

‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave’: Jocasta’s Suicide in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Nicole Loraux’s *Tragic Ways of Killing Women* has been instrumental in examining the women and death within Greek tragedy, especially with regards to different forms of suicide. This paper situates itself within Loraux’s framework by asserting that hanging is indeed a form of suicide which reads feminine due to the meticulously planned and offstage nature of the suicide: women’s places are inside, as are their silent suicides. I push Loraux’s argument further by asserting that Jocasta’s form of suicide is not only one that emphasizes her role as (failed) wife, but also a mother.

Sophocles’ situates Jocasta’s suicide within the *thalamos* within the *oikos*. I assert that Sophocles’ closely follows Homer’s portrayal of Epikaste’s suicide intentionally – namely because hanging is the most shameful form of suicide according to Homer (*Od.* XXII.462-464). In Homer’s account of Epikaste’s suicide, she hangs herself from a ὑψηλοῖο μέλαθρον, ‘lofty beam,’ which Loraux connects to the symbolic framework of the house, and even the husband himself. I would argue however that Jocasta’s death is characterized by ambiguity. The *thalamos* is the scene of the Homeric and Sophoclean suicides, both emphasize her role as a wife initially, but Sophocles capitalizes on her confused role as wife and mother. Sophocles utilizes language that emphasize the twofold nature of her progeny and her role, always centered on the marriage-bed and the marriage chamber. The intertwining vocabulary and the focus on dual roles as mother and wife during the messenger’s report of her suicide underscores the πλεκταῖσιν αἰώραισιν, ‘twisted noose,’ with which she kills herself. Just as the lines of the house of Oedipus have become twisted and confused and Jocasta’s role as both wife and mother to her son, and grandmother and mother to Ismene, Antigone, Polynieces, and Eteocles – so twisted are the fibers of rope which ends her life.

Sophocles' use of *aiora* is pointed out by Loraux but requires further exploration. I assert that Sophocles' use of *aiora*, 'a swinging motion,' for 'noose,' would give the Athenian audience a particular understanding lost on a non-Athenian audience. The *aiora* rite was carried out by girls transitioning into adolescence, a way for them to 'swing the suicide away,' as the Hippocratic corpus asserts that young girls are particularly prone to suicidal thoughts. The *aiora* rite was originally celebrated as a way to cleanse Athens of *miasma* after the death of Ikarios and the subsequent suicide of his daughter Erigone. Sophocles' use of *aiora* for noose should then signify Jocasta's suicide not only as the tragic end of a woman but also a ritual cleansing for Thebes. Though Jocasta's throat is not cut, her suicide is nonetheless bloody as Oedipus' blood rains down her dead body. The fixation on the neck of Jocasta and her hanging casts her suicide as wholly feminine, but not only emphasizes her role as wife as Loraux asserts, but also mother, as the blood of her son rains down on her body, symbolically cleansing the *oikos* of *miasma* as a virtual sacrifice is performed.

I would assert then, that Jocasta's suicide intentionally follows the narrative of Epikaste's suicide in Homer, particularly emphasizing the shameful nature of the act and the inherent womanliness of the means, but Sophocles' adds to the Homeric tradition by using language within the scene that place Jocasta's suicide as virtual sacrifice and cleansing ritual intelligible to his Athenian audience.

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