

Tragic Riddles in the Margins: A Syriac Invocation of the Story of Oedipus

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Abstract: *This article analyses a paratextual writing on the final page of a fifth or sixth century Syriac manuscript currently housed at the Russian National Library in St Petersburg. The note is somewhat difficult to decipher, in rough handwriting that is hard to date. The present paper provides the text and translation of this Syriac paratext and argues that it is two columns of riddles about Oedipus, the mythical king of Thebes. The argument suggests that the riddler knew the story of Oedipus according to the Sophoclean cycle of tragedies. These riddles are some of the only known invocations of or allusions to the tragedy of Oedipus in the Syriac language.*

Keywords: *Oedipus, Syriac, riddles, tragedy, manuscripts*

“It has justly been said that the Oedipus complex is the nuclear complex of the neuroses, and constitutes the essential part of their content.”¹

Oedipus is probably best known to modern readers through the mediation of Sigmund Freud’s theory of adolescent sexuality. Regardless of one’s opinion of Freud’s theory, the founder of modern psychoanalysis based it on the ancient story of the mythical king of Thebes known chiefly through the tragedian Sophocles in the fifth century BCE, but retold at various intervals in antiquity, perhaps most notably by the first century CE Roman philosopher Seneca.² Sophocles’s drama—no less than Seneca’s reworking of it—is a complex story of the quest for knowledge, truth,

¹ Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, 149 n.1.

² See, e.g., Boyle, *Seneca*.

identity, and epistemology, but also about morality, emotion, political power, and the nature of gods *vis-à-vis* humankind. Sophocles was arguably the most famous and best dramatist from the classical tradition.³

One of the most widely discussed aspects of Sophocles's series of plays surrounding Oedipus is the question of the tragic protagonist's innocence or guilt.⁴ In Sophocles's telling, Oedipus begins his story in blissful ignorance—even the audience (though more prescient) is permitted a chance to bask in the glory of the King of Thebes for a moment.⁵ In his later rendition, Seneca is perhaps less gratifying in his opening:

In stark contrast with Sophocles [Seneca] begins his play with a more Roman Oedipus, isolated by his own power. Alone on stage at dawn riddled with doubt and melancholy before the 'melancholy flame' of a 'doubtful' (*dubius* 1) sun, preoccupied with power's deceitful allure (6 ff.), he is presented as a ruler racked by anxiety, guilt, and, most of all, fear.⁶

If anything, Seneca's preclusion of a guilty Oedipus is representative of most impressions of the story, especially in a post-Freudian age. Who wouldn't be preconditioned to judge a character who murdered his father and married (and procreated with) his mother? But it is in part this very predetermined evaluation of the character that has made the story so compelling for generations. Indeed, *Oedipus Tyrannus* (along with its sequels, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*) opens discussion for a pertinent matter that is deeply religious and significant to groups long removed by time and space from classical Greece: to what degree do humans bear responsibility in a world run by god(s)? As Marina Berzins McCoy recently pointed out, throughout the Sophoclean tellings of the story, Oedipus "possesses an overly confident sense of his own righteousness, a judgement of

³ Wright, "Reception of Sophocles."

⁴ See, among others, a classic discussion in Sheppard, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, xxiv–xl; Dodds, "Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*." A recent philosophical discussion can be found in Gaskin, *Tragedy and Redress*, and a response by Crisp, "*Oedipus Rex* and the Interpretation of Literature."

⁵ See e.g., Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, 94; Boyle, *Seneca*, lvi.

⁶ Boyle, *Seneca*, lvi–lvii.

the would-be criminal as his polar opposite, a tendency to suspect or to blame others, rather than to look inwardly.”⁷

In this paper, I do not take a firm position on the tantalising question of Oedipus’s guilt or innocence. Rather, I am interested in the reception of the story and perceptions left behind by past audiences and thinkers. In particular, I am interested in how an average religious person might have understood the story. Not many traces of such engagement with Greek tragedy survive (beyond, e.g., the various *scholia* in the manuscripts) and perhaps the least likely place we might expect to find it would be in a manuscript from Syriac-speaking Christians. Yet, I present in this paper one of the only (as far as I can tell) documented instances of engagement with the story of Oedipus in the Syriac language. In the margin of a manuscript that dates probably to the late fifth century, an anonymous Syriac writer⁸ penned in two-columns riddles invoking the story of Oedipus. I offer here a text and translation of the riddles along with a brief analysis. I hope to show that the riddles testify to a level of engagement with the Oedipus cycles⁹ that is otherwise unattested in Syriac literature.

1. *Classical Greek Literature in Syriac*

Before coming to the riddles, something should be said briefly of the reception of the Classical Greek heritage in the Syriac language. Syriac translations of Greek texts exist from the earliest extant period of Syriac literarisation.¹⁰ Some early mosaics from the region

⁷ Berzins McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 42.

⁸ Due to the anonymity of the writer, I can only determine that he or she knew how to write in Syriac at the intermediate level at least. Whether they knew other languages, such as Greek, Arabic, or Coptic is undeterminable.

⁹ By cycles I am referring to Sophocles’s three-part story of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the *Antigone*. This could also refer to the three-part cycle of Aeschylus (*Laius*, *Oedipus*, and the *Seven Against Thebes*), and perhaps even Seneca’s *Oedipus*. Since we cannot know the nature of the Riddler’s source(s), I remain open to the possibilities that they could have known any (or none) of these cycles, though I will make the case that the Sophoclean versions are probably in the Riddler’s mind.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Brock, “Greek Words in Syriac”; Butts, *Language Change*; Rigolio, “Syriac.”

of Edessa (the birthplace of the Syriac dialect) portray scenes from the myths of Orpheus, Prometheus, and the *Comanus*, all containing Syriac inscriptions.¹¹ In manuscripts, quotations attributed to Homer and Plato (many of which are spurious) are found in the writings of Antony of Tagrit and elsewhere.¹² Perhaps more than anyone else from the Classical tradition, Syriac speakers read Aristotle, especially his *Organon*, mediated through the commentaries of Porphyry.¹³ It has been well established that it was through Syriac that Aristotle came into Arabic.¹⁴ Greek medicine of the Hippocratic and Galenic traditions was also transmitted into Syriac where it was then picked up by Arabic scholars.¹⁵ There are thus multiple examples of the Syriac reception of the Classical tradition, and no doubt more work remains to be done.

One lacuna in this transmission history, however, includes Greek tragedy and comedy. There are no clear traces of the Classical dramatists' works in the Syriac tradition. In fact, linguistic evidence suggests that Syriac writers only understood conceptually the terms τραγῳδία and κωμῳδία in an abstract sense mediated through the definitions provided by Aristotle¹⁶ and Galen.¹⁷ In other words, late antique and medieval Syriac writers transmitted a theoretical knowledge of tragedy and comedy, but they do not seem to have translated any actual dramas. If, as I suspect, the riddles analysed here refer to Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is unlikely that the riddler knew this story in a Syriac translation.

An important component of this lacuna is the lack of mediation of Eusebius of Caesarea, through whom Syriac writers became familiar with many texts and authors without actually engaging them

¹¹ Possekkel, "Orpheus among the Animals"; Rigolio, "Syriac," 171–74. Nöldeke also studied Theodore Bar Koni's discussions of Homer, Hesiod, and Orpheus. See Nöldeke, "Bar Chōnī."

¹² Raguse, "Syrische Homerzitate"; Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings*.

¹³ Watt, *Aristotelian Rhetoric in Syriac*; Arzanov, *Porphyry*; Nicosia, "La Rhétorique d'Aristote."

¹⁴ E.g., Watt, "Syriac Translators."

¹⁵ Lamoëux, *Hunayn ibn Ishāq*; Bhayro, "Reception of Galen"; Chipman, "Reception of Galenic Pharmacology."

¹⁶ Rigolio, "Aristotle's Poetics in Syriac and in Arabic."

¹⁷ Schrier, "Hunayn ibn Ishāq."

But soldiers provoked them so that they might accuse us falsely and say that we [Christians] eat our sons and we are joined in marriage with our mothers

Oedipus said: ‘There are no people who have a good fate and a bad fate in marriage. For it becomes either good or bad as soon as a man brings a good or a bad woman into his house.’²¹

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3. *The Manuscript*

The manuscript in which we find the riddles is an early and important one in several respects. It is currently housed at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg and is catalogued by Pigulevskaya as New Series ms 04 (henceforth StPet 04).²⁵ It measures 26 x 17 cm with 142 extant folios;²⁶ the text is written in a clear, neat Estrangelā handwriting in two columns. Pigulevskaya dated the manuscript by palaeography to the sixth century, but van Esbroeck has made a strong case that it should be dated to the second half of the fifth century.²⁷ Aside from an owner's note and the riddles, there are no colophons indicating scribe or provenance. On fol. 2r, a similar hand to the owner's note has written the contents of the manuscript in large, sloppy letters in the margins. The contents are of Christian apocryphal and hagiographical nature:

*Doctrine of Addai*²⁸

*Doctrine of Simeon Cephas*²⁹

*History of John the son of Zebedee*³⁰

*Helena Augusta Legend*³¹

*Legend of Judas Kyriakos*³²

*Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*³³

²⁵ Пигулевская, *Каталог*, 140–43.

²⁶ van Esbroeck, “Le manuscrit syriaque” estimates that the manuscript is incomplete, but the final text on fol. 142v ends with the rest of the page blank. Two different later hands then added paratexts (including the riddle) to this blank space. Moreover, the first folio, 1v, contains the full beginning of the *Doctrina Addai*. With the beginning and end intact, it is difficult to maintain the hypothesis that the manuscript is incomplete. There are, however, missing pages in the main body of the manuscript, so this must be what van Esbroeck means.

²⁷ van Esbroeck, “Le manuscrit syriaque,” 217–19. See also van Esbroeck, “La légende des Sept Dormants.”

²⁸ See Lollar, *Doctrine of Addai*.

²⁹ See Walters, “Preaching of Simon Cephas.”

³⁰ See Lollar, *History of John*.

³¹ See Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*.

³² See Drijvers and Drijvers, *Finding of the True Cross*.

³³ See van Esbroeck “La légende des Sept Dormants”; Tondello, “Sleepers of Ephesus.”

*Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus*³⁴

*Panegyric of Basil of Caesarea*³⁵

In terms of contents, StPet 04 is a collection of apocrypha and hagiography that presents a quasi-historiographical collection related to the city of Edessa (modern Şanlıurfa, Turkey).³⁶ Given the contents, especially the *Doctrine of Addai* and the *History of John*, it is highly likely that StPet 04 was compiled in Edessa. It may have remained there until around 931/2 when Moses of Nisibis, abbot of Deir al-Surian (the Monastery of the Syrians) in the Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt, brought it back to his monastery, along with around 249 other manuscripts. Moses went to Baghdad to plead his case regarding taxation of his monastery before the caliph al-Muqtādir and while awaiting the caliph's ruling, Moses travelled around to Syriac-speaking communities of Mesopotamia and collected manuscripts for his library at Deir al-Surian.³⁷ StPet 04 was one of these manuscripts, as an owner's note in the inner margin of fol. 142v states:

ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ
ܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ
ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ ܕܡܢ ܕܥܠܡ

(The book) is from the desert of Scete, from the Monastery of the Syrians.

Let the curse of God be upon anyone who removes
it from it [i.e., the monastery] or [...].³⁸

The final line is illegible but based on similar warnings in other manuscripts from Deir al-Surian it probably mentions not returning the book if borrowed. From the Monastery of the Syrians the manuscript was purchased by Russian representatives in the 1830s for 2500 rubels.³⁹

³⁴ See van Esbroeck, "Panegyric of Gregory of Nyssa."

³⁵ See Muravjev, "La partie syriaque du dossier."

³⁶ I argue this point more comprehensively in my monograph (in preparation) related to my British Academy International Fellowship (IF23\100342).

³⁷ Brock, "Without Mushê of Nisibis"; Brock, "Abbot Mushe of Nisibis."

³⁸ Note that my transcription of this note differs somewhat from the one recorded in Пигулевская, *Каталог*, 140.

³⁹ Dorn, "Ueber vier"; Wright, "Syriac Manuscripts at St. Petersburg."

Another writer later wrote over the final line of the owner's note from Deir al-Surian and added two short columns of text. In his analysis of the manuscript, Tondello also noted this text underneath the ownership note (though he does not appear to have realised they were in two columns) and commented, "The last six lines [of additional notes] may be some kind of practice-writing: the calligraphy throughout varies greatly and sounds like a nonsense rhyme."⁴⁰ He was not far off: it is these lines that contain the riddles. From the right side, over the final line of the owner's note, is possibly the name of the riddler: "Ioannes." This is a peculiar spelling for the name "John" in Syriac, which is typically "Yuhannon" and appears in the first line of the text of the riddles but is likely the addressee of the riddle. Ioannes asks, the riddle begins, and is followed by the typical phrase to begin a riddle: "who is it/this".⁴¹ This opening phrase is thus highly suggestive in its relationship to the content of the riddles. The fact that this appears to be written over the owner's note makes it difficult to read.⁴² Fortunately, the text of the riddles is clear, even if the grammar is a bit obscure. The riddles appear in two columns, side by side, and are somewhat repetitive in content, creating some challenges regarding how they are intended to be read. I provide here a literal translation of the riddles so as to clarify the constituent parts as clearly as possible.

Column 1

1 مہ اےفہ مہلہ

♦ مہلہ: مہلہ اوہ اےفہ مہلہ مہلہ ♦

⁴¹ Cf. Chabot, “Éclaircissements,” 277–83. The manuscript is damaged here and the word could read **ΔΔ** (to relate a proverb, parable, fable, or myth), so that it would be something like “Ioannis told a parable/proverb”. Note that the Arab writer Mubashshir refers to *symbola* attributed to Pythagoras as “riddles”, implying enigmatic or symbolic language. See Izdebska, “Riddles of Pythagoras,” esp. 482.

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ܡܠܬܗܡ ܕܐܚܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ	ܡܠܬܗܡ ܕܐܚܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ	
ܡܠܬܗܡ ܕܐܚܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ	ܡܠܬܗܡ ܕܐܚܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ	
ܕܐܚܝܬܐ	ܕܐܚܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ	5
	ܡܠܬܗܡ ܕܐܚܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ	
	ܡܠܬܗܡ ܕܐܚܝܬܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ	
Other:	Ioannis asks:	1
I killed my father and ravished my mother	Who is this, O brother mār John,	
and appointed my sisters in widowhood	I ask my brother: the husband of my mother	
and god is my witness that I did not commit	[is] the son of my wife; a daughter whom I bore	
injustice against any one of them.	to her mother; and a son who killed his father	5
	before he will arise in ten generations.	
	Read, interpret, and pray for me.	

Given that Syriac is read right-to-left, it would make sense that the reader is intended to read beginning with the righthand column. The opening words of line 2—"who is this?"—immediately signal that this is a riddle.⁴³ The naming of the anonymous John as a "brother" suggests that the riddle has been composed in a monastic setting. The verb *bqar* in col. 1, l. 3 is an investigative word for *inquiring after* something.⁴⁴ The last line, col. 1, l. 7, calls for the reader to "interpret" or "explain" (*paššeq*), followed by a customary request for prayers for the writer. Ultimately, the classification of a riddle is entirely suited to the linguistic and grammatical structure of the two columns.

In terms of the contents of the riddles, some of the lines are fair-

⁴³ My thanks to Prof. Matthew Monger at MF in Oslo for confirming that this is the typical opening of biblical riddles he is currently editing.

⁴⁴ Sokoloff, *Syriac Lexicon*, 177.

ly straightforward, even if the grammar is somewhat opaque. *The husband of my mother [is] the son of my wife* (col. 1, ll. 3-4) is a clever description of the entangled relationship in which Oedipus finds himself. In *OT* 260–263, Oedipus confirms that (to his knowledge at the time) Laius and Jocasta had no offspring, but that he and Laius share a wife who shared the same seed (a double entendre, though at that point Oedipus doesn’t know it yet). Jocasta indeed reveals later that she did have a son with Laius and that she gave him up to be exposed on a trackless mountain (*OT* 707–725). This son, of course, is Oedipus himself, now husband to Jocasta, so that Jocasta’s own son (Oedipus) is indeed married to Oedipus’s wife (Jocasta).

The next lines (col. 1, ll. 4-6) are harder to interpret for a few reasons. For one, they are grammatically ambiguous. The verb “to give birth” (*yīled*), the last word of col. 1, l. 4, can be one of three possibilities: first person singular (“I gave birth to”), second person singular, masculine (“you gave birth to”), or third person singular, feminine (“she gave birth to”). Syriac scribes often used diacritical dots to distinguish the various forms that have identical endings,⁴⁵ but here such dots are missing. Moreover, all three could be viable in the context: the first person would agree with the previous clause which contains the first-person pronominal suffix; the third person feminine agrees grammatically with the mother mentioned in the previous clause; the second person masculine could, in theory, refer to the “brother *mār* John” mentioned in l. 2. That said, I find it most likely to be the first person, since this would agree with the previous clause.

This, however, does not necessarily clarify matters in reference to the story of Oedipus. The king has four children, two sons and two daughters (*OT* 1459–1467). In the riddle, there is mention of a daughter (*bartā*) followed by a son (*brā*). The son is said to have “killed his father,” which would seem again to refer to Oedipus. But what about the “daughter whom I bore to her mother”? Despite the challenging grammatical issues, the likeliest interpretation is that these lines are not so much continuations of the first clause, but rather should be read as individual clues:

⁴⁵ Cf. Kiraz, *Syriac Dot*.

Clue 1: *The husband of my wife [is] the son of my mother* || Answer: Oedipus/Jocasta

Clue 2: *A daughter whom I bore to her mother* || Answer: Antigone

Clue 3: *A son who killed his father* || Answer: Oedipus

Line six of column 1 presents the most challenges. The idiomatic phrase “before” (*qdam d-*) is difficult to interpret. Does it refer to what comes before—“a son who killed his father *before*”? If so, what to do with the final verb, *nethīled*, “to be born” or, metaphorically, “to rise up”?⁴⁶ Equally perplexing is the mention of “ten generations.” In his famous curse in which Oedipus unknowingly indicts himself (*OT* 216–275), there is a list of the king’s ancestral credentials,⁴⁷ from Oedipus himself back to Agenor, the offspring of Libya (granddaughter of Zeus and Io) and Poseidon. If one includes all four of Oedipus and Jocasta’s children, counting back to Agenor, we have the number ten, but only seven generations. To get to ten generations, one would have to count from Zeus and Io all the down to Antigone, who, with her siblings, bears Oedipus’s fateful curse. Is this lineage what is meant by “ten generations” in the riddle? It is possible, given that even in other iterations of the Oedipus myth a multi-generational curse appears to have been a consistent theme.⁴⁸

The riddle in column 2 is a bit more straightforward grammatically. It is set apart as another riddle with the word (*a*)*hrinā* (other/another) in l. 1, once again written over the final line of the owner’s note. The lack of dots in the verbs in this riddle creates the same possibilities as discussed earlier, but in l. 3 there is a clear use of the first-person pronominal suffix, which strongly implies that the verbs throughout should be read in the first-person singular. Notably, the content of this riddle can easily be related to Sophocles’s

⁴⁶ Payne Smith, *Supplement*, 191.

⁴⁷ Gould, *Oedipus the King*, 48.

⁴⁸ This may be particularly true of Aeschylus’ *Oedipus*, in which the responsibility for all the evils and misfortunes of the lineage can be traced back to Laius due to his sexual transgressions. Lauriola writes: “This view of the whole story might be interpreted as the product of Aeschylus’ adaptation of Oedipus’ myth in such a way that it fits his ‘tragic model’ of the chain of sin and guilt (namely, the ancestor/father’s sin and guilt) which rages through three generations, as it is exemplified by his masterpiece, *Oresteia*.” See Lauriola, “Oedipus the King,” 155.

Oedipus at Colonus as much as *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Column 2, l. 2 is the most obvious clue: *I killed my father and ravaged my mother*. Notably, the verb here in reference to Jocasta, *gōr*, in the *aphel* has a similar sense to *μείγνυμι*, the verb used in the two recollections of the oracle pronounced to Oedipus in *OT* 791 and 995. In the supplement to the *Thesaurus Syriacus*, Jessie Payne Smith noted that the sense of the Syriac term in the *aphel* is that of the behaviour of the Greek gods⁴⁹—indeed, *LSJ* lists the meaning of “sexual intercourse” as especially common for the verb in Greek epic literature.⁵⁰

Line three is intriguing once again for its clever entanglements: *(I) appointed my sisters to widowhood*. On the one hand, Oedipus has no sisters in that he was the only child born to Laius and Jocasta. On the other hand, since Jocasta is his mother, any children born to Jocasta are thereby Oedipus’s sisters. In fact, Oedipus admits this explicitly in two different places. The story of *Oedipus at Colonus* begins with Antigone, the eldest daughter, caring for the old Oedipus, leading him to Colonus. As they wait outside the city, they are eventually joined by Ismene, the younger daughter, at which point Oedipus is overjoyed crying out ὦ σπέρμ’ ὄμαιμον—O children, sisters! (*Oed. Col.* 329). Later, as the chorus of locals interrogate Oedipus for the truth behind his infamous fate, the confession slowly comes forth:

Chorus: ἦ μητρόθεν, ὡς ἀκούω,
 δυσώνυμα λεκτρ’ ἐπλήσω;
 Was it your mother, as I hear,
 who shared your ill-famed bed?

Oedipus: ὦμοι, θάνατος μὲν τάδ’ ἀκούειν,
 ὦ ξεῖν’· αὐταὶ δὲ δύο’ ἐξ ἐμοῦ μὲν
 Alas, death it is to hear such things,
 O stranger. But these two are from me...

Chorus: πῶς φῆς;
 How say you?

Oedipus: παῖδε, δύο δ’ ἅτα
 ...children; two curses...

⁴⁹ Payne Smith, *Supplement*, 70.

⁵⁰ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1092.

Chorus: ὦ Ζεῦ.
O God!

Oedipus: ματρὸς κοινᾶς ἀπέβλαστον ὠδίνος·
...sprung from my mother's anguished labour.

Chorus: σαί τ' εἶσ' ἄρ' ἀπόγονοί τε καὶ
And to you they are both offspring and...

Oedipus: κοιναί γε πατρὸς ἀδελφεαί.
Too true. Sisters of their father.

Chorus: ἰώ.
Ah!
(527–536)

Oedipus admits that his daughters are “sisters to their father.” As to the next part of the Syriac line, *appointed...to widowhood*, there is the problem that technically neither of Oedipus's daughters are ever married and thus their husbands do not die. There are a few of possibilities here. First, we could see this as a very broad interpretation of what happens to Antigone on the one hand and what happens to Oedipus's sons Polynices and Eteocles on the other. In *Antigone*, Oedipus's daughter becomes betrothed to Creon's son Haemon. When Haemon learns of Antigone's death by means of his father, Haemon kills himself. In a sense, Antigone is left derelict by her father's deeds and his curse. A second possibility is to interpret the deaths of Polynices and Eteocles as rendering their sisters as widows. Oedipus claims that his daughters have acted for their father as his sons should have:

ἐκ ταῖνδε δ', οὔσαιν παρθένοιν, ὅσον φύσις
δίδωσιν αὐταῖν, καὶ τροφὰς ἔχω βίου
καὶ γῆς ἄδειαν καὶ γένους ἐπάκεσιν·

And it is from these two, who are maidens, that so far as their nature allows

I have sustenance and a safe place to live and help from my family.⁵¹

(*Oed. Col.* 445–447)

The daughters are unable to take husbands as they have taken on the responsibilities of caring for their aged father. Adding to this,

⁵¹ Trans. Lloyd-Jones, LCL.

the sons kill one another in their subsequent war, leaving Antigone and Ismene without husbands, father, or brothers. What other category might the daughters fit than widowhood?

A third possibility is that the riddler has in mind Oedipus's predictions about the sorrow he has brought on his children upon realizing what he has done. Having discovered his true identity, found that Jocasta has killed herself, and blinded himself, Oedipus tries to find solace in his children, but even this brings no comfort in the end. His sons will do alright, as they are grown men. But his daughters, laments Oedipus to Creon, are young and innocent, having never left home, what will become of them? He tells them quite plainly:

ἀλλ' ἥνίκ' ἂν δὴ πρὸς γάμων ἦκητ' ἀκμάς,
 τίς οὗτος ἔσται, τίς παραρρίψει, τέκνα,
 τοιαῦτ' ὀνειδίη λαμβάνων, ἃ ταῖς ἐμαῖς
 γοναῖσιν ἔσται σφῶν θ' ὁμοῦ δηλήματα;

And when you've reached the time for marrying,
 where, children, is the man who'll run the risk
 of taking on himself the infamy
 that will wound you as it did my parents?⁵²
 (OT 1492–1495)

In other words, his daughters will be left destitute as a result of Oedipus's deeds. They are as good as widows, for what man will have them now?

The final two lines (col. 2, ll. 4–5) bring us to the central feature of the interpretation of the tragedy of Oedipus with which we began: who is to blame? The riddler, speaking in the voice of the tragic king of Thebes, absolves himself of guilt: *god is my witness that I did not commit injustice against any one of them*. Indeed, whatever one makes of such a claim at a more existential level, the riddler has undoubtedly captured a repeated sentiment that echoes through the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. It is Apollo above all who is the real culprit behind this horrific story. “Apollo, it was, Apollo, dear friends” (Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι), Oedipus exclaims, Apollo led him to the point that he took his own eyes (OT 1329). Oedipus killed, he admits, but has a plea of justice (πρὸς δίκας τι): he killed

⁵² Trans. Gould, *Oedipus*, 165.

his father unknowingly and in self-defence (*Oed. Col.* 545–548). Oedipus claims (by the gods!) he did nothing wrong out of malice, in a phrase that echoes the very statement in the riddle:

ἤνεγκον κακότατ', ὃ ξένοι, ἤνεγκον ἐκὼν μὲν,
 θεὸς ἴστω·
 τούτων δ' αὐθαίρετον οὐδέν.

I endured distress, O stranger, endured it willingly,

let the god be my witness.

None of these things was self-incurred.

(*Oed. Col.* 521–522)

It is perhaps this line of the riddle that displays the riddler's clear knowledge of the Oedipus story. It is the very heart of the matter of *Oedipus Tyrannus* that the king's freedom and choice clashes with divine providence. The tension and ambiguity created by Sophocles' telling of the story creates room for Oedipus to be at once doomed to the fate assigned to him, but simultaneously free to seek out the truth so ruthlessly for himself.⁵³ Other tellers of Oedipus' story do not engage with this dynamic to nearly the extent of Sophocles, a fact which lends support to the conclusion that the Syriac riddler was likely familiar with the story as it was told by Sophocles, rather than some other iteration of the story.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that the riddles appearing on fol. 142v of StPet 04 are referring to the myth of Oedipus. Although the grammar is confused in places and some lines are obscure, the riddler definitely has the tragic story of the king of Thebes in mind. Certain questions remain: did the riddler know Sophocles's version of the story, or could he have been thinking of another version, or even have just has the basic myth in his head? All options are of course possible, but several details align with the Sophoclean version. The evidence of Syriac dependency on Latin sources is incredibly thin and it is much more likely that a Syriac user would be familiar with Greek, ruling out the *Oedipus* of Seneca as the source. Moreover, the comparisons I have drawn above stress the

⁵³ Lauriola, "Oedipus the King," 161–62.

plausibility that the riddler was familiar with the tripartite story of Oedipus related in Sophocles's dramas. This is not to suggest that it was direct familiarity—direct literary connections are too tenuous. Rather, the riddler probably knew the story through oral (re)tellings or perhaps through the church fathers.

Could there have existed a version of Oedipus in Syriac? Unlikely. As there is no trace of Syriac translations of any Greek dramas it is doubtful that the riddler knew the story in Syriac. He could have known Greek, but he also may not have known a written version of the story at all and could have simply heard it told as a popular narrative.⁵⁴ One point of contact through which a Syriac reader could have encountered Sophocles is Aristotle's *Poetics*, which had been translated into Syriac,⁵⁵ and which quotes material from Sophocles multiple times.⁵⁶ Indeed, Aristotle's interest in and promotion of Sophocles's works may have influenced the opinions of Syriac readers, as it did so many Greek writers.⁵⁷

One significance of these riddles is the setting in which it was produced and intended to be read. The context of a Christian manuscript containing apocrypha and hagiography that was deposited in a monastic library in Egypt where Syriac-, Coptic-, and Arabic-speakers and readers encountered and collaborated with each other is a striking setting in which to find such riddles. To my knowledge, there is no trace of Oedipus in the Syriac monastic curricula. Was this simply a fun quiz left behind to readers of the manuscript? Did this riddler think that the average reader would know the answer? These questions cannot be answered firmly, but it would seem possible that the riddler expected some knowledge of the Oedipus story and that other Syriac-users would, too. Perhaps a more appropriate setting that would explain the knowledge of and interest in Sophocles and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the school set-

⁵⁴ On the popularity of Greek mythic stories see Johnston, *Story of Myth*.

⁵⁵ Schrier, "The Syriac and Arabic Versions of Aristotle's *Poetics*."

⁵⁶ Cf. Wright, "Reception of Sophocles," 595: "Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is viewed by Aristotle as an exemplary tragedy, both in terms of its plot construction and in terms of its ability to create emotional and intellectual responses on the part of the audience."

⁵⁷ Lauriola, "Oedipus the King," 156, 165.

ting, where Syriac students could have encountered the works (and praise) of Sophocles via Aristotle.

Another question then arises: why Oedipus? What would inspire a monk (or perhaps a student) to write a riddle about this story in particular? One obvious point is that Oedipus himself was a riddle solver. Although Sophocles never explicitly quotes the riddle of the sphinx that Oedipus solved in order to win his throne, the king's reputation as a master of riddles permeates the play.⁵⁸ In fact, it is curious to consider the role of *three* in riddles throughout folktales and myths, including the riddle of the sphinx, whose enigma inquires after what is four-footed, two-footed, and three-footed.⁵⁹ If my analysis above is correct, the Syriac riddles also appear to have three clues and then three figures who suffered by the curse of Oedipus (father, mother, sisters). The dialectic between Oedipus as riddle-solver and the literary form of an *αἰνιγμα* itself may have inspired the Syriac riddler.

Significantly, many manuscripts of Sophocles contain in them copies of a five-line hexameter riddle, often entitled τὸ αἰνιγμα τῆς Σφίγγος.⁶⁰ These often appear in the *hypotheses* of the manuscript copies (e.g., Paris, BnF gr. 2712, fol. 139r). The fact that the riddle attributed to the sphinx occurs in a paratextual form, separate from the *Oedipus Tyrannus* text itself, presents a nice comparandum to the riddles in StPet 04: scribes adding riddles in the margin associated with Oedipus, but not altogether found in any extant narrative or play.

Perhaps it was simply that Oedipus was a famous story and a riddle was a fun thought exercise. Perhaps our riddler was interested in wrestling with the riddle that Oedipus is unable to solve: who are we, and who is really in control of destiny, god(s) or individuals? Such a question would have been intriguing to a Christian monk or student, no doubt. In Aristotle's assessment, Oedipus is "described as the best example of a morally 'in-between' person; and in general, [*Oedipus Tyrannus*] is so constructed that just hearing about the

⁵⁸ Cf. Davies, "Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx."

⁵⁹ Davies, "Riddle of the Sphinx," 432.

⁶⁰ Cf. Dawe, *Sophocles*, 103.

events described might cause us to shudder in fear and pity.”⁶¹ Aristotle’s opinion could have influenced the riddler in a similar regard, as an example of moral ambiguity. Or perhaps he was plagued by his own form of neurosis and used a riddle as a cathartic exercise. Perhaps he was dealing with his own crisis of identity and his own deeds of the past—the margins of Syriac manuscripts have been used as such.⁶² Perhaps he should have heeded the advice of Jocasta: “Doomed man! Never find out who you are!” (*OT* 1068).⁶³

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⁶¹ Wright, “Reception of Sophocles,” 595.

⁶² E.g., Penn, “Moving beyond the Palimpsest.”

⁶³ Trans. Gould, *Oedipus*, 126.

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