriously inescapable fate of man. The fore knowledge of the hero about such a prophecy and the conscious attempts taken by the hero himself to shun such an embarrassing situation make the story of Oedipus more and more intensely pathetic. The second instance from Ethiopia could be attributed to a hasty belief in a philosophical maxim and the immature decision of a youngster to experiment with his own mother with regard to the veracity of that maxim. This hasty decision of generalizing the women's nature assumed by Skendes after his experimentation with his own mother, is not at all substantiated with reference to other women. And once the poor woman came to know that she had slept with her own son, she committed suicide. Skendes vowed not to speak any more, but became very famous after that and his Maxims are collected by the order of the King and Skendes became a respected wise man. A comparison between these two stories is proposed in this study.

Oedipus Trilogy

The first one is from the classical Greek Literature and composed by the great dramatist Sophocles in his trilogy of Oedipus story which is commonly known as the Theban Plays. Each of the plays in the Theban Plays relates to the tale of the legendary Oedipus, who happened to kill his father and marry his mother without knowing that they were his parents. His family is fated to be doomed for three generations.

In the first play *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus is the protagonist. Oedipus' infanticide is planned by his parents, King Laius and Queen Jocasta, to avert him from fulfilling a prophecy; in truth, the servant entrusted with the infanticide passes the infant on through a series of intermediaries to a childless couple, who adopt him not knowing his history. Oedipus eventually learns of the Delphic Oracle's prophecy of him, that he would kill his father and marry his mother; Oedipus attempts to flee his fate without harming those he knows as his parents (at this point, he does not know that he is adopted). Oedipus meets a man at a crossroads accompanied by servants; Oedipus and the man fight, and Oedipus kills the man (who was his father, Laius, although neither knew at the time). He becomes the ruler of Thebes after solving the riddle of the sphinx and in the process, marries the widowed queen, his mother Jocasta. Thus the stage is set for horror. When the truth comes out, following from another true but confusing prophecy from Delphi, Jocasta commits suicide, Oedipus blinds himself and leaves Thebes. At the end of the play, order is restored. This restoration is seen when Creon, brother of Jocasta, becomes king, and also when Oedipus, before going off to exile, asks Creon to take care of his children. Oedipus's children will always bear the weight of shame and humiliation because of their father's actions.

This gruesomely tragic story has been commonly approached with the explanatory note of man's incapability of squarely confronting with the forces of fate and destiny. One could find umpteen number of research studies trying to exonerate Oedipus with the responsibility of all the tragic things occurring in the play. We could also see attempts at highlighting the helplessness of the legendary Oedipus and trying to justify whatever he did in order to avert the sad occurring predestined for him by the fate. Some critical writers tried to see the play as a work of art and attributed the intensity

of tragedy to the scheme and plan of the playwright Sophocles. They tried to view the whole tragedy against the background of the tragic flaw (*hamartia*) of Oedipus. E.R. Dodd (2007) in his critical study explains: "His [Thyestes'] story has clearly much in common with that of Oedipus, and Plato as well as Aristotle couples the two names as examples of the gravest *Hamartia* . . . Thyestes and Oedipus are both of them men who violated the most sacred of Nature's laws and thus incurred the most horrible of all pollutions; . . . The *hamartia* of Oedipus did not lie in losing his temper with Teiresias; it lay quite simply in parricide and incest – a *megaleh hamartia* indeed, the greatest a man can commit" (20).

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the banished Oedipus and his daughter Antigone arrive at the town of Colonus where they encounter Theseus, King of Athens. He appeals to the world-famed hospitality of Athens and hints at the blessings that his coming will confer on the State as predicted by the Oracle. They agree to await the decision of King Theseus. From Theseus Oedipus craves protection in life and burial in Attic soil; the benefits that will accrue shall be told later. Theseus departs having promised to aid and befriend him. No sooner has he gone than Creon enters with an armed guard who seize Antigone and carry her off (Ismene, the other sister, they have already captured) and he is about to lay hands on Oedipus, when Theseus, who has heard the tumult, hurries up and, rescues them. He upbraided Creon for his lawless act, and threatened to detain him till he has shown where the captives have been and did everything for restoring them. In the last scene, Theseus returns bringing with him the rescued maidens. He informed Oedipus that a stranger who has taken sanctuary at the altar of Poseidon wished to see him. In fact, it was Polyneices who has come to crave his father's forgiveness and blessing, knowing by an oracle that victory will fall to the side that Oedipus espouses. But Oedipus spurned the hypocrite, and invoked a dire curse on both his unnatural sons. As we read in the Argument of this play, "A sudden clap of thunder is heard, and as peal follows peal, Oedipus is aware that his hour is come and bids Antigone summon Theseus. Self-guided he leads the way to the spot where death should overtake him, attended by Theseus and his daughters. Halfway he bids his daughters farewell, and what followed none but Theseus knew. He was not (so the Messenger reports) for the gods took him" (*Sophocles' Oedipus Trilogy*, p.74). Oedipus dies and strife begins between his sons Polyneices and Eteocles.

While feeling pity with the valiant and heroic Oedipus falling prey to the flaw of being upright and very investigative to inflict punishment on the culprit, there are scholars who pointed out the incestuous relationship of Oedipus with his daughters Antegone and Ismene. This is based on the reversal of *threptra* as is clear in the drama *Oedipus at Colonus.* Sarah Binns (2011) exclaims: "*Threptra* the Homeric word for the concept, is defined as 'return for rearing'. . . . Through analysis of the use of *threptra* in Greek literature and in archaic Atheninan history, we see its traditional role and obligations in society. Antigone and Ismene fulfill the *threptra* that should be their brothers', an undermining of Greek practices as expressed in Hesiod and Herodotus. The roles of Ismene and Antigone are important, and Sophocles presents their relationship with Oedipus as incestuous. This incest, however, is yet another reversal from Oedipus Tyrannus that leads to positive results both for Oedipus and civic

society, as represented by Athens" (11). Dorothy Wilner (1982) "sees the relationship between Oedipus and his daughters as one metaphorical incest", and affirms that this seems to be a correct interpretation. She posits that "Oedipus seeks to bind his daughters to himself and displace his sons" (59).

In *Antigone*, the protagonist is Oedipus' daughter, Antigone. She is faced with the choice of allowing her brother Polyneices' body to remain unburied, outside the city walls, exposed to the ravages of wild animals, or to bury him and face death. The king of the land, Creon, has forbidden the burial of Polyneices for he was a traitor to the city. Antigone decides to bury his body and face the consequences of her actions. Creon sentences her to death. Eventually, Creon is convinced to free Antigone from her punishment, but his decision comes too late and Antigone commits suicide. Her suicide triggers the suicide of two others close to King Creon: his son, Haemon, who was to wed Antigone, and his wife, Eurydice, who commits suicide after losing her only surviving son.

The legendary story of Oedipus brings out a full length tragedy: Oedipus fated to marry his own mother and having brought forth four children from his own mother, all of it unwillingly and sans knowledge of the incest element, suffers excruciating pains when the reality was made known, afflicts severe self-punishment by making himself blind, Queen Jocasta prickly takes her life away, Antigone and Ismenehis daughters and his two sons Polynices and Eteocles also suffer the tragic consequences and the members and relatives of that family are affected intently.

John Peradotto (1992) has "urged that Apollo not only predicts Oedipus' 'crimes,' and punishes him for them, but causes them to happen" (10). He means to affirm that the poet Sophocles causes them to happen. It can be understood on a level of poetic construction which is quite distinct from that on which he fabricates verisimilar motivation and action in his human characters. Obviously, the result of it will significantly reduce the usefulness of the play as a model for evaluating the relative merits of prophecy over sophistic science, to be taken as a model for a theory of action, or as a model for anything except perhaps the production of a powerfully persuasive ideological message.

Peradotto (1992) explains further: "What Apollo 'does' in the O[edipus] T[yrannus] is something the poet is doing directly; what Oedipus "does" is something the poet does indirectly" (10). If we consider what "Oedipus" in this kind of story could or might be expected to do, we will try to pronounce a whole set of rules (verisimilitude) explicit, which are shaped by prevailing views about what human beings can or are likely to do in certain circumstances. The Audience- and reader-response is naturally controlled by such rules, and poets are obviously constrained by them; in composing, they must work through these rules at least in an indirect way. But if we ponder what "Apollo" in a story like this can or might be doing with respect to human beings, we realize that it is very nearly identical to what a poet, composing this kind of story, could do with respect to his characters. This explains why nothing that "Apollo" does in the play is motivated the way human actions in the play have to be motivated and arereally motivated. What is to be noted well is that such direct operation of the poet on the plot, specifically in the creation of the coincidences, is construed, by the

unscientific mentality, as divine activity. In fact, the power of the play as a model of belief and conduct lies in the opacity of this distinction. To reveal the distinction is to demystify and so to neutralize that power. For our knowledge of how the effect is achieved can actually destroy the illusion, and, surely should do so.

Peradotto (1992) goes on to affirm: "Prophecy is not conceivable apart from narrative. It derives from narrative, from the representation of causal continuity in time. It is, I believe, less accurate to say that a narrative represents a prophecy than to say that prophecy represents that narrative, and does so by pre-presenting it, the frame paradoxically embedded in what it frames" (10).

Towards the end of his article Dodd (2007) concludes: "To me personally Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles – even the last riddle, to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion. I do not know how far Sophocles intended that. But certainly in the last lines of the play (which I firmly believe to be genuine) he does generalize the case, does appear to suggest that in some sense Oedipus is every man and every man is potentially Oedipus" (27).

There have been some versions of the Oedipus story where it is argued that Oedipus was not simply following his fate of committing the patricide by killing Laius, but it was a punishment for the crime of Laius falling in love with and carrying off his host's youngest son, while enjoying the hospitality of Pelops. According to Thomas Gould (2007) "there is not a word of any of this in any surviving play by Sophocles. When, in the *Antigone*, Ismene and Antigone fear the working of a family curse, it is the consequences of the accidental marriage between Oedipus and Jocasta that they fear, not any old remembered crime of Laius'. In the *Oedipus at Colonus* (964ff) Oedipus says of his unwitting patricide and incest: this is the way the gods wanted it, perhaps because they had some ill will for my family from of old. Then he adds that he knows this because in him himself there was no flaw to upbraid in payment for which he had done these things against his parents and himself. And then he adds a second proof. If an oracle is given to a father that his son will kill him, he asks – if that oracle is given before the son is born – how could one blame the son? (40)."

The Story of Skendes

The second story in the purview of this study is that of Skendes who happened to experiment with his own mother to know the veracity of a wise philosopher's maxim that "All women are prostitutes", which is handed down to us by the Ethiopian Literature. A great scholar Claude Sumner has done extensive work on the Ethiopian philosophy and has produced a comprehensive volume *Classical Ethiopian Philosophy* (1985) and two special volumes of *Ethiopian Philosophy,Vol 1, The Book of the Wise Philosophers* (1974) and *Ethiopian Philosophy, Vol IV, The Life and Maxims of Skendes* (1981) all of which refer to this incestuous relationship of mother and son. The obvious similarity of this story to the Oedipus story cannot be ignored. But before we make a comparison between the two stories, I will try to retell this story as we draw it from extracts of all Sumner's books referred to and as the story is compiled by KirosTeodros (2004).

One of the outstanding texts of the fourteenth century [Ethiopian Literature] concerns the story of Skendes (Greek, Sekondos), a story that has ûred the imaginations of Greek, Syrian, Arabic, and Ethiopian scholars over the centuries. The scholars are of general opinion that the Ethiopian text is based on the Arabic, although some scholars contend that its style is modeled on the Greek. The Ethiopian version is describing the story of Skendes, the son of sagacious parents, who decided to send him to Berytus (modern Beirut) and Athens for a classical education. The brilliant boy Skendes was thirteen years old at the time of his departure for higher studies in the foreign lands. During the span he stayed abroad, he had encountered with a statement of the wise philosophers that declared, "All women are prostitutes." He was greatly perturbed by the statement ever since he heard it and determined to verify it. After staying abroad for twenty-four years he returned to his homeland. Even now he was not liberated from the perturbing feelings he had when he had to confront with that disturbing statement about the women and was still unmarried. He recalled that disturbing statement about the nature of women, and decided to test his own mother. Through the services of a maid servant whom he met at a public well, he managed to trick the maid into letting him into his mother's house, to spend the night with her mistress in exchange for one hundred dinars. Gail M Presbey (2003) states, "While his mother had first vehemently refused the offer when her maid conveyed the message, she was later wooed by the maid's account of the handsomeness of her suitor. He spends the night with her, kissing her breasts, but going no farther"(142). As Skendes became successful in his experimentation with his mother, he concludes that the philosopher's maxim is true.

As Gail M Presbey asserted further: "However, this story goes on to convey both tragedy and Skendes's later success in life"(142). In the next morning after he spent the night with his mother, she questioned her maid asking with concern if he were not pleased with her. Skendes then explained: 'I am your son'. The poor mother could not bear with this shocking news and hence runs out and hangs herself. Skendeswas surprised at what has happened and blamed his tongue and its utterance for the death of his mother and deeply regretted his words that had caused it. In atonement, he vowed never to speak again; from that moment on, he became permanently silent. As Sumner (1981) asserts: the "tragedy" of the story is that "his mother, as all women, is burdened with instincts that necessarily lead her to the incestual act; on the other hand, she is a free, responsible creature"(266).

Teodros Kiros (2004) explains the consequences, "the emperor at the time was Andryanos, and when he heard the extraordinary and tragic story of Skendes, he invited him to his court. When Skendes was ordered to speak, he refused; instead he wrote down his thoughts, and the king also communicated with him through writing" (166). His responses were all compiled and brought out into two books, with ûfty-ûve questions in the ûrst and 108 questions in the second. After the emperor had carefully perusedall his responses, and he was deeply impressed with the depth of those responses given in writing by Skendes, and so did not order the philosopher to speak. Instead of it, it was ofûcially decided that the work of Skendeswill be treated as a national treasure and should be preserved in the priests' archives.

The philosopher Skendes developed in his discourses systematic theories about the essence of God, the angels, the universe, and the elements, and about the soul, human nature, and the spirit. Many of his other discourses speculate about the emotions and states of being. According to Sumner, the obstinate silence of Skendes produced an implacable dialectic of speech and silence in classical Ethiopian philosophy. The importance of silence and wisdom, the need to control the tongue, thus became powerful ethical and sapiential themes in classical Ethiopian philosophy.

The *Book of the Philosophers, Fisalgos*, and Skendes's sayings are both literary and philosophical. At issue is not the status of the texts. They are broadly speaking philosophical in their own right. It is the case, however, that they are derivative transformations of non-Ethiopian texts to which Skendes and many others contributed. Some of the sayings are natively Ethiopian, based on observation, reports, readings of the Bible, and other sources. Given Ethiopia's location and history, it is not an accident that the sapiential themes are at once Arabic, Syrian, biblical, and Greek. Ethiopia is clearly at the conûuence of world cultures, and its philosophical tradition precisely reûects that conûuence.

Gail M. Presbey affirms (2003): "The broad wisdom tradition of Ethiopia emphasizes vices of women so that women will be seen as needing to subject themselves to men's rule" (151).

It should be specially noted that immediately after the death of his mother, it is this act alone for which Skendes felt any guilt at all, and not the complete scenario that preceded it, for he can observe an immediate connection between the two events. When Skendes finally communicated to the King the circumstances of his mother's death, he protected himself from any small part of blame in her death, through a reasoned argument contemplating necessity. He tried to explain that the death was the outcome of a chain of coincidental events, thus severing any form of causality, and therefore blame, between his own words and actions to his mother and her resultant suicide. He tried to bring an analogy to a parable of the "milk-bearer" which again was wholly inappropriate as a parallel to his own actions. As a matter of fact, the honest and guileless milk-bearer of his story, in feeding guests milk which she does not know is accidentally poisoned, is engaging in an act of gracious hospitality that would be praised in most circumstances. As highlighted by Sumner (1985) clearly: "Skendes is instead engaging in deception, incest, and payment for sexual favors – all morally unacceptable behaviors. The resulting suicide of his mother, while not foreseen by him, is triggered by his unacceptable actions as well as her shame at having cooperated with him in forbidden deeds" (178-80). Surprisingly, the outcome of his experiment and his mother's expression of her shame does not lead Skendes to question the universality of the maxim which he confidently verified, and which he continues to believe after her death.

Conclusion

We have gone through the pathetically miserable stories of two women victims. When we compare the fate of these two women, the first one Queen Jocasta cannot be held responsible at all for the incestuous relationship with his son Oedipus.

Similarly, the mother of Skendes has fallen prey to the feminine weakness of yielding to a covetable and most suitable suitor for love. Both of them never had any inkling to sleep with their own sons. Analyzing the stories at this perspective we come to learn that both these women should be exonerated of the incestuous crime of sleeping with their sons. It is only the fate and circumstances alone which forced them to be the victims of such a predicament. Both of them had to take away their precious lives once they understood the truth of the unthinkably heinous crime of sleeping with their own children.

A comparison and contrast with the two men characters would be more interesting in the scope of this study. With regard to Oedipus the first hero, he is the one who was always bent on eschewing any crimes in his life. The twisty turns of events one after the other led the valiant and heroic Oedipus to the utmost shameful moment in his life. The more and more he was intent on avoiding thepredicted crimes and running away from them, the deeper and deeper Oedipus was immersing into the abyss of fateful ignominy. It is true that Oedipus has achieved a legendary status in the world of literature and Sigmund Freud the psychologist elevated him to greater levels by conceptualizing the Oedipus complex. As asserted by Joshua Waggaoner (2017): "To reiterate, we know that Freud recognized Oedipus the King to be 'comparable to the work of psychoanalysis' primarily because of the delayed discovery of the king's true identity (Freud 1940, p. 160) The correlation is made possible in part by the play's tragic irony, which transforms the audience and certain characters (i.e., Tiresias and the shepherd) into the analyst who watches the analysand (Oedipus) come to terms with his past (8 of 11)".

With regard to Skendes the second hero, the most important difference between him and Oedipus is that Skendes fully knew what he was going to do when he ventured to experiment with his own mother. So naturally the story of Skendes spending one night with his own mother is not so intensely pathetic as in the case of Oedipus sleeping with his mother and bringing forth four children quite unaware of it for a pretty long span of time. As Sumner (1981) has observed in *The Life and Maxims of Skendes*: "The emphasis on Freudian psychology turns Skendes into an individual with a complex neurosis: he is immature, infantile in so far as he has not passed through a stage that most boys grow out of (227-28, 234)". After Skendes has sent the maid with the message of the offer to his mother, he states that he will rejoice in his mother's virtue if she turns down the offer; and if she says yes, then he will be satisfied that the philosophers are indeed a sound source of wisdom. The Freudian analysis has to say that his true happiness would be if he were to be able to sleep with his mother – the one thing that Skendes denies is a motive of his at all. Such an analysis turns Skendes into a liar and self-deceiver, when the text presents him as an earnest young man in pursuit of knowledge.

In fine, as Gail M. Presbey (2003) has highlighted the difference between Oedipus story and the story of Skendes excellently in concise terms: "The Skendes story differs from the Greek Oedipus tragedy. In the Greek Version, Oedipus is pitied because his life is ruined by what he has done; both Oedipus and his mother are destroyed. But Skendes is catapulted to fame and success by his experiment with his mother; his

mother suffers a tragedy, while he escapes unscathed. He suffered from the memory of the death of his mother. However he curiously protected himself from realizing an accurate account of his role in her death, by blaming only one body part, his tongue, for having uttered the words 'I am your son' (145)."

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