Jocasta Character Analysis

Jocasta is as a tragic figure as Oedipus. And yet she is often eclipsed by the tragedy of the hero. Laius, the king of Thebes, and his wife Jocasta had no child. Laius, therefore, sought the help of Apollo, the god of Delphi. The god declared that a son would be born to them, no doubt but in the course of time he would kill his father. He was, therefore, well-advised not to beget a child. Eventually a child was born. Jocasta, a loving mother as she was, entrusted the infant to a servant with the specific charge that he should be exposed on a mountain so that he might die. Here the mother is undoubtedly represented as demonstrably cruel. But cruelty is not the last word in her character.

Sophicles’ Jocasta is slightly drawn, and yet she leaves an indelible impression upon the reader’s mind. Gilbert Murray argues:

“Euripides might have brought her character out more explicitly and more at length, but even he could not have made her more living or more tragic, or represented more subtly in her relation to Oedipus both the mother’s protecting love and the mother’s authority.”

Perhaps Laius and Jocasta wrongly interpreted to oracle of Delphi and that is why reluctantly she had to commit a cruel and outrageous act, which must have been haunting her mind all her life. We do not believe that Jocasta voluntarily gave away the child. She had to do it under duress. But even Oedipus had a misgiving about it. He asked the shepherded;

“Twas she that gave it?”

And when assured that it was Jocasta, he reacted adversely;

“Her own child…?

Cruel!”

The mother by sheer chance became the wife of Oedipus. She was a loving and affectionate partner, and always sought to assuage his feelings. She could not be charged with impiety, for her devotion to the gods was unwavering. But she did not trust the priests, who pontifically claimed to be the link between the gods and men. She told Oedipus:

“Then absolve yourself at once. For I can tell you,

No man possesses the secret of divination.

And I have proof an oracle was given to Laius-

From Phoebus, no; but from his ministers-

That he should die by the hands of his own child,

His child and mine. What came of it? Laius,

It is common knowledge, was killed by a band of robbers

At a place where three roads meet.”

Jocasta chose to make a distinction between the oracle and of god and the mantic words. This was certainly not a blasphemy nor even impiety.

But at a subsequent stage when Jocasta retold the story, she seemed to be impious.

“Oh, but I assure you that was what he said;

He cannot go back on it now–the whole town heard it.

Not only I. And even if he changes his story

In some small point he cannot in any event

Pretend that Laius died as was foretold.

For loxias said a child of mine should kill him.

It was not to be poor child, it was he that died

A fig for divination! After this

I would not cross the road for any of it.”

The impiety, if it is one, can be justified on the ground that Jocasta loved Oedipus with all her tenderness and solicitude. Her skepticism was the outcome of deep and passionate love. It is love that outweighed even religious consideration. For a man love is only a part, for a woman it is her very existence. For a loving woman, love is the only religion.

Oedipus always reciprocated the sentiments of Jocasta. Proud, egotistical, confident, and aggressive in the presence of Creon and Tiresias, he was unbelievably sweet and reasonable in Jocasta’s presence. When Creon asked: “And she your equal partner in rule and passion ?”, Oedipus almost emotionally replied:

“All that she can desire is here by right.”

It does not, of course, mean that Oedipus and Jocasta were sharing the throne together. It simply means that they had emotional and intellectual compatibility, and that their thoughts and actions were inseparable. Always holding his head high, Oedipus felt it to be a genuine pleasure to submit to her. When he was about to fall foul of Creon, it was Jocasta who saved the situation. Jocasta asked Oedipus:

“Will you not tell me too? Tell me, I implore you,

Why you have concieved this terrible hatred against him.”

And Oedipus replied:

“I will, you are more to me than these goad men,”

His wrath was curbed. It was she who sustained Oedipus, when he was in the deep agony of doubt.

It appeared as if Oedipus and Jocasta were made for each other. They had mutual love and respect. Jocasta always exercised a sobering influence upon her husband. And Oedipus in his turn always sought her counsel whenever he was faces with any problem. They were partners in life, they were partners in death as well. But such an incestuous union is not destined to be happy in the long run. For it is a gross violation of all norms–social, moral and legal.

The messenger came from Corinth and brought what he thought to be a good news. Polybus was dead, Jocasta was on her way with flowers and incense to the altar of the god, whom she had insulted. She shared the happy news with her husband. But the false joy was short-lived. As they were told by the messenger, that Oedipus as an infant was exposed on Mount Citheron, both Oedipus and Jocasta were almost on a precipice. Jocasta knew that more would soon be unearthed. She tried her utmost to dissuade him from further enquiry. Oedipus, with demoniac frenzy, was determined to tear off the last veil of illusion. Jocasta rushed out of the stage. Before that she appealed to him once again:

“Doom man ! O never live to learn the truth!”

And then she left with these words:

“O lost and damned!

This is my last and only word to you

For ever!”

In her life and death she shared Oedipus’ tragedy. It is because of her undying love. “What she shows, and stands for,” says Victor Ehrenberg, “more determinedly and more outrageously than he, is that they both belong to a world of man-made standards–the world indeed to which the poet is opposed with heart and soul. Piety is not sufficient, if it is not the unconditional Acceptance of one’s fate at the bands of the gods.”