

How and why do the characters of Jocasta, Antigone & Ismene differ between *Children of Jocasta* (Natalie Haynes) and the Oedipus myth by Sophocles?

The women of this title – Jocasta, Antigone and Ismene – are female characters that have appeared repeatedly throughout Western literature. Their portrayal by Sophocles in his plays *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429BCE) and *Antigone* (441BCE) contrasts markedly to Natalie Haynes' contemporary retelling in her novel *Children of Jocasta* (2017). In both depictions the women are central characters, yet Haynes makes them captivating figures who move beyond the classical focus on the male characters such as Creon and Oedipus. Beyond these portrayals by Sophocles and Haynes there are a multitude of others across a 2,500 year history. These were directed at different audiences using different media thereby making any straightforward analysis of how the stories have been received challenging. In this essay I will focus on how Haynes took the Oedipal tradition and specifically chose to rewrite the stories of Jocasta, Antigone and Ismene to introduce a feminist angle for thinking through their experiences.

In her novel, Haynes takes her inspiration from a story whose origins are complex. When Sophocles wrote the play for his production of *Oedipus Tyrannus* – first performed in 429BCE in the Athenian city Dionysia – he was not creating the story. He was inspired by the tales of Oedipus that circulated during the Archaic and Classical Greek periods.¹ As such, although I will be looking at the reception of the Oedipus story by Haynes, there are vast swathes of work that could be done looking at how the Homeric traditions were themselves received by Sophocles and how they inspired his work. This makes analysis of these two works of literature even more compelling as I am examining the reception of a text with its own complex reception history.

From Sophocles to Haynes: the challenges of cross-medial reception

The plot of the Oedipal tradition follows the genre of Aristotelean tragedy: no matter how hard you might try, you are doomed to an inescapable fate. While documenting the struggle between what is good and what is right it depicts destiny as predetermined. Yet, in essence, these are family dramas which resonate with their audience on a human level. The themes expose society to tragic concepts that have been around for millennia and are ceaselessly engaging.² *Antigone* as the perfect example of such a story “is the most performed play even in modern times”.³ The characters themselves moreover have been mutable throughout time, helping to explain their continued appeal to Haynes in creating her own version of a timeless story.⁴ Haynes noted her affinity to Euripides' twist on the story in which he gave the women a greater measure of autonomy.⁵

Reception is primarily the study of ways in which Classical material has been received and reimagined by modern day authors.⁶ It requires “focusing on not just the relationship between the ante text and modern text, but considering the social and political aspects that influenced both of the

¹ An example is the Oedipodea, an epic, written during Homeric times but lost. Pausanias' writing is the only evidence we have for it where we learn that even before Sophocles the story was well documented. Oedipus is also referenced in Book 11 of the *Odyssey* with a condensed but similar plot.

² Maarten De Pourcq, Nathalie De Haan and David Rijser, eds., *Framing Classical Reception Studies: Different Perspectives on a Developing Field* (Brill 2020).

³ Edith Hall, 'Introduction to KCL Greek Play' (KCL Greek Play, June 2022).

⁴ See modern novels such as Kamila Shamsie, *Homefire* (2017) which contains similar characters and themes as *Antigone* but changes the story considerably.

⁵ Haynes, *Pandora's Jar*, 45.

⁶ Susanna Braund, 'A Companion to Classical Receptions', Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray, eds., *Translation and Literature* (2011) 223.

texts”.⁷ For the two texts I am analysing, the ‘social and political’ influences are markedly different, as are the intended audiences, and the forms of these texts themselves, plays versus a novel, making studying their reception particularly complex.

The contrast between the public and private audiences is a key challenge. Sophocles’ plays, *Antigone & Oedipus Tyrannus*, were performed for Athenian audiences which were primarily male. As already noted, his plays retold stories to audiences familiar with the Homeric traditions, having watched other comparable tragedies. Sophocles retold stories in a way that was so captivating that they left an indelible mark on the subsequent reception of these myths. These provided the source texts from which Haynes would draw. However, the audience for her novel, *Children of Jocasta*, is overwhelmingly female and often younger. Hence the targeted audiences receiving the story differ considerably. Moreover, the different media, by determining how the story is told, offer different approaches to depicting the challenges faced by the characters in the respective depictions of the same story. A novel enables the reader to gain an intimate look into the thoughts of the protagonist; a play is more detached, certain nuances are harder to transmit thus more likely overlooked. In these ways it becomes clear that reception is not merely the analysis of how text A influences text B. On one level, the specifics of each text must be examined to draw out the details setting each text apart. On another level, the journey leading from text A to text B collates a variety of additional influences that can shape any analysis of how the latter text was created.

Plot of *Children of Jocasta* - Similarities and Differences

There are three key thematic and structural differences in Haynes’ novel which are important to my analysis: the way in which Jocasta learns about the curse, the contrasting approaches to the narrative – highlighting the importance of differing perspectives – and the Plague’s significance in Haynes’ retelling.

The first key difference intriguing me was Haynes’ decision to portray Jocasta as being ignorant of the prophecy: that any child of Laius would go on to kill him. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Laius and Jocasta are aware and fearful that he will be killed if he has a son, so he only begets a child with Jocasta after drinking too much to be aware of any repercussions. This strongly diverges from Haynes’s iteration. Haynes portrays Jocasta as ignorant of the prophecies until the ἀναγνώρισις (the moment of realization), when Teresa, the cook/head of the household, tells her about “a prophecy which said he would be killed by his son. Laius wouldn’t allow that to happen”⁸, Teresa then snatches away baby Oedipus, leaving him exposed on a mountain to die. By contrast in Sophocles’ account, Jocasta tells Oedipus that “Laius was fated to be killed by a child conceived from him”, indicating that she had known this prophecy for a long time.⁹ It is likely that Haynes’ account is commenting on the ignorance forced upon women in classical antiquity: how they were unaware of the wider events occurring outside the household.

Haynes writes a story that, although it bears a close resemblance to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*, has key differences making the novel more engaging. In the *Children of Jocasta*, she compiles the accounts of both women’s stories, which Sophocles uses two plays to tell. By developing the two women’s experiences in parallel stories that run through Haynes’ novel the tragic conclusions of both plots occur simultaneously, leading to an even more tragic conclusion.¹⁰ Opening her novel with a prologue introducing the Plague devastating the city, she then starts by

⁷ Susanna Braund, ‘A Companion to Classical Receptions’, Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray, eds., *Translation and Literature* (2011) 223.

⁸ Natalie Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*. (Picador 2021).

⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* line 857

¹⁰ Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*.

telling the story of Ismene before jumping directly to Jocasta. At the novel's start, Jocasta is portrayed as a child. Crucially, we see her marriage to the king, as an unwilling young girl. The first-person perspective allows the audience a glimpse inside her mind, which Sophocles never allows. She is fundamentally a child during the start of the novel, whereas in *Oedipus Tyrannus* she is only shown fully grown. By depicting her youth, naivety and poignant backstory, Haynes can better explain why the subsequent sorrows of her life are so devastating.¹¹

Looking at key thematic differences, the Plague, named 'the Reckoning' by Haynes, is a much more central part of her novel, serving as the physical embodiment of Fates wreaking chaos on Thebes. The novel opens with the Reckoning sweeping through the city. Killing multitudes who never appear again in the story the Reckoning is established as fearful and it foregrounds the inescapability of fate throughout the rest of the novel. This contrasts with *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in which the Reckoning is only discussed by the Chorus "countless are their deaths and the city is perishing"¹², never by primary characters. In Haynes' account, the Reckoning leads to the death of Eurydice, unlike Sophocles who writes her suicide after her son's suicide. However the most striking difference appears at the novels' end, compared to Sophocles' *Antigone*. Haynes depicts Antigone being saved and deposing Creon as a ruler. Instead of having Antigone hang herself, Haynes portrays her seizing power.¹³ Haynes applies her feminist principles to her retelling, empowering Antigone as a heroine more likely to appeal to the distinctive audience for whom she is writing.

Jocasta: Heroine or Victim?

Haynes explains that she felt compelled to write about Jocasta as "that rarest and most dangerous of things: a women who doesn't become invisible to men even as she ages... this is a marriage of love and perhaps even lust".¹⁴ Indicated here is the paucity of aging women, who are frequently cast into the shadows, from the Ancient world up to now, as they age. Jocasta's sexuality is a more significant feature of her portrayal in Haynes' retelling of the story. Her relationship with Oedipus throughout their marriage is shown as consensual.¹⁵ By portraying this in highly physical terms, ultimately Haynes heightens the tragedy of their incestuous relationship, increasing the dramatic irony of the story.

Throughout Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus is the character who knows everything, with wit as his main trait. In the novel, he talks down to Jocasta, believing that his superior intellect allows him to know more than her. Towards the end of the novel, Jocasta starts suspecting the incestuous nature of their relationship. Oedipus labels her irrational instead of agreeing, implying her complete ignorance as an inferior woman. This is a classic example of a man talking down to a woman, assuming her female hormones ruin any rationality or intelligence she might have. Ironically, Jocasta realises the truth far earlier than Oedipus: Teresa tells her that Oedipus is her son and "Jocasta felt the world shift, as she had lost her footing and was falling sideways towards the ground."¹⁶ Understanding what has happened, she flees to her room and is dead for almost an entire day before Oedipus breaks down the door to find her.¹⁷

¹¹ Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*.

¹² Sophocles, 'Oedipus Tyrannus' [1994] Digital Loeb Classical Library 343.

¹³ Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*.

¹⁴ Haynes, *Pandora's Jar*, 55.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*, 268.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

In *Children of Jocasta*, Sophon, Jocasta's children's tutor, theorises that her suicide was unrelated to the incest. Rather, it was a response to believing she had been infected by the plague. Fearing so greatly that she could cause her family's deaths, she preferred to die rather than let that happen.¹⁸ It is likely that Euripides' *Phoenician Women* inspired Haynes to introduce this theory. There Jocasta is the authority within the city, with Oedipus having been locked up due to his abhorrent actions. Her two sons fight, killing each other leading to Jocasta, overcome with grief, killing herself on the battlefield.¹⁹ This portrayal of Jocasta seems closer to Haynes' version of her, reflecting the different context and influences that shape her depiction since Euripides created a woman dying for the sake of her children and not due to shame. Although Sophocles allows his audience to believe that Jocasta commits suicide from shame, Haynes provides Jocasta with the dignity to die for her own reasons. Haynes' depiction of Jocasta's death reinforces the centrality of motherhood, increasing the tragic irony since the maternal relationship she has with Oedipus is the central conflict of the Oedipal myth.

The portrayal of Eurydice, Jocasta's sister-in-law, in Haynes' version is also a jarring contrast to Sophocles' telling, especially regarding her role as mother. Haynes writes that Eurydice stays outside the walls of her house once she realises she is infected with the plague. By staying back, she is given no care and thus dies alone soon after. However, she prevents her husband, Creon, or her son Haemon from growing ill and potentially dying. By giving up her life in order to save her child Haynes shows that her devotion to motherhood and her self-sacrifice are highly noble and fit into the tragic story. Sophocles depicts Eurydice as killing herself. After Antigone's suicide at the end of *Antigone*, her betrothed Haemon (Creon & Eurydice's son) also commits suicide and due to her grief, Eurydice takes her own life. Sophocles shows her suicide as an act of hopeless grief, whereas Haynes dignifies her death depicting it as an act of self-sacrifice to protect her child.

Haynes appears to manipulate the expectations of the genre of tragedy. She frames the tragic events of her story against the backdrop of womanhood: the rapid shift from childhood to marriage, the suffering of childbirth and the primitive instincts that stem from protecting the life of one's child over everything else. In all these ways the scope for tragedy in a woman's life is heightened by Haynes as she takes the character of Jocasta and uses her to amplify the challenges facing women. Thus two plays that for Sophocles are dominated by male characters who overshadow the female experience, for Haynes become a medium for telling an archaic story with a feminist slant. Focusing on the thoughts and individual emotions of the women the female tragedy of the novel is strengthened.

Antigone & Ismene

These young women are the characters who suffer greatly as a result of the Fates' hatred for their father and prophecies that existed way before their birth. Antigone, the titular character of Sophocles' play, is overshadowed in his telling of the story by her uncle Creon who is given a far more significant speaking part. By the end of the play she has hanged herself and although Creon goes on to regret his actions, Antigone is silenced and marginalised in this depiction. Antigone is a character who refuses to adhere to the demands of the state when she believes she is doing what is right. This faithfulness to what she believes is the correct way to act has influenced many authors such as Jean Anouilh.²⁰ However I would argue that Haynes offers an especially compelling account by depicting Antigone as deposing Creon.

¹⁸ Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*.

¹⁹ Euripides, *'Phoenician Women'* [2002] Digital Loeb Classical Library.

²⁰ Anouilh produced *Antigone* in occupied Paris in 1944 and utilized the struggle between Creon – representing the law – and Antigone – representing what is right – to express the French Resistance's struggles against Nazism. This production aimed at inspiring political activism. I would argue that Haynes'

In *Children of Jocasta*, Antigone's story ends very differently. Instead of successfully hanging herself, she is cut down by Haemon and Ismene enabling her subsequently to rule in place of Creon. Antigone is the eldest surviving child of Oedipus and Jocasta, the previous rulers, and she refuses to allow Creon to continue ruling as regent viewing his actions as those of a despot. Although her story is different and undeniably about the ability women have to rule, Ismene's characterisation by Haynes is even more fascinating. Ismene is given a direct voice, and all the chapters told from her perspective are in the first person thus exposing all her thoughts to us. The reader is able to witness how quickly she realises what is going on, faster than even her brothers Eteocles and Polynices. Ismene perceives how Creon is manipulating the two boys against one another to enable him to rule, with both of them dead. Ismene has the anagnorisis at the very moment the boys are at each other's throats. Her epiphany indicates her intelligence and since the reader is inside her head one sees the precise moment her intelligence benefits her. The reader is also able to see how Sophon, her tutor, had known that she was the wisest even when she was a child!

In Haynes' depiction Ismene appropriates aspects of Antigone's character, for example she is the one who buries Eteocles against the specific demand of Creon. This courage renders Ismene the sister who embodies the concept of standing up for what is right in the eyes of the gods; not succumbing to the demands of a dictator. In Sophocles' iteration, she speaks very little, and then only to tell Antigone that the family has suffered enough and the burial is not worth extra sorrow. She lists all the ways in which their family members have tragically died "and consider ... we who are left".²¹ Haynes subverts this indicating that both sisters are noble in their own rights.

Antigone, as we see in Sophocles' plays is always a well-developed character, given the titular role and acting as a foil to Creon, who is "the lead role in the play if you count the number of lines each character has".²² Sophocles causes Antigone's suicide to act as the catalyst for the other later suicides of Haemon — out of grief for Antigone — and Eurydice — out of grief for Haemon. Thus he gives a woman the impetus for his tragic ending. However she is attributed with far less of the (κλέος) glory typically awarded to men who fight against authority and die for their efforts. Antigone hangs herself, an action typical for virginal girls, reinforcing a portrayal that indicates how, although she is noble, she is still only a teenage girl hence undeserving of honours typically awarded to a man.²³

Haynes, driven by the context in which she writes, the audience for whom she tells the story, and the influences shaping her depiction, chooses to subvert this account entirely. Antigone does not die; she attempts to hang herself but is saved. In Haynes' novel her suicide attempt, which is portrayed as a way of demonstrating Creon's flaws as ruler rather than a genuine desire to die, acts as a catalyst for the pivotal moment of the book when she seizes power from the despotic Creon to rule in his stead. Hence Haynes warps the typical narrative to demonstrate her belief in the strength contained within teenage girls and their superiority to despots. The events indicate how in writing for a modern audience, whose approach to the genre of tragedy has shifted considerably from that of Classical Greece, it is not a requirement that the majority of female characters end up dead, fitting into Haynes' reimagining of the myth for a modern feminist audience.

Conclusion

portrayal of Antigone similarly seeks to establish Antigone as an admirable, heroic role model for teenage girls.

²¹ Sophocles, 'Antigone' [1994] Digital Loeb Classical Library, 9.

²² Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*, 330.

²³ Haynes, *Pandora's Jar*.

Haynes writes an *Afterword* to her novel *Children of Jocasta* where she outlines her motivations for this novel and discusses how “she was startled to find out that Oedipus’ story is not (and has never been) immutable”.²⁴ Haynes was fascinated by the reception of the myth. Inspired by Sophocles and the many later adaptations, she seized the opportunity to take the central characters and retell their story for a new audience.

Haynes has written two other books with a central focus on female voices in Greek literature.²⁵ Her podcast ‘Natalie Haynes Stands up for the Classics’ shows that she is a keen advocate for the relevance of classics in contemporary society. Through her novels she demonstrates how the characters and themes remain prevalent, moving and relatable today. Through her changes, today they reach a broader audience, which is her main aim. Haynes is undoubtedly influenced by the context in which she writes. The way modern audiences receive her works is shaped by the current socio-political climate meaning that Haynes recognizes how the reception of her novel is influenced by the distinctive context in which she is writing. This informs her approach to rethinking how the reception of the varied tellings of the Oedipal myth themselves reflect the different contexts in which they were received: either watched as plays or read as stories. That creates two parallel driving forces in her writing. One is simply to draw out the ongoing appeal and relevance of the Oedipal myth and make classics more accessible. The other is to introduce a feminist angle in which by amplifying the role of the women in her stories she can empower female characters as potentially inspiring female heroines for a shifting audience.

Haynes has more of an interest in Jocasta since she writes that, to her “it is arguable that Jocasta’s fate is worse [than that of Oedipus] since she could not psychologically prepare herself.”²⁶ To Haynes, the ignorance forced upon Jocasta as a result of Archaic treatment of women, and her death at her own hand is worse than Oedipus’ years of mental preparation for his eventual fulfilment of the prophecy and then self-blinding. Sophocles focuses the entire plot around Oedipus thus the reader knows that he knows about the prophecy since boyhood. To me, the sisters are equally crucial to the plot and offer much potential to inspire readers. Haynes, in notable contrast to Sophocles, creates a plot that is strikingly driven by the actions of women providing her with a compelling reason for choosing to retell this specific story. Its tragic nature makes for compulsive viewing – or reading.

Undoubtedly a trend has been growing since the start of the 21st century for feminist retellings of Ancient myths which is likely to have informed Haynes’ decision to create this novel.²⁷ Novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), Madeleine Miller’s *Song of Achilles* (2011), and *Circe* (2018) have been hugely popular – Miller’s *Song of Achilles* has sold over 2 million copies.²⁸ Retellings have come a long way since 2005 and I would argue that Haynes has influenced the increase in books bringing feminism to the forefront of ancient stories.

In conclusion what appears most striking about the account of the sisters and Jocasta in Haynes’ novel is that we hear the events occurring side by side. Recently, watching the Kings College London production of Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, I noted how both stories were shown side by side, seemingly heavily inspired by Haynes’ creative talents, influenced by Edith Hall’s involvement in the production as she has collaborated with Haynes on her podcast. What appears most poignant in

²⁴ Haynes, *Children of Jocasta*, 327.

²⁵ These books retell the Illiad through the stories of female characters, *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and *Pandora’s Jar* (2020), focus on the relevance of the oft-ignored female mythical characters.

²⁶ Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar*.

²⁷ This concept of rendering stories more engaging was already highlighted by Plutarch who said topics at symposia (which can be easily adapted as any modern forum of intellectual discussion or literature) should be accessible to all, tragedy should be written for people to enjoy, and should shy away from being taxing and pretentious, De Pourcq, De Haan and Rijser, *Framing Classical Reception Studies*.

²⁸ ‘The Song of Achilles’ (Wikipedia2021) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Song_of_Achilles>.

both the novel and production is that we can intimately witness the action of the stories from within the heads of the women who are pivotal to the stories. The mother/daughter relationship may not be the main storyline for Sophocles, but Haynes places it front and centre. The reader sees the two tragedies unfolding in unison, even though they occur years apart, thereby experiencing the sorrow even more strongly as the separate tragic endings occur side by side.

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