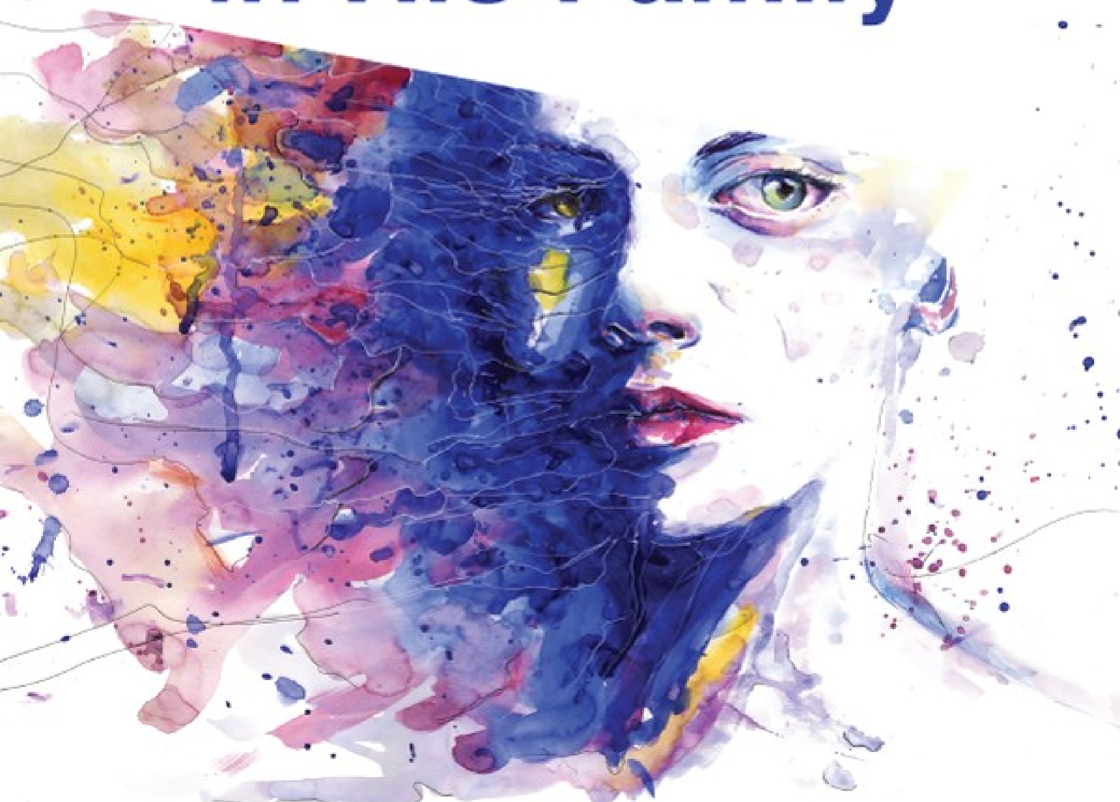
Refinding the Object and Reclaiming the Self

Oedipus Revisited in His Family



David E. Scharff M.D.

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Oedipus Revisited in His Family

The Oedipus situation is not just a stage in the individual's psychosexual development. It is a collaboration between the child and the family. Freud first described the Oedipus complex as a natural consequence of the 3- and 4-year-old's drives, stemming from the in-built pattern of the child that inevitably had to unfold (1905b). When we examine it from the standpoint of the constant interaction of self and object, the picture is one of mutual influence between child and parent, self and external object, and self and internal object.

The Oedipus complex was Freud's contribution to an object relations formulation of development.

He described the way that children incorporate and modify aspects of their relationships to objects as they order their internal worlds. Later, Freud (1923) described the direct consequences of oedipal organization for internal structure in the formation of the superego.

Fairbairn (1944) added considerably to our understanding of the oedipal situation. The child grows up, he noted, with one ambivalent relationship with the mother, who is perceived as exciting or rejecting as well as good. During the oedipal period, the child imposes that ambivalence upon a triangular situation and tries to resolve two independently ambivalent relationships with mother and father by splitting exciting and rejecting objects along sexual lines and assigning all of the excitement to one object and all the rejection to the other. Thus in the ordinary oedipal situation for the boy, the mother becomes the good, exciting object, and the father

provides the model for the bad, rejecting object. The opposite situation pertains to the girl. For her, the father is the good and exciting object, whereas the mother is associated with the bad, rejecting object.

I have previously described four forms of inventiveness exercised by the infant and growing child in development, which together ultimately result in the oedipal splitting first described by Fairbairn (Scharff and Scharff 1987). Here I briefly review them as a foundation integrating oedipal development for the individual and the family as an interplay between self and object.

THE INFANT'S INVENTION OF THE FAMILY

The Child Finds What Is There

First, extending Winnicott's description of the child's experience of “inventing" the mother's breast (1971a), I suggest that infants have to discover

already existing aspects of family life for themselves. These are aspects of life that they suddenly become able to discover at certain points in their growth. They are new for the child, but they were there before because the family put them there. The parents' relationship is such a discovery waiting to be made.

The Child's Growth Alters the Family

Second, each child's presence and growth alter the family, and this reshaping creates changing forms for everyone. The family's new-found instability during the baby's growth creates room for a shared illusion that the baby is almost intentionally causing them all to change.

Regressive Invention

Third, infants see the family in ways that they invent as they go along. From the standpoint of other members of the family, these ways of viewing the

family are idiosyncratic because they are based on the infants' limited ability to think and formulate, as determined by the age and stage of development at which they make each new observation. They are also influenced by the issues that energize the infants at the time of each observation—for instance, on the heightening of separation and autonomy at age 2, and on the heightening of genital sexuality at 3 and 4.

In each new phase, children are suddenly faced with issues that are new to them in terms of their previous developmental stage and their previous object relations. For the infants, it is like trying to understand calculus with only a knowledge of algebra, and sometimes even by falling back on the more limiting mathematics of geometry or simple arithmetic. Although these earliest disciplines may give a vocabulary with which to approach the new, the language does not fit. The concepts have to be

distorted to fit the new system, and the growing children do just that. In their attempts to understand their own growth in archaic terms, the children distort each new step. This is the first way in which they actively invent the meaning of events. Really, they *reinvent* them regressively and explain new events to themselves as though they were variations of old situations. So the explanations are inventions, although they are based on familiar principles, and children seriously distort things in this process. But this distortion tends to get split off, to be repressed and remain unmodified. It continues to exert itself, first because it is repressed and also because it came first and has the tenaciousness of early models.

This early thinking is close to body thinking — that is, to the bodily ways of organizing experience that precede thinking. These early explanations are shot through with the young child's experience of the

body as immediate and unrefined by complex thought and verbalization.

Thus one little girl said to her mother, "My vagina is like an alligator." In this situation, her vulva and her discovery of it were read in the regressive terms of oral biting. She read a new awareness of her body as though it were a version of the old. This regressive inventiveness also applies to the child's distortion of the external world by the imposition of existing internal object relations onto new situations. Here the internal version of the world is used as an approximation in responding to new circumstances the child is meeting. This use of internal world models carries with it a conservative factor in the understanding of new experience. The tendency to thus conserve meaning by understanding events in terms of previous experience is crucial to growth, but it also carries an inevitable tendency for distortion of the historical accuracy of new external

events that will not, at times, be recognized as being fully different from prior experience.

Development Imposes New Ways of Seeing

Fourth and finally, development brings in new ways of seeing. As the child is able to see things with advancing cognition and the progress of development, he or she rereads old history and rewrites it in the process. The idea that splitting occurs along sexual lines in the oedipal phase is my major case in point. This is the opposite point of the one described above where things are understood in the light of old ways of thinking. Here, old events are rewritten in the light of the child's new understanding. Old events are reinvented. This helps to justify Melanie Klein's (1932, 1945, 1961) controversial claims from her analyses of 2½- and 3-year-olds that the oedipal situation had been active during the first year of life, when the parents' relationship had been fantasized by the child as

consisting of unendingly gratifying oral intercourse. Her theory was based on what she saw through the eyes of the relatively advanced 3-year-old, who, in my view, was already reporting rewritten history. Understanding of triangular situations from earlier ages revealed in Klein's 3-year-old analysands' play had been infused with sexuality in the same way that the 3-year-olds themselves had newly become sexualized. Recent contributions have described the sexualization of development during the phallic and genital phases at 2½ to 3 years of age, which brings children to see things in sexual terms that previously they have not (Edgcumbe and Burgner 1975).

Klein's description of the oedipal situation occurring at the age of 1 year was inaccurate because it was distorted through its reprocessing by the 3-year-olds she heard it from. Children do understand triangular situations as soon as 8 months of age (Abelin 1971, 1975). But they do not read

triangular relationships in specifically sexual terms until the developmental sexualization of the phallic period.

Fairbairn notes that "the child really constitutes the Oedipus situation for himself" (1944, p. 124). Children make up or invent the oedipal situation by the use of splitting to deal with their newly sexualized interest in the triangular situation with the parents. This occurs when they have sexualized not only the relationships with their parents, but all relationships, because of an internal developmental push.

The oedipal situation then can he defined, first, as the genital sexualization of triangular relationships, and second, as the attempt to solve the conflicts involved through splitting good and bad, exciting and rejecting qualities between the parental objects.

Thus, as noted earlier, for the boy, the father becomes the bad, threatening object and the mother becomes the good and exciting object. There is also the minor theme of the negative Oedipus situation in which the father is the good and exciting object, and the mother the bad and rejecting object for the boy. For some children, depending on many factors including family influence, this becomes the dominant and conscious pattern, resulting in various forms of homosexuality or perversion.

These four principles of the child's reinvention of the family together contribute to one final way in which a child distorts its image of others and then influences the family on the basis of these distortions. It is a tenet of object relations theory, and of all psychodynamic models, that previous experience teaches the child to look at life in the light of that experience. The child develops internal models that operate through the structure of internal

object relations themselves. As these structures are elaborated within the child, they exert an independent influence on the reading of external reality. In psychoanalysis, this principle is the basis of transference. The pervasive influence of internal life on the external world is so well known that I do not dwell on it further except where it adds to other points concerning the way in which child and family influence each other.

THE INTERNAL COUPLE

Within this situation, an important role is also played by the child's internalization of the couple's relationship itself. Children take in not only images of the individual parents, of mother and father, but of mother and father together in a relationship, both in its nonsexual and sexual aspects. It is at the oedipal period that interest becomes most heightened in this area and most sexualized. Various images are taken

in of a loving couple and of a fighting or spoiling couple, and, in each case, of the infant in relationship to the couple.

All that is described to this point is from the child's point of view. In *Object Relations Family Therapy* (1987), Jill Scharff and I also described the equal and prior contribution of the couple to the growth of the family. The father and mother, and the two of them together as a couple, have fantasies that invent the child they would want, the child they fear, and the family that will ensue. These might be called their internal child and their internal family. The actual pregnancy and the child who is born modify these fantasies of their internal child and family through the interaction each of the parents has with the actual child. For instance, the child who is more or less active temperamentally, more or less responsive, who is a positive or negative reactor to new stimuli, presents different challenges and

persuasions to the developing family and to each of the parents. The child who is a boy when they had expected a girl, challenges assumptions about omnipotence in getting what is wanted and about the values of the two sexes.

In turn, the child is interested in the parental couple very early, at least from 8 months of age. In fact, it is the couple's relationship itself that constitutes the chief rival to the child's having a competitively more intense relationship with only mother or father.

OEDIPUS' FAMILY

All of this makes for an extremely complicated situation. To extend my thinking, I use Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex,* and the two other plays that form his Oedipus Cycle, as the chief illustration. I then follow with a clinical illustration.

When I first studied *Oedipus Rex* in high school, I learned that it was understood by the Greeks to be about man's confrontation with his fate. Man must accept what has happened as being intrinsic to him despite the contradictory belief in the influence of fate and predestination. This is underscored by the role of Teiresias, who, because of his special relationship with the gods, knows the truth without being told.

As an adolescent, I was uncomfortable with the idea of tragedy as an acceptance of fate and predestination. As an adult, I have come to think of the abiding influence of the internal family as the modern equivalent of predestination. In this interpretation, *Oedipus Rex* becomes an allegory of family process. A more recent book is *What's Bred in the Bone,* by Robertson Davies (1985); the completed phrase used in the title is "What's bred in the bone will out in the flesh." The book is a

marvelous fictional case illustration of the way early experience is expressed throughout an ensuing life, reading in part like a "whodunnit" and in part like a literary case history.

Despite being modified by each subsequent step, early experience with primary objects—the parents—is most of what is "bred in the bone." Even though much of that early experience is not consciously known, it continues to determine personality and personal development.

As far as I know, Fairbairn (1954) was the first analyst to point out clearly that Oedipus' story is mainly one of the consequences of preoedipal development.

> It is a remarkable fact that psychoanalytical interest in the classical story of Oedipus should have been concentrated so preponderantly upon the final stages of the drama, and that the earliest stage should have been so largely ignored; for it seems to me a fundamental

> principle of psychological, no less than of literary, interpretation that a drama should be considered as a unity deriving its significance as much from the first act as from the last. In the light of this principle, it becomes important to recognize that the same Oedipus who eventually killed his father and married his mother began life by being exposed upon a mountain, and thus being deprived of maternal care in all its aspects at a stage at which his mother constituted his exclusive object, [p. 116]

I turn now to the play *Oedipus Rex*. In it, we find that Laïos fears the prediction that his son will kill him.[1] It is Iocastê who says,

> An oracle was reported to Laïos once . . .
> That his doom would be death at the hands of his own son —
> His son, born of his flesh and of mine!
>
> (*Oedipus Rex*, p. 36)

To prevent this, he sent the infant to die.

> . . . his child had not been three days in this world . . .
> Before the King had pierced the baby's

> ankles.
> And had him left to die on a lonely mountain.
>
> (p. 37)

When Iocastê tells Oedipus this, he responds,

> How strange a shadowy memory crossed my mind.
> Just now while you were speaking; it chilled my heart.
>
> (p. 37)

The first point is that Oedipus was rejected by his parents in a profound and thorough way. He was sent to die with his ankles pierced and bound. Infanticide was apparently fairly common in ancient Greece, as it has been in some underdeveloped countries even recently. Perhaps this act was culturally sanctioned. Even so, it is the parents who are the conveyors of the culture. It was the parents themselves who took the decision and who committed the act, but there is no indication that

they suffered remorse for their act, which seems to have deprived them of their only child.

When we turn to the rejected Oedipus himself, we can recall that early rejection leads to severe alteration of personality. In Oedipus' "strange shadowy memory," which crosses his heart as Iocastê tells him the story, I hear an allusion to the vague stirring to consciousness of unconscious recognition that frequently accompanies patients' emerging early memories in psychoanalysis.

In this modern reading, the play *Oedipus Rex* tells of a baby subjected to abuse by having his ankles pierced and bound, sent away to die, saved through the intercession of two pitying shepherds who fill the role of foster care workers, and eventually adopted wordlessly by Polybos and Meropê, the "good parents." Supposedly, Oedipus knows nothing of this. But modern family theory and psychoanalytic experience have taught that early

events are carried unconsciously, even while not being consciously known. Further, psychoanalytic exploration and family therapy often demonstrate the effects on the individual and family of what is carried in the shared family unconscious as well as the unconscious of the individual members of that family.

Finally, it is almost inconceivable that a king and queen could adopt a child when the queen had been childless and presumably not pregnant without the whole populace being aware of the situation. When we consider this ordinary fact, Oedipus' lack of knowledge about his adoption and the failure of his adoptive parents to tell him the truth look more like shared denial of reality. There would have been talk, and Oedipus would surely have heard some of it. Might not this denial of reality have contributed to his anxiety, to his restless search for oracular truth about his origins and fate, just as modern adoptive

children hope to find aspects of themselves in finding their biological parents?

With this in mind, let me propose a family and object relations-based understanding of the story of Oedipus.

Let us consider that the oracular prediction that his son would kill him represents the unconscious fear of Laïos. There is some supporting material for this hypothesis, for Iocastê says,

> An oracle was reported to Laïos once.

Then she adds the crucial disqualifier;

> *I will not say from Phoibus himself,*
> *But from his appointed ministers at any rate.*
>
> (p. 36; My italics)

And then she gives the prophecy,

> That his doom would be death at the hands of his own son.
> His son, of his flesh and of mine.

(p. 36)

Might we not consider this second-hand oracle to constitute Laïos' paranoid fantasy-a common one in fathers? This is to say, Oedipus' story actually begins with Laïos' fear of being bested and killed by his own son—revealed by an oracle. This apparently fit well enough with his own fantasy that he did not bother to check out the oracle firsthand, nor is there any note of his protest. I note further that Iocastê does not report trying to keep Laïos from acting. By her silence on this point, she seems to be a passive, compliant actor —like contemporary mothers whose silence facilitates child abuse and neglect. We would, in these days of family dynamics, see her as collusive in the rejection of her son. Else, where is the passion over her loss as the mother of their only son?

From this point, the action proceeds on two tracks in two distant families. The development of

Oedipus occurs in a "good" family with his foster parents, Polybos and Meropê. He grows up "chief among the men of Corinth" (p. 40), but is disturbed when

> At a feast, a drunken man maundering in his cups,
> Cries out that I am not my father's son!
>
> (p. 40)

With "anger and a sinking heart," the next day he questions his parents, who deny the rumor, calling it "the slanderous rant of a fool" (p. 40).

Oedipus says,

> This relieved me. Yet the suspicion,
> Remained always aching in my mind;
> I know there was talk. I could not rest;
> And finally, saying nothing to my parents,
> I went to the shrine at Delphi.
>
> (p. 40)

The god dismissed Oedipus' question about his parentage, but predicted dire events.

> As that I should lie with my own mother, breed
> Children from whom all men would turn their eyes;
> And that I should be my father's murderer.
>
> (p. 41)

To avoid these events, Oedipus flees and wanders far from Corinth. But in the following dramatic episode, seeming almost to occur the next day, he meets and kills Laïos, his bad, rejecting, and abusive biological father.

This encounter is also interesting from the point of view of Laïos' psychology-for the only provocation to Laïos is that Oedipus is physically present at the crossroads. Laïos attacks after forcing his unrecognized son off the road merely for being in the way. Symbolically, Oedipus is once again in Laïos' way, just as he was at his birth.

Laïos' personality is of interest. I have not seen any commentary on the fact that in the two brief

descriptions we have of him, he appears as a brutal, self-centered, and raging despot. He would seem to fit modern criteria for a narcissistic personality, full of self-justifying fury. Oedipus is also quick to anger. After being struck, Oedipus immediately proceeds to kill Laïos and all but one of his party. And although this is so, the subsequent unraveling of the tale does not mention that it was actually the father who struck the son first.

What we appear to have is a narcissistic father who, from the time of the birth of his son, was fearful of him as a rival to his uncontested power over his kingdom and sexual exclusiveness with his wife. How often we see clinical situations in which a parent sees an unborn child as a rival for attention—and an embryonic sexual rival as well. These fantasized rivalries do not wait for the child to become developmentally sexualized at age 3. They often begin even before the child is born.

Like his father Laïos, Oedipus is a narcissistic character. He is self-centered, self-righteous, and full of narcissistic fury. Never does Iocastê protest this. His doom, his blindness, and his self-pronounced exile stem from his narcissistic righteousness, rage, and impulsivity. No one in the play can stop him in his narcissistic determination. He is his father's son, and to the brief family history the play gives us, we can add our modern understanding of the way in which infantile rejection promotes the formation of a narcissistic character, just as surely as does the experience of living with parents who are themselves narcissistically flawed. Oedipus turns his rage and self-righteousness on everyone near him, on his brother-in-law Creon, on Teiresias, on the citizenry embodied in the chorus of Theban elders. And finally, he turns it on himself. We can also understand Iocastê projecting her own murderousness into her two husbands, even while

being fully subservient and apparently worshipping them.

The fate that befalls this entire family can be understood as a contemporary psychological drama —firmly and poetically drawn. It is the drama of a narcissistic family. A father projects his own murderousness onto his son and attempts to exterminate the son as a threatening object and to get rid of the projected murderous part of himself, at the same time expressing it with disastrous consequences for his son. Whereas the father is active in rejecting the son and ordering his death, the mother accedes without protest. The son is rescued. Both the couple and the child live with the knowledge of the murderous rejection—the couple consciously and the child unconsciously. I am proposing that the child unconsciously understands the rejection by his biological parents, and because of the unexplained injury to his feet, he would grow

up with at least a fantasy of parental harm, perhaps one he would imagine had been done by his adoptive parents, perhaps by his unknown biological parents.

Meanwhile, Laïos remains a difficult king—probably an arbitrary and angry tyrant. This may perhaps be represented by the plague that visits the country under the Sphinx's grip. As in the subsequent reign of Oedipus, a sick king rules a sick country. It occurs to me that there is an additional meaning to the Sphinx's riddle, "What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three at night?" It is a riddle specifically aimed at the problems in human development in Laïos' family and kingdom. Men are not free to grow and develop through the life cycle, to walk on four legs, then two, then three, under his despotic rule. The theme of development as the capacity to walk echoes with the sentence that Laïos added to Oedipus' death sentence. He ordered that the infant Oedipus be

crippled so that he would not have been able to walk at all! This gratuitous added cruelty makes no particular sense on the surface, but it makes great sense as an unconscious act to stifle his development. It also points to the need for double measures to ensure against the possibility that he might survive the murder and return—like the return of the repressed bad object—to kill his father and possess his mother.

Oedipus does survive. He bests and kills his father. He can solve the riddle of development posed by the Sphinx because he has been saved by the split-off good parents. And he can walk. But his narcissistic core is ultimately no better suited for ruling than his father's. In his reign as well as in his father's, Thebes is "riddled" with the effects of unconscious and unacknowledged loss, deprivation, and abuse. The city reflects the consequences of

Oedipus' inner object relations set and that of his family.

Oedipus Rex can be seen as a paradigm of the possibility of insight in psychotherapy. But the revelations of truth uncovered during the play serve better as painful parody of a misguided treatment. Increased understanding results in accelerating destructiveness, not in mercy or tolerance. The one candidate as a possible therapist is Teiresias, who has experienced much and knows much. Oedipus reviles and threatens him. Under threat, Teiresias, too, reverts to narcissistic rage. Oedipus has projectively identified with Teiresias, who becomes like him. This play and the entire cycle of plays that describe Oedipus' death in *Oedipus at Colonus* and the fate of his children and brother-in-law in *Antigone* represent the perpetuation of suffering and the transgenerational transmission of object relations. Through the next generation, a cycle

continues of pervasive, familywide narcissism and rejection. In *Oedipus at Colonus,* Oedipus is led in his blind old age by his daughter, Antigone, whose own procreative adulthood is in turn sacrificed to her father. Although Oedipus is revered and sanctified, he continues to act in the same self-justifying and raging manner, threatening everyone who stands in his way. And in a final act of vengeance, he refuses to forgive one of his sons, who vies for the throne with the other.

This fatherly meanness of spirit affects the next scene of the drama. No sooner is Oedipus dead than the two brothers strike each other down. But even that is not the end of pathological grief in this most doomed of families. The action of the third play of the cycle, *Antigone,* is usually presented as the confrontation of the order of the state by the moral imperatives of the individual. For instance, *Antigone* was rewritten by the French playwright Jean

Anouilh in 1942 to symbolize this kind of moral conflict in the Nazi era.

But there is another, more immediate reading in the vein we are mining. Antigone leaves her father upon his death and immediately seizes on the edict of her mother's brother, Creon, that her own brother must not be buried. In support of her protest, she commits suicide herself and is followed in death by her fiancé, who is Creon's son. Unable to mourn her unrelenting father, she in essence destroys herself to sanctify the son whom Oedipus had refused to bless. In so doing, she even rebels against Oedipus, dying as witness to her brother's right to the kind of sacrament that Oedipus had denied him. And she completes the cycle of destruction in the house of Laïos and Iocastê. In this light, the play *Antigone* becomes a psychological tragedy about the passing of the destructiveness of narcissistic character from one generation to another. Antigone, with her

passionate heritage of self-destruction, cannot mourn her father and survive to have a life of her own with her own husband. Rather, she seizes on Creon's decree to justify her own self-destruction and takes her fiancé, Creon's son, with her in the process.

In *Oedipus Rex,* the oedipal situation results from family- wide action that begins before Oedipus' birth and continues throughout his life. Oedipus' "oedipal situation" itself is mostly determined by early trauma to him, determined by the parents' dynamics. Finally, in turn, the issues of Oedipus and Iocastê exert a similarly fatal influence on the thoroughly angry and tragic history of all three of their children.

THE WHEELER FAMILY

A clinical case vignette can further illustrate my contention that the whole family influences the oedipal constellation. This example comes from

therapy with the Wheeler family, a case I used to illustrate the child's role in inventing the oedipal situation in a previous book (Scharff and Scharff 1987). The same case here allows us to explore the family's contribution to oedipal development and pathology. In the course of work over several years, I saw Max and Ginger Wheeler for marital and sex therapy and for individual psychodynamic psychotherapy. Later, I saw them with their daughter, Laura, in family therapy.

Mr. Wheeler

> Mr. Wheeler had been adopted, and his adoptive father was reported to have died in sexually suggestive circumstances when the boy was 5. He was idolized by his overbearing mother, who remarried when he was a teenager. His feeling about both of his mother's marriages was that she had ruled and mistreated her husbands. Now married himself, Max experienced anxiety in his marital relationship. He suffered from

premature ejaculation and had engaged in numerous affairs.

Mrs. Wheeler

Ginger Wheeler had two symptoms. She was completely uninterested in sex, and she was fearful that her 3-year-old daughter Laura would replace her in her husband's affections. Ginger had a picture of her parents common to many hysterics. She felt that her father preferred her and did not love her mother, whom she had been allowed to denigrate and partly replace. She was shocked —and eventually relieved —to find that her parents' relationship was actually a good deal better than she had believed.

The Couple

Max and Ginger met in an affair while Max was married. After their marriage, when Ginger was pregnant, Max unconsciously expected that he would be excluded by the mother-child pair. When Laura was born, Ginger feared that Max and Laura would exclude her, as she and her father had excluded her mother. Ginger experienced her fear consciously at the level of worrying that

Laura would push her out of the way. She contributed to her fear by not maintaining her sexual relationship with Max. Max did not experience his fear, but created compensatory pairings for himself in the form of affairs.

The fear of relationship that this couple brought to their marriage was considerable. Max used splintering and splitting of relationships to avoid domination. He longed for and feared dependent relationships. He used oedipal splitting to keep the bad object at bay. Ginger also used splitting and repression of the bad object, projecting its rejecting aspects into her genitals where it was repressed, substituting a bodily state-the absence of sexual desire — for a problem in relationship (Fairbairn 1954). She projected the exciting aspect of the object into her daughter where it was feared. The anxieties that Max and Ginger shared were also felt between them in the loss of a cooperative relationship around the issues of parenting Laura.

Laura

I saw Laura when she was 4. She had reacted to the threats held in oedipal triangular issues by regressing to her earlier concerns about the relationship with her mother. She and her mother had great difficulty separating from each other. When I asked her to draw a family, Laura drew an "empty picture" (Figure 11-1), saying that a dog and cat might live in the picture, but they might fight if they were together. She was unable to locate people in her stories or pictures. Her picture of a family was therefore empty. Oedipal development could not proceed because of her fear of the pair, seen as orally aggressive, not as genitally sexual. Her parents' early fears for their own relationship could be seen to have borne painful fruit in her development. She, too, feared sexual relatedness at her own developmental stage.

Figure 11-1. Laura's picture drawn at age 4

I next saw Laura two years later when she was 6. She greeted me warmly and without fear. Her parents were much better now, after individual, couple, and sex therapy, which had brought them together and given them a

normal sexual relationship. When Laura touched my hand to show how warm it was from the clay she was playing with, she immediately looked to the door and asked if anyone could come in—a clear reference to fearing her mother might intrude on our oedipal scene. In drawing a picture of her family (Figure 11-2), she began with sky and ground as if drawing a frame around the emptiness of the picture she had drawn two years earlier. But this picture she then filled in with oedipal themes. A line of smoke connected a phallic house to a sky, which at first was drawn in the shape of two ample breasts and was then filled in. There was a family of three birds on one side of the house and of four octopuses on the other. A sister had been born in the interval and Laura was playing, or struggling, with her place in the family. The parents' progress had paralleled Laura's own growth in their tolerance of warmth, intimacy, and sexuality. I thought the spur to Laura's improvement had come not only from her two years of maturation, but also from the growth in each of her parents and in their relationship. But Laura was still phobic and fearful of abandonment.

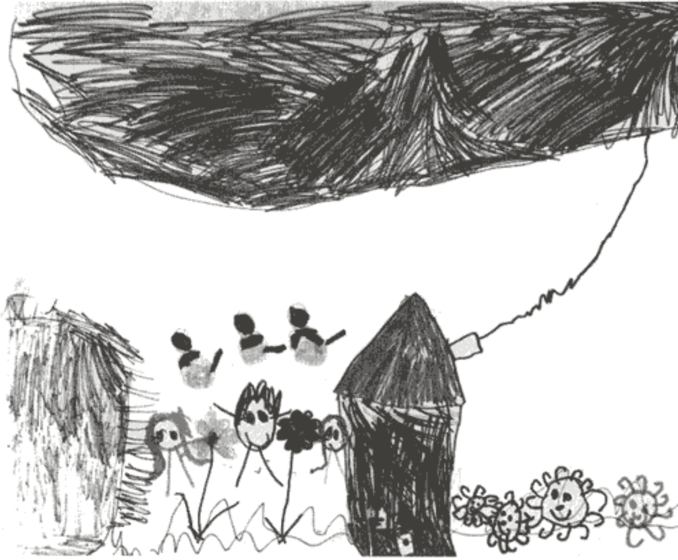

Figure 11-2. Laura's first family picture, drawn in an individual session at age 6

When I convened a family meeting, many of these issues could be seen, although the family related in a generally warm way throughout the session. The 2-year-old sister was a focus of shared good feeling. Laura was able to please both her mother and father through her concern about and caretaking of her little sister. The birth of the sister had been a spur to improved relationships throughout the family and had been part of the support to an improved

oedipal constellation. I thought the overall family pattern was beneficially influencing Laura's development.

I asked each family member to draw a picture of the family. Because the parents' pictures were highly idealized (Figures 11-3 and 11-4), I asked them to make a second drawing (Figures 11-5 and 11-6), while Laura finished the one she contributed (Figure 11-7). The baby sister's drawing, of course, consisted of a few scribbles (Figure 11-8) — just what one would expect of a 2-year-old.

Figure 11-3. Max Wheeler's first family picture

Mr. Wheeler's first drawing (Figure 11-3) depicted an exciting and sexualized view of his relationship to the family. It showed a narcissistic focus on himself as a sly seductive Indian looking out of the corner of his eyes at his three tepees, each said to have a squaw inside. In a second drawing (Figure 11-5), he drew the family house. In this version, Laura stared out into the night in fright while everyone else slept. It seemed a clear statement of the way that Laura, now the identified patient, had absorbed all of the family anxiety as if to let everyone else sleep.

Mrs. Wheeler's first picture (Figure 11-4) was an idealized, faceless drawing of a happy family on a vacation picnic. Her second picture (Figure 11-6) showed an embattled family breakfast and focused on the difficulty between her and Laura. Father and baby sister flanked Laura and Mother, who were frowning at each other. Mrs. Wheeler's two pictures of family meals illustrated her use of food to organize the splitting between an image of an idyllic family situation in her first picture and a rejecting situation in the second picture. We see below that this idiom joined Laura and her mother in

another drawing they constructed together (Figure 11-9).

Figure 11-4. Ginger Wheeler's first family picture

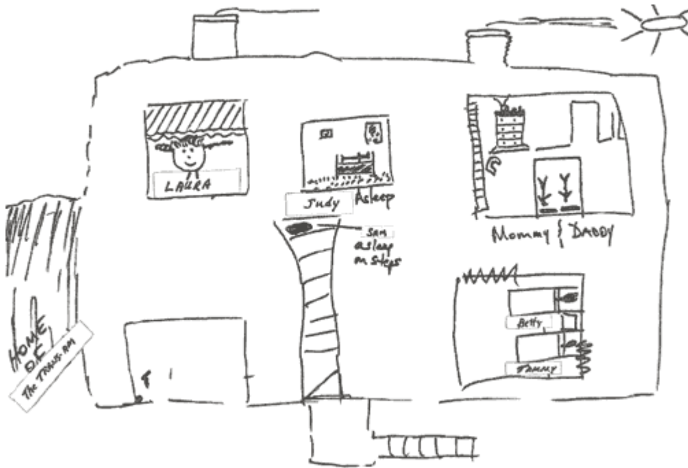

Figure 11-5. Max Wheeler's second family picture

As mentioned, Laura's original picture from this period showed a phallic house connected to a buxom sky (Figure 11-2). In this session she drew another family picture (Figure 11-7), which demonstrated a sexualized and phallic appeal to both parents. She drew herself with one arm distorted to look like a penis. She was positioned between her parents, and they were far apart. She said that they were sitting around a swimming pool, but, to me, the pool also resembled a bed. The picture balanced Laura's interest in the parents as a couple, neither of whom she wanted to offend, with her individual sexualized

relationship to each parent. It seemed to me to be a clearly oedipal statement.

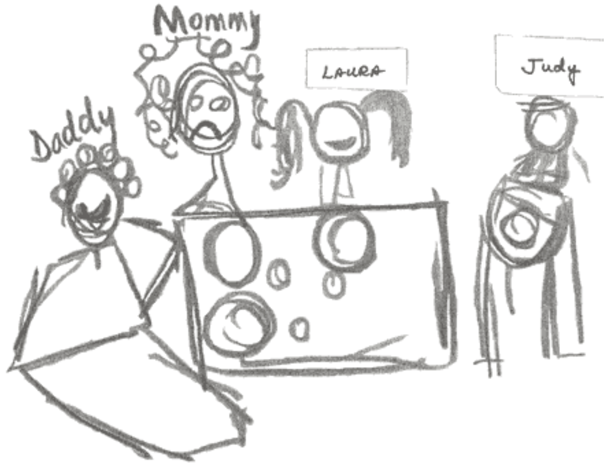

Figure 11-6. Ginger Wheeler's second family picture

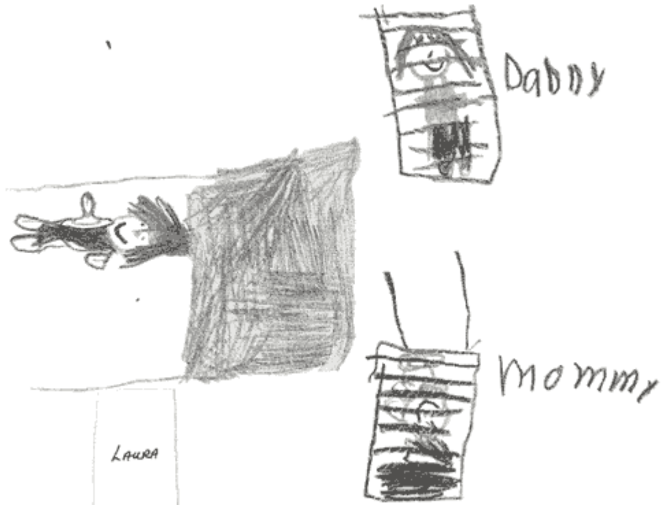

Figure 11-7. Laura's family picture, drawn during the family session

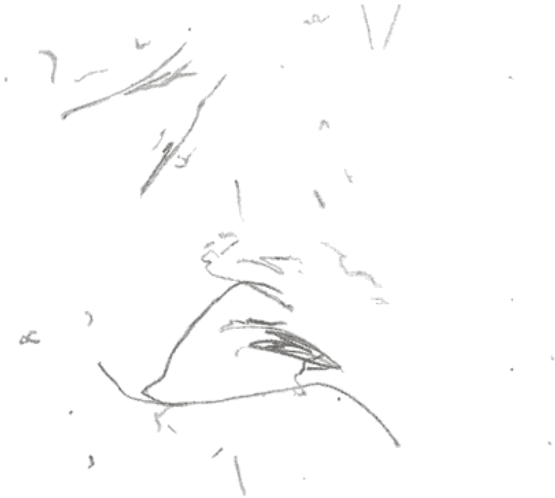

Figure 11-8. Laura's sister's scribbles

Finally, I asked the family to share in drawing a picture (Figure 11-9). In the process, Max supported Laura in trying to work out her relationship with her mother. This occurred now on the basis of a much improved relationship between husband and wife, and of improved internalized object relationships for each of them. But Ginger still had difficulty in relating to Laura.

Laura took the lead in drawing the picture (Figure 11-9). It was of the dog asking for a snack, an animal dramatization of Laura's own wishes for afterschool snacks. In the session, Laura tried to get her mother to draw the dog an afternoon snack in the family kitchen. Mother responded that Laura knew she herself was supposed to have fruit and vegetables after school, not candy. She then overlooked Laura's attempt at conciliation when Laura drew a banana, the kind of fruit she would prefer to the carrot sticks and celery offered by Mother. Father had been filling in the kitchen background and not interfering, providing the tolerance and containment for the process.

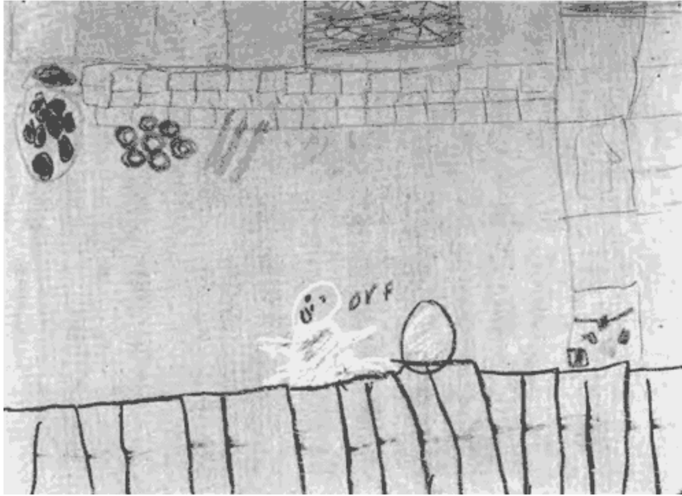

Figure 11-9. The Wheelers' family picture done together

Following the diagnostic family interview, Laura worked in therapy individually and in sessions with her mother on her fears of the bad "witch mother" and of abandonment, fears relating both to Laura's projecting aggression against her mother and to the internalization of her mother's aggression relating to Laura. Most of the internal persecuting and abandoning object was projected onto her mother, but discussion revealed that her father could also be experienced as disappointing. Much of Laura's anxiety stemmed from the quite reasonable fear that the marital relationship

would fail, depriving Laura of her parents as a pair.

Laura's frightening internal image of a couple was shown in a picture in which a bad witch and kidnapping monster were paired (Figure 11-10). Her oedipal constellation and the fears that expressed it derived both from her parents' projections into her and from her own developmental experience. Laura feared that she would be left entirely alone, as shown in a picture that portrayed the experience of fear at being left (Figure 11-11). This fear of abandonment was built on her earlier experience of hostile mothering and exciting, inconsistent fathering. Her fear also embodied the fears and fantasies her parents carried with them into their marriage —the fragile, threatened narcissistic wishes of her father, and the sexualized, threatened special status of her mother, who feared rejection as a vulnerable child and as a woman. Laura's symptoms gave expression to these projections from her parents and to her realistic fear for the safety of their marriage. These fears and projections had been there through all of Laura's early life, but as Laura reached the oedipal phase, she reorganized

her understanding of these difficulties in genital and oedipal terms.

Figure 11-10. Laura's "witch-mother and monster"

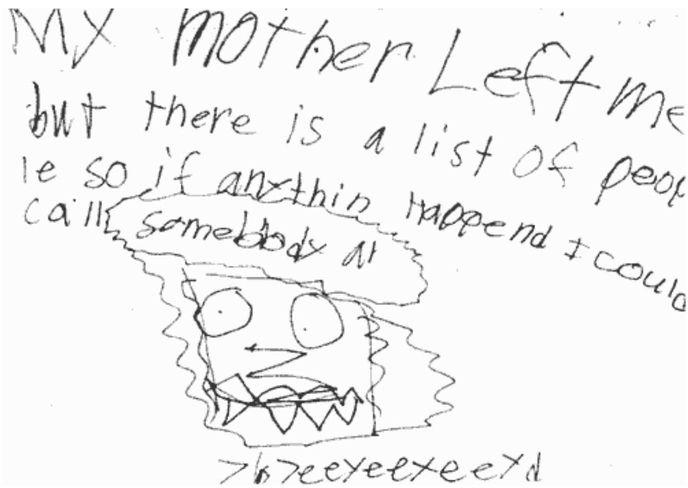

Figure 11-11. Laura's picture of fear and abandonment

Laura, her mother, and father all needed help with several levels of object-related issues at the oedipal level. They each split positive and negative elements of the maternal object along sexual lines. Each of them projected fear and rejection onto maternal objects and excitement onto fathers. They handled preoedipal fears of abandonment and inadequate attachment through an oedipal disguise and a search for an exciting father. All three shared a concern about the adequacy of the self when

deprived of the parental pair, which each of them understood to be a result of the attacks they had made as children on their parents as a pair.

Early in Laura's growth, these fears had delayed oedipal development. Later, the fears organized for her a way of understanding family experience and the harm Laura feared her new sexual interest would do to her parents in destroying them as a couple. Each of her parents had gone through a similar process many years earlier.

Finally, we can see that just as the couple's fantasies determined their treatment of Laura, so her growth and her personality influenced their experience and the experience of the whole family. Just as in *Oedipus Rex,* the oedipal situation was a shared family matter.

The oedipal situation, in the plays of Sophocles, in life, and in therapy is a family affair—with

complex determinants from before the birth of the child, from the child, from the parents, from the previous generations, and even from the culture itself. It constitutes the combined attempt of child and family, as with Oedipus and his family, to correct and modify problems in earlier development and in earlier relationships. The family influences the child, who in turn influences the family before, during, and after the oedipal period. Family and child influence each other in a never-ending cycle.

[1] The usual spelling of these names is Laïus and Jocasta. However, I follow the spelling used in the Fitts and Fitzgerald (1956) translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Cycle* from which I have drawn, that is, “Laïos" and "Iocastê."

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