

The Alchemical Oedipus: Re-Visioning the Myth

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Abstract

The Oedipus myth is foundational to depth psychology due to Freud's use of Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* in the creation of psychoanalysis. But analytical psychology's engagement with the myth has been limited despite the importance Jung also places upon it. The absence of a developed Jungian response to Oedipus means the myth's psychologically constructive elements have been overlooked in favour of reductive Freudian interpretations. I examine whether analytical psychology can fruitfully re-engage with Oedipus by reinterpreting his story as a paternal rebirth. This is achieved by reincorporating those parts of the myth that occur before and after the period portrayed in *Oedipus Rex*. Such a move reintegrates Oedipus' father, King Laius, into the story and unveils important parallels with the alchemical trope of the king's renewal by his son. Using Jung's method of amplification, Oedipus is recast as Laius' redeemer and identified with the archetype of psychological wholeness, the Self. The contention is that such an understanding of Oedipus supports a clearer recognition of the potentially generative quality of human suffering, restoring to the myth the quality of moral instruction it possessed in antiquity.

Keywords: alchemy, analytical psychology, Laius, myth, Oedipal, psychoanalysis

Introduction

In the opening passage of *Symbols of Transformation*—the book that precipitates C. G. Jung's split from Sigmund Freud—Jung discusses the great significance of the Oedipus myth, noting how “we realize with astonishment that Oedipus is still alive for us” (1911–1912/1952a, para. 1). The myth is foundational to depth psychology due to Freud's use of Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* in the formulation of the Oedipus complex, his theory of infantile sexuality. But despite Jung's recognition of the myth's importance, he makes only a handful of references to Oedipus in *Symbols of Transformation*,

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preferring, instead, to analyse other mythological manifestations of the incest motif, which he considers a primordial image of the heroic libido's rebirth from the symbolic mother. This leads the post-Jungian thinker James Astor (1998) to argue that Jung views Oedipus as representing "primarily a moral problem not a sexual one" (p. 705). Jung's somewhat cursory treatment of the Oedipus myth may be due to his exclusive focus on *Oedipus Rex*, the tragic nature of which limits constructive interpretation. But *Oedipus Rex* is not the whole story; indeed, it is but one version. The classicist Karl Kerényi (1966–1968/1991) notes, for example, that in the ancient Greek epic poem, the *Oedipodeia*, Oedipus does not blind himself and, in fact, remains king after his mother, Jocasta, commits suicide on the revelation of their incest. Furthermore, the origin of the familial curse involving Oedipus and his father, Laius, is a key omission from Sophocles' play. Traditionally, Laius and his descendants are taken to have been cursed by either the gods or Pelops, king of Pisa, for the suicide of the latter's son, Chrysiptus, after his abduction and rape by Laius.

The absence of a developed Jungian and, indeed, post-Jungian response to Oedipus has led to the myth's psychologically constructive elements being overlooked in favour of reductive Freudian interpretations. In this paper, I examine whether analytical psychology can address this deficit by reinterpreting the Oedipus myth as a paternally driven rebirth. I begin by reincorporating those parts of the myth that occur before and after the period portrayed in *Oedipus Rex*—particularly, Laius' story and the events related in Sophocles' final play, *Oedipus at Colonus*. I explore if this reinsertion of Laius unveils parallels with the alchemical trope of the king's renewal by his son. Jung claims that alchemy and classical mythology are related, with the latter being either the parent or elder brother of the former (1955–1956, para. 144, footnote 157); it is from this underexplored space that my investigation proceeds. Jung's method of amplification—a technique for illuminating the meaning of a symbolic content by employing association and analogy—provides the theoretical framework. He developed the method to interpret dreams and other manifestations of the unconscious, and I apply it to my analysis of the Oedipus myth based on Jung's (1933/2001) assertion that "A great work of art is like a dream" (p. 175). The hypothesis is that by using the king's renewal parable to amplify the myth, Oedipus is revealed as a redeemer, thus identifying him with the Jungian archetype of psychological wholeness, the Self, and allowing a clearer recognition of the potentially generative quality of human suffering.

The Forgotten King

Several writers have commented on the lack of scholarly engagement with Laius. The literary theorist Silke-Maria Weineck (2010) notes that "Ever since

Sophocles banned him from the stage, Laius has remained the one we know by hearsay, the one we never see” (p. 132).¹ The psychoanalyst J. M. Ross (1982) argues that Laius’ is the “forgotten story” and that “The myth of Oedipus, the son, is also the story of Laius, the father” (p. 171). Jungian analyst Caterina Vezzoli (2021) pursues a similar line when she asserts that the Oedipus myth is a tragedy about the ghost of the father. Indeed, as Ross notes, without the tale’s prehistory, Oedipus’ story “might remain mysterious and apparently unmotivated” (1982, p. 175). Further, we must remember that Laius does not seek the death of the newborn Oedipus without reason—he does so because a votary of Apollo states that the child will kill him (Sophocles ca. 429–420 B.C.E./1947a). Nonetheless, Kerényi (1959) argues Laius would likely not have needed the oracle’s intervention to harm Oedipus as dethronement anxiety is common in Greek mythology—the prototypical example being the primordial god Uranus’ hostility to his Titan son, Kronos.² The ethnopsychanalyst George Devereux (1953) labels as the *complementary Oedipus complex* those fantasies and behaviours of a parent that constellate the traditional Oedipus complex, while Ross (1982) uses the term *Laius complex* to describe a father’s specifically filicidal fantasies. Devereux says of Laius that he “appears to have retained throughout life a propensity for unconsidered violence” (1953, p. 134). But according to Devereux, it is not Laius’ attempted murder of Oedipus that is the key to understanding his bad reputation in antiquity but his hybris or overbearingness towards Chrysippos.³ Laius shelters in the house of Chrysippos’ father during the former’s exile from Thebes at the time of the joint reign of Kings Amphion and Zethos. According to the myth, he falls violently in love with Chrysippos and abducts him; thus, he becomes known as “a violator of good manners, which the Greeks deemed more important than good morals” (Devereux, 1953, p. 135).

Yet, Oedipus, too, is prone to what Kerényi (1959) calls “fits of furious anger” (p. 93). According to Kerényi, Aeschylus (467 B.C.E./1973) records that Oedipus bites Laius’ corpse and spits out the blood at their fateful encounter at the crossroads. Further, the aged Oedipus curses with death the two sons from his incestuous union with Jocasta in apparent repetition of his father’s filicidal stance (Martinez, 2012; Vezzoli, 2021). Oedipus also displays, arguably, wanton aggression towards his brother-in-law-uncle, Creon, and the blind prophet, Teiresias, during his investigations in *Oedipus Rex* into the

¹ Weineck (2010) tries to rehabilitate Laius as a tragic figure of fatherhood, although her analysis relies on a delinking of Laius from Chrysippos’ fate.

² This myth is also the prototype of the reverse situation, as Kronos eventually castrates Uranus with a sickle. However, in the Oedipus myth, the eventual retaliation against the father is apparently unwitting.

³ Devereux (1953) and Ross (1982) identify Chrysippos as Oedipus’ alter-ego.

killing of Laius. Devereux (1953) claims Oedipus' impulsiveness derives from his father's character rather than being inherent to the son. But given the mythology, such a position is, arguably, naïve. Indeed, Devereux's assertion would seem to support Weineck's (2010) claim that the tendency since Freud has been to overidentify with the filial at the expense of the paternal. Ross (1982) adopts, arguably, a more sophisticated approach when he claims not that Oedipus' anger derives from Laius' impulsiveness, but that it is a part of the son's nature, which he, nonetheless, transcends. Thus, Oedipus becomes "the son who, unjustly victimized, blinded and maimed though he may be, openly betrayed by his father and his sons, will still find solace in his care for others and an informed redemption in old age and death" (Ross, 1982, p. 181). This characterization of Oedipus as a man who rises above the corruption of his father recalls the alchemical parable of the renewal of the "sick" king by his son. Jung discusses this theme in his 1944 book, *Psychology and Alchemy*, and, most comprehensively, in his final book, 1955–1956's *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. He explores the same idea, but outside the specific confines of alchemy, in 1952's *Answer to Job*—an examination of what Jung considers Yahweh's redemption by His son, Jesus Christ. The king's sickness takes various forms, such as sterility, senescence, ignobility and corruption. He is associated with the "secret, infernal fire," the blackness of the *nigredo*—the initial stage of the alchemical opus—and "the dark, cold *maleficus*" that is the planet Saturn (Jung 1955–1956, paras. 464–73). Jung notes that Saturn is "connected with dubious love-affairs" (1955–1956, para. 140, footnote 125). This recalls Laius' perverse treatment of Chrysispos. And according to Ross (1982), it is in relation to his "base father" that Oedipus "stands at his best as the lofty and poignant opposite" (p. 187).

Jung asserts that the reason for the king's sickness is a lack of the "dark, chthonic aspect of nature" (1955–1956, para. 427). In psychological terms, the king, who was once a living symbol of wholeness, has decayed into egoic one-sidedness. Jung describes the process as follows:

The more distinctly an idea emerges and the more consciousness gains in clarity, the more monarchic becomes its content, to which everything contradictory has to submit.... For these reasons, too, the king constantly needs the renewal that begins with a descent into his own darkness, an immersion in his own depths, and with a reminder that he is related by blood to his adversary. (Jung 1955–1956, para. 471)

The king is renewed through various fatalities, which, in addition to immersion and descent, include "dissolution and decomposition, extinction of his light in the darkness, incineration in the fire, and renewal out of the chaos" (Jung 1955–1956, para. 486). These processes identify the alchemical parables as stories of rebirth. Such stories are also presented as imagery—for

example, the illustration (figure 1) contained in the 1582 alchemical manuscript *Splendor Solis* (*The Splendour of the Sun*) showing the salvation of the drowning king (in the background) by his crowned son (in the foreground).

These stories differ from the heroic narratives Jung discusses in *Symbols of Transformation* in that they approach the problem of rebirth from the perspective of the father-son dyad rather than the mother-son equivalent. Jung notes that while early versions of the parable describe the king's revival in terms of a "strengthening, rejuvenation or renewal of the initial state," later versions clarify the goal as the king's "transformation into a higher nature" (1955–1956, para. 367). Thus, the "secret, infernal fire" that is the old king becomes "the reborn *puellus regius* (kingly boy) ... an allegory of Christ" (Jung, 1955–1956, para. 465). The alchemists called this developmental process "the philosophical tree," with its goal being the production of the *lapis* or philosopher's stone, which they identified with Christ (Jung, 1944, para. 451). According to the alchemist Dorn, the root of the philosophical tree is "ascribed to Saturn," which suggests that the corruption of the old king is the necessary soil for the splendour of his son (Dorn, 1659, as cited in Jung, 1945/1954, para. 409).⁴

Analysis of the Oedipus Myth Using the King's Renewal Parable

I use as my amplificatory tool a version of the king's renewal parable called the *Visio Arislei* (*Vision of Arisleus*), contained in the 1593 alchemical compendium, *Artis Auriferae* (*The Golden Art*). This version of the parable describes a clear developmental process—an hypothesis key to my investigation.⁵ The technique of amplification has been criticized by psychoanalysts such as Edward Glover (1950) as pedagogic rather than analytic since it requires the analyst to bring their personal associations to the examined content. However, whilst Jung acknowledges the challenge posed by what he calls the "personal equation," he does not consider this a barrier to sound interpretation so long as "the latter makes no pretence to be

⁴ It could be argued that Freud and Jung themselves enacted the alchemical drama of "father" and "son" that is the object of my enquiry. Before his split from Freud, Jung was considered by the former his heir apparent; Freud even said of Jung "The Swiss ... will save me" (Wittels, 1924/2014, p. 140); however, their story ended not in renewal but schism (Hayman, 1999).

⁵ The use of any one version of the king's renewal parable is justified by the view that the basic theme of any myth is the same in all its variants (Devereux, 1953; Lévi-Strauss, 1958/1963). As Devereux puts it, "these variants not only do not contradict each other psychologically, but actually supplement each other, and help us obtain a deeper insight into the latent nuclear meaning of the basic theme, *motif*, or plot-element" (1953, p. 139).



Figure 1. *Splendor Solis: Drowning King*. Courtesy British Library, Harley 3469

generally valid, but valid only for that area of the object which is being considered" (1921, para. 10). Yet, while Jung concedes that the insights obtained through amplification can never be proved right scientifically, he argues their validity can still be demonstrated by the "intense value for life" they provoke (1916, para. 493). This subjective aspect means that the method makes no claim to exhaust knowledge; thus, Jung observes that it has more in common with hermeneutics than scientific enquiry (1916, para. 493). Nonetheless, as Jung also notes, even a scientific concept "will always be a product of the subjective psychological constellation of the investigator" (1921, para. 9). I agree with Vezzoli that in using amplification to analyse the Oedipus myth, we stave off the risk of "interpreting the tragedies as Freud did with the Oedipus complex," that is, in a quasi-scientific manner (2021, p. 25).⁶ It is my view that the openness inherent in amplification's mythopoetic approach is more appropriate for the analysis of a great work of art, such as the Oedipus myth, which, like a dream, "does not explain itself and is never unequivocal" (Jung, 1933/2001, p. 175).

The anthropologist Curtiss Hoffman summarizes the *Visio Arislei* (henceforth to be called the *Vision*) as follows:⁷

The philosopher Arisleus journeys to the land of the King of the Sea, in which only like mates with like; consequently nothing is begotten and nothing prospers. Arisleus advises the king to mate together his mentally conceived son and daughter, Gabricus and Beya. During intercourse, Gabricus is swallowed into the womb of Beya, and dissolved into atoms. As a punishment, Arisleus and Beya are banished to a hothouse under the sea. There they remain imprisoned for 80 days until they are rescued by the androgyne Harforetus, a disciple of Pythagoras, who feeds them the fruit of the immortal tree which gives salvation. Beya gives birth to her own brother, resolving the king's problem. (Hoffman, 1999, pp. 159–160)

The sickness of the King of the Sea (or "*Rex marinus*" as he is called in *Artis Auriferae*) is sterility. We are told that his land is barren because "only like mates with like" and that in his despair, the king seeks the philosopher's counsel. Arisleus journeys to the dark depths, where the king lives, and it is

⁶ Merkur (2005) argues, however, that many psychoanalytic writers have misunderstood the nature of Freud's reliance on *Oedipus Rex* in his formulation of the Oedipus complex. He suggests that Freud uses the play to *illustrate* the theory rather than as a proof text for the concept. Thus, according to Merkur, "the validity of the Oedipus complex neither stands nor falls with the validity of any particular interpretation of *Oedipus Rex*" (2005, p. 7); this provides further support for my non-traditional take on the text.

⁷ *Artis Auriferae* contains two versions of the *Visio Arislei*; the quoted summary from Hoffman (1999) is comprised of elements from both.

only then that we discover the existence of the king's two children: the names "Gabricus"⁸ and "Beya" deriving from the Arabic terms "*kibrit*" (sulphur) and "*al-baida*" (the white one) respectively (Ruska, 1931, as cited in Jung, 1944, para. 435, footnote 37). The literary scholar Thomas Willard (2015) notes that in Arabic alchemy the red sulphur and the white mercury are the two paired principles "from which all other metals emerge" (p. 271). Thus, the presence of Gabricus and Beya bodes well as it shows that "the hidden state is one of latency and potentiality" (Jung, 1944, para. 436). But to realize this potential, it must be activated—that is the role played by Arisleus, whom Jung equates with consciousness (1944, para. 438).

Let us now shift our attention to the Oedipus myth. King Laius would appear to suffer the same sickness as *Rex marinus*. As Hillman (1987/1991) puts it, "He [Laius] could not generate, which was his reason for going to the oracle.... His kingdom was barren already before Oedipus, before the Sphinx" (p. 127). Euripides (ca. 409 B.C.E./2005) tells us that Laius and Jocasta live in a childless marriage for many years. Returning to the parable, the reason for the sterility of *Rex marinus*' kingdom is the fact that "only like mates with like." This reference to inherently non-generative sexual relations recalls the story of Laius and Chrysippos. Kerényi (1959) tells us that in one version of the myth, Laius takes his abductee back to Thebes "to replace his wedded wife," thus triggering the wrath of Hera, the wife of Zeus (p. 91). The mythology generally places Laius' love of Chrysippos at the root of the king's barrenness: either because he prefers to share his bed with the boy over his wife or because his rape of Chrysippos brings down upon him the curse of sterility. And even when, in a momentary act of lust, Laius does conceive a child with Jocasta, his response is to seek its death because of oracular prophecies that the child will kill him or lead to the destruction of Thebes.

Yet, the mythology tells us that Laius is concerned about his sterility and, consequently, seeks guidance from the Delphic oracle of Apollo.⁹ In this way, his actions mirror that of *Rex marinus*, who seeks the philosopher Arisleus' counsel on the same matter. This fear of barrenness may explain why Laius does not execute the newborn Oedipus, but instead, pursues the child's death through exposure on Cithaeron, a mountain range on the outskirts of Thebes. There is an ambivalence to that decision; one that suggests Laius is not the same as the "son-murderer" Uranus, or, indeed, Kronos, who also seeks the death of his own son, Zeus. When Laius encounters Oedipus at the

⁸ Gabricus is also called Gabrick, Cabricus, Cabritis, Kybric and Thabritus in the alchemical literature.

⁹ *Oedipus Rex* is an outlier in this regard as it suggests the oracular warning from Delphi may have been unsolicited.

crossroads, the ageing king is en route to Delphi. Sophocles is silent on the reason for the visit, but Euripides (ca. 409 B.C.E./2005) says that Laius makes the pilgrimage to ask after the child he had supposedly killed. It could be, as Kerényi (1959) argues, that the visit was “impelled by evil apprehensions” of parricide (p. 92). But it could also be that Laius’ pilgrimage amounts to what Jung, in reference to *Rex marinus*’ plea to Arisleus, calls a “cry for help from the depths of his unconscious” (1944, para. 436).

In the parable, Arisleus initiates the king’s renewal by advising that his children mate. During the sexual act, Gabricus is “dissolved into atoms” in Beya’s womb; thus, the son, who represents the father in this encounter, is killed by his sister.¹⁰ There is an inherent connection here between sex and power. Jung argues that the two drives are “coexistent,” and as such “it is often very difficult to make out which of the two predominates” (1946, para. 360). We are, perhaps, then authorized to draw an analogy between sexual congress and the act of killing; in so doing, we may interpret the confrontation between Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads as the prelude to an act of intercourse. As Jung (1955–1956, para. 415) puts it, writing in the context of the alchemical opposites, this is “the quarrelling that precedes their union”—where Laius and Oedipus are posited as Gabricus and Beya, respectively. But it is a union consummated in the death of a king, who, like his alchemical counterpart, is “related by blood to his adversary” (Jung, 1955–1956, para. 471). Furthermore, the equivalence we have posited between Arisleus and the Delphic oracle means we may cast the latter as the initiator of this intercourse between father and son; such a reading is supported by the fact that it is for the sake of Apollo that the two men find themselves in confrontation at the crossroads: Oedipus, because he is fleeing the oracle’s prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother; and Laius, because he is seeking word from the oracle about the fate of his son.

While this reading of Laius and Oedipus as Gabricus and Beya is, perhaps, bold, it is not without foundation. Willard (2015) notes that the symbolism of the latter pairing contained in the seminal alchemical tract “*Rosarium Philosophorum*”¹¹ reverses alchemy’s more usual associations to male and female by presenting the former as body and the latter as spirit. The early

¹⁰ Mathers (2014) describes as the *queen-servant fantasy* the symbolic enactment in a clinical setting of the alchemical theme of Beya’s killing of Gabricus. Using the *Visio Arislei* as an amplificatory tool for her clinical material, she notes how in the transformations observed in her analysand’s dreams and fantasies, “The king of the water’s mean, hidden, manipulative and cold power, and limited vision, gave way to the expansiveness of the king of the air” (2014, p. 77). The affinity of this insight with my analysis of the Oedipus myth will become clearer to the reader as my investigation proceeds.

¹¹ This tract comprises the entire second volume of the 1550 alchemical anthology *De Alchimia Opuscula Complura Veterum Philosophorum*.

17th century alchemist Michael Maier makes a similar move when he ties ostensibly female entities like Beya and Venus to the eagle, which is associated with the air element and spirit, while implying that the “male” corresponds to the earthbound toad, despite “earth” generally being viewed as a female element (Maier, 1617, as cited in Jung, 1955–1956, para. 2).¹² This identification of Beya with spirit and Gabricus with body aligns with the key character traits mythology ascribes to Oedipus and Laius, respectively: intellect, for the son, which is a spiritual quality; and for the father, an emphasis on bodily instincts. But ultimately, my assertion that Oedipus can be identified with a female alchemical force is based on the fact that in alchemy “male” and “female” are both essentially androgynous since “they are nothing other than Mercurius duplex”—the arcane substance at the heart of the alchemical art (Jung, 1955–1956, para. 416).

The alchemists identify the two forms of Mercurius as “crude mercury,” which is the *prima materia* or initial substance of their work, and “philosophical mercury,” which is the *lapis* or goal of the work. They stress the consubstantial nature of Mercurius’ two forms, illustrated by the fact that the *prima materia* and *lapis* share the same names.¹³ Thus, an hypothesis that Laius and Oedipus are equivalent to the *prima materia* and *lapis*, respectively, implies that the two men are of the same essence. If correct, we would expect to see some corroboration in the mythological data. And there are, indeed, several themes that attest to the consubstantiality of father and son—something to which Jocasta alludes when she says to Oedipus of Laius that he is “about your figure” (Sophocles, ca. 429–420 B.C.E./1947a, line 743). I spoke earlier of a shared tendency to violence. Jung argues that when an alchemical king exhibits violence, it is “a sure sign of his morally defective state” (1955–1956, para. 365). Kerényi (1959) claims that Oedipus’ very name (which means “swell-foot”) speaks to a violent inheritance. This is not only because it references the cruel piercing of his ankles at birth by Laius, but also because it betrays what Kerényi calls Oedipus’ “ancient Daktyl nature,” a reference to a race of earthbound male beings associated with the mother goddess, Rhea (1959, p. 93).¹⁴ This association with earth recalls a further link between Laius and Oedipus that the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958/1963) posits in his structural analysis of the myth. He notes that the name “Laius” (which means “left-sided”) suggests, like the name “Oedipus,” a difficulty with walking. Lévi-Strauss argues that in mythology this is a universal characteristic of humans who remain close to their

¹² The association of the feminine with spirit also recalls Sapientia or the radiant white dove, which the alchemists termed the “salt of the metals” (Jung, 1944, para. 443).

¹³ Examples of names given to Mercurius include *aqua permanens* (permanent water), *argentum vivum* (quicksilver) and *ignis noster* (our fire) amongst many others.

¹⁴ An example of the daktyls is the korybantēs, who protect the baby Zeus from his murderous father.

chthonic roots.¹⁵ Such archaism is evident in Oedipus' incest with his mother, which is as much of a "dubious love affair" as anything practised by Laius—further establishing their similarity. The two men's consubstantiality is also illustrated in variations of the myth that suggest Oedipus kills Laius because he is his rival for the love of Chrysis (Devereux, 1953).¹⁶

An implication of the androgyny and consubstantiality I posit for Laius and Oedipus is that any treatment of the son as female can be extended to the father. On this reading, it is now Laius who is identified with Beya—thus becoming the renewing "womb" of his own transformation. And whilst this claim might seem far-fetched, there are versions of the myth that support it. Devereux (1953) notes that in the *Oedipodeia*, Oedipus removes Laius' sword and belt after killing him; according to Devereux, in ancient Greece, the undoing of a woman's belt is "a preliminary to intercourse" (p. 134). Thus, he contends that by removing Laius' sword and belt, Oedipus engages in the symbolic castration and feminization of his father. This allows Devereux to posit an identity between Laius and his wife through the prism of Oedipus' sexuality, so that the latter's marriage to Jocasta is "not only cohabitation with the mother as a woman, but also with the mother as the representative of the now feminized homosexual paternal ogre" (1953, p. 134). Here, Oedipus takes the male role and is identified with Gabricus; thus, we might understand his tragedy in *Oedipus Rex* as a similar account of dissolution and death (albeit not literal, but of ego). And just as Jung (1944, para. 436) calls Gabricus' demise "punishment for the incestuous *coniunctio oppositorum* [union of opposites]" with his sister, so Oedipus' self-blinding is the dreadful consequence of his own incest in the womb of his father-mother, whom, here, I identify with Beya.

Let us now shift to the second half of the *Vision*. The parable states that *Rex marinus* banishes Arisleus and Beya to a hothouse under the sea for their role in Gabricus' death.¹⁷ This act recalls the Theban regent Creon's decision to banish Oedipus, who is accompanied on his exile by his sister-daughter, Antigone. The mythology suggests the banishment may have been enacted on the confirming word of Apollo after the revelation of Oedipus' crimes (Watling, 1947, p. 69). The key point, here, is that the Delphic oracle remains implicated in events. We have previously identified the oracle with Arisleus; but Oedipus could also

¹⁵ Lévi-Strauss (1958/1963) argues that Oedipus and Laius' chthonic aspect extends to the latter's father, Labdacus, whose name means "lameness," thus repeating the motif of "difficulty walking."

¹⁶ Devereux (1953) argues that although Oedipus and Laius' quarrel as to whom should pass first *over a narrow road* is part of the best-known version of the myth, it is "a somewhat bowdlerized and symbolic version of certain far more explicit accounts of Laius' death" that reference the homosexuality of father and son (p. 134).

¹⁷ Willard (2015) identifies the hothouse under the sea with the alchemical vessel in the heated bath.

play the philosopher's role given his Apollonic character in *Oedipus Rex* (Hillman, 1987/1991; Kane 1975). Thus, a comprehensive recasting of the *dramatis personae* of our alchemical parable may be due at this halfway stage—reflecting the presence of that “elusive, deceptive, *ever-changing content* [italics added]” that is Mercurius (Jung, 1946, para. 384). This association of Arisleus with Oedipus (by way of Apollo) chimes with the Jungian analyst Frances Hatfield's (2020) playful equating of the Oedipus of *Oedipus Rex* with “a vapor from Apollo's oracle” (p. 118). Creon now takes the role of *Rex marinus*—ruler of the barren, plague-ridden kingdom, which we must assume Thebes continues to be until the Apollo-mandated expulsion of Laius' killer. Gabricus, while seemingly absent at this stage of the parable, remains present, albeit bound to Beya in darkness and death. Oedipus, too, is in darkness—but of a more literal kind. He is banished from Thebes, “bound” to Antigone, who is now responsible for his blind and destroyed person; in a manner of speaking, she “carries” him—just as a mother carries a child. Thus, I posit an identity between Antigone and Beya, who carries the atomized Gabricus. But Oedipus can also be considered Beya in this new casting because Beya *possesses* Gabricus, with whom Oedipus remains identified. Thus, through this further amplification, our tragic hero is again revealed as the arcane substance, which has “everything it needs” in that it “begets, reproduces, slays, and devours itself” (Jung, 1955–1956, para. 143).

Rex marinus banishes Arisleus and Beya to a place at the bottom of the sea that is characterized by intense heat; here, they are imprisoned for 80 days and “exposed to every kind of terror” (Jung, 1944, para. 437). We have identified Arisleus as an Apollonic character, and this section of the parable accords with the stage in the hero myth—with which Apollo is often associated¹⁸—that Jung describes as “being swallowed up in the belly of the whale or dragon”; he calls the heat in this place “the *ignis gehennalis*, the hell into which Christ descended in order to conquer death as part of his *opus*” (1944, para. 440). Upon Oedipus' banishment, Sophocles (401 B.C.E./1947b) says that he and Antigone enter the hamlet of Colonus, which is located on the outskirts of Athens. Sophocles tells us that Colonus is sacred to the god Poseidon and the Titan Prometheus. It is interesting that these divinities are associated with the very elements—water and fire, respectively—that characterize Arisleus and Beya's prison.¹⁹ Further, Colonus is the site of the sacred grove of the Furies, the underworld deities of vengeance who particularly despise the murder of kin. It is a crime of this kind that drives *Rex marinus*' banishment of Arisleus and Beya, and Creon's banishment of Oedipus. In its parallels with the hothouse under the sea, Colonus recalls

¹⁸ See Jung, 1911–1912/1952a, para. 577; Hatfield 2020; and Hillman 1987/1991.

¹⁹ The alchemists call this fire-water mixture “the fire of the Philosophers,” which they consider the purifying “living fire” of God (Waite, 1678/1893, p. 199).

Hades. Kerényi (1959) and the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1986/1988) refer to Colonus as the threshold of Hades. But the amplification provided by the *Vision* suggests that we are justified in identifying the hamlet fully with hell—that “region of danger” where one might find “the ‘treasure hard to attain’” that leads to transformation and resurrection (Jung, 1944, para. 438).²⁰

Amid his torment, Arisleus sees his master, Pythagoras, in a dream and pleads for help. Pythagoras sends his disciple, the hermaphrodite Harforetus, who is called the “author of nourishment” (Ruska, 1931, as cited in Jung, 1944, para. 449); Harforetus saves Arisleus and Beya by feeding them fruit from the tree of life.²¹ Jung claims that Arisleus makes the journey to hell “as a ‘redeemer’” (1944, para. 441). But he notes that, while there, the philosopher’s role in the redemptive work is “entirely passive” because “no one can complete the work except with the help of God” (1944, paras. 449–450). Jung identifies Pythagoras with God. Further, he asserts that “While Arisleus was in such dire straits, and Thabritius [Gabricus] lay in the sleep of death, the tree [of life] was evidently growing and bearing fruit” (1944, para. 449). The tree described is clearly the philosophical tree of alchemy, which the alchemists identify with Mercurius, who, as I have already noted, is identified with the *prima materia* and *lapis*. The androgynous messenger Harforetus is an Hermetic figure and is, thus, also identifiable with Mercurius (Jung, 1943/1948, para. 278). Harforetus’ designation as the author of nourishment marks them as a representation of the philosophical tree, from which the food of life is grown.

In the Oedipus myth, our hero’s plea to Apollo after banishment from Thebes parallels Arisleus’ entreaty to the divine Pythagoras. Sophocles (401 B.C.E./1947b) says that Apollo promises Oedipus eventual rest and redemption at Colonus. This salvation is achieved through Oedipus’ supplication to the Furies, honoured in that hamlet in their benevolent form, the Eumenides. An understanding of the latter as “bringers of salvation” reveals an analogy with Harforetus; further, the goddesses’ duality parallels Harforetus’ androgyny. We have linked the Furies/Eumenides, in their dark aspect, with the banishments decreed by *Rex marinus* and Creon. But the goddesses’ double nature also suggests the potential for *enantiodromia*—the tendency for a thing to become its opposite. And this is, indeed, what occurs: Just as Arisleus and

²⁰ *Oedipus at Colonus* could also be understood as a Jungian “confrontation with the unconscious” in which Oedipus must face the ghosts of Laius’ curse—in the shape of his brother-son Polynices, sister-daughter Ismene, and Creon—to become the renewed king or *lapis*: a literal *opus contra naturam* (work against nature) that brings blessings to Athens and curses to Thebes.

²¹ Ruska (1931, as cited in Jung, 1944, para. 449) discovered text in the Berlin Codex—a gnostic manuscript from the fifth century—that expands on the tree’s nutritive role in the *Vision*; the text reads: “Pythagoras says, ‘Ye write and have written down for posterity how this most precious tree is planted, and how he that eats of its fruits shall hunger no more.’”

Beya's torments in the hothouse transform into the epiphany of Harforetus, so the Furies of the underworld make way for the Eumenides.²² The latter's divine patronage is then equivalent to the "fruit of the immortal tree"; Oedipus and Antigone "consume" this fruit upon their entry into the grove of the goddesses, and it saves them from their present torment because Colonus' ruler, King Theseus of Athens, is obliged to protect them.²³ Thus, as is the case for the philosopher in the *Vision*, Oedipus' work of redemption cannot be completed without the help of the gods.

We now reach the end of the parable: Beya births her brother, Gabricus, thus renewing *Rex marinus* and bringing life to his kingdom. But Gabricus is now changed. The *Rosarium* tells us that his union with Beya results in a son who is unlike either parent (Jacobus, 1550, as cited in Willard, 2015). This son is the *filius regius* (royal son) that "bestows on men all health and prosperity, heals all diseases, gives to the God-fearing temporal honour and a long life, but to the wicked, who abuse it, eternal punishment" (Waite, 1678/1893, p. 86). It is instructive to compare this description of the renewed king, who is also the *lapis*, to the following extract from Oedipus' prayer to the Furies at the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*: "And on them that received me in my sojourning should be great blessing, With affliction upon them that spurned me and drove me out" (Sophocles, 401 B.C.E./1947b, lines 92–93). The similarities are striking: In his death, Oedipus becomes a blessing for the city of Athens, whose king welcomes him and within whose earth his remains are buried; but to his brother-son Polynices and Creon, who seek his body for ignoble reasons, he is a curse that seals their fate and that of Thebes. The historian Jean-Pierre Vernant (1972/1988) asserts that "Oedipus is double"—a summation that expresses well the ambiguity in this "duality of his being" (1972/1988, p. 116).

This ambivalence in both the *filius regius* and Oedipus marks them as *pharmakon*—the ancient Greek word for a medicine that, according to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, "acts as both remedy and poison" (1972/1981, p. 70). *Pharmakon* can also mean "scapegoat"; in this sense, it refers to the ancient Greek idea of the *pharmakos*, which is both a ritual where a person is expelled from a city to remove evil, and the expelled person themselves. Oedipus and the *filius regius* are, thus, also *pharmakos*: the former is expelled by the unwise regent to purify Thebes of his crimes against nature, while the latter is expelled by the unwise king because of its "nigredic" blackness—the result of

²² Hatfield (2020) also notes the significance to Oedipus' development of the Furies' transformation. My view that the hothouse in the *Vision* is the negative aspect of the androgyne Harforetus is supported by Jung's contention that Mercurius, whom I identify with Harforetus, is both "the revelatory light of nature" and "also hellfire" (Jung, 1943/1948, para. 257).

²³ According to Scodel (1984), the one recourse for the helpless in ancient Greece was to become a suppliant to a god "so as to demand protection from other human beings"; thus, in doing his duty, Theseus avoids "the anger of the gods" (p. 107).

Gabricus' incest with Beya, another crime against nature.²⁴ The classicist Helene Peet Foley (1993/2020), in her discussion of Oedipus as *pharmakos*, alludes to his nature as *pharmakon* when she speaks of his "extraordinary capacity to save and destroy" (p. 319). Indeed, the *pharmakos*, whom the ancient Greeks also called *pharmakeus*, can be understood as the administrator of the *pharmakon*. Thus, the *pharmakeus* operates as a magician or sorcerer who wields a "power of fascination" that "makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws" (Derrida, 1972/1981, p. 70). We see in *Oedipus at Colonus* that this is precisely the effect Oedipus has on Polynices, Creon and Theseus; it is also the effect the *filius regius* and other symbols of wholeness have had on humankind throughout history (Jung, 1940, para. 285). Further, Derrida says of the *pharmakon* that it "would be a *substance* ... if we didn't have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself" (1972/1981, p. 70). This recalls the alchemists' view of the *lapis* as "the stone that is no stone" and, perhaps, explains the mystery shrouding the death of Oedipus: that of a man who is marked as "other-than-man" by the god's entreating cry: "Oedipus! Oedipus!... It is time: you stay too long" (Sophocles, 401 B.C.E./1947b, lines 1627–1628). The literary critic Harold Bloom (1996) contends that, at his death, Oedipus has become a god. But we might say, that in this final intimacy with the divine, Oedipus becomes identical with that other synonym for the *lapis*, the *homo altus* (lofty man) (Jung, 1952b, para. 707). And as that lofty man, he stands, like the earlier quote from Ross suggests, as the "poignant opposite" of his base father.

Oedipus as the Jungian Self

The equating of Oedipus with the alchemical *lapis* identifies him as the Jungian Self. Jung (1958) sees the Self as "a combination of opposites" (para. 640). And it is this extraordinary state that Oedipus achieves when Theseus, on observing his apotheosis, salutes both "heaven and the earth" (Sophocles, 401 B.C.E./1947b, lines 1654–1655). A key implication of an understanding of Oedipus as Self is that it enables a clearer recognition of the potentially generative quality of human suffering. Thus, we might agree with both the classicist Thomas Kane's (1975, p. 20) contention that Oedipus' torment is "a necessary condition of spiritual growth" and Hatfield's (2020, p. 117) claim that he is "a poignant symbol of the evolution of consciousness" that Jung calls "individuation."

Yet, some still question the reality of Oedipus' achievement, arguing that even as the aged hero at Colonus, he is compelled to repeat his familial trauma

²⁴ The *lapis* is also called *lapis exilis* (stone of no worth), which has overtones of the scapegoat concept.

(Martinez, 2012; Vezzoli, 2021). Such perspectives, however, seem coloured by conceptions of the Self anchored in the mundane. Jungian literary analyst Inez Martinez (2012), for example, suggests Oedipus never achieves true consciousness as that would have meant “thinking about how to father his children differently than he had been fathered” (p. 18). But this view, while valid in certain respects, appears one-sided in light of our new understanding of Oedipus, which privileges ambivalence. We observe that it is in his gift to curse as well as bless—the key point, as Jung notes in a discussion of the Self, is that Oedipus, as an individual, “must know ... what he is deciding about and what he is doing” (1951, para. 51). Thus, I would agree with Hatfield (2020) that he is “clear-seeing in his blindness” when he “calls out their [Creon and Polynices’] hypocrisy and gives his final blessing to the land of Theseus” (p. 124).

Ambivalence is a quality Oedipus shares with the Self. The latter, according to Jung, “cannot be equated either with collective morality or with natural instinct, but must be conceived as a determining factor whose nature is individual and unique” (1942/1954, para. 394). Further, by the time of his death, Oedipus has achieved a cognizance of alterity that reflects the Self’s unity of consciousness and the unconscious. This state has been reached through a kind of suffering that could be considered Dionysian in that it describes what Jungian scholar Susan Rowland (2017) calls “the dismembering of knowing,” which is achieved “by renouncing or seeing through” an identity that had been constituted as “the one presumed to know” (p. 122). Thus, Oedipus’ suffering opens him up to “what he has *not* [italics added] known” (Kane 1975, p. 20); this we may understand as a kind of wisdom that not only exists beyond ego but is also the fount of the old king’s renewal. It is in this way that Oedipus redeems the hybris of Laius, meriting the bestowal upon him of alchemy’s most auspicious sobriquet: “Saviour of all imperfect bodies and men” (Waite, 1678/1893, p. 98).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how an amplification of the Oedipus myth using the alchemical trope of the king’s renewal supports an interpretation of the myth as a story of paternal rebirth. This was achieved by reincorporating those parts of the narrative that occur before and after the events of *Oedipus Rex*. I have shown that the reinsertion of Laius into the story unveils parallels with the alchemical theme of the king’s redemption by his son. Through recasting Oedipus as Laius’ redeemer, I have established an identity between Oedipus and the Jungian Self. This location of Oedipus’ tragedy within a drama of salvation illuminates the deeper meaning that may inhere in human suffering. The ancient Greeks called the insight gained through trauma “*anagnorisis*” (Troutsell, 2016). And Oedipus demonstrates just how hard the road is to

such understanding; indeed, Jung equates the journey to consciousness with a crucifixion in its “path of blood and suffering” (1926, as cited in Adler, 1975, p. 12). But it is my contention that the extent of Oedipus’ achievement is only truly grasped when it is recalled that *his* path begins with Laius: that king, devoid of insight, whom, in contrast to the splendour of his son, I have identified with the first matter.

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TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Le mythe d'Œdipe est fondamental pour la psychologie des profondeurs en raison de l'utilisation faite par Freud de la pièce de Sophocle, Œdipe Roi, dans la création de la

psychanalyse. Mais l'engagement de la psychologie analytique avec ce mythe a été limité malgré l'importance que Jung lui accorde également. L'absence d'une réponse jungienne plus élaborée à Œdipe a pour conséquence que les éléments psychologiquement constructifs du mythe ont été négligés au profit d'interprétations freudiennes réductrices. J'explore la question de savoir si la psychologie analytique peut renouer avec succès avec Œdipe en réinterprétant son histoire comme une renaissance paternelle. Ceci est réalisé en réincorporant les parties du mythe qui se produisent avant et après la période décrite dans Œdipe Roi. Un tel geste réintègre le père d'Œdipe, le roi Laios, dans l'histoire et dévoile des parallèles importants avec l'image alchimique du renouvellement du roi par son fils. En utilisant la méthode d'amplification de Jung, Œdipe est redéfini comme le rédempteur de Laios et identifié à l'archétype de la plénitude psychologique, le Soi. Une telle compréhension d'Œdipe soutient une reconnaissance plus claire de la qualité potentiellement génératrice de la souffrance humaine, rétablissant dans le mythe la qualité d'instruction morale qu'il possédait dans l'Antiquité.

Mots clés: psychologie analytique, œdipien, mythe, psychanalyse, Laios, alchimie

Der Ödipus-Mythos ist von grundlegender Bedeutung für die Tiefenpsychologie durch Freuds Heranziehung von Sophokles' Theaterstück *Ödipus Rex* bei der Entwicklung der Psychoanalyse. Aber die Auseinandersetzung der Analytischen Psychologie mit dem Mythos war trotz der Bedeutung, die auch Jung ihm beimißt, begrenzt. Das Fehlen einer ausgeprägten Jungianischen Antwort auf Ödipus bedeutet, daß die psychologisch konstruktiven Elemente des Mythos zugunsten reduktiver Freudscher Interpretationen übersehen wurden. Ich untersuche, ob sich die Analytische Psychologie erneut fruchtbringend mit Ödipus auseinandersetzen kann, indem sie seine Geschichte als väterliche Wiedergeburt neu interpretiert. Dies wird durch die Wiedereinbeziehung jener Teile des Mythos erreicht, die vor und nach der in *Ödipus Rex* dargestellten Zeit auftreten. Ein solcher Schritt reintegriert Ödipus' Vater, König Laios, in die Geschichte und enthüllt wichtige Parallelen zum alchemistischen Bild der Erneuerung des Königs durch seinen Sohn. Mit Hilfe von Jungs Methode der Amplifikation wird Ödipus zum Erlöser von Laios umgestaltet und mit dem Archetyp der psychologischen Ganzheit, dem Selbst, identifiziert. Die Behauptung wird aufgestellt, daß ein solches Verständnis von Ödipus eine klarere Anerkennung der potentiell generativen Qualität menschlichen Leidens unterstützt und dem Mythos die Qualität moralischer Belehrung zurückgibt, die er in der Antike besaß.

Schlüsselwörter: Analytische Psychologie, ödipal, Mythos, Psychoanalyse, Laios, Alchemie

Il mito di Edipo è fondamentale per la psicologia del profondo per l'uso da parte di Freud dell'opera di Sofocle *Edipo Re* nella creazione della psicoanalisi. Purtroppo, il coinvolgimento della psicologia analitica con il mito è stato molto limitato, nonostante l'importanza che anche Jung gli attribuisca. L'assenza di una risposta junghiana a Edipo significa che gli elementi psicologicamente costruttivi del mito sono stati

trascurati a favore di interpretazioni freudiane riduttive. Esamino se la psicologia analitica possa impegnarsi in maniera fruttuosa con Edipo, tramite la reinterpretazione della sua storia come una rinascita paterna. Questo è possibile reincorporando le parti del mito che si svolgono prima e dopo il periodo ritratto in *Edipo Re*. Una tale mossa permette di reintegrare il padre di Edipo, re Laio, all'interno della storia e svela importanti parallelismi con il cliché alchemico del rinnovamento del re da parte del figlio. Usando il metodo dell'amplificazione di Jung, Edipo viene riformulato come il redentore di Laio e identificato con l'archetipo della totalità psicologica, il Sé. La tesi presentata è che una tale comprensione di Edipo supporti un riconoscimento più chiaro della qualità potenzialmente generativa della sofferenza umana, restituendo al mito la potenzialità di istruzione morale che possedeva nell'antichità.

Parole chiave: psicologia analitica, edipico, mito, psicoanalisi, Laio, alchimia

Миф об Эдипе является основополагающим для глубинной психологии благодаря тому, что при создании психоанализа Фрейд обратился к пьесе Софокла "Царь Эдип". Однако среди аналитических психологов работа с этим мифом не получила широкого отклика, несмотря на то, что Юнг также придавал ему большое значение. Недостаточное внимание к Эдипу со стороны юнгианцев означает, что психологически конструктивные элементы мифа остаются незамеченными и отданы на откуп редуцированным фрейдистским интерпретациям. Я исследую возможность для аналитической психологии с пользой для себя пересмотреть миф об Эдипе и переосмыслить его как историю о перерождении отца. Для этого следует обратиться к тем частям мифа, в которых происходят события, предшествующие и следующие за теми, что описаны в «Царе Эдипе». Такой подход позволяет вернуть в эту историю отца Эдипа, царя Лая, и обнаружить важные параллели с алхимическим тропом обновления царя благодаря сыну. Используя юнговский метод амплификации, Эдип переосмысливается как спаситель Лая и идентифицируется с архетипом психологической целостности - Самости. Утверждается, что такое понимание Эдипа способствует более четкому осознанию потенциально благотворного аспекта человеческого страдания и возвращает мифу то качество нравственного поучения, которым он обладал в античности.

Ключевые слова: аналитическая психология, Эдип, миф, психоанализ, Лайи, алхимия

El mito de Edipo es fundamental para la psicología profunda debido a que Freud utilizó la obra *Edipo Rey* de Sófocles en la creación del psicoanálisis. Pero el involucramiento de la psicología analítica con el mito ha sido limitado a pesar de la importancia que Jung también le otorga. La ausencia de desarrollo de una respuesta junguiana al Edipo significa que los elementos psicológicamente constructivos del mito se han pasado por alto en favor de las interpretaciones freudianas reductivas. Examinó si la psicología analítica puede volver a comprometerse fructíferamente con Edipo reinterpretando su historia como un renacimiento paterno. Esto se consigue reincorporando aquellas

partes del mito que ocurren antes y después del periodo retratado en Edipo Rey. Este movimiento reintegra al padre de Edipo, el rey Layo, en la historia y desvela importantes paralelismos con el tema alquímico de la renovación del rey a través de su hijo. Utilizando el método de amplificación de Jung, Edipo se convierte en el redentor de Layo y se identifica con el arquetipo de la totalidad psicológica, el Self. El argumento es que tal comprensión de Edipo apoya un reconocimiento más claro de la cualidad potencialmente generativa del sufrimiento humano, devolviendo al mito la cualidad de instrucción moral que poseía en la antigüedad.

Palabras clave: psicología analítica, Edipo, mito, psicoanálisis, Layo, alquimia

炼金术化的俄狄浦斯:这一神话的再读

俄狄浦斯神话是深度心理学的基础, 这源于弗洛伊德在创立精神分析学时使用了索福克勒斯的戏剧《俄狄浦斯王》。尽管荣格也很重视神话, 但分析心理学对这一神话的探讨却很有限。对俄狄浦斯缺乏成熟的荣格学派的回应, 这意味着神话中心理建构的元素被忽视了, 而更多采用了弗洛伊德的还原性解释。我探讨了分析心理学能否通过将俄狄浦斯的故事重新诠释为父性的重生, 从而成效地重新理解俄狄浦斯。文章把《俄狄浦斯王》所描绘时期之前和之后部分的神话重新整合进来, 从而实现了对俄狄浦斯的重新理解。这一处理方式将俄狄浦斯的父亲拉伊俄斯国王重新纳入故事, 并揭示了其与炼金术中“国王通过儿子获得新生”之间的重要类似之处。利用荣格的放大法, 俄狄浦斯被重塑为拉伊俄斯的救赎者, 并被认为是心理完整的原型“自性”。本文的观点是, 对俄狄浦斯的这种理解有助于人们更清楚地认识到人类苦难的潜在生成性, 从而恢复神话在古代所具有的道德教化性质。

关键词: 分析心理学, 俄狄浦斯, 神话, 精神分析, 拉伊俄斯, 炼金术