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Sommario

The Siracusa Tragedy-Vase: Oedipus and his Daughters?

Oliver Taplin

The pottery fragments that were reassembled as Museo Archeologico Regionale "Paolo Orsi" inv. 66557 were excavated "near the Ospedale" in Siracusa in 1969.

The piece is not very well preserved, and only comprises most of one side of a calyx-crater without any base or handles. Nor is its artist one of the best practitioners of this era of fine Sicilian red-figure in the third quarter of the fourth century. And yet, the picture is of the very greatest interest if, as has been generally accepted, it conjures up for the viewer a scene of tragedy as performance. And even more so if, as has also been widely supposed, that scene is a particular moment in a canonical surviving play, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

This painting is crucially different from the main kind collected and discussed in my *Pots & Plays* [1]. Those tragedy-relaed vases show a mythological narrative, set in mythological space, so to speak, a narrative which may be claimed – rightly or wrongly – to call to mind a telling of that version of the story in a tragedy. The connection claimed with tragedy is not made through direct allusion to the theatre, but primarily through the particular version of the myth. On Siracusa 66557, on the contrary, there is no obvious mythological story-telling, and the space appears to be theatrical. The cumulative case for this is strong.

(i) First and foremost, there is a long narrow platform, supported on wooden joists, and there is an architectural background with pillars behind it.
(ii) On this platform are four adult figures and two children, who wear costumes characteristic of tragic outfits – although that does not in itself necessarily indicate a direct theatrical connection.
(iii) Furthermore, the left-hand old man is a clear example of the "paidagogos-messenger" figure who appears on so many vases with likely tragic connections [2].
(iv) All six people look far from happy.

Museo Archeologico Regionale "Paolo Orsi" di Siracusa, inv. 66557 (courtesy of Assessorato ai Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana della Regione Siciliana - Palermo).

There are a couple of objections that might be raised against connecting this picture with tragedy; they may not be strong but they are still interesting. Firstly, there is no sign that the figures are wearing masks. The old man's stare is perhaps somewhat mask-like, but his mouth is not open; nor are the mouths of any of the others. The reply to this, for someone who is persuaded of the theatre-scene on other grounds, must presumably be that the facial expressions reflect the dramatic situation. And this is arguably how audiences interpret the mask in performance, as a kind of blank canvas that in the imagination assumes expression in response to the dramatic situation. The other problem is that there are four adult figures here, whereas in tragedy there are hardly ever more than three characters involved in a scene. The way that the woman on the right is turned away from the concern that binds together the other three may suggest that she is marginal; also, the placement of the two children between the other three adults accentuates her detachment from the main scene. Perhaps she is simply to be seen as an attendant – or even possibly as filling out the composition?

It is also worth registering that the closest parallel to this vase, a calyx-crater excavated at Capodarso, and possibly by the same painter, has four actors on what is even more clearly a tragic stage, although unrealistically small [3]. All four on the Capodarso vase are participating in the action, but it looks possible that they are enacting two separate scenes brought together by the artist.

Our Siracusa vase is not photographically close to a tragedy in performance, but it is almost certainly theatrical. Are there, then, any

Tragedy-related scene, Sicilian calyx-krater, ca. 330s, the Capodarso Painter (Gibil Gabib Group), Caltanissetta, Museo Civico 1301bis.

clues that encourage the viewer to identify a specific tragedy? Very soon after its discovery the great A. D. Trendall rose to this challenge [4]. He homed in on a particular scene, almost a particular moment, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. According to this explication the left-hand figure is the old Corinthian shepherd; the worried-looking king-figure is Oedipus, disconcerted to learn that Polybus was not his father, and that he had been taken as a baby to Corinth from Thebes; the queen-figure is Jocasta, who is just realizing that her husband is also her son – she lifts her robe to her face in silent distress. This interpretation is unable to explain the fourth figure, who is, as already discussed, rather separate and detached. It does, however, have a ready explanation of the children: they will be the two young daughters, who are brought on in the final scene of Sophocles' play. Even though they were presumably not present in productions of the scene evoked, there is no difficulty in identifying them [5]. Trendall's interpretation fits the bill well and is highly attractive, not least because it evokes a key scene in a key tragedy. It has met with almost universal acceptance (and in *P&P* I personally expressed no doubts about it).

This consensus has recently been seriously contested. In a blog-post Edith Hall goes so far as to dub this "the Not-Oedipus Vase" [6]. The key argument in this contra-interpretation is a condemnation of the supposition that the two children are girls. Hall is quite right to insist that the long curly hair and the whole-cover robes are no indication that they are not male. She is also right that, while boys are often represented as naked or semi-naked, this is not invariably the case. Thus, the young Hippolytus, identified by name, on the fascinating Rhodope vase in Basel is fully robed [7].

Herakles with Hyppolitus and Antiope, Apulian calyx-krater, Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, S34.
Medea's children, volute krater, Princeton University Art Museum.

And of the two children on the Medea at Eleusis vase in Princeton [8], who must be the sons of Medea, the left-hand one is not fully naked, and the right-hand one has luxuriant ringlet hair, while being marked as male by his genitals. Furthermore, Hall rightly points out that pairs of sons are far more common in Greek myth and tragedy than daughters. So if there were no reason to think otherwise, the viewer of the Siracusa vase should take the two children to be boys. It must be conceded to Hall's case that they are not self-evidently girls: on the other hand, there is no reason to say that they absolutely must be boys.

While tragic boys are thicker on the ground than girls, there are two sisters who are especially well-known: Antigone and Ismene were (and are) powerfully woven into the picture of the tragic Oedipus. Indeed they are the most prominent daughters in all Greek tragedy, so far as we know it. Their familiarity can be seen from Antiphanes, the fourth-century comic poet, who has an advocate of comedy complain that a tragedian only has to mention the name "Oedipus" and everybody knows the rest [9]:

> [...] ὁ πατὴρ Λάιος,
> μήτηρ Ἰοκάστη, θυγατέρες, παῖδες τίνες,
> τί πείσεθ' οὗτος, τί πεποίηκεν. [10]

To judge from this, his daughters were no less well-known than his notorious sons, whose story was much older and widely established than that of the daughters. Their fame was very probably invented by

Sophocles himself, first in his *Antigone*. Ismene (with her Theban name) is cited in several sources before *Antigone*, but the eponymous sister is so little known that it is even possible that Sophocles invented not only her story but even her name [11]. The play was well-known in the fourth century, and back in the fifth it was already being quoted (or misquoted) in Eupolis (fr. 260, 23-5).

The most significant evidence for the "classic" stature of *Antigone* before the time of the Siracusa crater is, I shall argue, the transmitted ending of *Seven against Thebes*. It is beyond reasonable doubt (as it seems to me at least) that the language and characterisation of Antigone in this scene (1005-76) are heavily influenced by Sophocles' play, especially its prologue [12]. In that case, whoever added this ending regarded the pair of sisters in Sophocles' play as so powerful, and maybe so popular, that it was worth re-casting the Aeschylean play in order to introduce them into it [13]. While only Antigone speaks in this final scene, the half-chorus who acquiesce in the edict and follow the body of Eteocles clearly reflects the role of Ismene in Antigone. We cannot know who made these changes, but it is, in my view, most likely to have been performers from before, rather than after, the establishment of any authorized "Lycurgan" text in the later fourth century [14]. These adaptors may even have been descendants of Aeschylus; or at least actors who enjoyed the approval of the family: that is the most likely way for the addition to have become part of the transmitted text by the mid-fourth century.

It may well have been Sophocles himself who next brought Antigone and Ismene back on stage, although without speaking roles and without being named. In the final scene of *OT* it is explicit that there are two daughters (1462). It is also clear that from line 1481 onwards, Oedipus holds them in his arms to form a kind of tableau group. This is only broken at the very end when in a harsh – yet strangely underplayed – moment Creon insists on separating them (1521-30).

This tableau of the father/brother in close embrace with his two daughters/sisters recurs in *Oedipus at Colonus* with a persistence that suggests it had already become a kind of motif [15]. When Ismene first finds Oedipus and Antigone at Colonus, Oedipus calls for her to clasp him, and she embraces them both (329). Then, when the young women have been rescued by Theseus from their abduction by Creon, there is a joyful reunion. It is given an emotional build-up as Oedipus calls for them (1104), and they embrace (1108), so that he exclaims that he could

die happy with them close by him (1110-11). Finally, the most memorable embrace of all is not seen on stage, but it is reported by the messenger who witnessed the end of Oedipus' life. He tells how, after preliminary rituals, the thunder sounds, and Oedipus embraces his daughters for his moving last words (1610ff). They hold this embrace until the supernatural voice calls for him at 1623ff. The play ends with the laments of the two desolated sisters, separated from their father.

There were, no doubt, other now lost works that contributed to the mythical "family photo" of Oedipus. But we can trace how, through the accumulation of these three plays, spanning his dramatic career, Sophocles created the close association of Oedipus with his two devoted daughters, the antithesis of his two power-hungry sons. This is why the character in Antiphanes can say that when anyone hears the name of Oedipus they know who his daughters are.

In her case against taking the children on the Siracusa crater to be female, Edith Hall asserts: "Everyone has assumed that the two children are girls, simply because they have long dresses and ringlets". I cannot find this argument deployed by Trendall, nor by anyone else. No one has started from identifying the two children and then moved from that to an interpretation of the scene as a whole: the widely accepted identification has been arrived at the other way round.

Consider the situation of the original viewers of this vase back in Siracusa in about the 330s BCE. Looking at this representation of a tragedy as a scene of theatre, they are faced with a kind of challenge to identify the episode. They might well start from the old messenger-figure who is staring out at them. He is saying things that seriously concern the man and the woman who are turned towards him; the woman is even raising her robe to her face in distress. In the corpus of tragedies that have survived to this day there is only one episode – that I can think of – that fits this situation: the scene of *Oedipus Tyrannos* already singled out by Trendall back in 1971. There may conceivably have been a scene in a lost tragedy that would have fitted just as well, or even possibly better, particularly if it would have accounted for the fourth turned-away figure as well. That remains a possibility, and so it remains a possibility that the two children would in that scenario have been boys.

But if we once suppose that the original viewers had got as far as thinking of the scene in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, then they are not going to be deterred

from this identification by the thought that pairs of children in tragic myths are usually male. The reason why they would without hesitation reach the conclusion that these two are girls is because of the prominence of Antigone and Ismene, as established by Sophocles' tragedies. And so by far, the most probable explanation of the two children on Siracusa 66557 is that they are the daughters of Oedipus.

Notes

[1] The discussions are gratifyingly continued and challenged by the Italian "Pots and Plays Seminar". See the work-in-progress in *Scene dal mito. Iconologia del dramma antico*, a cura di Giulia Bordignon, Rimini 2015.

[2] The locus classicus on this type of figure remains J. R. Green,*Tragedy and the spectacle of the mind: messenger speeches, actors, narrative, and audience imagination in fourth-century BCE vase-painting*, "Studies in the history of art" 56 (1999), pp. 37-63..

[3] Caltanissetta, Museo Civico 1301bis. *P&P* no.105 gives the best picture ever published.

[4] Webster-Trendall (1971) III.2,8 on pp. 66-9. The painting is, interestingly, more-or-less contemporary with Aristotle's choice of this play in his *Poetics* as an archetype for Tragedy; and the scene in question is, in fact, cited at *Poetics* 1452a24 for Jocasta's *peripateia.*

[5] J. R. Green in *BMCR* 2007.10.37 suggests that they were there in the earlier scene in at least some early performances.

[6] The Edithorial for 8 May 2016. Accessed as http://edithorial.blogspot.co.uk/2016/05/oedipal-quiz-llittle-boys-in-greek.html.

[7] *P&P* no. 97 on pp. 245-6.

[8] *P&P* no. 94 on pp. 238-40.

[9] Fragment 189, lines 6-8, from his *Poiesis.*

[10] This has been taken in two ways: either "they know that he had some daughters and some sons…", or, more likely in my opinion, "they know who his daughters were, who his sons…".

[11] See the Introduction to the Commentary by Mark Griffith (Cambridge 1999) 4ff., especially 9-10.

[12] I briefly epitomized the case in *Antigone e le Antigoni. Storia forme fortuna di un mito* a cura di Anna Maria Belardinelli, Firenze 2010, 34. It has been argued, though less indisputably, that the ending is also influenced by Euripides' *Phoinissai*.

[13] As well as the ending, the introductory lines at 861-74, which explicitly name the sisters, must have been added.

[14] Scholars tend to speak of "late" or "post-classical" features, but on the strength of very little comparative evidence. I find it implausible that such a substantial change could have been composed or incorporated after the later fourth century.

[15] The only vase-painting evidently related to *OC* shows the blind old man with his two daughters sitting as suppliants: see *P&P* no. 27 (pp. 100-102, fig. 5).

English abstract

The pottery fragments that were reassembled as Museo Archeologico Regionale "Paolo Orsi" inv. 66557, present a scene that, as has been widely recognized, is a particular moment in a canonical surviving play, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. This consensus has recently been seriously contested: Edith Hall goes as far as to dub this "the Not-Oedipus Vase". The key argument in this contra-interpretation is a condemnation of the assumption that the two children in the scene are girls. But, in the corpus of tragedies that have survived to the present, there is only one episode that fits this situation: the scene of *Oedipus Tyrannos* already identified by Trendall in 1971. This paper asserts that the most probable explanation for the presence of the two children on Siracusa 66557 is that they are the daughters of Oedipus – Antigone and Ismene.

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