

## **Tiresias and the Other Sexual Difference**

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I am going to present an abridged version of a chapter from a book I am writing tentatively titled *Transgender and the Other Sexual Difference*.

The chapter is about Tiresias, the blind prophet and seer and what ze tells us about an Other sexual difference to be distinguished from Oedipal (or phallic) sexual difference theorized by Freud and later Jacques Lacan. Tiresias appears in Greek mythology and makes an important debut in *Antigone* and in *Oedipus the King*, both by Sophocles; in Homer's *Odyssey*; in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*; and in T.S. Elliot's *The Wasteland*.

My book uses the feminist psychoanalytic theory and art of Bracha L. Ettinger to ask what psychoanalysis would look like had it been written from the perspective of Tiresias as opposed to Oedipus. My question is offered as a challenge to contemporary Lacanian psychoanalytic writings that too often reduces transgender to psychosis. Read through an Ettingerian lens, Lacanian theory enables us to view trans subjectivity as an expression of an Other sexual difference.

### **The Other Sex Difference**

The Other sex difference involves an unconscious process whereby we are borderlinked to Others (whom Ettinger calls our non-I's) in a matrixial web. It is a sexual difference based on transitivity. In essence, it conceives of the subject as more than one and bound to others in difference, distance and proximity. It is before, alongside and after phallic sexual difference where identities make sense. It isn't based on phallic cuts, splits and severance whereby it is possible to imagine a singular and unified subject. Rather, it is based on trans-connectivity and trace connections to Others known and unknown in familial and extra-familial matrixes. Ettinger writes about partial subjectivity and borderlinkages whereby compassion and ethics are predicated upon shared yet different experiences. There is, as Lacan agrees, One but this *one* is not simple (1975, 66).

Although Ettinger isn't a trans studies scholar and to the best of my knowledge hasn't worked analytically with trans clients, she offers an understanding of the Other sex difference that is highly relevant to trans studies and to theories of subjectivity in general. Ettinger's work offers a way to understand what Susan Stryker calls trans phenomenon. The mythical character of Tiresias is, for me, a symbol of this Other sex difference. This is not because ze is trans but because ze brings Sophoclean characters, like Oedipus and Creon, knowledge of subjective interconnections normally refused in phallic and I would add cisgender ways of being and knowing.

My claim is based on the premise that trans identifications are distinguished from cisgender identifications by the way they involve a somatization of the *other sex* in the body, not just as identification but as a phenomenological experience. But those of us who are cisgender must also negotiate this Other sex difference. While trans subjectivity typically makes this matrixial link visible by, for example, identifying *as* trans (and somatizing this link), it is a psychical component of all human subjects regardless of gender identity, sex embodiment or sexual orientation.

I apologize in advance for not being able to explicate the specifics of this Other sex difference in relation to trans subjectivity in this short presentation, but I want to turn to Tiresias. More specifically, I want to talk about Tiresias without or beyond Oedipus.

If psychoanalysis has a founding myth it is the story of *Oedipus the King*.

Oedipus preoccupies Freud to the point where he was only able to interpret the “human psyche through the exclusive structure of the Oedipus myth” (Pollock 2008, 15). As a result, we have sophisticated understandings of sexual difference within the domain of cisgender masculine identification and phantasy, but only nascent understandings of an Other sexual difference beyond the phallus. Although Lacan and Freud give us important psychoanalytic tools to theorize desire, identification, phantasy, and Oedipal sexual difference, they repeatedly fail to ascertain a space for the Feminine that is not already passive (as Freud tells us) or non-existent (as Lacan tells us). Moreover there are only nascent tools available to theorize trans subjectivity outside psychosis and perversion.

Feminists have been searching for alternatives to Oedipus for quite some time but without attention to Tiresian-like characters. Much focus has been devoted to Antigone, the daughter of Jocasta and Oedipus, born of an incestuous union, in the Sophoclean tragedy by the same name.

### **SLIDE THREE:**

Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Shanna Carlson, Griselda Pollock and Bracha Ettinger have all written brilliantly on Antigone. But significantly less has been written about Tiresias and hir prophetic insight into Antigone’s traumatic familial legacy.

Despite hir clairvoyance, knowledge of masculine *and* feminine sexual pleasure (jouissance), and long life, Tiresias is largely absent from feminist theorizing. Tiresias is a Theban seer who is famous for having lived as both a man and as a woman. Ze was the son of Everes, a shepherd and Chariclo, a nymph (a female deity possessing great beauty and an amorous nature in contrast to the chaste women of the Greek polis) of Athena. Tiresias is a liminal character straddling many binary divisions between male and female; mortals and the Gods; seeing and (symbolic) blindness; past and future, etc. Tiresias survives the liminal spaces ze occupies and lives to tell something about an Other sex difference otherwise foreclosed in the city of Thebes striving to see itself as a democracy beholden to individual actors. Although Tiresias is ultimately killed by the Greek God Apollo after drinking water from a tainted spring, he survives the turn-in-to-death and, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, continues to deliver prophecies from the underworld. Ze lives alongside the dead in trans-generational continuity.

Tiresias is, in Greek mythology, a highly respected figure with insight into the future. As told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, Tiresias came across two snakes copulating near Mount Kyllene in Peloponnese.

Somehow upset by the inter-coiled snakes, Tiresias kills the female snake with his staff. Hera, the Goddess of women, marriage and fertility is furious. As a Goddess well known for having seduced Zeus and for acting upon impulse, she turns Tiresias into a woman in body and mind as punishment. Tiresias appears to have adjusted well to life as a woman. He married and had three daughters, became a renowned prostitute and priestess, a female priest administering religious rites to Hera.

Seven years later Tiresias again encounters two mating snakes. Having learned his lesson, he leaves them be and his masculinity is magically restored. We are to assume that by respecting not only the female snake but the act of copulation itself – a Feminine dimension – Tiresias frees himself from Hera's spell.

But all was not well for long. Hera and Zeus were fighting over whom – man or woman – experienced more pleasure in love making. Zeus insisted it was the woman while Hera insisted it was the man. Being unable to reach consensus they consulted Tiresias who had experiential knowledge of both masculine and feminine pleasure. Tiresias answers to the Olympian court: "Of ten parts a man enjoys one only, but a woman enjoys the full ten parts in her heart." Hera was again moved to fury. She struck Tiresias blind for revealing Feminine secrets. Zeus took pity on Tiresias but couldn't undo his wife's spell. Instead, he gave Tiresias the gift of prophecy, second sight and long life. As the legend goes, Tiresias's life spanned seven Theban generations and closely tied to the great Greek God Apollo. He became a respected and sought after prophet – even as those seeking his message like, for example, Oedipus and Creon, ultimately refuse it or accept it too late (after insult and injury has already been done).

Tiresias's knowledge is not only about life and love and death but an Other axis of sexual difference tied to what Ettinger calls sub-subjectivity and to trans-generational border-linkages. Tiresias doesn't easily or readily offer his knowledge. It is usually sought out but typically refused in anger and incredulity.

In Euripides' *Phoenician Woman* Tiresias foretells that Oedipus's sons will ultimately kill each other in their warring anger and greed, and also for disrespecting their father. In *Oedipus Rex* Tiresias has the unpleasant task of telling Oedipus that he killed his father and married his mother. In *Antigone*, Creon the King is less than thrilled to hear that he must withdraw his indictment against Antigone – he sentences her to death for giving her brother, an enemy of Thebes, burial rites -- to save his family, a tragedy he cannot avoid because he waits too long to heed Tiresias's advice. In every case, Tiresias's words are truthful and stand the test of time<sup>1</sup> -- even as they are almost never well received.

Tiresias uses his gift wisely but is troubled by ignorance and resistance expressed by those seeking his counsel. After telling Creon that in order to save his kingdom he must sacrifice his very own son, Tiresias laments to his daughter:

It's a thankless job, being a prophet.  
Interpret things the way 'they' do not like, they turn on you:

If you falsify results to save them pain -  
 Well, then you antagonize the gods.  
 Apollo should do his own dirty work:  
 Speak to men direct. Then they'd have to take notice. (Euripides, *Phoenician Woman*, translated by Andrew Wilson).

Exasperated by the plight of Oedipus and his refusal to see in *Oedipus the King*, Tiresias says “How terrible – to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees!” (Sophocles 176). Ze endures threats and insults by Oedipus who, like a petulant child, refuses what is not only inevitable but sound advice.

What is significant about the Tiresian presence in these dramas is not the fact that ze is a trans character but rather the knowledge ze possesses of the Other sexual difference, knowledge others – more firmly entrenched in the phallic domain – cannot see, let alone tolerate. It is fair to say that Oedipus has limits and it is high time we asked what psychoanalysis would look like had it been imagined from a Tiresian perspective. What knowledge does Tiresias possess that would trouble the existing order of psychoanalytic theory, particularly those paradigms circumscribed by Oedipal stories without others.

As we see in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus’s life doesn’t end well. Nor is it an example to follow. Apart from the fact that he kills his father (thereby committing patricide) and marries his mother (thereby committing incest), he disowns his sons who are at war with one another for what was once their father’s throne. Refusing Antigone’s advice to yield to his sons and relent upon his anger, to the older Polynices he says: “Die by your own blood brother’s hand – die!” (Sophocles 365). While his daughter is left to contend with his traumatic legacy, Oedipus remains unforgiving to the bitter end. Oedipus never learns that he is his own worst enemy. He dies alone, in pain and exile. As Tiresias foretold: “No man will ever be rooted from the earth as brutally as you [Oedipus]” (Sophocles 183).

I want to be clear about the fact that transgender isn’t a Rosetta stone or unencumbered road to ethics or to otherness beyond the phallus. It does, however, prompt one to consider another axis of difference because there is an acute awareness of the *other sex* in the one. In other words, there is a no-longer unconscious knowledge of an aggregated subjectivity. This aggregated subjectivity is, for Ettinger, an Other sex difference which I would like to suggest is also a trans specific sex difference.

In Ettinger’s assessment, Lacan too quickly concludes that the Tiresian myth doesn’t get us any “closer to understanding feminine sexuality” (Ettinger, 2000, 185). The possibility of knowing something of what Ettinger calls the “feminine-beyond-the-phallus” (2000, 186) in the matrixial dimension is, for Lacan, foreclosed. The Symbolic which, for Lacan, is structuring makes knowledge of difference (in this case of feminine sexuality) impossible.

But Tiresian knowledge *does* infiltrate the Theban milieu. Through his advice, wisdom and prophecies given to Oedipus and Creon – both of whom can only see in phallic terms -- the audience and chorus are left to apprehend the matrixial webs joining blood and non-familial relations including neighbors and foreigners alike in the city-state.

While Freud thought *Oedipus the King* had an impressive following because it reveals universal incestuous and patricidal desire – hence the Oedipal complex – the play is, in my reading, a classic because it reveals the tragic outcome associated with the negation of an Other sex difference in the matrixial web. A dangerous negation Tiresias could see and foretold clearly. It must also be said that the tragedy in each play is born of exile, excommunication and war between cities – incest and patricide come after the fact. In other words, Oedipus is primarily affected by the traumatic rupture to his familial web and exile from his city-home. While I don't recommend that we forget Oedipus he can no longer be the center of psychoanalytic theorizing.

The story of Tiresias is fascinating and worthy of attention in feminist, trans and psychoanalytic theory. Unlike Oedipus who is overinvested in the city polis and the Kingdom of Thebes (the Symbolic domain of the law), Tiresias has gone beyond the city-limit and crossed a sexual border terrifying to cisgender mortals. His subjectivity is not (only) One, but predicated upon two axis of sex difference along with transgenerational memory. Although Oedipus also transgresses phallic laws -- through incest and patricide – he doesn't acquire knowledge or access to an Other dimension (which I would argue leads to his downfall). Tiresias, by contrast, becomes a prophet; he can see what cissexist (read phallic) eyes cannot – beyond the Lacanian limit and into the matrixial order of things.

### **Trans Feminism**

The marginalization of the female characters in Sophocles plays along with the one trans character who can tell us something about an Other sex difference beyond Oedipal sexual difference isn't coincidental. The negation of this Other sex difference in psychoanalysis is wrapped up in the way natal female subjects *and* trans subjects are ignored or pathologized. Feminism cannot move forward without Tiresias and trans studies cannot move forward without Antigone and Jocasta. The fate of each group is intimately connected and a trans-positive feminist psychoanalytic mode of inquiry is needed to fully understand the Other sex difference – along with other modes of being and otherness not yet cognized.

There is unacknowledged sadness and trauma linked to the disappearance of this Other dimension in western culture and Tiresias has much to tell us about the genesis of this disappearance. Oedipal dramas are not the only psychic struggles on stage and the collateral damage done by the negation of trans subjectivities and the Feminine under the auspices of Oedipal psycho-sexual development is increasingly well established. If Antigone challenges heteronormative kinship structures as Judith Butler claims (2010) and Tiresias challenges cisgender norms of psycho-sexual development (as I argue in my book), it behooves us to attend to the non-Oedipal characters in Sophocles' plays. As Patrizia Gherovici writes in her discussion of transsexuality and the clinic, "Psychoanalysis needs a sex change."

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