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Jocasta in Euripides' *Phoenissae*: Incestuous Motherhood and Heroic Masculinity

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Abstract

Interpretations of Jocasta's gender in Euripides' *Phoenissae* tend to focus primarily on her maternal aspect and dismiss elements that do not conform with her image as a mother, such as the patently military context of her suicide and the heroic connotations of the sword she uses. Approaching the play's framing of Jocasta's gender within a framework informed by Judith Butler's theoretical work reveals Jocasta to be engaged in an ongoing performance of heroic masculinity and incestuous motherhood. This performance culminates in Jocasta's suicide, and the tension thereby created between the character's sympathetic portrayal and her death encourages the audience to reflect on contemporary sexual and gender norms.

Introduction

Speaking of Euripides' *Medea*, *Orestes*, and *Phoenissae* in their Introduction to *Queer Euripides: Re-Readings in Greek Tragedy*, Sarah Olsen and Mario Telò (2022: 1) remark that 'the three plays could not look queerer'. For *Phoenissae* specifically, as demonstrated in Rosa Andújar's essay, this queerness partially resides in the play's disruption of chrononormativity:¹ in addition to the circular organisation of time that is evinced in the repetition of events across generations, queer time in the *Phoenissae* also hinges on the survival of Jocasta long past the point at which traditional mythic narrative places her suicide. Her longevity upends the familiar temporal sequence, which leads Andújar (2022: 178) to note that '*Phoenician Women* offers new queer possibilities for Jocasta.'

In this paper, I will focus on Jocasta's underexplored queer possibilities via a discussion of the construction of Jocasta's gender in the play. I will demonstrate that Jocasta's gender performance transgresses the boundaries of normative femaleness

¹ Andújar uses the concept of 'chrononormativity' as developed by Elizabeth Freeman 2010: 3 (quoted in Andújar 2022: 178).

as that can be understood to operate in the *Phoenissae* through her appropriation of a masculine death and a continuous invocation of incest in her relationships with the male members of her family. Although the shape that Jocasta's gender assumes is not named in the play, the mechanisms for its configuration resonate with Judith Butler's notion of the aberrant repetition of gender norms and with their elaboration on the entanglement of kinship and gender via incest. Butler's theory illuminates the dynamics of non-normative gender formation in the *Phoenissae* and offers a framework within which to understand that which the play continuously gestures towards but does not name. Jocasta's portrayal as a figure engaged in a subversive gender performance is consistent with the play's overall focus on sexuality and kinship and fits in with the examples of female sexuality and motherhood furnished by the play. It is, however, unique in providing an example of a possibly viable and socially valuable non-normative gender configuration that cannot be easily dismissed as yet another manifestation of the Labdacids' curse, and which would have prompted its audience to reconsider the value and limitations of contemporary sexual and gender norms.

Approaches to Euripides' Jocasta usually foreground her maternal aspect, which is a core part of her characterisation in the play. Viewed in this light, her suicide on the battlefield using a discarded sword is variously explained as an act of solidarity with her dead sons,² an instance of (maternal) female heroism,³ or an authorial choice that ensures Jocasta die close to her sons.⁴ Such interpretations underplay the significance of choosing a mode of dying long associated with heroic masculinity, and of the overwhelmingly military context of her suicide. Nicole Loraux has responded to this challenge by arguing for an equivalence in Greek thought between this traditionally masculine death and maternity. Jocasta's suicide method in the *Phoenissae* is therefore aligned with her emphatic presentation as a mother, marking a shift from her Sophoclean incarnation as wife.⁵

² Burian 2009: 26; Mastronarde 1994: 553; Papadopoulou 2008: 55.

³ Lamari 2007: 21.

⁴ Davies 1991: 217.

⁵ Loraux (trans. A Foster) 1987 [1985]: 14–25, (trans. P. Wissing) 1995 [1990]: 41.

Loraux's argument is insightful, but there are limitations to its application. Some of the evidence she adduces is not secure,⁶ and the equivalence she postulates should be viewed as generalising and heuristic, lest we end up arguing that suicide by the sword is masculine when committed by men but associated with maternity when perpetrated by women. What is more, it does not account for the relationship between Jocasta's suicide and other instances of deaths or mutilations by piercing instruments that take place in the drama and its prehistory. These other occurrences create new associations for this mode of dying specific to the drama and must be considered when examining Jocasta's suicide.

I submit that the play would have encouraged its ancient audience, as well as modern readers, to view Jocasta's motherhood and the femininity it anchors alongside the overtly masculine associations of her death and the connotations generated by other instances of death and mutilation. Not only does her suicide take place on the battlefield, using the weapon that pierced her sons' bodies; it is also integrated with the narration of military events, and is twice repeated in that context.⁷ This encounter between motherhood and the masculine world of war is of a piece with the gender-destabilising effect that penetrating injuries have had on other characters. There, traditional masculinity becomes undermined by intimations of sexual violence, defloration, and incestuous reproduction. The play invests suicide by stabbing with multiple, often internally conflicted concepts that make any claims for a one-to-one correspondence between this type of death and motherhood untenable.

Understanding Jocasta's gender as encompassing contradictory elements requires a conceptual shift to a more flexible understanding of gender. To a large extent, the limitations of the approaches discussed stem from a tendency to seek coherence in gender identities and an implicit subscription to a binary view of sex and gender. These underlying assumptions explain why, for example, Jocasta's use of a sword to commit suicide is consistently explained in terms that shore up her female identity.⁸ The discordance introduced by the masculine overtones of her death is smoothed over to preserve the coherence of a female identity at odds with a heroic mode of

⁶ For a detailed criticism of Loraux's reading of a crucial passage from Plutarch (*Vit. Lyc.* 27.2), see Brulé and Piolot 2004.

⁷ See below, 13–14.

⁸ See nn. 2-4 above.

dying. Even when the tension between the two poles of masculinity and femininity is acknowledged, it is not viewed as productive, and the conversation remains within the bounds of a view of gender as binary.⁹

I propose that the unsettling encounter of an act with masculine connotations within a feminine context can be understood via Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender and the aberrant repetition of norms.¹⁰ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler offers the following definition of gender:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.¹¹

The performativity of gender resides in the realisation that it has no ontological status outside of the acts that constitute it. The repetition of acts, gestures, and desires along established lines of coherence produces the illusion of the identity that these very acts are purported to express. An act or attribute that disrupts the coherence of a normative gender sequence signals the emergence of subversive genders, genders that, importantly, are both enabled by and irreducible to the norms they disrupt. This means that although Jocasta's performance hinges on the intelligibility, mobilisation, and interplay of masculine and feminine attributes, it exceeds both these categories. The redeployment of a masculine act in the context of motherhood becomes the occasion for a subversive gender configuration enabled precisely by this encounter.¹²

These realisations mean that we can no longer view Jocasta's masculine mode of dying as an inconsequential aberration in a performance of femaleness that remains fundamentally unchanged. Nor is it necessary, as some critics have done, to retrospectively expand the definition of femaleness to accommodate dissonant elements.¹³ Similarly, the tension between feminine and masculine aspects of

⁹ Lamari 2007: 21; Papadopoulou 2008: 55–56.

¹⁰ Butler (2nd edition) 2006 [1990]: xv, 191–193, 198–200. From here onwards, I will be referring to the 2006 publication edition, which includes the preface to the 1999 edition.

¹¹ Butler 2006: 45.

¹² Butler 2006: 33–34, 43, 167–168.

¹³ Sissa 2020. Sissa argues that our understanding of aristocratic Euripidean mothers should be revised to include their ability to articulate sophisticated arguments that reflect contemporary trends in political theory. In effect, Sissa takes an element that has traditionally troubled the gender categorisation of such characters and rehabilitates it by redefining motherhood in Euripidean drama.

Jocasta's gender can be viewed as contributing to a subversive gender performance rather than signaling an impasse or suspension between these poles.

The play also challenges attempts to relegate Jocasta to normative femaleness through its very focus on motherhood and the transgressive sexual practices in which it is implicated. Most readings of the play, while acknowledging the significance of incest for exemplifying and perpetuating Labdacid troubles, do not address how it informs Jocasta's particular brand of motherhood.¹⁴ Loraux again offers some comments on the topic when she observes that contrary to other tragic women who 'die with' a husband or lover, Jocasta dies with her sons. By re-directing the love ordinarily reserved for the husband towards her offspring, she confirms her status as an incestuous mother.¹⁵

Even so, the implications of her problematic maternity for the femaleness that it supposedly guarantees remain unexplored. It is perhaps the play's departure from the mythological tradition that is to blame for this lack of curiosity; the marriage between Jocasta and Oedipus and the revelation of its true nature belong to the drama's prehistory, while Jocasta's presumably advanced age predisposes critics to focus on her maternal role rather than the sexual practices that underpin it.¹⁶ Yet any impression that the enquiry into Jocasta's motherhood and its conditions is concluded is steadily eroded as the play progresses: the incestuous union between mother and son is mentioned at regular intervals. Moreover, references to the Theban past feature figures that exemplify unconventional modes of reproduction and transgressive sexuality. These figures surround the only actual mother we encounter in the play, raising questions about how Jocasta's own motherhood should be perceived. I will argue that the slide of maternal love into sexual desire, both in her union with Oedipus and later, in her sexualised suicide, renders Jocasta's motherhood transgressive and upsets the normativity of her gender.

The operation of this process can be understood through recourse to the incest taboo as a way to organise sexuality and kinship. Butler's analysis of the relation

¹⁴ This dissonance can be observed by comparing passages within individual analyses of the play: Mastrorarde 1994: 7–8 and 553; Luschnig 1995: 176–177 and 220; Swift 2009: 53–54, 58.

¹⁵ Loraux 1987: 26.

¹⁶ For Sissa 2020: 286, old age removes sexuality from the equation. However, as I will show in my analysis, the play will not let us easily forget about Jocasta's deviant sexual practices and the threat they continue to present.

between gender and the incest taboo in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* provides a helpful inroad to understanding how this relation was configured in the society that produced the *Phoenissae*. The criminalisation, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, of the titular heroine's devotion to Polyneices and her condemnation to death have often been read as an illustration of the impossibility of transgressing the laws that render kinship positions legible and viable.¹⁷ Butler approaches Antigone's example from the other end, as it were, and asks under what conditions the kinship relationships she embodies and enacts would have been culturally intelligible.¹⁸ This becomes the occasion for reflecting on the ways in which the incest taboo covertly works to also delegitimise kinship positions that are premised on non-heterosexual relations.¹⁹

In the context in which Butler speaks, compulsory heterosexuality governs the formation of gender, the implication being that violating the incest taboo and the heterosexual mandate it institutes also destabilises gender.²⁰ In our play's cultural context, the violation of the incest taboo challenges gender normativity not because it undermines heterosexuality, which may not have been a discourse governing gender in antiquity, but by confusing the kinship positions the taboo establishes. In Greek thinking around women, to be a woman is to become a wife and then a mother — that is, to direct one's sexual and reproductive potential in specific directions and assume certain kinship positions.²¹ What happens to the femaleness anchored by these roles when the order of these positions is re-organised through incest, and supposedly distinct roles merged?

To the extent that the cultural injunction to be a (Greek) woman takes place through discursive routes such as the imperatives to be a good mother and wife, the unexpected convergence of these discourses that results from the doubling of kinship positions creates the space for aberrant repetitions of gender norms. Butler elaborates on this in *Gender Trouble*:

¹⁷ In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler discusses readings of the play that fall primarily within the Hegelian and Lacanian traditions.

¹⁸ This question runs through the entirety of the book, but for some helpful passages where it is discussed see Butler 2000: 69–71, 72, 78–79.

¹⁹ See also Rubin 1975: 180, quoted in Butler 2006: 99.

²⁰ Butler 2006: 30–31, 43–44, 98–99, 2000: 70–72.

²¹ King 1983: 110–113. See also Sissa's (2013: 86) analysis of the concept of *παρθένος* (young unmarried woman), which she defines as encompassing both a social status (unmarried) and a specifically sexual condition (not having engaged in penetrative sex).

The very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object or be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment.²²

Finding herself in the midst of the demands placed on her by her position as mother and wife to Oedipus, mother and grandmother to their children, Jocasta redirects those roles in unexpected ways. Specifically, she repeatedly introduces incestuous connotations in her maternal performance, and emerges as the ultimate source of the family's incestuous self-reproduction. The fact that Jocasta is old and likely past child-bearing age highlights, rather than undermines, the subversive configurations that can arise from contradictory discourses: her response to their conflicting demands, themselves the product of the prior collapse of linear time, is to further elide the distinction between familial roles and the corresponding life stages.

Acknowledging the disruptive potential of performing conventional female roles opens the door to a significantly revised understanding of Jocasta in Euripides' play. Reading within a Butlerian framework, it becomes possible to recognise that normative gender roles do not always guarantee a normative gender configuration, and to reconnect our understanding of Jocasta's maternal role with the incestuous practices in which it is entangled. To demonstrate the play's construction of Jocasta's gender in the ways outlined above, I will first discuss elements in the play that encourage an interrogation of Jocasta's gender and will show how incest informs her ongoing gender performance and her relationship with her sons, Eteocles and Polyneices. The discussion will then move to Jocasta's suicide and its role in upholding that gender performance through the symbolic consummation of a sexualised relationship with her sons that overlaps with their re-birth. I will also explore the masculinising effect of her mode of dying and the role of other deaths and mutilations in the play in establishing many of the gendered associations that will re-emerge in Jocasta's death. Throughout, I will be bringing together ancient Greek ideas around gender to shed light on the gender trouble brewing in the play and will be drawing on Butler's theory on gender performativity and the relationship between gender and kinship. Their work will enable us to see the ways in which *Phoenissae* is

²² Butler 2006: 199.

a play preoccupied with questions of gender, the intelligibility of non-normative gender configurations, and their place in the community.

Transgressive sexuality and incestuous motherhood

Phoenissae configures Jocasta's roles as mother and wife in ways that problematise her normative categorisation as woman. Even before the dramatised events, normative femaleness has been fatally compromised by Jocasta's incestuous union to Oedipus, which has brought the roles of mother and wife in scandalous cohabitation. The play sustains throughout the troubling effect of this transgressive marriage through frequent reminders; in doing so, it also encourages closer scrutiny of Jocasta's relationship with her other sons, and of the potential for incest lying therein. The threat of the recurrence of incestuous unions is sustained, rather than mitigated, by Jocasta's advanced age. Her commanding and energetic presence, which stands in stark contrast to Oedipus' diminished state, reinforces the impression that time is moving differently in Thebes, and that the past carries enough force to elide its distinction from the present. Indeed, unconventional reproduction and transgressive sexuality become running themes in the play as monstrous and semi-divine figures from Thebes' mythological past surface in the play's choral odes. Such references provide a frame that draws attention to Jocasta's aberrant sexuality and its potential for generating further gender trouble.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the link between Jocasta's incestuous desires and practices and the destabilisation of her gender should be sought in the role of the incest taboo in establishing kinship positions by regulating sexual relations. An array of literary, medical, and other evidence bears witness to a conceptualisation of femaleness grounded in women's sexual and reproductive status. The very term *γυνή* (woman), which describes women as a category, also denotes women who have been married and borne children.²³ Marriage, motherhood: clearly, the roles that anchor femaleness double as kinship positions contingent on sexual practices. When roles that are defined in relation to distinct individuals become merged, cracks appear in the definition of femaleness that takes these roles as its core components. What is more, the performativity of gender means that for Jocasta, the injunction to be a woman takes place through the cultural prescription to be an obedient wife to

²³ King 1983: 110–113.

one's husband and a loving mother to one's children. The convergence of these discourses as a result of the violation of the incest taboo creates a space where the precise form that compliance with the norms will take becomes uncertain, and the possibility of aberrant repetitions emerges.

An interpretation of Jocasta's portrayal that is informed by a Butlerian understanding of the role of the incest taboo in stabilising the kinship positions underpinning gender is encouraged by the frequent appearance of mythological snippets highlighting atypical motherhood and transgressive sexual desires. The parallels between the Spartoi's internecine battle (670–675) and the impending war between Eteocles and Polyneices draw attention to the similarities between the earth and Jocasta, herself a pure descendant of the Spartoi.²⁴ Read against the story of Thebes' foundation, Jocasta's death over the bodies of her sons will appear as an amplified echo of the Spartoi's quasi-erotic union with the earth as they fall dead. What is more, the doubling of this narrative as a myth of Theban autochthony casts Jocasta's self-penetration as an act of self-contained symbolic reproduction where all generative power is concentrated in her body.

If the myth of the Spartoi frames Jocasta's relationship with Eteocles and Polyneices, then it is in the figure of the Sphinx that the implications of transgressive sexuality for gender find a powerful expression. Throughout the play, references to the Sphinx as a *παρθένος* (young unmarried woman, virgin, maiden) and *κόρα* (girl) abound,²⁵ yet her preying on young men is not devoid of erotic overtones.²⁶ By engaging in the eroticised abduction of young men while retaining her status as *παρθένος*, the Sphinx confounds the conventional process of (human) female maturation, which maps a progression from *παρθενία* (virginity, maidenhood) to marriage and the commencement of sexual relations. As a sexually voracious female figure that is also a *παρθένος*, the Sphinx simultaneously occupies contradictory positions, and the paradox is reflected in her hybrid form, which accommodates disparate human and

²⁴ See pp. 17–18 and references there.

²⁵ Eur. *Phoen.* 48 '*παρθένου*' ('the maiden's'), 806 '*παρθένιον περόν*' ('winged maiden'), 1023 '*μειξοπάρθενος*' ('half-maiden', 'half-woman'), 1042 '*παρθένος*' ('maiden'), 1730 '<*μειξο*>*παρθένου κόρας*' ('of the half-woman maiden'). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. For all Greek passages quoted, I have consulted the relevant edition of the text(s) in the OCT series.

²⁶ Swift 2009: 71, 76, and 76 n. 56. For the Sphinx's sexuality see Andújar 2022: 182. For sexual undertones of men's abduction by Sphixes and other winged figures in ancient Greek iconography see Vermeule 1979: 145–178.

animal parts. As a woman similarly caught between the contrasting definitions of the positions she occupies, Jocasta emerges as the human counterpart of the 'πολύστονος/μειξοπάρθενος' (1022–23 'the half-woman of many sighs'). Where, however, the Sphinx retains her status as *παρθένος* despite consuming human men, Jocasta's roles proliferate every time she engages in sexual relations. Having already confounded motherhood with marriage by marrying her own son, she will, before the play is over, condense the female life cycle into a single moment, when as an old woman she will commit a sexualised suicide to restore the maternal bond with her incest-born sons.

Nor are there any normative examples of womanhood to be found closer to home. Antigone renounces a future as Haemon's wife in favour of a permanent *παρθενία* in exile (1678–79, 1737–42), privileging her natal family and her duties to it over and above the enticements of a life as wife and mother in her own right (1684–86). Her refusal takes the form of a threat to emulate the Danaids (1675), whose attachment to *παρθενία* directly threatens marriage and the social organisations it supports. As for the Chorus of Phoenician women, it is doubtful whether they embody a positive example of regulated sexuality, as Swift (2009: 55, 78–82) argues. They are *παρθένοι* chosen to serve Apollo at Delphi (202–205, 221–225), but it is far from clear whether their service is for life and, if not, what their prospects are after its end. Their own references to sexuality and motherhood are also telling. Not only do they sing stories of monstrous reproduction and transgressive sexuality, but also, they address their prayers for future offspring to Pallas (1060–62). Athena is an eternally virgin goddess and famously alien to motherhood, having been born from the head of Zeus; the Chorus themselves have previously referred to her as 'ἀμάτωρ' (666 'motherless', but also 'unmotherly'). Within our play, her only involvement in generation has been to instruct Cadmus, the founder of Thebes,²⁷ in the sowing of the dragon's teeth, which resulted in an incestuous union between the Earth and the dragon and the fratricidal battle among the Spartoi. So far from providing an

²⁷ Lines 638–657 provide a summary of Thebes' foundation by Cadmus. Following directions from an oracle, Cadmus follows a cow to its resting place, where he is meant to build a new city. Guarding the spring in the place that is to become Thebes is a dragon, whom Cadmus slays. Athena subsequently instructs Cadmus to sow the dragon's teeth, out of which spring the Spartoi. Those left standing after the initial internecine battle that follows their emergence go on to become ancestors of the play's Thebans. For a survey of the literary sources preserving version of this myth, see Gantz 1993: 467–471.

alternative to the transgressions encountered in the play, the Chorus actively participate in compounding the effect of subverted norms.

A similar function is performed by the play's repeated references to the incestuous union with Oedipus. This first infraction places Jocasta in a situation where attempts to describe her gender in conventional terms flounder against their proliferation and conflation. Littered throughout the play, these references also create a background for her relationship with Eteocles and Polyneices that draws out its incestuous potential. Jocasta herself is the first to mention her marriage to Oedipus, and describes its precise nature candidly in the play's Prologue (53–55). If, as Schirripa (2018) has argued, the recitation of the past here negates Eteocles' and Polyneices' efforts to conceal the family history by confining Oedipus to the palace (64–65),²⁸ then this first mention of incest operates as an almost programmatic statement about the play's treatment of it. Indeed, several characters go on to refer to the unlucky union even in contexts where this is not, strictly speaking, necessary.²⁹

Jocasta sets the example once again, joining 'τεκοῦσα' (53 and 54 'mother', 'birth-giver') with 'παιδί' (54 'child') via 'συγκοιμωμένη' (43 'sleeping with') and plainly exposing the perversion of family relations with successive uses of 'παῖς' ('child') to signify both Oedipus and the children she bore to him (55 'τίκτω δὲ παῖδας παιδί δύο μὲν ἄρσενας', 'and I bore two male children to my child'). This lack of distinction on the semantic level also raises the spectre of further incestuous unions between Jocasta and her sons. Far from restoring some generational order by identifying Oedipus as a son and only acknowledging Laius as 'πόσις' (46 'husband'), Jocasta's grouping of all her male children under the banner of τέκνον, τέκος, and παῖς (all words meaning 'child') highlights sameness and interchangeability.³⁰ In a play that regularly refers back to the union between mother and child, Jocasta's addresses to Eteocles and Polyneices in the same terms she uses for Oedipus hint at the possibility of future incestuous unions.

²⁸ However, see Lamari 2010: 26–30 for Jocasta's prologue as a conscious manipulation of the narrative in order to distance herself from the most disturbing aspects of the past.

²⁹ Eur. *Phoen.* 59 (Jocasta), 814–817 (Chorus), 869 (Tiresias), 1047–50 (Chorus), 1609–10, 1695 (Oedipus).

³⁰ Sissa (2020: 219 n. 26) notes that such words are among the most often repeated in the play. Jocasta's references to Eteocles and/or Polyneices account for thirteen occurrences of τέκνον, eight instances of παῖς, and two of τέκος. For Oedipus Jocasta exclusively uses παῖς (seven times).

Jocasta's relationship with Oedipus is in fact one among many that gesture towards a possible introduction of sexual desire in her relationship with Eteocles and Polyneices. The intergenerational conflict that saw Eteocles and Polyneices overthrow Oedipus recalls the earlier deposition of Laius by his son, as does the present struggle for power between the brothers. Not only has Jocasta retained her position as queen throughout this turmoil, but she has also been involved in marital and/or blood relations with all the men laying claim to the Theban throne. Laius was Jocasta's first husband, and it was by virtue of her status as queen that Oedipus ascended to power upon marrying her (47–49). During the brief interregnum that followed Laius' death, power was temporarily assumed by Creon, whose close relationship with his sister has been variously noted.³¹ Jocasta's role as a foster mother to the orphaned Menoecus compounds the impression of underlying incestuous feelings between brother and sister, especially considering the absence of obvious reasons for this innovation.

Even Eteocles and Polyneices betray an awareness that their claims are somehow connected to their relationship with Jocasta. At the end of the failed reconciliation scene, when Polyneices calls on Jocasta to witness Eteocles' abuse, Eteocles rebukes him by declaring he has no right to utter their mother's name: *ἄθέμιτόν σοι μητρὸς ὀνομάζειν κάρᾳ* (612 'it is unlawful for you to mention our mother'). Polyneices himself seems to acknowledge that this failure to secure his share of power and property also deprives him of any claims to Jocasta. Just a few lines before he departs, he admits he is no longer Jocasta's son: *οὐκέτ' εἰμι παῖς σός* (619 'no longer am I your son').³² Time and again, relationships with Jocasta appear to be inextricably linked to participation in Theban life and power. The realisation that for two of the city's rulers these relationships took the form of marriage, and the progression from exogamy to incest, set a precedent for the future configuration of Jocasta's relationship to Eteocles and Polyneices.

Jocasta's suicide

Like all the surviving Labdacids, Jocasta lives under the shadow of the Delphic prophecy which warned Laius that the birth of a male child would implicate his *oikos*

³¹ Burian 2009: 32; Craik 1988: 167, 225.

³² On this phrase's meaning see also Mastronarde 1994: 326.

in a legacy of blood (20 *‘πᾶς σὸς οἶκος βήσεται δι’ αἵματος’*, ‘your entire house will walk through blood’). The ways in which this prophecy has materialised so far are an early warning that its fulfilment may come in unexpected shapes; Oedipus, for instance, has literally walked through blood not once, but twice — the first time when his ankles were pierced, the second when Laius’ horses stepped on his feet. But when Jocasta informs Antigone that her own survival depends on that of Eteocles and Polyneices, the audience is made wise to the way in which Jocasta, too, will succumb to the oracular pronouncement. Euripides’ decision, then, to give Jocasta the choice of a bloody death in the presence of her dead sons fulfils the conditions set up by the drama itself.

And yet, the particular way in which these conditions are met also becomes the occasion for consolidating the subversive gender performance that has been taking place. Throughout, the play has been drawing attention to the incestuous dynamic in Jocasta’s relationship with Eteocles and Polyneices. Her suicide symbolically realises that latent potential, as a weapon of war is used to inflict a penetrating injury to an evocative feminine part of the body, shedding its blood and calling up images of sexual penetration and childbirth.³³ Although Jocasta is too old for her body to experience these acts in anything but a symbolic level, the play’s emphasis on her incestuous marriage and other instances of transgressive sexuality, and the consistent association of penetrating wounds with sexual violence that, as we will see, permeates the play, creates the appropriate background for the ready evocation of defloration and childbirth in Jocasta’s suicide.

However, the assignment of this mode of dying to Jocasta is not without additional complications. The sword itself as well as the military context of its use in Jocasta’s suicide evoke the traditional association with masculinity which compounds the subversiveness of Jocasta’s gender configuration. Suicide by the sword owes its masculine connotations to its similarity to death in battle, which has been consistently associated with men and masculinity in various literary contexts.³⁴

³³ See n. 50. As the examples there demonstrate, these connotations do not require a young and fertile female body – or a female body at all — to be called up. Jocasta may be older, but the play has drawn little attention to this fact and has conversely expended much energy in maintaining the focus on the transgressive sexuality and abnormal motherhood that she typifies.

³⁴ See for example Hom. *Il.* 6.492–493; Tyrtaeus fr. 10.1–2, 15–18, 11.1–6 West *IE*².

Viewed against these well-attested associations, the masculine inflections of Jocasta's suicide become salient.

Jocasta dies on the battlefield (1454–59), at a point poised between the two phases of the enemy armies' clash. Although the sword she picks up has been used in a contest that exposed Eteocles' and Polyneices' failure to measure up to epic standards of heroic masculinity, the description of the suicide itself (1457–58 *ᾠδιὰ μέσου γὰρ ἀυχένος | ὠθεῖ σίδηρον*, 'she pushes the sword through the middle of her neck') is strongly reminiscent of Iliadic scenes, and especially of Hector's death (Hom. *Il.* 22.326–227 *ᾠτῆ ρ' ἐπὶ οἷ μεμαῶτ' ἔλασ' ἔγχει δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς, | ἀντίκρου δ'ἀπαλοῖο δῖαυχένος ἤλυθ' ἀκωκῆ*, 'it was there that noble Achilles drove with his spear as he was rushing against him, and the point went through his tender neck to the other side').³⁵ The narrative, too, encourages a view of her death as of a piece with the military events. In the Messenger's speech, Jocasta's suicide is framed on either side by narrations of turning points in the war — the single combat between Eteocles and Polyneices on the one hand, and the battle that follows their deaths on the other.

The accumulation of actions, images, and language evocative of the masculine sphere of war upsets Jocasta's already troubled femininity. Euripides' text hints at the entwining of Jocasta's feminine aspects with masculinity at several points. The description that most closely assimilates Jocasta's suicide to wounds inflicted in Homeric battlefields also draws attention to the erotic and generative connotations of the act.³⁶ Some hundred lines later, Antigone's account of her brothers' death (1570–76) incorporates in its military setting the suicide of their mother (1577–78). The embeddedness of sexuality and motherhood in the sphere of war points to a gender configuration that is more than the sum of its parts, and which lends itself well to an interpretation through Butler's concepts of the performativity of gender and the aberrant repetition of norms. It is a literary norm most at home in Greek tragedy that women should follow in death the men of their family. Jocasta herself has advertised her determination to die if she cannot prevent the mutual fratricide of Eteocles and Polyneices. Yet in complying with that norm under the conditions created in the play she also sends it in directions that had not been anticipated. The outcome of the

³⁵ See also Hom. *Il.* 17.49.

³⁶ See pp.18–19.

appearance of a masculine act in a context where motherhood and sexuality are the overarching preoccupations is to enable a gender performance informed by notions of femaleness and maleness but contained by neither.

The encounter between contradictory gender terms in Jocasta's suicide falls into a wider pattern in the play whereby several important characters blur gender distinctions through acts, gestures, and desires that are often ambiguous in their gender associations. Significantly, such gender performances take place through wounds and deaths inflicted with sharp instruments, thus investing these injuries and their weapons with gender-destabilising force. Together, the emerging gender associations for traumatic injuries create a nexus of ideas that frame Jocasta's suicide and inform its interpretation.

First among the characters suffering penetrating wounds is Oedipus, who over his life has experienced two instances of mutilation with sharp instruments. Remarkably, both occasions are assimilated to murder, reinforcing their connection to the deaths that will follow. Jocasta's use of *φόνος* (61 'murder') for Oedipus' self-blinding is matched by his own framing of his mutilation and exposure in infancy as an act of deadly violence (1600–01 *ἐπεὶ δ' ἐγενόμην, αὐθις ὁ σπείρας πατήρ | κτείνει με*, 'after I was born, then in turn the father that sowed me seeks to kill me'). The language of this figurative killing evokes epic descriptions of the mutilation of enemy corpses: Oedipus is left on Cithaeron to become *θηρσὶν ἄθλιον βοράν* (1603 'pitiful food for beasts'), a phrase which becomes especially poignant when viewed against Creon's later proclamation about the fate of Polyneices' body (1650 *οὐ δικάϊως ὄδε κυσὶν δοθήσεται*), 'is it not just for this man to be given to the dogs?'). Denial of burial is explicitly aimed at depriving the dead person of a 'beautiful death' and the honour that accompanies it.³⁷ To the extent that honour, as the acknowledgement of martial valour, is an essential component of normative (heroic) masculinity, the 'killing' and exposure of newborn Oedipus undermine his masculine credentials. The presentation of Oedipus' mutilation in terms that attach it to the sphere of war paves the way for also detecting in Jocasta's soldier-like death a similar subversion of normative gender concepts.

³⁷ Hom. *Il.* 22.331–336, 345–354; Soph. *Ant.* 198–208, 514–520. See also Lendon 2009: 9; Rosivach 1983: 196–197; Tritle 2013: 288; Vernant 1991: 87.

The piercing of Oedipus' ankles and his self-blinding in adulthood are also brought together through the chosen terms for the instruments that inflicted the wounds. The 'χρυσοδέτοις περόναις' (805 'gold-bound pins') that marked the exposed Oedipus echo the 'χρυσηλάτοις πόρπαισιν' (62 'brooches of beaten gold') he used to deprive himself of sight.³⁸ This act of self-directed violence has often been interpreted as an instance of symbolic castration, where deprivation of eyesight becomes an appropriate substitute punishment for sexual transgressions. Such interpretations tend to cluster around the Sophoclean Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*,³⁹ but their insights are applicable to the situation we find in the *Phoenissae*.⁴⁰ As Devereux (1973: 46) notes, Euripides' Oedipus links his self-blinding with the curse he placed on his sons (1612–14); he therefore encourages a view of his mutilation as the cause behind his children's destruction and, implicitly, as equivalent to castration. As a self-inflicted wound that carries associations of onanistic sexuality, the blinding of Oedipus points forward to the configuration of Jocasta's suicide as an act of symbolic self-contained reproduction.

The theme of gender-destabilising penetrating wounds is picked up again by the self-sacrifice of Menoeceus, which is strongly reminiscent of the sacrifice of young women in other Euripidean tragedies. The similarity extends beyond the noble attitude towards death and encompasses the presentation of the male victim in terms usually reserved for female *παρθένοι*. The word 'πῶλος' (947 'colt'), which denotes

³⁸ The possibility of an allusion to Oedipus' self-blinding in 805 is rejected by both Craik 1988: 213 and Mastronarde 1994: 384–385 as chronologically out of place. However, given that the nails driven through Oedipus' ankles are elsewhere described by Jocasta as 'iron' (26 *σιδηρᾶ*), it is perhaps significant that their description here uses an adjective that looks forward to Oedipus' self-blinding with the golden pins.

³⁹ See Devereux 1973; Hay 1978: 128, who objects that the text does not support such an interpretation of Sophocles' intentions, nevertheless admits that the act has sexual undertones and constitutes 'a deliberately homeopathic self-punishment.' Another argument for the relation between sight and the sexual act that is not premised on psychoanalytical underpinnings is made by Pucci 1979: 130–131. But see Buxton 1980: 32, 34–35 for an analysis that identifies castration as only one among several paradigmatic equivalents of blindness in Greek myth.

⁴⁰ The Euripidean phrases (62, 805) previously noted look like iterations of Sophocles' description of the brooches Oedipus uses to blind himself (Soph. *OT* 1268–69 'χρυσηλάτους | περόνας', 'pins of beaten gold'). Mastronarde 1994: 161 argues that the language in Eur. *Phoen.* 62 is sufficiently formulaic to warrant no further search for intertextual references. Yet the division of the adjective and noun in Sophocles' description between the two Euripidean phrases is too neat to be accidental. The Sophoclean Oedipus' choice of an item of feminine adornment as opposed to the sword he had been previously demanding (Soph. *OT*. 1255) is marked in that play and goes some way towards supporting the interpretation of his blinding as castration. Read side by side with *OT*, the *Phoenissae* appears to not only be reprising the theme of Oedipus' emasculation, but to also be furthering the inversion by having Jocasta pick up the masculine sword that the Sophoclean incarnation of her husband/son contemplated but abandoned.

Menoceus' sexually pure status, is also a common metaphor for young, sexually desirable women in erotic literary contexts.⁴¹ Similarly, the emphasis on marital status as a (dis)qualifying criterion frames Menoeceus' sacrifice as a marriage-to-death, a motif common for young unmarried women but not for men, whose *telos* in life is not so narrowly defined.⁴² The assimilation of Menoeceus to young (sacrificial) women upsets his categorisation in conventional gender terms but also introduces the substitution of throat-cutting for defloration that underlies such instances of ceremonial killing *qua* marriage to death.⁴³ In that respect, Menoeceus' death consolidates the presentation of penetrating wounds as a stand-in for sexual violence, and points forward to the re-emergence of such connotations in Jocasta's suicide, which it closely resembles.⁴⁴

Next in line for inflicting and receiving penetrating wounds, Eteocles and Polyneices provide an instance of double murder that verges on suicide. As a military engagement between army leaders, the single combat between the brothers picks up and literalises the warlike associations of Oedipus' wounding and exposure in infancy. Although the parallels between the duel's setting and battle scenes from Homeric epic mobilise connotations of heroic masculinity,⁴⁵ the fratricidal character of the confrontation, the combatants' questionable morality, and the use of language and images drawn from the sphere of athletic competition skew the masculinity evoked and transform the context of the brothers' death.⁴⁶ Coming shortly before Jocasta's suicide, this deviation from the ideal of heroic masculinity prepares the ground for the entry of the masculine connotations of Jocasta's suicide in the domain of maternal love and incestuous desire.

It is not only the motives and battle manoeuvres of the two combatants that displace expectations around the performance of masculinity; the wounds they suffer also

⁴¹ Craik 1988: 223; Mastronarde 1994: 419; Swift 2009: 71. See also Loraux (trans. A Foster) 1987 [1985]: 35–36, 41–42, who nevertheless introduces qualifications to mitigate the striking impression created by the substitution of a young man for a young woman.

⁴² Swift 2009: 71. For the marriage-to-death motif see Rehm 1994.

⁴³ Loraux (trans. A Foster) 1987 [1985]: 38–41.

⁴⁴ Menoeceus is the only other character to die by driving a sword through his neck: Eur. *Phoen.* 1091–92 'μελάνδετον ξίφος | λαιμῶν διήκε' ('had driven a black-bound sword through his neck').

⁴⁵ For parallels between the brothers' battle and those of Homeric epic, as well as for significant deviations, see Mastronarde 1994: 528–529, 535–536, 545. Papadopoulou (2008: 43–46) contests some of Mastronarde's points and focuses on greater thematic similarities between this battle and the one of Paris against Menelaus in Hom. *Il.* 3.84–115, 324–380.

⁴⁶ The brothers' combat as an athletic event: Mastronarde 1994: 528–529, 535–536, 542–543.

carry connotations of femininity. After driving his sword through Polyneices' 'ὄμφαλός' (1412 'navel'), the body part that binds the child to the mother, Eteocles suffers a blow 'to the liver' (1421 'εἰς ἥπαρ'). In epics, this is the locale of many penetrating wounds, but in tragedy it is also the organ under which children reside in their mother's bodies.⁴⁷ Earlier in the brothers' engagement, (the threat of) penetrating injuries had circled back to the theme of emasculation. As they begin their combat, Eteocles and Polyneices take aim at each other's eyes (1384–85), hoping to render their opponent vulnerable and score a quick victory. In a play haunted by the figure of Oedipus and his self-mutilation, this initial attempt at blinding sustains the idea of injuries with sharp instruments as a kind of violence that affects gender configurations.

Motherhood and sexual violence as connotations of penetrating wounds are brought together for the first time in the play through the assimilation of Eteocles and Polyneices to the Spartoi.⁴⁸ Not only are the Spartoi the product of an incestuous union between the earth and the teeth of the 'earth-born' (935 'γηγενεῖ') serpent; their own death and reunion with the earth (673 'φόνος πάλιν ξυνῆψε γὰ φίλα', 'slaughter joined [them] once again with dear earth') is imbued with erotic connotations, too.⁴⁹ Born of incest and engaged in fratricidal battle like their maternal ancestors, the brothers mimic the giants' end as they fall to the earth (1423–24 'γαῖαν δ' ὀδᾶξ ἐλόντες ἀλλήλων πέλας | πίπτουσιν ἄμφω', 'grasping the earth with their teeth they both fall close to each other') and drench it with their blood (1574–75 'αἵματος | ἤδη ψυχρὰν λοιβὰν φονίαν', 'the deadly libation of blood, already cold'). Occurring right before Jocasta's arrival at the scene of the duel, the evocation of the Spartoi's reunion with the earth prepares the audience for viewing Jocasta's suicide in a similar light.

Against this background, Jocasta's taking up of her sons' sword is also a taking up of the gender-destabilising force it has acquired in the play. As they emerge in instance after instance of piercing wounds, connections with sexual violence, incest, and defloration become part of the field of signification for Jocasta's mode of dying. The simultaneous evocation of sexual penetration and childbirth in the scene of Jocasta's

⁴⁷ Eur. *Supp.* 919. Epic wounds to the liver: Hom. *Il.* 11.578–579, 13.410–412, 17.348–349, 20.469.

⁴⁸ For the similarities between the Spartoi and the sons of Oedipus and Jocasta see Alaux 2008: 7; Mastronarde 1994: 8.

⁴⁹ Mastronarde 1994: 342.

suicide upsets her conventional categorisation in gender terms through a symbolic violation of the incest taboo that confounds the kinship positions that underpin her status as *γυνή* ('woman'). Jocasta performs the roles of mother and wife, but in doing so with respect to the same persons — Eteocles and Polyneices — she performs an aberrant repetition of the gender norms with which she superficially complies.

The association of suicide by stabbing with sexual penetration and/or defloration has often been acknowledged in other tragic instances of this type of suicide,⁵⁰ and in Jocasta's case its significance is reinforced by certain inter- and intra-textual echoes. When Jocasta drives the sword through her neck, she is targeting a part of her anatomy that shares both a name — '*αύχην*' (1457, 'neck') — and, at least in Hippocratic gynaecological writings, a sympathetic relationship with the uterine cervix.⁵¹ The sparse use of *αύχην* within the tragic idiom to designate a human neck sharpens the focus on this part of Jocasta's body and highlights the ambivalence of the term.⁵² With the sword thrust through her neck, Jocasta becomes an almost *λαιμόμητον κάρα* (455 'head cut off at the throat'), the fearsome Gorgon's head that Jocasta evokes to chastise Eteocles for his reaction at the sight of his returned brother (454–56).

The gorgonian association helps draw attention to another aspect of Jocasta's performance of incestuous sexuality and motherhood that is centred around her neck and breast. Like that of Medusa, Jocasta's nearly severed head marks her failure to halt the murderous advance of men. While Medusa's power lies in her visage, however, her human counterpart in the play resorts to the naked female breast, inserting herself in a long tradition of women, especially mothers, who wish to stop men in their tracks.⁵³ The Gorgon's head and the human woman's breast converge in their ability to signify femaleness, and to do so by operating as a stand-in for the female sex. The association of the Gorgon's head with female genitalia is well-

⁵⁰ Deianeira: Foley 2001: 118; Hernández Muñoz 2014: 60; Segal 1981: 77; Winnington-Ingram 1980: 81. Haemon: Griffith 1999: 339; Miller 2014: 169–174; Ormand 1999: 92, 97–98; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 183–184; Rehm 1994: 64–65; Seaford 1987: 120–121.

⁵¹ *Αύχην* of the uterus: Hippoc. *Nat. Mul.* vii.340.10; *Steril.* viii.438.10; *Mul.* viii.14.14, 320.1, 338.5. The sympathetic relationship between upper and lower neck is best exemplified in Hippoc. *Virg.* viii.468.9–16. See Hanson 1990: 328–329; King 1998: 28, 137. The edition of the Hippocratic texts consulted here is the one by Littré.

⁵² Griffith 1998: 243 observes that *δέρη* and *τράχηλος* (both meaning 'neck,' 'throat') are tragedy's preferred terms for human necks.

⁵³ See Hecuba's plea to Hector (Hom. *Il.* 22.80–83) and Helen's success at stopping Menelaus' from killing her (Ar. *Lys.* 155–156; Eur. *Andr.* 628–630).

developed in readings of pictorial and textual representations of the Gorgon,⁵⁴ while the function of the female breast as a powerful image of motherhood and feminine appeal helps evoke the nether regions of the body.⁵⁵

The maternal/sexual appeal of the female breast and its connection with the Gorgon's power is particularly relevant in the *Phoenissae*, where Jocasta mentions her breast exclusively in association with her sons. In a family where motherhood does not preclude erotic fascination and the mother-son bond can turn into a matrimonial one, mentioning the maternal breast can only serve as a reminder that the boundaries have already been transgressed and could do so again. In that respect, the death of Jocasta's sons before she can bring forth her 'suppliant breast' (1568–69) marks a certain failure both of maternal fascination and of feminine appeal. A pierced throat is a fitting response to this failure, just as the Gorgon's decapitation is the consequence of her inability to petrify Perseus. However, it is also an act that in some sense realises the latent threat of a repetition of incest within the family by mobilising the sexual connotations of the breast, the throat, and the Gorgon's head.

The insinuation of sexual undertones in this act is bolstered by Jocasta's determination to die with her sons, itself reminiscent of similar statements by tragic women who follow their husbands in death. Compare Jocasta's words in 1280–82 with those of Deianeira in the *Trachiniae* and Evadne in Euripides' *Suppliants*. After exhorting Antigone to join her in preventing the mutual slaughter of Oedipus' sons, Jocasta proclaims (Eur. *Phoen.* 1280–82):

ὥς, ἢν μὲν φθάσω

παῖδας πρὸ λόγχης, οὐμὸς ἐν φάει βίος:

θανοῦσι δ' αὐτοῖς συνθανοῦσα κείσομαι

For if I reach

my children before the spear, my life continues;

⁵⁴ Kristeva 2015; Loraux 1986; Sutter 2015: 28–31; Vernant 1991: 113, 137.

⁵⁵ Even though, as Mastonarde (1994: 153) notes, 'in tragedy, esp. Eur., it is customary to evoke the emotional bond between mother and child by referring to [...] the act of nursing', the mention of women's breasts never seems to be entirely free of sexual connotations. This dual aspect of women's breasts in Greek thought has been well noted: Loraux 1986, esp. 91–98; Salzman-Mitchell 2013: 144–151. For a survey of the mention of breasts in erotic literature, see Gerber 1978.

but if they die I will lie dead with them.

Deianeira echoes Jocasta's sentiment once she has become aware of the destructive potential of the unguent she used on Herakles' robe: *καίτοι δέδοκται, κείνος εἰ σφαλήσεται, | ταύτη σὺν ὀρμῇ κάμῃ συνθανεῖν ἅμα* (Soph. *Trach.* 718–719 'and yet I have decided that if he falls, | with the same impetus I too will die at the same time'). The desirability of dying with a loved one, especially a husband, is powerfully expressed by Evadne as she gazes at Capaneus' funereal fire: *ἡδίστος γάρ τοι θάνατος | συνθνήσκειν θνήσκουσι φίλοις* (Eur. *Supp.* 1006–07 'the sweetest death is to die with loved ones as they die') and *πόσει γὰρ συνθανοῦσα κείσομαι* (Eur. *Supp.* 1063 'for I will lie dead with my husband').

Among these tragic women who, as Loraux ((trans. A Foster) 1987 [1985]: 24–26) put it, display a tendency to 'die with' a male family member, only Jocasta 'dies with' in a direction other than marriage, and does so in a context where the boundaries between marriage and motherhood have already proven permeable. The only other tragic heroine who may be said to display such a tendency is the Sophoclean Antigone, whose devotion to her brother Polyneices is implicated in her death. Antigone's expressions of affection towards Polyneices have long been suspected of harbouring incestuous undertones:⁵⁶ *φίλη μετ' αὐτοῦ κείσομαι, φίλου μέτα* (Soph. *Ant.* 73 'I will lie dead with him, loved one with loved one'). The parallels between Euripides' Jocasta and Sophocles' Antigone reinforce the impression that the diversion of suicidal women's affection from the husband to another male family member is rooted in incestuous leanings.

The insinuation of incestuous sexuality into motherhood observed in Jocasta's death can be understood as a deployment of literary gender norms in contexts where the premises for their operation have been undermined. Jocasta has been repeatedly exhorted by the Chorus (444–445) and the Messenger (1260–63) to mediate the conflict between her sons. This duty is framed as arising from her maternal status (444 *σὸν ἔργον, μήτηρ Ἰοκάστη*, '[it is] your task, mother Jocasta', 1260–61 *ἐρήτυσον τέκνα | δεινῆς ἀμίλλης*, 'restrain your children from the terrible combat'), and can be viewed in Butlerian terms as one discursive route through which the

⁵⁶ For Antigone's incestuous desire for Polyneices see Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 172; Rehm 1994: 59; Seaford 1990: 78; Thumiger 2013: 37 n. 32; Winnington-Ingram 1980: 130.

injunction to be a woman takes place. Yet in conforming to the literary gender norm of maternal supplication through exposure of the breast Jocasta derails it, because she inserts it in a context where the breast's ability to signify motherhood has been contaminated with reminders of infant exposure and incestuous sexuality. As a result, her performance of motherhood exceeds the confines of the norm and strays into uncharted territory. When her attempt to stop her sons from mutual fratricide fails, Jocasta finds herself in the grip of another norm, that of 'dying with'. The mobilisation of a norm that regulates wifedom in the context of mother-son relationships enables a gender performance where different roles anchoring conventional femaleness become fused.

Overlapping the image of sexual consummation evoked in Jocasta's suicide is the symbolic re-birth of Eteocles and Polyneices, who, like newborn babies, are lying in their mother's arms, covered in the blood that flows from her ambivalent *αὐχὴν*. The image of Medusa, whose severed neck brings forth Chrysaor and Pegasus, emerges once again to highlight the generative potential of Jocasta's suicide.⁵⁷ The evocation of childbirth consolidates the conflation of motherhood and wifedom observed so far. Not only is Jocasta performing these roles simultaneously and in relation to the same individuals; overlaid, the two images present an even further straining of kinship positions by implicitly painting Eteocles and Polyneices both as Jocasta's sexual partners and as the offspring of that incestuous union.

Viewed in this light, the restoration of the severed bond between mother and sons takes place through a symbolic re-enactment of their birth as well as a reproduction of their conception via an incestuous union. The increasing sexual introversion in Jocasta's family is highlighted by the masculine connotations of her suicide, which draw attention to the multiplicity of roles she is simultaneously occupying. Wielding the sword, Jocasta turns its violence against herself, merging in her person the one whose neck/uterus is penetrated and the one who breaches the body's boundaries and sheds its blood. Progressing from exogamy to incest, Jocasta is pushing the logic of intrafamilial reproduction to its limits by attempting to absorb into herself every role and become the sole generative source.

⁵⁷ For the birth of Chrysaor and Pegasus see Hes. *Th.* 280–821.

Against the backdrop of these involuted kinship relations, what kind of gender stability does the assertion that Jocasta is still a woman guarantee? Even before the masculine associations of a suicide by the sword arrive to undermine Jocasta's categorisation as woman, the distorted family relations she institutes through real and symbolic acts of incest result in an aberrant multiplication of the female roles that arise from kinship, installing confusion at the heart of normative femaleness. Within the play, it is true, we encounter no explicit acknowledgement of the effect of Jocasta's suicide on her gender; there are, however, hints that a shift has occurred in the way she is perceived. For the first time, with the exception of the Messenger's address in line 1070, Jocasta is explicitly referred to as Oedipus' wife (1548, 1566), where previously she identified exclusively as his mother.⁵⁸ Oedipus himself acknowledges her dual status in line 1695, and hints at the doubling of kinship positions when he speaks of the 'children and brothers' (1610 'παῖδάς τ' ἀδελφούς') he had with Jocasta. Such subtle acknowledgements of the strange kinship configurations and distorted female roles that Jocasta occupied point towards a gender configuration that exceeds the boundaries of normative femaleness and encourage recourse to the terms of contemporary gender theory helps us articulate this configuration as a subversive gender performance.

Conclusions

This paper started with the aim of exploring Jocasta's queer potential; its conclusion locates this potential in the distortion of conventional femaleness and the emergence of a type of heroic masculinity. Reading the play's own articulations alongside Butler's ideas enables an interpretation that accounts for all the varied, often contradictory elements, of Jocasta's identity, and illuminates the mechanisms of their interplay. Jocasta's subversive gender configuration is in line with some of the play's themes, namely transgressive sexuality and atypical motherhood,⁵⁹ and its treatment of other figures, such as Antigone and Menoecus, whose deviation from gender norms is often noted.⁶⁰ Her portrayal in these terms can therefore be viewed as

⁵⁸ Eur. *Phoen.* 1548 (Antigone), 1566 (Oedipus).

⁵⁹ As demonstrated in above in 'Transgressive sexuality and incestuous motherhood'.

⁶⁰ Swift 2009; Andújar 2002.

resonating with the play's strategy of exposing the destructive consequences of unchecked sexuality.⁶¹

Against such implicitly negative assessments, I propose that Jocasta's portrayal in the *Phoenissae* would have prompted the audience to reflect on the received wisdom on gender norms and their value, and to imagine the life of a community in which gender configurations like Jocasta's are assigned a central place. That our play furnishes tragic Thebes, steeped in a legacy of infighting and inbreeding, as an example of such a community may initially seem to signal the limits of this mental experimentation. This is, after all, the locale that often operated in Attic tragedy as an 'other' place plagued by crises that tragic Athens always seems to successfully overcome.⁶² But lest the negative associations of the Thebes of the surviving plays condemns Jocasta prematurely, I would like to discuss three aspects of the play that buttress my interpretation of Jocasta's figure: Jocasta's sympathetic presentation throughout, her longevity, and the absence of positive evidence that her death was the inevitable outcome of her aberrant gender configuration.

Throughout the drama, Jocasta remains a sympathetic figure that the play's numerous characters treat with respect and, in the case of family members, affection. Her actions in the play are for the most part conventionally positive: she cares for the aged Oedipus; she uses all means at her disposal to avert the impending war; and she tries, until the very last moment, to prevent her sons' mutual fratricide. The positive picture that Jocasta's own actions and other characters' perceptions of her should also inform how we understand the relationship between her long life, her death, and the non-normative practices in which she has been engaging. As mentioned in the play's Prologue, Jocasta's incestuous marriage, which inaugurated an aberrant repetition of gender norms, occurred a long time before the crisis dramatised in the play. Contrary to her predecessors in the mythic tradition, Euripides' Jocasta not only lives to tell the tale of her involuted family

⁶¹ Swift 2009.

⁶² This is the thesis developed by Zeitlin 1986, and subsequently also picked up by other critics (see for instance Percaux 2015; Nimis 2017). Subsequent analyses have added nuance to the discussion around tragic representations of Thebes and of other Greek cities. The main takeaway from these approaches is that Thebes is not always an anti-Athens, and that its role must be viewed against the variety of cities represented on the Attic stage. See the lucid discussion by Buxton: 2013, with relevant bibliography. Some instructive examples of alternative approaches: Said 1993 (Argos); Croally 1994 (Troy). Further bibliography can be found in Rosenbloom 2013.

relationships but remains active in family and city life. Her vitality and the authority she commands are in stark contrast to Oedipus' decrepitude, despite a presumably large age difference. The transgression of gender norms, the *Phoenissae* seems to say, need not spell disaster.

Jocasta's survival long past the point of her first transgression has significant implications for the legitimacy of incestuous relationships and subversive genders in the play. In their discussion of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Butler repeatedly observes that Antigone's desire only leads to death because it stands at the very limit of the laws that render kinship positions culturally intelligible.⁶³ Although Butler exposes the contingent character of these laws, their self-presentation as eternal and immutable, and the necessity of casting Antigone's desire as unsurvivable to maintain this appearance, they do not explicitly contest the conclusion to Antigone's drama. Within the play's terms, attempts to articulate an alternative legality cannot be sustained. The situation presented in the *Phoenissae*, on the other hand, is markedly different and may provide a vision of viable, intelligible organisations of kinship that instantiate the sort of reality simultaneously shunned and evoked by the incest taboo.

This radical possibility cannot be circumscribed even by Jocasta's death, which seems to re-align the play's plot with the traditional timeline. At no point does *Phoenissae* posit Jocasta's suicide as the inescapable outcome of the subversive gender performance in which she has been engaged for a long time; on the contrary, her death neutralises the threat of a permanent disruption in her relationship with her sons, and of the subsequent foreclosure of an incestuous future with them. In this sense, it enables her gender performance without becoming its necessary condition; Jocasta has already had one incestuous marriage, while her death allows her to symbolically re-enact it with her sons.

Nor does the Delphic oracle make Jocasta's death inevitable. Apollo's prophecy warns against legitimate exogamous pro-creation, which, ironically enough, is the type of relationship the incest taboo safeguards. Even the wholesale destruction of Laius' house is phrased in terms ambiguous enough to allow for different scenarios. Oedipus, himself guilty of incest, has already fulfilled the oracle without surrendering his life. He suffers, it is true, but his suffering can be linked to the parricide foretold at

⁶³ Butler 2000: 6, 23–24, 27–29, 54–55, 72, 78, 82.

Delphi. Although the death of Laius at Oedipus' hand is predestined as a consequence of disregarding the oracular warning, and can therefore incur divine punishment, the incestuous marriage that follows is neither mandated nor leveraged as a future catastrophe; it is, in fact, not mentioned at all. It is for this reason that Jocasta can live on and even find some measure of happiness, while Oedipus withers away inside the palace. Laius' family will indeed walk through blood, but the manner and the reason for this do not necessarily fall within the oracle's purview.

Jocasta's portrayal then seems designed to unseat certainties about her story and her identity, and in the process question the validity of established gender norms and the possibilities they circumscribe. In a process not unlike Jocasta's aberrant repetition of norms, the familiar elements of her myth are re-shaped, re-organised in time, and re-configured in relation to one another or combined with new inventions, drawing in the audience with their familiarity only to take them in new and unexpected directions. As dictated by tradition, Jocasta dies, and with her any danger arising from her non-normative gender configuration; yet her journey up to that point encourages the audience to explore, with the safety offered by distance and the knowledge of what is to come, to what extent her gender is implicated in the destruction unfolding, whether her death is indeed necessary, and what purpose, if any, it serves. The play's setting acts in a similar way. Familiar from its many iterations on the tragic stage as a place of disorder and disaster, the Thebes of *Phoenissae* offers itself as a safe, doubly distanced space within which to freely and fully contemplate the implications of what Euripides has put in front of the audience's eyes. Drawn in, spectators and contemporary readers confront a Thebes simultaneously familiar and markedly different from its previous iterations, which requires them to consider anew questions on gender and kinship norms.

The interpretation of Jocasta's gender advanced in this paper offers a fresh approach to a character whose appraisal has remained largely consistent.⁶⁴ My reading draws attention to incest as a part of, condition, and future direction of Jocasta's relationship with her sons. Viewed in this light, her motherhood can be neither adequately described within the terms of maternal love conventionally

⁶⁴ See discussion in 'Introduction'.

understood nor assimilated to that of other old and wise Euripidean mothers.⁶⁵ Related to this shift is the interpretation of her suicide offered here; understanding Jocasta's death as an act that places norms governing motherhood and wifedom in a chiasmic relationship with these roles and that introduces maternal love into the sphere of war does justice to the situation presented in the drama and provides a resolution to the tension between Jocasta's maternal love and the military context of her death.

This interpretation has implications for understanding the play's overall engagement with issues of gender. It has often been argued that in our play, the repercussions of the Theban royal family's transgressive acts manifest as the curtailing of the younger generations' reproductive potential. These interpretations focus on Antigone and, less so, Menoecus, and highlight their refusal to progress to other life stages and the absence of a future for them within society.⁶⁶ Jocasta expands our understanding of the queer gender configurations possible in the drama by providing an alternative to the sterility and lack that characterise Antigone and Menoecus; her gender performance involves the abundance and proliferation of gender roles, their fusion, contradiction, and overlap. As an older woman, and a mother at that, she also necessitates a shift of focus from the future to the present and the past, and from the bleakness of a vision of existing outside society to the possibility of a queer existence within it.

⁶⁵ For this type of Euripidean character see Foley 2001: 271–296; Sissa 2020.

⁶⁶ Swift 2009 60–75; Andújar 2022: 182–184.

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