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## FROM THEBES TO LONDON: THE OEDIPUS MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

“How dark and magnificent were the Greeks! How  
Their melancholy rings down the years to this day”  
Richard Eberhart, “Oedipus”

Theban myths have always played an active role in the works of the most renowned English poets of all times. Nevertheless, it seems that the ancient story of Oedipus, with its intense dramatic appeal, has had a special attraction. In the sixteenth century one detects initial attempts to compile the plot of this immortal legend into a five-act play (c. 1580), intended then by the Elizabethan playwright William Gager, the “chief champion of academic plays at Oxford” (Bradbrook 50). A century later John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee wrote the play *Oedipus* (first performed 1678-9; published 1679), following the French version that Pierre Corneille had introduced a few years earlier. Following the suit, the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley also composed *Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swell-foot the Tyrant* (1820), a dramatic satire on George IV’s matrimonial affairs<sup>1</sup>. In the twentieth century the interest in this mythical Greek figure increased substantially, motivating W. B. Yeats’s translations of Sophocles’s *King Oedipus* (1928) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (first published in *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, 1934), as well as T. S. Eliot’s *The Elder Statesman* (first performed 1958; published 1959), a play in verse about the latter days of a

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<sup>1</sup> It is said that Shelley had a volume of Sophocles in his pocket when he was drowned (Harvey 768).

distinguished politician, based on the *Oedipus at Colonus* of Sophocles<sup>2</sup>.

Critics have already examined all these works and have shown how it is possible to employ this myth that would embody the emotions and attitudes so characteristic of a modern society. What remains to be analysed and further dissected is the presence of Oedipus in recent poetic trends. This essay, in consequence, aims to study the echoes of this Theban myth in some contemporary British poets, including Thomas Blackburn, Anthony Thwaite, John Heath-Stubbs, Dannie Abse, and Ted Hughes. I shall elaborate then on their personal views of this old legend, the type of hero they represent, and the poetic form they use.

I propose to consider first a poem by Thomas Blackburn (1916-1977), a distinguished British poet, critic, editor, and a lecturer in English who published his poetic production in the third quarter of this century. Blackburn's poetry is profoundly concerned with disturbing emotional experiences, and though it deals with a great variety of topics, violence, distress, and some sort of mysticism prevail as constant elements. His verses are often written in traditional manners which show to a degree the influence of W. B. Yeats. Like the Irish poet, Blackburn also wrote some poems that dealt with classical themes; a singular example is "Oedipus", the first piece of his *Selected Poems*.

This poem comments on the tragic moment in which the King of Thebes learns that he has been actually sleeping with his own mother, Jocasta. The poet describes Oedipus as a monstrous, but at the same time pathetic figure who, following in the classical hero's footsteps, permits Jocasta to hang herself and, after blinding himself, goes into exile. The last lines offer a gloomy view of his future: "Its feet upon the carcass of the ape / And round its mighty head prophetic birds". Blackburn's main subject in this poem echoes that of the Sophoclean tragedy: crisis of suffering. Oedipus goes through the painful experience of discovering his incest, with fatal consequences: it makes him lose his mother, his wife, his sons, his throne, and even his eyesight. Nevertheless, as in the Greek drama, this mental and physical agony produces a transformation, a "rebirth" with enhanced un-

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<sup>2</sup> British fiction also reflects this interest in Oedipus. For instance, critics have pointed out some parallels between Sophocles' *King Oedipus* and Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), such as the plague at Thebes, Oedipus' jealousy of Creon, and the concluding reflections on life (Pinion 42). On the other hand, D. H. Lawrence, in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) introduces the Oedipean figure of Paul Morel, though here his source is Freud rather than Sophocles.

derstanding. It is no coincidence that Blackburn writes about the deepest experiences of people and explores passionate mental conflicts, often in an autobiographical mode<sup>3</sup>, since he himself suffered from psychological disorders and had to overcome serious emotional crises which befell him in his twenties<sup>4</sup>. It is perfectly understandable then that Blackburn decided to inaugurate his volume of selected poems by re-examining the great suffering of this Greek hero.

A similar poem with the same title, "Oedipus", likewise heralds the beginning of Anthony Thwaite's volume of collected verses, *Poems 1953-1988*. Similarly to Blackburn, Thwaite also matches his poetic vocation with other activities, such as editing, reviewing, and lecturing, though he began publishing his work a few years later, in 1957, when the members of the Movement were already celebrated poets. Though at first he might have been influenced by them, very soon he becomes "a food deal more expansive and romantic" (Lucie-Smith 249). Thwaite combines descriptions of tender private and domestic life interwoven with experiences that reflect his fascination with other cultures. Several memorable poems, for example, are the result of his experiences in Japan and Libya, countries where he has taught English Literature for a period. His thirst for travel and discovery of distant civilizations matches in parallel with his interest in antiques and archaeological remains. Behind his well-shaped poetry prevails the keen eye of an antiquarian or archaeologist who is fond of relics of the past and wonders about their function and meaning. This curiosity about other cultures and about past times may have prompted him to rediscover classical myths and legends, the source of an inspiration that transpires through some of his poems<sup>5</sup>.

Thwaite's "Oedipus" is a dramatic monologue in which the Theban King addresses Jocasta once he discovers that she is not only his wife, but also his mother. At this critical moment Oedipus unveils his intense emotions: love, confusion, nostalgia, guilt, shame, and grief. The poem reveals the speaker's plight, and one must feel sympathy for him when he so vividly depicts his own miserable existence bound by the spell of this unusual

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<sup>3</sup> One of Blackburn's most impressive poems is "Hospital for Defectives", where he describes the brutality of a warder in a psychiatric hospital.

<sup>4</sup> See his autobiography, *A Clip of Steel*, where he depicts the strained relations with his father, his nervous breakdown and his drinking problem.

<sup>5</sup> This co-existence of classical culture and wish for travelling can be clearly seen in the title of one of his travel books, *Odyssey: Mirror of the Mediterranean*.

predicament: "In your embrace / I trudged a lifetime's pilgrimage / From prince's birth to king's disgrace". Towards the end of this poem, it seems that the experience has been a horrible nightmare, but when he wakes up he realizes that he is actually blind, so the tragedy has really happened. Once more, in these stanzas one can attest to a psychological exploration of a troubled mind scourged by a terrifying ordeal after having unknowingly committed incest.

A peculiar variation on the Oedipus myth is offered by another contemporary British poet, John Heath-Stubbs, quaintly summarised in his memorable poem entitled "Not Being Oedipus". A lecturer in English, like Blackburn and Thwaite, Heath-Stubbs's publications include several volumes of verse, plays, translations, and criticism. As a poet he frequently seems to be on romantic side of the fence, particularly when he elaborates on his own experiences and shares with the reader his innermost feelings. Accordingly, his well-wrought poetry also displays an "encyclopaedic knowledge of past cultures" (Van Domelen 665); this erudition is often present concerning a special interest of classical traditions and mythology, poignantly immortalised in poems such as "The Cave of the Nymphs", "Plato and the Waters of the Flood", "Ibycus", "Epitaph for Thais", and "When Sappho Loved".

In "Not Being Oedipus" Heath-Stubbs does not concern himself with suffering or acute emotional dilemmas. Rather, he recounts the myth of Oedipus from the moment the hero meets the Sphinx, but the main facts of the story are altered; as the title suggests, the protagonist is not really Oedipus, so he does not have to act like the Greek character. Instead of destroying the Sphinx, Oedipus befriends it and they travel to Thebes together. Shortly afterwards, while the Thebans are debating whether Oedipus is entitled to marry Jocasta - after his triumph over the monster, the hungry Sphinx enters the palace and devours the queen. Oedipus is crowned king of the Thebes after all and he never has to worry about the question of incest. Upon his death, the Sphinx transforms into a tombstone guarding his grave. For this narrative poem Heath-Stubbs employs a device similar to the technique used in the so-called "alternate worlds" novel, a subgenre of science fiction in which some historical event is reshuffled, so that the resulting story is entirely different from the original<sup>6</sup>. Here, the destruction

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<sup>6</sup> The English writer Kingsley Amis was fond of this type of novels and wrote, for instance, *The Alteration* (1976), where he imagines a 20<sup>th</sup>-century society dominated by the Catholic Church because the Protestant Reformation never took place in Europe.

of the Sphinx does not occur, and Oedipus never marries his mother; thus, the poet can recreate a more ordinary story, a tale without mythological qualities, a parody of the Theban myth in which the force of Destiny, the crime of incest, as well as other tragic elements are missing. Oedipus is no hero, just an ordinary politician with the ability of negotiating with the Sphinx. To his merit as well, he seizes the throne of Thebes, has a "distinguished and uneventful reign", establishes an "extremely liberal and reasonable constitution"; but, like many other great statesmen, he soon phases out into oblivion.

I shall now consider another contemporary poet with a different sociological perspective, style and concern: Dannie Abse. He is a poet, a novelist, and a playwright, whose work is distinguished by a strong autobiographical element. It reflects memories of his childhood in Wales, together with his Jewish family background, and his experiences collected as a practising chest doctor. Abse's poetry is all humane and purely sensitive, full of wit and imagination, written in an unpretentious conversational tone which makes it readable and enjoyable. Although many of his poems are irrevocably scientific in nature, for they reveal references to illnesses, pathologies, and technical medical terms, there is also a finely woven thread of his profound humanism that denotes his taste for ancient traditions throughout his poetry and his drama<sup>7</sup>. This fondness for ancient traditions is specifically reflected in his keen awareness of myth and mythological patterns, as the poem "The Ballad of Oedipus Sex" attests to, published in *A Small Desperation* (1968).

This is the story of a twentieth-century Oedipus who reads the morning papers, converses over the phone, and pays a visit to the psychoanalyst. It is Oedipus who narrates how he kills his father by drowning him in a river and rushes back home to make love to his mother. After seeing the ghost of his father, who appears with a hatchet in his hand, desperate Oedipus seeks the help of a psychoanalyst, but ends up assassinating the doctor and his wife. Finally, when the police try to arrest him, it is his mother again who shelters him and covers up his wanton crimes:

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<sup>7</sup> He wrote a play entitled *Pythagoras* (produced for the first time in Birmingham in 1976 and published by Hutchinson in 1979).

I was sheltered by Jocasta,  
 a widow with catarrh.  
 "Your sins be white as snow", she thrilled,  
 "Long as you love your ma.  
 Forget your past, my pet, my poodle,  
 and let me be your peke".  
 Oedipus wrote the headlines  
 for longer than a week,

The fruit of this passionate relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta is a son, whom they both love dearly; yet, on his thirteenth birthday he pokes a knife into Oedipus' chest. The story finishes as it began, with the child following the footsteps of a killer dad, committing parricide. With this circular plot Abse wishes to show that Oedipus' actions are not so indigenious to this singular hero, but quite characteristic of human nature, often dominated by violent and sexual impulses. Here, Oedipus is not a victim of Destiny, but a homicidal maniac who gives free rein to the primitive instincts of the body, notably sex and aggression. It would appear, then, that this provocative, lighthearted version of the Theban myth is rearranged to illustrate Freud's concept of "Id", that surfaces unchecked when all the mechanisms of self discipline are forsaken in the spur of the moment. According to the poet / doctor, a clear case of a serious mental disorder which often afflicts human beings.

Other variations of the myth of Oedipus may be found as well in the work of Ted Hughes, one of the most influential voices in Britain since the 1960s. In his poetry Hughes resorts to myths of all kinds: Celtic, Red Indian, Eskimo, Christian, and, of course, classical myths<sup>8</sup>; hence against this mythological background the figure of Oedipus comes through in vivid colours. Here as well, it is well worth noting his adaptation of Seneca's *Oedipus*, a play produced by Peter Brook and first performed by the National Theatre Company at the Old Vic in 1968. The myth of Oedipus also underlines several pieces of the volume entitled *Crow* (1970), a sequence of poems which narrates the birth, development, and undertakings of a predatory bird, and where Ted Hughes inverts a number of biblical passages and

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<sup>8</sup> This interest in primitive civilizations and traditions springs from his studies of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University, where he became acquainted with Sir James Frazer, author of the famous study of ancient mythology, *The Golden Bough* (Hirschberg 7).

various traditional myths. In one of these poems, "Oedipus Crow", Hughes even manages to identify the protagonist of the book with Oedipus when it hinges on the theme of pride. Nevertheless, I will confine myself to a brief discussion of another poem from this collection, namely, "Song for a Phallus", which offers striking similarities with Abse's "Ballad of Oedipus Sex" and represents another interesting variation on the Oedipus myth.

"Song for a Phallus" is a tragicomic ballad which tells the story of Oedipus from the moment he is inside the womb of his mother. At the beginning, Hughes does not stray too far off from Sophocles' version and gives us a picture of Laius, Oedipus' father, in his intention of averting the fulfilment of the prophecy; classical doomsday, where Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother. But soon, some deviations from the Greek legend surge unexpectedly. Instead of being abandoned to die on Mount Cithaeron, Oedipus is thrown to be devoured by the cat, killing his father accidentally as he bounced off the ground. Rather than defeating the Sphinx with his wit, which meant solving the riddle, he chops it in two with an axe. Eventually, Oedipus kills his mother with the same axe, not out of shame or anger upon finding out about the incest, but because he wants to find out what lies after death, or in Hughes's words, "What's on the other side?" This modern Oedipus' odyssey provides no satisfactory answer; all he sees in his mother's womb is himself as a foetus. After all his vicissitudes, he ends exactly where he had started, as if nothing had ever happened. Unlike the Theban king who becomes wiser after all his terrible ordeals, Hughes's Oedipus never matures. He is, much like Abse's Oedipus, just an irrational and instinctive murderer who serves as a reminder of the ignorance, the brutality, and the limitations of human species. The poem, then, becomes another parody of the classical hero, in which, according to Stuart Hirschberg, even the chorus of the Greek tragedy is distorted almost beyond recognition: "Hughes reworks the ballad form so that the refrain 'Mamma, Mamma', is transformed both into a mock chorus and captures the sound a doll makes when it is squeezed". (114).

After this brief review of some contemporary poems which indulge in a common interest of the Oedipus myth, one can identify other close similarities among them. It is undoubtedly true that they deal with a great variety of topics, including love, passion, suffering, politics, and above all, human limitations; however, it is interesting that these topics are not "per se" contemporary. They do not refer to the complexities and peculiarities of Yorkshire, Wales, or London in the second half of the twentieth century,

but elaborate on more general and universal topics. Even Dannie Abse, who creates a modern counterpart of Oedipus, unquestionably wished to enhance the worn out fatalism into much broader issues, the whole riddle of human life and, as he declares, "our human laws". Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts assert that the poetry of Ted Hughes, Peter Redgrove and Seamus Heaney describe life in a "symbolic Jungian way" (93), and strive for archetypal symbols in all sorts of myths. This argument could be expanded to the rest of the contemporary poets discussed here. Despite its apparent contrast between the classical world and our present reality, this Theban myth is still applicable today to represent universal archetypes and to help modern poets to broaden the context of their poetry.

What seems exceptional and modern is the special emphasis that most contemporary British poets place on the psychological reactions of Oedipus in their poems. We have already seen how Blackburn's hero struggles to overcome his emotional crisis; then, Thwaite also explores the depths of a troubled mind which has just gone through a very excruciating experience; finally, Abse's and Hughes's Oedipus is branded as a dangerous psychopath who needs urgent psychiatric treatment. Hence, it would be reasonable to assume that over the classical myth Freud's ideas are, intentionally or accidentally, superimposed. The name of Oedipus very often evokes Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and these modern versions of the Greek hero may be merely redressed to fit into Freud's famous model. Curiously, the episode that is especially prized and developed in most of these poems is Oedipus' relationship with Jocasta, whereas other basic elements of the classical myth, such as the oracle, the father, or the four children, are often mentioned in general terms or completely ignored. Perhaps, this concern with the crime of incest might be better comprehended by the fact that all the poets chosen for this essay are males. Maybe we will soon be able to discuss a poem by a woman poet offering Jocasta's point of view.

Nonetheless, we are obliged to distinguish between the poems by Blackburn and Thwaite, which are considerably faithful to the classical myth, and the other three free versions where their authors invert, adapt, and reinterpret the ancient plot as a vehicle for their own imagination. Here we can clearly see a tendency to make the myth more ordinary. In "Song for a Phallus" the oracle is turned into a Dickybird, and in "The Ballad of Oedipus Sex" Jocasta is simply a "widow with catarrh", while in Heath-Stubbs's poem the Sphinx has become no more than a domestic animal. However, this should be of no surprise, since Greco-Roman mythology



has always lent itself to continuous variations and reinterpretations. In fact, it would be ridiculous to assert that there exists a single specific version of any classical myth. Therefore, our contemporary British poets simply carry on with the traditional practice of modifying old stories, as Homer so quaintly and masterfully exposed it in his *Iliad*.

It is also significant to note that those poems which are respectful of the traditional myth apparently present a more sympathetic view of a hero than the other poems. Blackburn's Oedipus, for instance, is described as "Bleeding and helpless as the newly born", and Thwaite's hero is also portrayed as a body who snuggles in his mother's belly. We are obliged, therefore, to view his tragedy with a mixture of emotions, as in Sophocles' play: we feel horror at the crime of incest, but simultaneously we feel pity for an innocent victim of fate. On the other hand, Heath-Stubbs offers a dull and colourless character, while Abse and Hughes, as we have already seen, present a repulsive and grotesque figure to reinforce their parody.

As to the poetic form, although these five contemporary British versions of the Theban hero are very different in approach and purpose, they are all predominantly traditional in format. Their authors are technically accomplished poets who do not disregard the rhyme, and other conventional poetical techniques. They prefer the regular stanza and even the traditional ballad to the modernist or postmodern experimental lines. It seems that using classical myths in the second half of the twentieth century inevitably entails leaving poetic revolutions behind and resorting to ancient lyrical patterns again.

Similarly, these poets tend to link up with the Romantic tradition of English literature, where the great transcendental themes of death, life, evil, man in relation to nature, or art are everlasting subjects. Their work is sometimes akin to that of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Yeats, the Georgian poets or Dylan Thomas. They shunt away from the rationalist poetry established by those authors associated to the Movement, who aim at intelligent articulateness and prefer to deal with the particular, the local and specific aspects of real life, keeping emotions at bay<sup>9</sup>. In fact, Dannie

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<sup>9</sup> See the anthology edited by Robert Conquest, *New Lines* (1956), which includes the poems of Philip Larkin, John Wain, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, D. J. Enright, and Kingsley Amis, among others.

Abse edited, together with Howard Sergeant, an anthology entitled *Mavericks* (1957) to voice his dissatisfaction with the poetic strategies of the Movement and to show that there were other poetic trends in post-war Britain. Thus, it is apparent that the use of myth blends into symbiosis with a more Romantic, symbolist and visionary type of poetry, rather than with the empirical and realist kind<sup>10</sup>. This opinion was stated, with commendable clarity, by Douglas Bush in the introduction to *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*:

The Revival of Greek myth in Europe generally was an integral part of the Romantic reaction against a rationalistic and mechanistic view of the world and man. (xi)

Terry Eagleton maintains that "Myth provides a measure of freedom, transcendence, representativeness, a sense of totality; and it seems no accident that it is serving these purposes in a society where those qualities are largely lacking" (239). It might be questionable whether British contemporary society lacks freedom or transcendence, but few will dispute the claim that poetry today transpires representativeness and a sense of universality by the use of mythical source. It is surely no coincidence that some prominent British poets in this century have opted to employ the myth of Oedipus so widely.

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<sup>10</sup> A distinguished member of the Movement, Donald Davie, published a collection of poems entitled *Orheus* in 1974, when the convictions and principles which dominated this group of poets in the fifties had come to an end.

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