
More than One Jocasta: Ancient and Modern Perspectives

In Socrates' *Oedipus the King*, the character of Jocasta plays a pivotal role in the plot. How one views Jocasta, the mother, and later, unknowingly, wife of Oedipus, is integral to progression of the story and to how one judges the various characters of a play. In choosing to tell the story of *Oedipus the King* through the eyes of Jocasta herself as opposed to the third person point of view employed in the original play, Ruth Eisenberg establishes another vantage point from which Jocasta can be viewed, setting her up more as a victim of circumstance and the gods' punishment as opposed to an accessory to the penance handed down to Oedipus. Using strong diction, vivid symbols, and passionate emotions, Eisenberg is able to establish Jocasta as a victim who does not have the power to alter her fate as opposed to Socrates' interpretation of Jocasta being more of an instigator in the fate of Oedipus but still little more than a pawn in the game of the gods. Primarily through the degree of depth into which each author goes into Jocasta's character, we are able to see two contrasting viewpoints of who Jocasta truly is.

In Eisenberg's poem, *Jocasta*, we get a much more in-depth look into Jocasta's psyche and especially into her relationship with Laius. Jocasta throughout the poem expresses that she has had no control over her life and has been forced to listen to the whims of others as opposed to making her own decisions. As early on as line twelve, when Jocasta says she is "fifteen and afraid to resist," we begin to see her as a victim of Laius. Laius is treating her not as a human but as an object, something subject to his will and fancies. Describing Laius as having "icy eyes" (18) and as a "deceitful man" (50/51) we as readers begin to see a picture of a resentful marriage. Laius' cold nature is contrasted with the warmth of Aphrodite that runs through Jocasta and the fire that burns within her for Oedipus. Whereas in *Oedipus the King* there were no signs of any negative feelings from Jocasta to Laius, Eisenberg sets Jocasta in firm opposition against Laius. As a result, the same woman who in Socrates' original play seemed in line with the corruption and sadness that Laius brought down upon Oedipus is, in Eisenberg's poem, in stark opposition to Laius, a seeming beacon of light against the dark hate that Laius carried with him. In doing so, Eisenberg places Jocasta and Oedipus in the same boat, both as victims who have had no say in their independent fates.

Socrates established Jocasta and Oedipus as two very separate, unlinked characters, with one, Jocasta, on the side of the Gods, merely a part of Oedipus' punishment. While there are signs that Socrates saw some sympathy for Jocasta, as she pleads with Oedipus not to question his origins throughout the play, Socrates does not attempt to go into depth at all with her character. She is a part to a whole in the gods' plan and nothing more. However, in Eisenberg's play Jocasta is seen completely differently, standing up to Laius and the gods, decrying their tyranny. Saying that the gods "blinded me to his [Oedipus] scars, his age, any resemblance to

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Laius,” (286/287) she rightfully calls out the gods for what they have put her through, describing their actions as nothing more than “heavenly whim” (311). Jocasta takes control of her life in Eisenberg’s poem, shaking her fist at the gods (283/284) and finally, in stepping off the stool “onto the air” (319) she seems to rise above the prophesy, fighting the gods until her last breath. She shows that she is a human with her own wills and wants, not just a plaything for the gods.

The primary contrast between Socrates and Eisenberg in how Jocasta is viewed lies primarily in the degree of depth to which she is discussed. Socrates sees Jocasta as something similar to Laius, a woman whose main role is to help the gods carry out their punishment against Oedipus. However, Eisenberg chooses to follow a different route and go in great detail into Jocasta’s thoughts, establishing her as a person in firm opposition to the whims of Laius and the gods and someone who wasn’t afraid to stand up for what she believed in, even if it was in defiance of the gods. The differences in diction, speech, and symbolism between *Oedipus the King* and *Jocasta* are what establish this contrast, and in doing so cause us as readers to completely question not only who Jocasta and the gods are, but to also question our own lives and if we are doing enough to establish conscious change for ourselves.

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