

IOCASTE

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Translated from the Bengali by S. L. Ghosh

Ever since we started translating Sophocles' tragedy we had been pondering over what kind of a person Queen Iocaste was and what her relationship with Oedipus was like. The question came up the oftener when we were rehearsing the play.

One day we were rehearsing the scene where an apprehensive Oedipus was asking the Queen, how old was Laius, what did he look like? The reply put into Iocaste's mouth is: he was as tall as you, and resembled you in looks.

A question arose as to the manner of delivery of the reply. Should the Queen speak as if she were merely imparting a piece of information? Or had she noted the resemblance earlier? If she had, why had she never spoken of it before? It is quite possible that she had been so deeply in love with her first husband that she had been able to love her new husband on account of this resemblance. In that event Iocaste would certainly have spoken to Oedipus occasionally about King Laius, and Oedipus would already have known a lot about him. But we find nothing in the play to bear this out. On the contrary it appears that no references had been made to Laius. Oedipus even seems to have had no precise knowledge of the details of the report of the man who first brought the news of the death of King Laius.

Had the Queen then kept the knowledge of the physical resemblance to herself? Why? Was it because she feared Oedipus would be jealous? But Oedipus in his proclamation before the elders had stated that he would discharge his obligation to the late King Laius as an obligation to one in

the position of a parent. In effect, we find not the slightest evidence of jealousy anywhere on his part. Besides, such marriages were not considered unnatural in those times. What now?

Should we then take it that although there was no jealousy in Oedipus' character the Queen withheld all reference to Laius under the mistaken impression that he might grow jealous? If so, we must also ponder why the Queen made this mistake. Had her experience of other males (that is, her experience of Laius, the man she had known most intimately) led her to conclude that men were by nature jealous in these matters and that it was prudent not to discuss other males in their presence?

In that case, what had been her impression of Laius as a man? And why did she disclose on this particular occasion that Laius resembled Oedipus in looks? No apprehensive woman would ever make this mistake. She would on the contrary strive to make it appear, in order not to arouse the jealousy of her present husband, that there could be no comparison between Oedipus and Laius.

At the rehearsal Tripti had delivered the lines as if Iocaste had noticed the similarity suddenly at this very moment. At this another member had raised the question whether this was correct, for had not Iocaste been seeing Oedipus for a long time?

From this discussion we gradually came to piece together a more-or-less complete portrait of Iocaste.

In the first place, Queen Iocaste was still of marriageable age at the time Oedipus first arrived in the kingdom. That is to say, she was very, very young when she gave birth to Oedipus.

How old was Laius at that time? Certainly very much older than Iocaste, for Oedipus refers to him as an old man. Thus there was a great difference in age between Iocaste and her husband.

Let us now turn to the old legend. This Laius had been under a curse for having sinned against another man. Having learnt of this curse from an Oracle, he consigned his own child to a servant to be killed. For Iocaste, however, this was her first experience of motherhood in adolescence, so she could not have handed over her son to an assassin with a smile on her lips. Neither could she weep out her grief, for it was her husband who had ordered the execution to save his own life.

Had she been a mother again she might possibly have got over her grief. But King Laius was too fearful for his own life, to provide her with an opportunity to bear a child. The adolescent wife blossomed by and by

into young womanhood and later into ripe womanhood, but old Laius may not have touched her again for fear it might lead to pregnancy, he must have avoided her and refused to satisfy any of young Iocaste's physical desires or urges and to give her anything she might lavish her passion upon.

And Iocaste was not the kind of woman to woo any other male for the satisfaction of her urgent desire.

Thus emerged the picture of a woman who had repressed her youth in every manner, who had unrelentingly done her duty by everybody with a set, drawn face—by her husband, her brother and all the common retainers in the palace. This solitary, lean, sad-eyed woman was not herself aware how bitterly she hated her husband in her heart of hearts. She had reconciled herself, in accordance to the ethical practice of the society of her time, to the position that husbands could take such cruel and selfish actions out of fear of their lives, but certainly the woman and the mother in her had never forgiven her husband, and she must have noted her husband's criminal act with loathing and avoided him.

For such a woman, who had suffered the privations of widowhood during married life, news of the husband's death should have little meaning. So when her remarriage was mooted for reasons of State she had reconciled herself to the idea as a matter of duty. For she would not have been under any illusion regarding marriage.

But the husband she married is of an entirely different sort, not in the least selfish but capable of loving wholly like a hero. It is like an undreamt of feast in Iocaste's starved life. In a short time Iocaste surrenders herself completely to her energetic, keen-witted, virile husband. He is indeed mercurial—easily moved to anger and as easily pacified. As capable of loving as of being aroused to jealousy. As insistent on attentions as a child spoilt by its parents, ever suspicious of being neglected although receiving its full meed of affection demanding more and more; and once assured of his full share of love, as trustful, as reliant as a child. All Iocaste's time is occupied in meeting the demands of and loving her husband. The past was a nightmare she wanted to forget.

Thus on the edge of middle-age Iocaste's body is overflowed by youthful grace. And when Oedipus asks her what Laius looked like she tries for the first time in many years to recall clearly the features of that forgotten man in her life. The long distance of time and the present fulfilment of her life have taken away her old bitterness and repugnance for Laius, so possibly she recalls the Laius she had seen long ago at her wedding instead of the aged and selfish man she had confronted later. And because she

recalled his looks on that early occasion she suddenly discovers his likeness to Oedipus.

So Tripti was right in the way she spoke those words, and we had a comprehensive picture of the character of Iocaste.

But our deliberations did not stop there. We had a feeling that Iocaste was not the picture of contented full womanhood and that there was a hitch somewhere—that her nerves were not completely restful and at ease.

The discussion that followed made it clear that in the midst of all her happiness Iocaste's mind was held by an ineradicable apprehensiveness about her fate, ever since the uncalled-for murder of her first child. Thus even in the plenitude of her happiness she is subject to lively spasms of fear and wonders whether fate will allow her to continue enjoying so much happiness. She has an uneasy feeling that the inexorably cruel hand of fate once again may snatch from her bosom her incredible happiness just as it had her beautiful three-day-old child. She has no such faith in destiny as Oedipus has, for she has been buffeted by fate and therefore takes a fear-ridden view of her destiny.

Moreover, had she never in the lonely hours of night complained fearfully to the ordainers of her destiny : Since you had designed such a husband for me why did you not give him to me earlier while I was young?

This is revealed when, towards the end, she says excitedly :—Fear? How much should man be weighed down by fear? How much? Our lives are nothing but a play of accidents. We are like puppets moved by chance happenings of a diverse nature..What, therefore, can man do? He would try to live as he wills to the best of his capacity without caring for anything..

Possibly Iocaste had no faith in anything in the depths of her mind, so she had attempted to live as madly and extract as much joy out of life as possible before falling a victim to inexorable fate. She had wanted to drink the wine of life to the dregs, as it were to suck its essence to the last drop and get drunk for a while.

Just like many a man and woman of present times who want to live madly, drunkenly before becoming sure victims of the holocaust of another Great War.

When it becomes gradually clear to this Iocaste that Oedipus is none other than her own child she frantically tries to restrain him, but desists on the point of touching him. Whom would she touch—her child or her husband? The powerful dramatic conflict that arises in the brief duration

of this moment has a profound histrionic richness almost beyond the reach of average comprehension. And when at last she holds the face of Oedipus between her hands she has become the mother. In that fraction of an instant Iocaste irrevocably pronounces her own sentence of death.

This for us is the tragic story of Iocaste.

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