

# MYTHS AS INSTRUCTIONS FROM ANCESTORS: THE EXAMPLE OF OEDIPUS

*by Lyle B. Steadman and Craig T. Palmer*

*Abstract.* The growing interest in dual-inheritance models of human evolution has focused attention on culture as a means by which ancestors transmitted acquired phenotypic characteristics to their descendants. The ability of cultural behaviors to be repeatedly transmitted from ancestors to descendants enables individuals to influence their descendant-leaving success over many more generations than are usually considered in most analyses of inclusive fitness. This essay proposes that traditional stories, or myths, can be seen as a way in which ancestors influence their descendant-leaving success by influencing the behavior of many generations of their descendants. The myth of Oedipus is used as an example of a traditional story aimed at promoting proper behavior and cooperation among kin. This interpretation of the Oedipus myth is contrasted with Freudian and structuralist interpretations.

*Keywords:* evolution; mythology; Oedipus; religion; tradition.

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## INTRODUCTION

From our ancestors we inherit both our genes and our traditions. Although the exact mechanisms involved in the “dual inheritance” of genes and traditions is quite complex and controversial (see Boyd and Richerson 1985; Campbell 1975; Cavalli-Sforza 1981; Cloak 1975; Daly 1982; Durham 1979, 1982; Flinn and Alexander 1982; Lumsden and Wilson 1981; Tooby and Cosmides 1989), we support the view that traditions are “a system of information, support, and guidance” that serve as “cultural supplements” (Hefner 1991, 123) to genetic inheritance. This view holds that traditions are passed down from ancestors to succeeding generations, because they tend to influence the behavior of descendants in ways that increase their inclusive fitness and, hence, the descendant-leaving success of their ancestors. We also suggest that myths are a crucial

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part of this supplemental information and guidance system, because myths “shape the most fundamental or ultimate values” (Burhoe 1979, 156; see also d’Aquila 1983, 1986) by providing each generation with “rules laying down what ought to be done or what ought not to be done.” (Hefner 1991, 115). Since cooperative social behavior does not occur automatically among humans, and the ability to form and maintain cooperative social relationships, both within the nuclear family and with larger sets of distant kin and nonkin (see Alexander 1979, 1986; Campbell 1975), is crucial to human descendant-leaving success, the most important of these rules are likely to concern social behavior. The *Lugbara* people of sub-Saharan Africa state, “The rules of social behavior are ‘the words of our ancestors’” (Middleton 1960, 27). For many people, the words of their ancestors are contained in myths.

Burhoe (1979, 1986) argues that religion is the key to “trans-kin” cooperation. This view is partially based on the fact that since such trans-kin cooperation involves altruism between very distantly related individuals, such altruism cannot be explained by shared genes (see Hamilton 1964). For example, Hefner states that “altruism beyond kin is transmitted culturally, not genetically, and . . . religious traditions are the chief carriers of this value” (Hefner 1991, 132). This view neglects the fact that, despite claims about the role of innate “kin recognition” in human altruism (see Taylor and McGuire 1988; Rushton 1988, 1989; Rothstein and Pierotti 1988; Seyfarth and Cheney 1988), cooperation between even close “familial” human kin is also largely a product of parental encouragement. Hence, even altruism among close human kin is “transmitted culturally” from one generation to the next. Further, there are some clear connections between the parental encouragement of cooperation among family members and the traditional encouragement of cooperation among more distant kin and nonkin. Cooperation between more distant kin is often the product of the influence of distant ancestors, transmitted through their living descendants.

Cooperative social relationships between first cousins, for example, are usually the result of parental encouragement of sibling cooperation during the previous generation. Cooperation among people not recognized as actual kin is nearly always fostered by some type of religious or political leader who engages in parentlike behavior to encourage familylike cooperation among his or her followers. The metaphorical use of close-kin terms (i. e., mother, father, brother, sister) is frequently a part of this strategy.

We argue that myths and other traditional stories can be seen as part of the human descendant-leaving strategy, because they allow even very distant descendants to experience, vicariously and safely, the consequences of the characters’ actions. Specifically, the myth of Oedipus, and in particular

the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, are sets of ancestral instructions prescribing proper kinship behavior for both parents and kings by emphasizing the dire consequences of improper kinship behavior.

#### WHY DOES OEDIPUS SUFFER?

The analysis of the Oedipus myth<sup>1</sup> has nearly always focused on the question of why Oedipus suffers. What is intriguing about Oedipus's suffering is that it is undeserved. Even though Freud's famous interpretation implies that Oedipus suffers because of his own desires to have sexual relations with his mother and to kill his father, there is no hint in the actual myth that Oedipus sexually desires his mother or wants to kill his father (Watling 1947, 23–24, 69–70). On the contrary, he banishes himself from Corinth to avoid violating his parents and pierces his eyes the moment he discovers that he unwittingly has done so. While Freud *may* be correct in his suggestion that the reader reacts to a “secret meaning” in the myth that parallels his own unconscious sexual desires for his mother and hatred of his father, even Freud points out that according to the myth Oedipus “did all in his power to avoid the fate prophesied by the oracle, and . . . in self-punishment blinded himself when he discovered that in ignorance he had committed both these crimes” (Freud 1935, 290).

The undeserved nature of Oedipus's suffering has led to an almost endless stream of explanations (see Dodds 1968), including Levi-Strauss's structuralist interpretation, which concludes that the myth focuses on a contradiction between normal and autochthonous birth (see Levi-Strauss 1963). Although Levi-Strauss's creative analysis has profoundly influenced the study of myths in general, the most widely held literary interpretation of the Oedipus myth is that the play demonstrates man's inability to control his own destiny; no matter what he does, Oedipus cannot avoid the fate the gods have set for him. Thus, Gould writes, “The effect [of the myth and play] is to make the audience fear that perhaps the efforts of human beings to create lives for themselves may be devoid of meaning” (Gould 1970, 2; see also Bowra 1944, 175; Ehrenberg 1968, 80).

There are those, however, who challenge the idea that the aim of perhaps the greatest tragedy ever composed is to convince the audience that behavior is irrelevant—that no matter what they do, men cannot influence anything. Dodds, for example, writes:

What fascinates us is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. . . . The immediate cause of Oedipus' ruin is not “Fate” or “the gods”—no oracle said that he must discover the truth—and still less does it lie in his own weakness; what causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to the truth. (Dodds 1968, 23)

Thus, Oedipus is more than simply the innocent dupe of the gods. The actions that lead him to disaster—to killing his own father and marrying his mother—are his own choice. Oedipus does not simply suffer *in spite of* what he does; he suffers *because of* what he does.

But there is a more fundamental problem with the “fate” explanation. If Laius and Oedipus had truly believed in the accuracy of the oracle, they would have done nothing to thwart it: if the prediction were true, it could not be thwarted, and if it were not true, there would be nothing to thwart. Thus, what the oracle predicted would be either uninfluenceable or irrelevant. The oracle’s prophecy was that Laius’s son would kill him and marry his wife. It did *not* say, in regard to Laius, that *unless* he killed his son, his son would kill him. And the oracle did not say that *if* Oedipus left Corinth, he would avoid killing his father and marrying his mother. Neither prediction/assertion is contingent on any action. Thus, with respect to the oracle, there is no appropriate behavior for either Oedipus or Laius; the only rational behavior would be to ignore it.

Why, then, does Sophocles have Laius and Oedipus take action in response to the oracle? One important use of oracles in myths is as a literary device to facilitate the plot. Is there a better way to make Laius appear to fear his innocent baby son sufficiently to kill him? Is there a better way to get Oedipus both to leave his Corinthian parents and, at the same time, to demonstrate his love for them? The behavior of Oedipus and Laius, as well as everyone else in the play, implies that behavior makes a difference—that it has consequences, regardless of predictions of destiny. The very efforts of Sophocles as a playwright presume this, for by writing, he himself discourages his audiences from accepting fate and doing nothing. Everything about the play encourages the opposite.

The immediate reason for Oedipus’s suffering is clear. He blinds himself because he has violated his parents. He pierces his eyes the moment he realizes he has killed his father and married his mother. The key to the meaning of the myth is that his unwitting patricidal and incestuous acts leading to his self-blinding are the results of *his father’s attempt to kill him*. This is seen in the following lines from the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles:

MESSENGER (from Corinth): Polybus was not your father.

OEDIPUS: Not my father? . . .

MESSENGER: Long ago he had you from my hands, as a gift.

OEDIPUS: Then how could he love me so, if I was not his?

MESSENGER: He had no children, and his heart turned to you . . . [I was] your savior, son, that day.

OEDIPUS: From what did you save me?

MESSENGER: The infirmity in your ankles tells the tale.

OEDIPUS: Ah, stranger, why do you speak of that childhood pain?

MESSENGER: Your ankles were riveted, and I set you free.

OEDIPUS: It is true; I have carried the stigma from my cradle.

MESSENGER: That was why you were given the name you bear.

OEDIPUS: God! Was it my father or my mother who did it? Tell me.

(Watling 1947; Jebb [1885] 1966)

This passage is also the moment Oedipus discovers the reason for his name being Oedipus, meaning, literally, “swollen foot.” Sophocles wrote his plays for an audience that already knew both the Oedipus myth and the meaning of the name (Watling 1947, 11). To them, Swollen Foot was not simply a personal name; each time it was uttered, they were reminded of the treachery of Laius, the ultimate cause of Oedipus’s mutilation and tragedy.

Although Oedipus himself does not discover why he bears this name until late in the play (indeed, the entire play focuses on his gradual understanding of the events related to his name), the Greek-speaking audience, unlike most audiences of today, was aware of its significance. To the Greek audience, the name of the myth, the play, and the hero symbolized the consequences of a selfish, treacherous father. The Greek audience knew why Oedipus suffered.

The cause of his tragedy is recognized by Oedipus when he asks the question, “God! Was it my father or my mother who did it?” This question refers to the riveting of his ankles (Gould 1970, 124) and to his true, not adopted, parents. He recognizes it again, explicitly, after blinding himself, when he entreats Creon to banish him to that mountain where, as a baby, he was sent to die, saying, “My mother and my father . . . made it my destined tomb, and I’ll be killed by those who wished my ruin!” (lines 1452–1455, Watling 1947; see also lines 262–75 of the play *Oedipus at Colonus*, Watling 1947).

*Oedipus Rex* takes place long after Laius’s attempt to kill his son, and the play does not discuss why Laius was confronted by the oracle. However, from the plays *Seven against Thebes* (lines 742ff.) by Aeschylus and *The Phoenician Women* (lines 18ff.) by Euripides (Watling 1947), it is clear that the curse is a punishment for Laius for seducing and abducting Pelops’s son Chrysippus. Because of this deed, Laius was told that *if* he had a son, *then* he would be killed by this son (Gould 1970, 92; Jebb [1885] 1966, x–xii). Laius, disregarding the oracle, went on to have a son, but rather than accepting his punishment, he attempted to save his own life by having his son killed. Thus Laius, in sharp contrast to Oedipus, does not suffer innocently or unselfishly; his death is the result of his own crime, and the ultimate destruction that comes to his wife and descendants is the result of his attempt to avoid his just punishment. For a father to lose his son is a tragedy; but for a father to selfishly kill his son to save his own life must rank

among the greatest of evils. Nothing forced Laius to try to kill his son. He could have responded to the oracle: "As a father I shall sacrifice for my son, even at the risk of my own life."

Oedipus, in contrast, did not knowingly kill his father; he was not in any sense an evil son. He was, in fact, the epitome of a respectful son, a concerned and loving father, a good king. He valued his kin and his subjects more than himself. When he first hears of the prophecy, rather than allow the possibility that he would kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus exiles himself from Corinth to avoid harming the parents he loves. Years later, when he learns of his (adoptive) father's death and is offered the kingship of Corinth, he declines it because of his fear that by returning he may fulfill the prophecy and marry his mother (lines 976–86, Watling 1947). As a king, Oedipus consistently shows his concern and willingness to sacrifice himself for his people. When he discovers that he himself is the cause of the plague affecting Thebes (because he had killed King Laius), he begs to be exiled (lines 1449–51, Watling 1947). Indeed, in his attempt to save Thebes, he risks his life to answer the riddle of the Sphinx. As a father, Oedipus is equally virtuous. His final line in the play emphasizes his concern for his young daughters: "Do not take them from me, ever!" Throughout the play, Oedipus sacrifices himself for others, for both his kin and his subjects, whom he calls his "children."

The tragedy of Oedipus is that despite his selfless, virtuous, courageous behavior, he is caught in the consequences of his father's selfish actions. What the audience learns from the story is that the significant consequences of a person's behavior are not limited to that person alone. Indeed, consequences of a person's behavior can influence the lives of descendants and others through endless generations. This is an important message for kings and fathers. Both children and subjects depend on parental (or parentlike) sacrifice. Laius refused to make such a sacrifice and ultimately destroyed his family and almost destroyed his kingdom. Not only was he a bad king and father but his behavior threatened the basis of society.

#### DISCUSSION

The meaning of the Oedipus myth and the play *Oedipus Rex* is found in the contrasting behavior of Laius and his son, Oedipus—a selfish parent and a son who is the epitome of selflessness. But whence comes the virtue of Oedipus? In one sentence Oedipus reveals the answer: "My father . . . Polybus, to whom I owe my life" (Watling 1947, line 827). Oedipus's morality must be related directly to the influence of his foster parents. Their parental care was crucial to his survival; it was their love for Oedipus that led him to love them and others. Human behavior is

influenced profoundly by the behavior of others; indeed, culture itself presumes this influence.

The behavior distinguishing Oedipus is kinship behavior—the cooperation that occurs regularly between kinsmen. It is filial love for his Corinthian parents that leads Oedipus to exile himself from Corinth, and it is a willingness to sacrifice himself for others that leads him to challenge the Sphinx. Indeed, Oedipus uses a kinship justification in his search for the murderer of Laius, a search to save his Theban “children.” Although considerable attention is now being given to the possibility that humans recognize and respond to the degree of genetic similarity they detect in other individuals, kinship cooperation clearly is not merely the result of the fact that relatives share genes. That birth alone is insufficient to establish kinship cooperation is seen in the relationship between Oedipus and Laius. Because the parental behavior of foster parents toward an adopted child, like that of the king and queen of Corinth toward Oedipus, is not necessarily different than parents’ behavior toward a true offspring, the resulting relationship may be identical.<sup>2</sup> Social relationships identical to those between kin can occur between nonkin.

People do not behave like kin automatically; they come to behave in this way because they are influenced to do so by others, especially by those who raise them. Thus, behavior normally directed toward kin creates social relationships between individuals, whether or not they are identified as kin. Thus, kinship behavior, crucial to human descendant-leaving success, is highly modifiable by the behavior of others and must be seen as the result of both a particular genetic nature and the actual behavior of other individuals. The lack of either results in the failure of individuals to behave like kin. We suggest that the ability of parentlike behavior to encourage familylike cooperation is also why kings (and other leaders) adopt parentlike behavior, including the use of kin terms, to encourage cooperation among their followers. In *Oedipus Rex*, the first words uttered by King Oedipus are “My children,” as he addresses his subjects. The play encourages fatherly behavior in fathers and in kings.

#### CONCLUSION

The Oedipus myth, we propose, is neither an expression of our alleged unconscious guilt nor a contradiction between normal and autochthonous birth. And it is not aimed at convincing people that fate rules their life. Generations have chosen to encourage the repetition of the story of Oedipus because it provides an understanding of the contrasting consequences of parental selfishness and parental love. The major assumption underlying the story of Oedipus is that behavior creates social relationships and behavior can destroy them. We also suggest that the Oedipus myth is not

unique in focusing on kinship cooperation and the consequences of parental behavior. Aristotle observed that in most good tragedies the “suffering” is a result of deeds done among *philoï*, or “kinsmen,” “as when the murder, or whatever, is carried out or intended by brother against brother, son against father, mother against son, and son against mother” (cited in Gould 1970, 33).

Myths and other traditional stories, by teaching vicariously the consequences of social behavior, transmit social knowledge. Such knowledge is the basis of kinship cooperation and hence social cooperation. Myths, like history, use past events, whether actual or alleged, to anticipate future consequences. This tends to influence those who hear traditional myths to behave socially in ways that increased inclusive fitness in the past and to choose to repeat the myth to their own descendants. The extent to which the behavior encouraged in traditional myths will lead to descendant-leaving success in the future depends upon the similarity between future environments and those of the past. This similarity is rapidly decreasing, and the naturalistic fallacy of equating descendant-leaving success with “success” in a more general sense is painfully clear in our rapidly overpopulating world. Still, kinship cooperation between both real and fictive kin is a crucial part of most conceptions of a desirable future. Hence, myths (now including films) still appear to be able to provide future generations with useful knowledge.

## NOTES

1. The following summarizes the Oedipus myth, following Watling (1947:23–24, 69–70) and Graves (1978, 9–15):

Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta, the king and queen of Thebes. Laius, the son of Labdacus, was a direct descendant of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes. King Laius, because of a crime he had committed against a prince of a neighboring kingdom (Gould 1970, 72; Jebb 1966, x–xii), was told by an oracle that if he had a son, that son would kill him and marry his wife, Jocasta. Laius and Jocasta did have a son. But then Laius, in an attempt to thwart the oracle, ordered a shepherd to kill their baby (some say Laius himself did it—see Graves 1978, 9) by abandoning him on a mountainside after cruelly piercing his ankles with an iron pin to prevent him from crawling to safety.

This was done. But in a moment of compassion, the shepherd gave the injured child to a passing shepherd from Corinth to raise as his own. This Corinthian shepherd, a servant of the king and queen of Corinth, was asked by them for the child, for they were childless and wanted to raise him as their own. He gave them the child, whom they named Oedipus (“Swollen Foot”) because of his injured feet. Oedipus grew to manhood, loved and honored as their true son. By chance, however, Oedipus heard a rumor that he had been adopted. Although his parents denied the rumor, Oedipus was not satisfied and traveled to Delphi to find the truth. But the oracle there did not answer his question, asserting instead that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

Like his true father before him, Oedipus attempted to thwart the oracle. In order not to violate his beloved Corinthian parents, he resolved never to see them again. While traveling on foot on the road to Thebes, he had a sharp encounter with a small group of men, one of whom was in a chariot. After some angry words and actions (Oedipus resisting their demand that he give way, saying he acknowledged no betters except the gods and his own parents), Oedipus slew several of them. Continuing along the road, Oedipus approached Thebes and found it to be in the grip of a deadly monster, the Sphinx. Risking his life, he attempted to save the city by answering the Sphinx’s riddle. He was successful, thereby destroying her power, and so was received joyfully into Thebes. Because their king



had been killed by someone while traveling, the grateful Thebans made Oedipus their king and gave him their queen, Jocasta, as wife. During the next fifteen years Thebes prospered, and Jocasta bore Oedipus sons and daughters. But then pestilence and famine struck again, threatening Thebes with utter extinction. And the citizens cried to their beloved king for help.

The play *Oedipus Rex* begins when Oedipus answers them, inquiring "My children, what ails thee?" During the course of the play, Oedipus, trying to discover the source of Theban affliction, gradually uncovers the hideous secret of his unwitting sins. The man he had killed in the chariot was his father, Laius; and the wife whom he had married after rescuing Thebes, and who had borne him children, was his own mother, Jocasta. In his horror at this discovery, and at the self-inflicted death of Jocasta, he chooses not to kill himself and thus continue to plague his violated parents in the after-life. Rather, he destroys the sight of his own eyes and asks Creon, his mother's brother or brother-in-law, to banish him forever from Thebes. At the conclusion of *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus implores Creon to protect and cherish his young, vulnerable daughters and begs, "Do not take them from me, ever!"

The Oedipus narrative is carried forward in the play *Antigone*. In this episode, Oedipus leaves Thebes forever. But then discord again rends his family; for while his daughters remain faithful to their father—Ismene remaining home, while Antigone, the younger, joins him in his wanderings—his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, fight and kill one another in their struggle for power. Because Polynices had attacked Thebes, Creon orders that he not be buried. Antigone, in defiance, chooses to perform the burial ceremony for her brother and is sentenced to death by Creon. As a result, Creon's son, Haemon, who loves Antigone, kills himself. Finally, Haemon's mother, Creon's wife, commits suicide upon hearing of her son's death.

2. Of course, the behavior of adoptive parents is not necessarily similar to the behavior of biological parents. There is, in fact, some evidence of differences in the behavior of adoptive and biological parents, which may ultimately be explainable in evolutionary terms (see Daly and Wilson 1988).

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