

Unspeakable and Unspoken Things: Silences, Incest, Tyranny and Innocence  
in *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Ordinary families look outwards. Family members choose partners outside their family grouping and make connections with new families designed to strengthen both the individual families and the society around them. Incestuous families look inwards and choose the wrong people as sexual partners, damaging both the immediate family and less immediate relationships. Certain members of the family have secrets that cannot be easily shared; certain things cannot be said, or if said, are quickly hushed up or ignored. Additionally, incest is not only by its nature often intergenerational (father/daughter, uncle/niece and so on: Cooper and Cormier (1982)), but often transcends the generation in which it starts, so that a child abused by an older relative can become an abuser him or herself, and the cycle of abuse, silence and denial is repeated in the next generation. Incest can arise from flawed perceptions of acceptable sexual partnerships and a confusion of categories or lack of appropriate boundaries between adult and child.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* was obviously not shaped by modern psychological understanding, but by traditional Greek ideas, especially of the effect of what Mark Griffith (1999) calls the "inescapable complex of delusion, error, crime and ruin" known as ἄτη (219). But incest itself may be seen as a kind of ἄτη, one crime begetting another as the abused become abusers, often with effects that spread far beyond the original family grouping. Everything in Oedipus' family is turned in on itself: mother and son are husband and wife, children are their father's half-siblings, and Oedipus' two sons eventually die at one another's hands in a manner that emphasizes the perverse nature of relationships in their family (*S. Ant.* 55-7). Oedipus has confused the categories of mother and wife, but equally his original confusion is entirely

unwitting, so that a further confusion of categories marks Oedipus as simultaneously guilty and not guilty. Above all, *Oedipus Tyrannus* is full of silences, blocked communications and attempts to suppress facts. Secrecy is endemic to incest (Kluft 2011; Zerubavel 2006), because once an incestuous relationship is brought to light, that is usually its end. Secrecy depends on people not talking about a topic or silencing those who attempt to do so. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* attempts from different people to silence questions about Oedipus' origins and identity are notable: those who know who Oedipus really is beg him not to pursue his inquiries or try to divert the conversation (*OT* 1060-72, 1144-1169).

The play also explores the connection of political power with the power of, and over, speech. The familiar sign of democracy is the open question, "Who wishes to speak?" (cf. *E. Supp.* 438-9), but a tyrant's absolute power means that he is able to, and sometimes must, silence or otherwise block others to make sure his power goes unchallenged (Segal (1999) 163; Bushnell (1988) 50-4). The Oedipus of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is ambiguous between good king and tyrant (Vernant (1988) 121-2; cf. also Vernant (1982)), just as he is ambiguous between guilty and innocence, and his handling of others' speech is an important means by which Sophocles explores the ambiguity of his characterization. Thus in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (as in the other Theban plays), the interplay between speech and silence is connected both with the potential tyranny of the royal house of Thebes, and also with suppression of its incestuous secrets. This paper will discuss the relationships between silence, blocked communication, incest, tyranny and Oedipus' simultaneous guilt and innocence in *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

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