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# THE LAIUS SYNDROME, OR THE ENDS OF POLITICAL FATHERHOOD

Silke-Maria Weineck

Reading Oedipus has never strayed far from the political: his story is, after all, the story of the rise and fall of a city, and even those readings that appear to disregard the polis altogether, presenting him as a figure of solitary desire, feed off and into theories of law, community, and violence. Psychoanalysis is the best example of that. Nonetheless, something changed drastically when Freud turned *Oedipus Tyrannus* into *Oedipus Teknon*, when the king becomes first and foremost the child, and the father turns into first and foremost an object of fantasy.

This essay seeks to recuperate the figure of tragic paternity as a foundational trope of democratic politics. To Sophocles, Oedipus was very much king and father: in the first lines of the tragedy, he addresses the citizens as “children,” and in its last scene, Antigone and Ismene are violently wrenched away from him. And yet, while Oedipus’s kingship has certainly been subject to debate, his paternity—symbolic and familial—has largely gone neglected. In the long history of classical reception, Oedipus has been read as either the universal subject or, after Freud, as the universal son *as* universal subject. And because Oedipus has exerted an identificatory pull matched, perhaps, only by Hamlet, post-Freudian subjectivity has become filial through and through. Who would want to, or dare to, speak in the name of the father these days?<sup>1</sup>

Returning once again to Oedipus and his family will illuminate a gap in the long reading of a narrative that has given prominence and urgency to classical reception like only a handful of other ancient texts. This gap opens in the elision of paternity as the political trope that governs the story of Oedipus’s family. I will argue that the same history that has turned a blind eye to Oedipus the father created a shadow

space of paternity that was filled by the figure of Laius as an unrealized presence. Sophocles introduces him through Creon: “Laius, my lord, was the leader of our land before you assumed control of this state.” Oedipus responds emphatically that he knows it well (*exoida*), and adds, in the well-known ironical twist, “by hearsay, for I never saw him” (ll. 104–5).

Ever since Sophocles banned him from the stage, Laius has remained the one we know by hearsay, the one we never see. He exerts his power through the speech of others, always evoked, never present—unlike Hamlet’s father, he never stakes his claims himself. Sophoclean Laius, then, easily lends himself to Lacanian readings as the quintessential absent father, powerful not despite but because of his death, and it is no accident that Lacanian paternity can only be articulated on the basis of Oedipal filiality.

But while modernity has had little time for Laius, he must have been a prominent figure in antiquity. He left relatively few traces in the extant literature, but we know of quite a few lost texts that engaged him: Aeschylus’s tragedy *Laius*, Euripides’ *Chrysippus* (a play that probably staged Laius’s rape or abduction of his host Pelops’s favorite son), the epic poems *Oidipea* and *Thebais*, to name a few. We have a suggestive but inconclusive remark in Plato’s *Laws*; some fragments from the Theban tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides;<sup>2</sup> and brief accounts such as the following lines in Pseudo-Apollodorus’s *Library*, a mythography from the early Christian era:

He [Laius] resided in Peloponnese, being hospitably received by Pelops; and while he taught Chrysippus, the son of Pelops, to drive a chariot, he conceived a passion for the lad and carried him off. (Apollodorus, 3.5.5)

Sir Richard Jebb, in his late-nineteenth-century commentaries on *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, several times refers to “the curse called down on Laius by Pelops, for robbing him of his son Chrysippus” (Sophocles). The entry for “Chrysippus” in a German standard reference work, *Der kleine Pauly*, refers to “the legend of the abduction of the beautiful Chrysippus” and informs us that “since the Thebans didn’t punish the transgression, Hera sends them the sphinx and has Laius and his house destroyed through Oedipus’s fate” (1:1169). The corresponding entry for Laius, oddly enough written by the same scholar, tells us that Pelops “cursed his son’s abductor to remain childless or

to die by his son's hand" (3:454). Both entries mention other myths according to which Chrysippus was killed by his half-brothers Atreus and Thyestes at the instigation of his mother, Hippodamia, who hated him, and the Laius entry notes that "the curse . . . probably did not originally belong to the Theban legends" (3:454).<sup>3</sup>

Laius, then, could have been treated along heterogeneous lines, and the very paucity of sources would have put little restraint on the collective imagination. And yet, during modernity, there is hardly anything at all, and certainly nothing remotely comparable to the intense engagement with Oedipus. Surely, during the hundreds of years we have spent thinking about Sophocles' Oedipus, the act of patricide—one of modernity's foremost political tropes—has never been far from anybody's mind, whether the readings that have emerged from this history center on the sphinx or on incest, on knowledge, desire, fate, or the *polis*. Its victim, however, barely appears. For the most part, he is simply the ("the") father and dead by his son's hand, invisible and beyond both analysis and blame—yes, he exposed a newborn infant to what must have seemed certain death, but that story is related without condemnation in a play notably bursting with anger, regret, and reproach. Always already off stage, it appeared as if he did not need to be imagined, as if "hearsay" could tell us all we needed to know. As one of the purest literary instances of a powerful presence in absence, to most of Oedipus's readers, the figure of Laius needed neither image nor description.

When he finally *does* reappear, however, it is as the dark father of a child's worst nightmare. Hugo von Hofmannsthal brings him to life in 1906, in *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, and Laius enters the stage as a nasty old man. Oedipus has just killed the king's herald in self-defense, and Laius, furious at the death of his old servant, will not accept Oedipus's humble offer to make amends, but instead threatens to torture and kill him. Oedipus asks, aghast, "With what murderer's hands do you reach into the world? Who are you?" Laius replies:

An old man who had to see an old man die like a dog under your hands.  
But you shall pay!  
I will send you down, draped in torments  
and amongst the dead he will encounter you  
and will feast on the sight and will bless me for it.  
(56, my trans.)

Much can be said about this passage and the play as a whole, but for my purposes here it is enough to note that Hofmannsthal's Laius is the voice of the old men, all the old men. Still alive, he already speaks for the dead, in the voice of a murderous antagonism too virulent to die with them—it is the voice of the father as dreamed in the dark by the Freudian son. Here is how Hofmannsthal has Oedipus see him:

Your voice is hatred and torment. You never had a child,  
 You are of the infertile ones,  
 Your sad wife, dust in her hair,  
 Has lain before the gods night and day—  
 Let me pass, let me go! (56–57)

Hofmannsthal's vision of Laius is both extraordinary and representative of modern fatherhood: extraordinary because he imagines him at all, gives him the voice he has lacked for so long, even if it is little more than a snarl; thoroughly modern because Laius, even if Oedipus with somewhat heavy-handed irony accuses him of infertility, appears through the encounter with the Oedipal son. He is little more than a pure obstacle on the road to selfhood, and a singularly unappealing one at that.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, too, shows us a deeply disturbing Laius, even though he is now a young man, recently married, and wearing the uniform of the fascists. Stealing into the room where his son is lying in his crib, Laius stares at the infant, his face a mask of petulant rage. On the screen, his thoughts flash in writing: "You are here again to take my place and rob me of all I have. [*looking to Jocasta*] She, the woman I love, already you steal her love" (*Oedipus Rex* 1967).<sup>4</sup> Later, we see him viciously squeezing the infant's feet, soon to be bound tightly by ropes, as if not even Pasolini had the nerve to show an actual piercing.

Such fictional treatments join seamlessly with scholarly ones. John Munder Ross, a psychoanalyst, sees in Laius a sadist beset by "pederastic and filicidal inclinations that I believe to be universal among fathers" (1985, 117), and he calls him "one of the prototypic perpetrators of child abuse" (1994, 95). Elsewhere, Ross names Laius as "an embodiment of a veritable web of paternal disease and its terrible consequences, offering himself as a prototype or paradigm of the 'bad father'" (1982, 170). For Martin Bergmann, he is "the father of pederasty

about whom nothing favorable can be said" (298). Marie Balmory, who returns to Laius in the context of her reading of Freud's relationship to his father, relies on Pierre Grimal's *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* when she renders the story as follows: "Laius was very young when his father, King Labdacus, died, and he had to flee when the regent was killed. He sought refuge with King Pelops. There he developed a passion for young Chrysippus, Pelops's son, and thus, by some accounts, he conceived unnatural passions. Laius ran off with the young man and was cursed by Pelops. . . . Chrysippus, from shame, committed suicide," and she continues:

Such is the origin of the curse of the Labdacidae. . . . It is neither Oedipus's desire, nor blind destiny, that constitutes the profound motive behind the tragic events that will befall him. At the origin is the fault committed by Laius; the abduction and homosexual violation of the young son of his host and the suicide that follows constitute the main-spring of the Oedipean myth. (8)

As they say, important if true. But none of the better-known texts—say, Homer's *Odyssey*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, or Euripides' *Phoenician Women*—mention the story when they talk about Oedipus, and we have already noted that the Chrysippus motif may well be a late addition to the Theban saga. Euripides, provided his *Chrysippus* did blame Laius for the whole Theban mess, is famous for rationalizing the myths his dramatic predecessors had told, and he may well have introduced the Chrysippus motif to motivate more plausibly the downfall of the Labdacidae—it is, in any case, impossible to tell. While Plato's *Laws* and a smattering of other sources do link the name of Laius to pederasty (which hardly translates into "child abuse" in the Greek context),<sup>5</sup> most of the extant sources concerning the rape and abduction of Chrysippus belong to the Christian era, and it is entirely unclear whether (and, I'd argue, rather unlikely that) the earlier ones carry the same tone of condemnation we find in Balmory or Ross.

Hofmannsthal and Pasolini are self-consciously, even aggressively modern: they reimagine the old story as a new one, and the results are stunning. The psychoanalytically oriented critics, on the other hand, insist that Laius has *always* been lurking in the shadows, that the ancient story is the same as the one they want to tell. In other words, they want us to believe that Laius was never a tragic hero. There is, in those

accounts, no reflection on the specifically modern desire that drives those readings (including a very modern heteronormativity that only fitfully distinguishes between pedophilia, pederasty, and homosexuality), an unrelenting identification with the filial position. Certainly, “all versions belong to the myth,” but myths evolve, and when and how they evolve matters. The darkening of Laius may or may not have some early roots—it seems undecidable to me on the basis of philological evidence—but it becomes all-pervasive in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Surely, no scholar would dare call Oedipus “one of the prototypic perpetrators of elder abuse”—while his story has undergone near constant reevaluation, its tragic structure has been acknowledged throughout. Laius, by contrast, consistently has it coming. Framed as a child rapist and a child murderer, his figure falls prey to the banal moralizations of contemporary therapeutic discourse. As the *New York Times*, in its habitual ignorance of the most basic tenets of classical scholarship, puts it: “Laius may have got what he deserved because he tried to murder his son and was a pederast to boot. Although Sophocles’ drama and Freud’s theory focus on the son’s guilt and thus suppress the father’s history of abusing children, that does not change the legend. Long before Oedipus was born, Laius raped Chryssipus [*sic*], who was King Pelops’ son. In other words, Laius had a ‘Laius complex.’ He wanted to murder his son” (Boxer).

While the reception of Oedipus is driven by recurrent movements of identification, the stories lately told about Laius block all empathy. In other words, precisely when criticism deems itself most critical of Freud, it repeats its fundamental move most faithfully: we are all Oedipus. And none of us is Laius.

If there seems to be a need to exonerate Oedipus from crimes for which he himself at times insisted he was responsible, it may bespeak a specifically modern guilt that here manifests itself not in any questionable Freudian elevation of the father, but in the disavowal of his humanity. In those accounts, Laius is no longer “the dead father, the father who, after his death, returns as his Name, that is, as the embodiment of the symbolic Law/Prohibition” (Žižek, 315f.)—his name returns only to justify his killing over and over again, as a marker of the son’s innocence, his enduring victimhood. We are encountering, as it were, *The Passion of the Oedipus*.

Martin Bergmann has argued that the sacrifice of children is as

surely part of our cultural heritage as the patricidal urges to which Freud was so attuned (298), and David Lee Miller has recently suggested that “the motif of filial sacrifice is the most striking feature shared by the canonical texts of English literature, along with their classical and biblical antecedents,” adding: “Why do Western patriarchies so persistently imagine sacrificing their sons?” (1). It is indeed a powerful motif that raises urgent questions concerning the structure of patriarchy and fatherhood, but we should not forget that the three perhaps most seminal narratives of filial sacrifice all imagine the son who survives: Isaac does *not* die on the mountain in Moriah; Oedipus does *not* die on Mount Kithairon; and Jesus, who does die on Mount Golgotha, in a fashion, is resurrected and gets to live eternally. In this regard, one of the foundational narratives central to our Greek and Judeo-Christian cultural inheritance presents the boy who lives, despite the odds, his survival a precondition of the story that turns into history.

If fantasies of patricide and of filicide are inextricably linked, as I, too, believe they are, then whose fantasies are they, and what ambivalent needs, desires, and anxieties feed them? Ever since Georges Devereux’s influential paper “Why Oedipus Killed Laius” (1953), those psychoanalysts who have paid attention to him have focused on what Devereux, in another paper, called Laius’s “cannibalistic impulses” (Devereux, 1966). But according to the remaining fragments of Aeschylus’s *Laius*, it is Oedipus who takes his father’s blood into his mouth, not vice versa (Mette, 35).

The filicidal gesture, I think, is no more important than its failure. No story may have driven the tension between the two as far to the breaking point as the *akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, which affords a trenchant counterpoint to the binding of Oedipus. In Genesis both the command to kill and the command *not* to kill issue from the same source, the divine father, who can both contain and resolve the rift within fatherhood because, unlike human fathers and the gods of polytheism, he is nobody’s son and he cannot be killed or disempowered in turn. In commanding both murder and mercy, he grounds the nation he had promised to Abraham, but he also names its price—the sacrifice of the sons that every state has reenacted in war after war ever since. Certainly, there is a tremendous affective gap between killing your son with a knife you hold in your own hand and sending your



sons into war to be killed by the knives (guns, gas, missiles, napalm) of others, but in either case, the father yields to the demands of what is said to be greater and more valuable than he, his son, and his love for him, or that which commands a greater love and a more complete loyalty,<sup>6</sup> and this demand on fatherhood is articulated over and over again. It is also, as I will show, at the heart of the story of Laius—or at least one of his stories, the one lost in the chorus of Oedipal advocacy. Abraham's paternal power—at its extreme in filicide—is both affirmed and denied, established and overruled by the divine *Übervater* who renders Abraham's own power of the second order. Abraham, like all human fathers, is both father and son, subject and subjected, and this specific dichotomy, one of many that constitutes and strains fatherhood, is related as a purely structural fact, not as an affective rift. Many of the *akedah's* most important readers, such as Kierkegaard and Auerbach, have commented on the terror the story has induced. But why is there no mention of any conflict, any fear? Where is the terror located in the text? "And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son" (Genesis 22:9–10 KJV).

What makes the story terrible is precisely the fact that it is told as if it were not, its *discours*. Genesis does not show us an Abraham who struggles; he does not rebel as he rebels against God's plan to incinerate Sodom and Gomorrah; he never pitches his own will against the will of God or of a powerful other. Abraham has no antagonist, and the agon is the one element tragedy cannot do without. Where it would have been, there is a gap:

And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. (Genesis 22:2–3 KJV)

The story does not merely take place in a vacuum, it creates one: right between the first and the second sentence cited above. Ben Asher,

Kierkegaard, Auerbach, Miller, and countless others all respond to the powerful appeal to fill in the terrible blank, to invent if not a revolt, then at least evidence of a nearly unbearable inner struggle, at the very least a question. But there is none—Abraham rises, saddles his ass, collects Isaac, and sets off. It is only God's voice that speaks of Abraham's love, that articulates the sharpest dissonance: take your only son, whom you love, and kill him. Yes, Sir, right away, Sir, or, in Bob Dylan's words: "Where d' you want this killing done?" (Dylan).

In the context of this essay, the distinction between Jerusalem and Athens emerges as that between a world in which there is an original father who, being fatherless himself, grounds and limits the power of all fathers after him, and a world in which the highest paternal power—Zeus—is always also a son whose revolt succeeded.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that Greece does not have its share of filicidal narratives. In fact, those stories abound, but there is a striking difference. Tantalus serves his son Pelops to the gods—but Pelops is resurrected and Tantalus is severely and eternally punished, sentenced to unquenchable desire. Laius has Oedipus exposed on Kithairon—but Oedipus survives, kills Laius, and ends up as Athens's highly revered guardian corpse. Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia to the military interest of the state—but Iphigenia is saved and Agamemnon is murdered by his wife. Both Uranus and Cronus attempt to kill their children, but neither of them succeeds and both lose their power in the process. Genesis grounds actual and symbolic fatherhood in a story of averted filicide, demanded and practiced by a paternal deity; Greek mythology installs Zeus through a story of accomplished patricide,<sup>8</sup> a theme noticeably absent from the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

The different structures have eminently political implications. Monotheism establishes the paternal triad in which god, king, and father are at the same time strictly analogous and subjected to one another in a descending hierarchy—the power of God establishes and trumps the demands of the king who, as the representative of the nation, in any crisis overrules the rights of the father. The political history of ancient Greece and especially Athens, in marked contrast to other histories, is characterized not so much by the personal struggle of paternal rulers competing for legitimacy, but by rivaling models of political organization that successfully challenge the principle of monarchy long before such a thing becomes possible in the Christian

West. Certainly, Olympus is nothing if not a patriarchy, but regime change is always possible.

The closest analog to God's command to kill Isaac, and this brings us finally back to Thebes, is Apollo's prophecy to Laius. Bergmann claims that the "very idea of comparing Abraham, 'the father of faith,' with Laius, the father of pederasty about whom nothing favorable can be said, is bound to evoke misgivings" (298), but I, for one, have some misgivings about Abraham, and I will argue that the case of Laius is quite a bit more complicated than either the dominant Sophoclean version or the Chrysippus plot suggest. The biblical narrative grants Abraham his nation as a prize for his obedience to the absolute paternal principle; as Bergmann notes, his "willingness to sacrifice Isaac symbolized a victory of his sonhood over his fatherhood" (199). Quite so, but Abraham's metaphysical sonhood also grounds his social and political fatherhood and gives it a strange moral power that apparently (or allegedly) cannot be challenged. And yet, admiring Abraham surely means to admire and condone blind obedience to a brutal and senseless command issued by a paternal deity that does not explain itself. By contrast, Laius's failed sacrifice of his son destabilizes him and leads to both his death and his political failure. It is Laius who emerges as the tragic figure.

It is curious that Laius's modern detractors, who rely unhesitatingly on the most obscure versions of the myth, often postdating the main narrative they are said to illuminate, tend to ignore entirely a very suggestive passage in an easily accessible canonical text: Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*, which precedes and informs the Sophoclean Oedipus whose version of the story has dominated reception. Anyone I have ever asked why Laius had Oedipus exposed has given me the same answer: an oracle told him that his son would kill him. But that is *not* the story Aeschylus tells:

Indeed I speak of the ancient transgression, now swift in its retribution. It remains even into the third generation, ever since Laius—in defiance of Apollo who, at his Pythian oracle at the earth's center, said three times that the king would save his city if he died without offspring. Ever since he, overcome by the thoughtlessness of his longing, fathered his own death, the parricide Oedipus, who sowed his mother's sacred field, where he was nurtured, and endured a bloody crop. Madness [*paranoia*] united the frenzied [*phrenôleis*] bridal pair. (742–57)

Laius has to choose not between his son and his god, like Abraham, nor between his son's life and his own, as *opinio communis* suggests, but between his son and his *polis*.

To my knowledge, Peter Szondi is the only major critic who has stressed the tragic implications of this passage and linked it to the ironic structure of Sophocles' Oedipus,<sup>10</sup> recognizing that Laius's dilemma is a variation of the quintessentially tragic logic: the very act meant to avert catastrophe will make catastrophe come to pass.

In the Christian era, most political thought preceding the early Enlightenment (and much of that beyond) conceives of kingship and fatherhood as parallel and analogous modes of benign and legitimate power. Even Aristotle, one of the model's earliest critics, notes that "the relationship of father to sons is regal in type, since a father's first care is for his children's welfare. . . . [T]he ideal of kingship is paternal government" (Aristotle, 1160b). Laius, however, must choose between being a father of children or a father to the city. To beget an heir, as heroic kings are expected to do in order to ensure the continuity of the city and its rule, would destroy the city instead. Under Apollo's injunction, King Laius must sacrifice both his sexual desire and his desire to leave behind an heir; he is called upon to let go of the path to immortality sons are said to offer, to accept the finitude of his own life and body, to die *gennas ater*, without something he had engendered, made, created, so that the city can survive.

Apparently, he took the oracle seriously enough, but he might not have trusted its message—according to Aeschylus, he went to hear it three times, as if he wanted to make sure what it said, as if it could not possibly have said *that*. His eventual surrender to desire is portrayed as a single event, a moment whose madness is doubly stressed: *paranoia* brought together a pair of crazed (*phrenôlês*) newlyweds. Laius does violate a divine command, but even if Greek culture valued sexual continence, marital sex does not usually make the cut of unforgivable transgressions.

It cannot be overstressed that in Aeschylus's version, superseded in nearly every mythographic account of the curse by Sophocles' corrective interpretation, the oracle does not predict that the son will kill his father, but that the city will fall if Laius does not die childless. It is not a matter, then, of protecting his own life. For the sake of the city,

the son must die before he dies. Time must turn. The king must not be a father anymore: the very nature of rule is at stake.

Just as the biblical account of Abraham's sacrifice did not show him as struggling, the extant Greek passages that refer to Laius's (and/or Jocasta's) decision do not suggest that exposing Oedipus was a difficult choice for him or them. But the brief passage in *Seven Against Thebes* bespeaks at the very least a resistance on his part, and it is certainly phrased in such a way as to suggest that he had to make an active choice. Like Hans Joachim Mette, who collected, edited, and commented the few fragments of *Laius* there are, I like to imagine that the lost *Laius* recounted scenes in which Laius and Jocasta agonized over the decision to abandon Oedipus in the wilderness, similar to Aeschylus's portrayal of Orestes struggling with his decision to kill Klytaemnestra.<sup>11</sup> Even if indirect infanticide carried not nearly as heavy a prohibition as it does now, it is not as clear that the choice would have been as easy as modern commentators assume.<sup>12</sup> Ancient texts, especially the Homeric epics, tell prominent stories of doting fathers (Zoja, 83–114), and even if Greek culture did not know the adoration of the infant or the romanticized childhood of late Christianity, I suspect that Laius's dilemma would not have been the stuff of tragedy in the first place if it did not entail a stark conflict.

Unlike Abraham, Laius is not called upon to wield the knife himself, and while there is, as mentioned above, an account of Oedipus taking his slain father's blood in his mouth and spitting it out again, no corresponding motif appears in the accounts of Laius. One might wonder whether Oedipus's exposure could not be read as a gesture of ambivalence. Laius's ultimate mistake may not have been his drunken coitus with Jocasta, but his decision—despite the high stakes—not to make sure of Oedipus's death, as he surely could have done, but to leave him to his fate on Kithairon, or in the hands of a servant with a soft heart. Perhaps the king wavered, perhaps he was tempted to let the city go to hell in order to let this infant live, perhaps he decided to give fate a small chance, giving those awful scales a nudge, tipping the balance.

Perhaps not. Exposure was, after all, the accepted infanticidal procedure, designed, probably, to forestall the pollution that would ensue from the actual murder of a blood relative. In any case, Laius, again very much unlike Abraham, loses: his son (or at least his fatherhood),

his life, the city. Choosing the welfare of the city over the welfare of his child is a sacrifice to the political—but like so many of Greece’s filicidal offerings, the sacrifice fails. The city does not survive but disintegrates after Oedipus, once again all father, curses his sons Polyneices and Eteocles to die in fratricidal bloodshed, and Creon, the last king of the cycle, loses his own son Haemon to suicide after he has condemned Antigone to death. Political paternity does not fare well in Thebes, and, by extension, on the Athenian stage.

Of all the stories we have been told about Laius, this, then, is the oldest one: father of the city and father of a son, he is forced to choose between the two, chooses the city, loses both, and dies by the hand of the son he thought he had to kill. His story is far more compelling than the one about the child molester, the nasty old man, the prototypical “bad father” (to cite Ross again), and far more intelligent politically. The fantasy of the bad father, the homicidal deviant monster, is but the flip side of the good father, the fantasy of the benign ruler who will slay the sphinx and bring peace and prosperity to all (until the plague breaks out, as it always does). Our own popular culture obsessively presents us with this figure: for every Voldemort, there is a Dumbledore (and once again, we are dealing with “the boy who lived”); for every Sauron, a Gandalf; for every Darth Vader, a Yoda. In other words, the paternal monster acts as a foil for a collective desire for the wise, kind, powerful, and, curiously, reliably celibate father, monotheism’s emissary in the land of Fantasy.

Aeschylus and Sophocles, by contrast, neither demonize nor idealize the father. Instead, they present us with fathers who fall prey to the model of symbolic paternity itself. Tragically, that is to say: with necessity. Long before Paul Federn coined the influential term of “the fatherless society” in 1919, they advocate the ideal of the fatherless city, a city not of sons, but of adults.

## Notes

1. For an analysis of Freud’s relationship to paternity, see Weineck.
2. Among other scattered sources, see Mette, which contains extant fragments from Aeschylus’s *Laius*, the *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, and Robert.
3. In the *Phoenician Women* Oedipus merely speaks of an unspecified “legacy of curses I received from Laius,” though the fact that Euripides did write a play about Chrysippus is, of course, suggestive (Euripides, vol. 2).

4. In the original screenplay, Laius is listening to his “inner voice”: “Here he is, the child who is gradually going to take your place in the world. Yes, he will . . . take your rightful place. He will kill you. . . . Through love of his mother, this fellow will murder his father” (*Oedipus Rex* 1971, 20). In the light of this passage, it is curious to read Pasolini’s insistence that “Freud . . . carries no more weight in the film than an amateur would have given him” (9)—a claim that, if anything, goes to show that our imagination of the father has been conditioned by Freud’s narratives to such an extent that his influence has become invisible.

5. “If we were to follow in nature’s steps and enact that law which held good before the days of Laius, declaring that it is right to refrain from indulging in the same kind of intercourse with men and boys as with women, and adducing as evidence thereof the nature of wild beasts, and pointing out how male does not touch male for this purpose, since it is unnatural,—in all this we would probably be using an argument neither convincing nor in any way consonant with your States” (Plato, 836c). It is striking that this passage has led some scholars to claim that Laius *invented* pederasty.

6. The theme of the father who sacrifices his sons to the state will deeply engage early modern writers who, long before Oedipus rises to his present paradigmatic status, work through it via the figure of Brutus.

7. Certainly, the New Testament introduces a son as well, and Christianity has been read as a “son religion” often enough, but Jesus is nothing *but* son—he never becomes a father in turn, and it is precisely for that reason that he can serve as a figure for Christian identification.

8. Zeus does not and cannot kill Cronus, since Cronus is immortal, but immobilizing him under a mountain seems close enough.

9. There is only a single and quite obscure story of patricide in the Bible: Sennacherib, an exceptionally cruel and, worse, idolatrous king, is killed by his sons whom he had meant to sacrifice to his false gods (2 Kings 19:367 and Isaiah 37:378). Importantly, not the patricides but their brother ascends to his throne.

10. Commenting on the same passage in Aeschylus, Szondi writes: “In order to have descendants, he shall forego them, for the heir, which otherwise saves the dynasty from going under, would here occasion the downfall himself” (214, my trans.).

11. Such scenes, if they existed, had to be recapitulations, since it appears as if the *Laius* began with Laius’s journey to Delphi. See Mette, 345.

12. See, for instance, Erik Erikson: “We take it for granted that King Laius knew what he was doing—for could he not count on the authority of the Oracle when he left his baby boy to die, taking no chances with the possibility that a good education might have proved stronger than the oracular establishment?” (22).

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