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THE THEME OF CHILD ABUSE IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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## ABSTRACT

My capstone project focuses on the theme of parental abuse portrayed in Greek mythology. Through an analysis of Greek literary and artistic sources, I aim to show that Greek parental figures--both mortals and gods--fail to recognize their children as objects of love and affection. Often these parent-child relationships can be visualized as an opportunity either to keep their existing position of power or to improve their social status.

The project brings attention to the question of child maltreatment through the detailed analysis of written primary and secondary sources whose narratives include, Tantalus feeding his children to the gods, Cronus eating his own children, Oedipus and Paris being abandoned by their fathers, and other accounts of parents' attempting to keep their positions of power by sacrificing their offspring.

As mythology is fundamental to how ancient "civilizations" explain natural phenomena beyond human understanding, the purpose and significance of this project is to interpret why the neglect of one's child is a recurring theme in Greek mythology and why the presence of children's mistreatment was important to ancient Greek culture. This research fills a crucial gap in classical studies by illustrating how the complex real-life parent-child relationship experienced in Greek poleis frequently aspired to such thematic myths.

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## INTRODUCTION

“The sorceress [Pasiphaë] had the same bitterness and hatred in her eyes that Hazel’s mother sometimes had. In her worst moments, Marie Levesque [Hazel’s mother] would look at Hazel as if Hazel were a monstrous child, a curse from the gods, the source of all Marie’s problems. That’s why the Minotaur story bothered Hazel—not just the repellent idea of Pasiphaë and the bull, but the idea that a child, any child, could be considered a monster, a punishment to its parents, to be locked away and hated. To Hazel, the Minotaur had always seemed like a victim in the story.”<sup>1</sup>

— Rick Riordan, *The House of Hades* (Book #4 of *The Heroes of Olympus* series)

The following quote is adopted from Rick Riordan's book, *The House of Hades*. Riordan is a fictional writer who adapts/places Greek mythology in a modern society context for young adults. This quote is the major inspiration for the paper and the frequent topic of child abuse in Greek mythology. Hazel, one of the main characters within the book, while battling with Pasiphaë, realizes that the minotaur was the real victim of the myth of his mother’s hatred. As the quote highlights how could a mother hate her own child, despite the child being the result of a curse by the gods, a typical theme represented in Greek mythology, and who imprisoned him inside a labyrinth.

There are many ways to abuse a child. These could be murder, violence, eating ones’ children, or simply abandoning them. A common form of child abuse often presented in Greek mythologies is abandonment. As the authors Jane Garry and Hasan M El-Shamy write, “there are a number of motivations for abandoning a child. Exposing a child to avoid the fulfillment of a prophecy, as in the story of Oedipus in Greek mythology, is one scenario.... Sometimes children are killed as a sacrifice, to appease a god, as in Agamemnon’s sacrifice

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<sup>1</sup> Riordan, Rick. *The House of Hades*. Los Angeles: Disney-Hyperion, 2019.

of Iphigenia..., or as a foundation sacrifice to ensure the stability of a structure.... Sometimes children are abandoned or killed due to fear of social censure... Still other abandonments or murders are done as acts of revenge... as in Medea , and even as acts of outright cruelty.”<sup>2</sup> In many of these abandonment stories, children that often survive, usually do not receive a happy ending, such as Oedipus or Paris, both who end up fulfilling the tragic prophecies delivered at their birth. Abused children, like Kronos and Zeus, who are abused by their father for their failing to pass over power, vindicate against their actions.

Oftentimes, parents' behavior is attributed to the characteristics of fear and jealousy toward children. This is present in *Snow White* where her mother is jealous of her daughter's beauty. Parents might also be poor to feed children, thus abandoning becomes a solution, as seen in *Hansel and Gretel*. As the authors Jane Garry and Hasan M El-Shamy explains, “abandonment is often associated with fear, jealousy, or dislike of the child or with deep poverty and looming hunger (S321) or the potential death of the adults in the family.”<sup>3</sup> The theme of abandonment is present in many mythological stories, such as *Oedipus Rex* is abandonment. This theme also occurs in many other stories, such as Paris from *The Iliad* and also within the real Greek poleis.

#### EXAMPLES OF PARENTHOOD FROM THE PRIMORDIAL GREEK GODS:

The Greek Olympian gods have a very dysfunctional family, with a longstanding tradition of child abuse. Hesiod recounts examples of this in *Theogony*, the beginning of Greek mythology. In the story, he narrates the origins of the gods. Many of the earlier deities,

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<sup>2</sup> Garry, Jane, and Hasan M. El-Shamy. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: a Handbook : A Handbook*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucr/detail.action?docID=302402>.

<sup>3</sup> Garry, Jane, and Hasan M. El-Shamy. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: a Handbook : A Handbook*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucr/detail.action?docID=302402>.

especially the male figures, neglect their children. Part of the blame for the long tradition of abuse falls on the primordial deities, like Ouranos and Kronos, the original father figures that abuse their children in fear of power struggles. In contrast, the mothers, Gaea and Rhea, turn out to be loving and caring mothers who want to bear and raise children.

Initially, the primordial goddess, Gaea, is the first mother figure in Greek mythology, and she presents the ideal image of motherhood. Gaea, who is created by Chaos, is the Earth goddess. Her desire for children is so immense that she conceives many offspring on her own. As Hesiod narrates, “Earth’s first child was Ouranos...and she bore the Mountains... then she gave birth to the...Sea without any sexual love.”<sup>4</sup> Gaea’s wish to become a mother is so intense that she gives birth to Ouranos, Ourea, and Pontus (the Sea) without any help from a partner. Typically, in Greek myths, there is a need for a female and a male to engage in a sexual act, whether voluntary or forced, to give birth. Yet, Gaea, because of the lack of male companionship, takes matters into her own hands and creates children. Her determination to have babies is the ideal picture of a mother.

While Gaea continues to wish for more children, her husband Ouranos fears his children’s power. Following the birth of Ouranos, Gaea uses him as a partner to bear more children. Gaea oversees the Earth while Ouranos is responsible for the sky and whenever the sky and the Earth meet, Gaea conceives many children from Ouranos. As Hesiod recites, “later she [Gaea] slept with Ouranos...,”<sup>5</sup> and through this amorous act, she becomes pregnant. The first children that Gaea gave birth to are her triplets, the Hundred-Handed Giants. Hesiod writes, “three other sons were born to Gaia and Ouranos, strong, hulking creatures that beggar description...outrageous children. A hundred hands stuck out of their shoulders, grotesque, and fifty heads grew on each stumpy neck. These monsters exuded

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<sup>4</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 126-133.

<sup>5</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 133.



irresistible strength. They were Gaia's most dreaded offspring."<sup>6</sup> In Hesiod's descriptions of Gaea and Ouranos' children, they are represented as strong giants with fifty heads. This suggests that they also have fifty brains and thus have multiple uses. Such as, the Hundred-Handed Ones might possess more mental and thinking power because of the multiple brains they have. As they have overpowering strength, their heads can also use them during a fight, to attack and shield. Their one hundred hands allow them to multitask and perform many difficult activities simultaneously. Another reason for Ouranos to fear his children is that if his three children were to combine their power, it would triple their individual powers. Although it is unclear why Ouranos fears his children, these could be some reasons for his intimidation. In case he had to engage in a physical fight with his children, as he would be at a disadvantage.

In contrast, as Ouranos governs the sky and has immense power, he does not want to give up his position. Ouranos is scared that these children would eventually grow up to be more powerful than him and overthrow him. The author writes, "Ouranos used to stuff all of his children back into a hollow of Earth soon as they were born, keeping them from the light."<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, Hesiod's word choice "hollow of Earth" highlights Ouranos' intent to send his children back to their mother, as Gaea is the Earth. He is sending her a message that this is not his problem and that he will not take part in rearing children. Since she birthed these children, it is her job to raise them under the Earth. He also makes sure that the children do not see light, and light comes from the sky, the domain Kronos is in charge of. Thus, he does not even wish for his children to see him or his power nor does he wish to see his children.

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<sup>6</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 148-154.

<sup>7</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 156-158.

In fact, fear of losing his divine power made Ouranos banish his children to dark caverns in Tartarus,<sup>8</sup> where they are forced to live in chains. Tartarus is located further down in the Underworld<sup>9</sup> region and offers hospitality to the most ferocious and dangerous Greek monsters. Tartarus is not the place one would wish to raise their children and Ouranos forces his kids to live in the worst place within the ancient Greek world. Hesiod also describes their father's feeling as, "and from the start their father feared and loathed them."<sup>10</sup> He names two of Ouranos' feelings: hatred and fear. Ouranos fears his children's power to eventually overthrow him, but also hates them. His hatred could be caused by his fear but also from his dislike of children. Even the poet of this work, Hesiod, expresses his opinion on child abuse within the poem. He recognizes Ouranos' act as abusive and takes pity on Gaea's children, "an awful thing to do, but Heaven<sup>11</sup> did it, and was very pleased with himself."<sup>12</sup> Ouranos prefers to abandon his children, punish them, and keep his throne rather than raising his offspring and loving them.

Indeed, Ouranos' abusive behavior toward his children continues with the next generation of children. Upon the loss of her first triplets, Gaea gives birth to another set of triplets, called the Cyclops. Hesiod describes the Cyclops "hearts of stone, Brontes, Steropes, and...Arges, who gave Zeus thunder and made the thunderbolt. In every other respect they were just like god, but a lone eye lay in their foreheads' middle. They were nicknamed Cyclops... Strong as the dickens, and they knew their craft."<sup>13</sup> These children are anthropomorphic, meaning they possess a human aspect but only have one eye in the middle of their foreheads. Greek gods are often represented with anthropomorphic characteristics,

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<sup>8</sup> Tartarus is a primordial deity Greek who is born from Chaos, along Gaea. It is also a place located at the lowest position of the Underworld.

<sup>9</sup> Land possessed by the Greek god of the death, Hades.

<sup>10</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 155.

<sup>11</sup> Another name for Ouranos.

<sup>12</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 159.

<sup>13</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 140-147.

and they are supposed to be depicted in the perfect form. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the human aspect is the ideal image in ancient Greek. Vice-versa, humans are created in the image of the gods, who are the ideal. As Rosette Zeitoune writes, “physicality reinforces the belief that human physical qualities are themselves an element of the divine. If the gods look like us, then we look like the gods; thus, our bodies are godly.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Cyclops, because of their similarity to humans, are a better version of Gaea’s previous offspring, the Hundred-Handed Giants. Despite this, they are still slightly monstrous in having just one big eye, but the next generation, the Titans, are a more improved form.

In addition, the Cyclops, similarly to their older brothers, also turn out to be very skilled craftsmen. Once again, Ouranos becomes fearful of his children’s power and ability and decides to send them to Tartarus. Although not stated by Hesiod directly, the Cyclops also hate their abusive father. Confirmation of that is shown when the Cyclops provide Zeus with the lightning bolt, his weapon, in order to help him overthrow Kronos. The fact that the Cyclops are willing to make this alliance indicates that they resent the maltreatment they received from Ouranos. Altogether the six children of Ouranos, chained into Tartarus, feel hatred and resentment toward their father and an intense disapproval for the mistreatment from the father.

However, Gaea’s role as a loving mother can be defined by her anger toward her husband's actions and her vengeful plan to liberate her children. Hesiod writes that “vast Earth groaned under the pressure inside, and then she came up with a plan, a really wicked trick.”<sup>15</sup> Hesiod describes her action as “wicked.” In a patriarchal society like the Greeks, Gaea's act to overpower her husband is seen as negative. Yet, Gear is willing to do such to

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<sup>14</sup> Rosette Zeitoune, “Humanism in Greek and Roman Art,” Fall 2018 Art 1010 at Brooklyn College, October 22, 2018, <https://art1010shawfall18.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2018/10/22/humanism-in-greek-and-roman-art-2/>.

<sup>15</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 160-161.

save her children. It only shows her vast love for her babies. Gaea continues to birth twelve more children, and these offspring are even more perfect than the previous ones. They are called the Titans. Gaea's ability to give birth to more improved offspring is a result of her desire for either her husband to finally accept their kids or for her bettered children to overpower their abusive father, thus, resulting in a movement from less to more order in creation. Once the Titans grow up, Gaea uses her soil to create a weapon and asks her children to get revenge. The author, Hesiod, describes her plan as, "she created a new mineral, gray flint, and formed a huge sickle from it and showed it to her dear boys."<sup>16</sup> At this point in the story, Gaea is tired of Ouranos' lack of respect and love toward his children. She uses her own body to create a weapon and provides her children with the weapon to remove their father. Gaea is the first female figure in Greek mythology who rebels against her husband's control over their children and attempts to provide more power to her offspring.

For instance, as the earliest mother in Greek mythology, Gaea represents the image of proper parenthood and the struggle of ancient mothers. Gaea's role as a mother is a good example of the challenges that ancient Greeks mothers experienced from their husbands. In antiquity, women lacked rights and the power to decide rested with the male of the house. As Philip Slater summarizes, "women were legally powerless — a man could sell his daughter or even his sister into concubinage."<sup>17</sup> Many women in antiquity are unable to do anything against their husbands' wishes, even if that involves removing or killing one's own child. Gaea, instead, rises as an influential figure as she rebels against her abusive and cold-hearted husband because of her love for her children. Gaea also defies Zeus and tries to overthrow him due to his imprisonment of some of her children. This war called "the Gigantomachy was

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<sup>16</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 162-163.

<sup>17</sup> Philip E. Slater "The Greek Family in History and Myth." *Arethusa* 7, no. 1 (1974): 9-44. Accessed September 11, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26307452>.

a desperate struggle between the Giants and the Olympians.”<sup>18</sup> Gaea even starts a war against the Olympians to provide her children the ability to rule. Her benevolent and caring attitude toward children is the reason why the planet Earth is considered a mother. Earth is another name for Gaea. Also, the etymology for the Greek word Gaia stands for the words of “land and soil.” As ancient Greek words and concepts heavily influence modern English vocabulary, Gaea’s name and especially her role in motherhood are symbolism of Earth as a mother. She successfully fulfills her motherly duties, and thus, her accomplishments are relevant, prominent, and recognized in modern times. Gaea’s longing for children and her successful plan to restore her children are the reasons why she can be considered the classical figure for motherhood.

Consequently, Gaea’s plan to remove her husband from power and let her children rule succeeds with Kronos. The subsequent children of Gaea, the Titans, are all fearful of attacking their powerful and mighty father. In spite, Kronos, who is the youngest, decides to bring justice to his siblings and put an end to his father’s abuse. As Hesiod describes Kronos’ feelings toward his father, “...she [Gaea] bore a most terrible child, Cronos, her youngest, an arch-deceiver, and this boy hated his lecherous father.”<sup>19</sup> Kronos is angry at his father’s loveless actions and at the way he behaves toward his offspring. In addition, as Hesiod writes in Kronos’ dialogue, “I can’t stand Father; he doesn’t even deserve the name.”<sup>20</sup> Kronos even states that his father does not deserve the title of a father. As a son, Kronos shows an awareness of what parenthood should be like and identifies his father’s neglect as an improper way to act.

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<sup>18</sup> “Giant,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/giant-mythology>.

<sup>19</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 137-139.

<sup>20</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 172.

Likewise, heavy parental influence is shown in Gaea's similar mindset reflected in Kronos. Kronos resides with his mother, who is always complaining about their father's unjust treatment of his children. Gaea is very angered by Ouranos' maltreatment and removal of her children. As Hesiod quotes her, "listen to me, children, and we might yet get even with your criminal father for what he has done to us. After all, he started this whole ugly business."<sup>21</sup> Mother Earth is constantly scheming plots to remove her husband from power and reminding her children of the tragic fate of their previous siblings if they do not act up. She also places all the blame on her husband for the situation. Children are easily persuaded into believing adults, especially if they are their parents. Research shows that "things thought to be especially vulnerable to influence in the first 5–7 years of children's lives include the language they speak, their food preferences, their religious beliefs, and certain enduring personality traits."<sup>22</sup> Evidence of this can be seen when Kronos exactly repeats his mother's famous lines: "and after all, he started this whole ugly business."<sup>23</sup> Kronos' similar view to his mother shows that he was under Gaea's influence, and the words she constantly repeats to her children affected their long-time view of the world. Thus, one can also blame Gaea for introducing Kronos to aggression and for suggesting that he performs a violent act.

In the end, Kronos' violent and brutal revenge plan to remove his father succeeds. Kronos violently attacks, slices, and mutilates Ouranos' genitalia. As Hesiod describes, "...with his [Kronos' hand] right he swung the fiendishly long and jagged sickle, pruning the genitals of his own father with one swoop and tossing them behind him..."<sup>24</sup> Kronos, then, proceeds to throw his father's remains into the ocean. The first thing Kronos does is remove

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<sup>21</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 165-167.

<sup>22</sup> Eleanor E. Maccoby, "Parenting and Its Effects on Children: On Reading and Misreading Behavior Genetics," *Annual Reviews*, 2000, <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.psych.51.1.1>. Page 3.

<sup>23</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 173.

<sup>24</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 180-183.

his father's private parts. His act of removing his father's reproductive parts signifies the end of his father's ability to produce children. Thus, it stops Ouranos from ruining further innocent lives. It is interesting to notice that with the simple removal of Ouranos' genitals, he becomes defenseless and powerless. There is no need to destroy or remove any other parts of his body. This suggests that all his power is conserved in his privates. Also, the cutting of his sex organs, a symbol of manhood, indicates the useless role Ouranos plays as a father and in producing children. Kronos, in a single act, removes his father from power and portrays his failure as a father.

#### GAEA'S AND OURANOS' PARENTAL INFLUENCE IN RHEA AND KRONOS

While growing up, Kronos develops a sense of fear caused by his parents. Kronos is well aware of the abusive behaviors that his previous siblings experienced. Research shows that "the fear that abuse and neglect elicits in children can lead to serious dysregulation of their emotions and behavior control."<sup>25</sup> Kronos lives in the constant fear that eventually he will encounter the tragic fate that his other siblings experienced and end up banished to Tartarus. Harvard studies on fear furthermore show that "physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; significant maltreatment of one parent by the other; and the persistent threat of violence in the community are examples of such threatening circumstances in a child's environment. Studies show that experiences like abuse and exposure to violence can cause fear and chronic anxiety in children and that these states trigger extreme, prolonged activation of the body's stress response system."<sup>26</sup> Early exposure to abuse leads Kronos to develop

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<sup>25</sup> The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Affect Young Children's Learning and ...," Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Persistent-Fear-and-Anxiety-Can-Affect-Young-Childrens-Learning-and-Development.pdf>. Page 7.

<sup>26</sup> The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Affect Young Children's Learning and ...," 1.

immense hatred toward his father and a strong desire to overtake him. Thus, the constant fear of Ouranos' punishment leads Kronos to be stressed, and combined with the "dysregulation of their emotions and behavior control"<sup>27</sup> As mentioned by the article, it is easier for Kronos to rely on violence to pose an end to Ouranos' threat. Kronos, similarly to his father, also wants to gain more power and rule over the world and, more importantly, avoid the tragic fate that his dad will cause him.

To illustrate, it is psychologically proven that children are more likely to pick up abusive behaviors and especially those of aggression and violence. As psychologist David Myers writes, "physical punishment may increase aggression by modeling aggression as a way to cope with problems. Studies find that spanked children are at increased risk for aggression (and depression and low self-esteem)...that many aggressive delinquents and abusive parents come from abusive families."<sup>28</sup> Oftentimes, children that grow up in an abusive household or are abused while growing up typically abuse others as a way to cope with their pain or because they simply think it is normal. In Kronos' experience, he grew up in an abusive setting, where his father devoured all his previous siblings. Thus, maltreatment of children is normalized in his eyes. As a father, he mirrors his father's abusive examples with his own children. Based on Myers's explanation of modeling aggression, from Kronos' perspective, his actions toward his children are justified and acceptable. Likewise, when Zeus is introduced to the violent ways of his father toward his siblings and the potential threat to his own life, he adopts similar abusive behaviors to protect himself and also to punish his father.

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<sup>27</sup> The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Affect Young Children's Learning and ...," Page 7.

<sup>28</sup> David G. Myers, *Myers' Psychology for AP* (New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 2014). Page 282.



Within Gaea's next set of children, Kronos and Rhea exhibit similar parental characteristics portrayed by Gaea and her husband. As Kronos removes Ouranos from power, he becomes the next ruler of the universe. His marriage with Rhea produces the next generation of children, the Olympians. As Rhea becomes a mother, Kronos is unable to accept that his children will take his role as the ruler. Thus, Kronos adopts his father's abusive behavior toward his children and wishes to keep his power. Meanwhile, Rhea follows her mother's example to raise her children and vindicates her husband for his fatherly abuse.

Similar to the fear exhibited by his father, Kronos is also scared of his siblings taking away his sovereignty. During his reign, Kronos makes some poor choices and decisions. Kronos angers his mother, Gaea, as he decides to keep his Hundred-Handed Giants and Cyclops siblings still chained in Tartarus as he fears their power. As Hesiod writes, "whom [the Hundred-Handed Giants and the Cyclops] their father [Kronos] in a fit of idiocy had bound."<sup>29</sup> Kronos is not willing to share power but rather be the only one in charge. He is even afraid to liberate them in the anticipation that they try to eliminate him. Gaea, angered by his decisions, but powerless, decides to pass a prophecy stating that Kronos will come to the same fate as his father. The prophecy predicts that "for he [Kronos] had learned from Earth and starry Heaven that it was fated for him, powerful though he was, to be overthrown by his child,"<sup>30</sup> Gaea is acting once again like a loving mother willing to save her children. As Kronos is not different from his father, Gaea is worried for the safety of her other children. She is ready to sacrifice Kronos and wish a tragic end for him, even if that means protecting her other offspring.

Because of Gaea's prediction, as Kronos becomes a father, he is incredibly fearful that he will encounter the same tragic end as his father. As Hesiod narrates, "with the intent that

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<sup>29</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 504.

<sup>30</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 467-469.

only he [Kronos] among the proud Ouranians should hold the title of King among the Immortals.”<sup>31</sup> This is the same mindset that his abusive father had. Kronos falls in love with his sister, Rhea, and they have five children together: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. As Hesiod describes, “later, Cronos<sup>32</sup> forced himself upon Rheia<sup>33</sup>, and she gives birth to a splendid brood: Hestia and Demeter and...Hera,...Hades,...Poseidon.”<sup>34</sup> Kronos sexually forces himself on Rhea, and when she conceives him children, from the rape, he is unwilling to accept these children. This behavior is similar to his father, Ouranos, who often slept with Gaea, yet did not wish for children. In contrast, Rhea is violated and taken advantage of her body, but Gaea willingly wishes for children. He is scared that his children will one day try to overpower him, as he has done with his father. Each time Kronos is introduced to a newborn child by Rhea, he devours his offspring in fear of his mother’s prophecy. Although he utilizes a different method from his father, the result is the same. As Kronos wants to avoid his mother’s curse and keep reigning over the universe, he removes his children and the threat they pose to his rule.

Meanwhile, similar to Gaea, Rhea is angered by her husband’s actions and each time she wishes that he would allow the child to live. Rhea is similar to her mother as she loves her children. As Hesiod recalls Rhea’s feelings, “Rheia’s grief was unbearable.”<sup>35</sup> Similar to her mother, Rhea wishes to raise her babies, and the loss of her children causes her pain. As discussed earlier in the paper, while Kronos adopts his father’s abusive behaviors, Rhea learns and copies Gaea’s motherly nature. Growing up, Rhea notices her mother’s grief upon the loss of the children. Therefore, as she becomes deprived of her children, she reacts similarly to the mother. She shows anger toward her husband and takes revenge on him.

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<sup>31</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 465-466.

<sup>32</sup> Cronos is another spelling for Kronos

<sup>33</sup> Rheia is another spelling for Rhea

<sup>34</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 456-460.

<sup>35</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 473.

In fact, Rhea's love for her children is so deep that she is regarded as the goddess of female fertility and motherhood. She is also known as the mother of gods, a title not even given to Gaea. Rhea's name, which means flow and ease, is used to describe her as the eternal flow, often associated with the same flow for menstruation blood, birth waters, and milk. Her name is associated with essential elements of birth and motherhood. This is because she is a loving and caring mother.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, Rhea asks for help from her parents in stopping Kronos' evil actions toward their babies. Gaea is already infuriated by Kronos' behavior toward her other children and her grandchildren. Along with her, Ouranos, who also loathes Kronos for castrating him, decides to create a plan to overpower their son. As Hesiod explains Rhea's frustration of constantly losing her children, "she [Rhea] petitioned her parents, Earth<sup>37</sup> and starry Heaven,<sup>38</sup> to put together some plan so that the birth of her child might go unnoticed, and she would make devious Cronos pay the Avengers of her father and children."<sup>39</sup> This time, both Ouranos and Gaea act like benevolent and loving parents, and "they listened to their daughter and were moved by her words, and the two of them told her all that was fated for Cronos the King and his stout-hearted son."<sup>40</sup> Rhea's behavior is similar to her mother, who wishes to see her other children, the Hundred-Handed Giants and the Cyclops, free. Gaea, as a mother who experienced the loss of her children, does not want Rhea to go through the same pain. This situation also shows the caring role that Gaea plays as a mother as she is unable to bear the similar pain of another mother and her need to help. Possibly, Ouranos might have joined the plan because he realizes his mistake as a father and regrets his action. Now, as a grandfather,

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<sup>36</sup> "Rheia," Rhea (Rheia) - Greek Mother of the Gods, Queen of the Titans (Roman Ops), <https://www.theoi.com/Titan/TitanisRhea.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Gaea.

<sup>38</sup> Ouranos.

<sup>39</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 474-477.

<sup>40</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 478-480.

he would prefer for his grandchildren to be free and not experience the same parental abuse he inflicted on his children.

With Rhea's parents' plan and with Gaea's help, Zeus survives becoming Kronos' food. Next, following her parents' idea, Rhea hides her sixth child in a deep cave made of Earth. Hesiod describes the haven as "vast Earth received him when he was born to be nursed and brought up in the wide land of Crete."<sup>41</sup> Rhea's mother, Gaea, protects and keeps Zeus hidden from Kronos. Gaea also nourishes him and supports his growth. Hesiod also narrates that Gaea's children, the Cyclops "gave him [Zeus] thunder and the flashing thunderbolt and lightning, which enormous Earth had hidden before." Gaea not only protects Zeus but also conceals his weapons from his father, Kronos. This assures Zeus' protection following his rise to power. Once again, Gaea embodies her role as the mother earth. Earth is a place that protects the needy and innocent ones. As Gaea has previously protected her own children, she takes the role of the protective grandmother and safeguards Zeus.

In the meantime, Rhea fools Kronos by feeding him a stone, which demonstrates his lack of love toward his child. As Hesiod writes, Gaea instead of Zeus, "wrapped up a great stone in swaddling clothes,"<sup>42</sup> and introduces it to Kronos as her child. Kronos "took it in his hands and rammed it down into his belly... He had no idea that a stone had been substituted for his son"<sup>43</sup> Kronos, once again, acts abusively toward his offspring without knowing that "unscathed and content as a babe [Zeus], would soon wrest his honors from him by the main force and rule the Immortals."<sup>44</sup> Kronos, by eating the stone accidentally thinking it is his son, shows his lack of love and respect toward the child. He does not even bother checking the baby's face. Typically, upon introduction to the newborn baby, parents check their children's

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<sup>41</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 483-484.

<sup>42</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 488.

<sup>43</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 490-492.

<sup>44</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 492-494.

face and body to rejoice. Kronos was exposed to multiple acts of violence and injustice since his birth. He grew up with feelings of revenge and resentment toward his father, yet he failed to differ from his father's actions and provide protection for his own offspring. Similarly, by following his father's example, he becomes the victim of his father's past mistakes.

Moreover, the fear that Kronos exhibits of his children taking over the throne can be attributed to a learned behavior that he copied while watching his father Ouranos. As psychologist Myers explains:

cognition is certainly a factor in observational learning (also called social learning) in which higher animals, especially humans, learn without direct experience, by watching and imitating others. A child who sees his sister burn her fingers on a hot stove learns not to touch it. We learn our native languages and various other specific behaviors by observing and imitating others, a process called modeling.<sup>45</sup>

In Kronos' case, he grows up with a father who is obsessed with power and intends to keep his position even at the expense of his children. Kronos, upon becoming a father, believes that his father's behavior is normal and justified. Thus, he behaves identically to his father when he has children of his own. Similar to Kronos, Zeus also grows up with a power-hungry father. Kronos once castrated his own father, Ouranos, to acquire his position. From Zeus' perspective, it is also normal to remove one's father, despite the violence, to attain power and control.

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<sup>45</sup> David G. Myers, *Myers' Psychology for AP* (New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 2014). Page 304.



David Stricker/The Image Works

**Children see, children do?**

Children who often experience physical punishment tend to display more aggression.

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In both cases, Zeus and Kronos use violence to obtain power as both are abused by their fathers. Much of Kronos' and Zeus' reliance on violence are affected by their parents' style of parenting. A famous psychology theory states that, "children see, children do," and that parents are the major role model for a child growing up. Children are very prone to copy their parental behavior as they are the only role models that they mostly see. Obviously, for the primordial deities, the only role models they have are their parents and siblings, since there were no other creatures in existence yet. Thus, Gaea and Ouranos were the only role models for Rhea and Kronos to copy. Moreover, children regard their parents highly and often believe their actions to be the correct. This is because parents are often the only grown-ups that children see. Parents' ability to provide for the child creates a form of trust for the child toward the parent. The picture above, figure 1, shows a child spanking her doll. Her behavior is adopted by copying an adult, most likely her parents, that she has either witnessed or experienced herself. The little child might have been spanked and physically abused as a

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<sup>46</sup> Figure 1. David G. Myers, *Myers' Psychology for AP*, 282.

punishment for her shortcomings. Therefore, the child identifies the behavior, in this case, spanking, as a normal way to punish the doll. She could also have associated this act as a way to express her feelings of disapproval of her doll's behavior, likewise, her parents might have done with her. As Hesiod writes about Ouranos, "...the intent that only he among the proud Ouranians should hold the title of King among the Immortals."<sup>47</sup>As for Kronos, he copies his father's abusive behavior toward his own children and his desire to keep power. In his turn, Kronos also acts as a figurehead to Zeus who uses violent acts to defeat his father and end his abusive treatment of his siblings.

With mythological stories, and especially origin myths, Greek fathers have control and power over children. They also present a theme of fathers often treating children as they please and ignoring their wives' wishes. Early Greek myths, such as the story of Gaea and Ouranos, along with Rhea and Kronos, define the different roles of motherhood and fatherhood. These deities, worshiped by the Greeks, define gender roles and parental expectations. Gaea and Rhea portray the image of motherhood, while Ouranos and Kronos depict fathers that are not the ideal, but work as a cautionary tale to encourage different behaviors in the populace. Hesiod might have written these stories not only for the purpose of having an origin myth, but also to tell people within Greek poleis (city-states) how to behave. Thus, mothers are supposed to be loving and put their children first, like Gaea and Rhea. In contrast, fathers are supposed to be cold toward children, rational, and abusive. For example, if a child possesses threats to the power of the father, the child needs to be eliminated. This example is also adopted by many mythological kings in Greece, such as King Laius and King Priam. Therefore, these Greek myths about gods also inspired myths about human kings

Ouranos and Kronos, similarly to King Laius and King Priam, experience revenge from their children because of their poor fatherly behaviors and inappropriate treatment of

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<sup>47</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 465-466.

their offspring. All four of these men are kings (whether humans or gods) and in charge of ruling their kingdom or the universe. In Ouranos' and Kronos' cases, they do not want to pass their power to their children, instead, they want to rule for eternity. Ouranos sends his children to Tartarus, while Kronos keeps devouring his children, both for fear of being overpowered. King Priam and King Laius are foretold by prophecies that their sons would cause the fall of their kingdom. For King Laius, he is told that his son would kill him, marry his wife, and share children with her. His act is selfish as he is trying to save himself from murder. Oedipus' story has a similar pattern to Kronos, who avenges his father for their atrocities. The only difference is that Kronos is intentionally killed by his son. In contrast, Oedipus is unaware of his father's identity when he commits patricide. Meanwhile, King Priam is foretold that his offspring will destroy Troy. Although, as a king, he tries to save his city and its people, he does it at the expense of his son. Even if Paris' parents abandon him, he still fulfills the prophecy. Paris brings Helen to Troy, wife of Menelaus and the queen of Sparta. This marks the beginning of the war between Troy and Greece. Troy falls when the wooden horse turns out to be full of Greek soldiers that sack Troy. King Priam eventually dies because of his son's wrongdoings.

To conclude, these stories of child abuse might have been popular in ancient Greek as they introduce the idea of justice. As the authors Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy write, "these blameless heroes and heroines vindicate themselves as their stories unfold, and this vindication often includes retribution against the adults who tormented them at the beginning. Such stories have an obvious charm for children who feel that they too have been disciplined unfairly, a category that—at one time or another—could include almost everyone."<sup>48</sup> Thus, Ouranos and Kronos, as fathers, are punished for their maltreatment of children. Both are

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<sup>48</sup> Garry, Jane, and Hasan M. El-Shamy. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: a Handbook : A Handbook*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucr/detail.action?docID=302402>. Page 391.



removed from power, while the abused child takes power. Meanwhile, benevolent mothers, like Gaea and Rhea, are left unpunished. In antiquity, where child abuse rates were high and children did not have power against parents, similar stories of children vindicating their parents might have offered comfort and enjoyment for children.

#### NEGLECT, ABANDONMENT, AND PHYSICAL ABUSE OF OEDIPUS

The Athenian tragedian, Sophocles, in *Oedipus Rex*, recounts the story of Oedipus, one of the major victims of child abuse within Greek mythology. Oedipus' parents, prior to his birth, are informed of the tragic prophecy. The revelation states that Oedipus is cursed to kill his father, wed his mother, and share children with his mother. Jocasta, Oedipus' wife and mother, narrates that "Laius<sup>49</sup> received an oracle... telling Laius that it was his fate to be killed by a son born to him and me."<sup>50</sup> Horrified by the news, his father decides to kill him to avoid the prophecy. Multiple Greek stories present this theme of children bringing doom to the family and kingdom. Within the Greek mythological world, humans (and gods) cannot escape prophecies, and the decisions taken by the Fates<sup>51</sup> will unfold. Thus, Oedipus is pitied and saved by the king's shepherd who offers him to a neighboring shepherd from a different city. His parents do not regret their actions, but the shepherd takes pity on him. "I felt pity, master, and thought he would take it to another land from which he came."<sup>52</sup> He saves Oedipus from his tragic fate and offers him to another shepherd from a different city. Eventually, Oedipus does grow up into an adult and fulfills the prophecy.

Initially, Oedipus, who believes himself to be the son of the Corinthian King, leaves his homeland upon doubting his prenatal origin in the search of his real parents. Oedipus

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<sup>49</sup> Oedipus' father. Formed king of Theban. Husband of Jocasta.

<sup>50</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 696-699.

<sup>51</sup> Three Greek goddesses that weave the future of mortals and gods.

<sup>52</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 135-1137.

comes to know bits of his true parentage: “at dinner there was a man who had drunk too much, and over wine he called me a counterfeit son of my father...but the next day I went to my mother and father and questioned them.”<sup>53</sup> On his journey to find his real parents, he encounters a priest of Apollo and receives a prophecy saying that he is destined to kill his own father. Scared of his own fate, he moves to a new city to prevent the killing of his father, who he incorrectly believes to be the king of Corinth. He comes to the city of Thebes and frees the city from the trouble caused by the Sphinx.<sup>54</sup> The Theban people quickly reward Oedipus with the kingship of the city. Oedipus marries the queen of Thebes, thus becoming the king of Thebes. Oedipus is unaware that Thebes is his real homeland and that Jocasta, now his wife, is in reality his mother. Following the death of the king of Corinth, Oedipus discovers the harsh truth behind his birth and the treatment by his parents, such as the attempted murder and neglect.

First, the way Oedipus’ murder is planned by his parents is not easy and light-hearted. It is not a painless experience. Oedipus, as a three-day-old baby, is pierced in his legs and tied up, so that he could die slowly from bleeding. As the messenger who receives Oedipus describes, “the ankles of your feet can bear witness.... Your ankles have been pierced, and I untied you.”<sup>55</sup> This is a painful and extreme way to kill an innocent child, who had not yet committed any crime, but merely fated to.

Also, deaths like this, called exsanguination, usually take a long time and are the most painful ways to die. Research conducted on children’s pain shows that children experience the same amount of pain as adults:

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<sup>53</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 759-765.

<sup>54</sup> A Greek mythological creature with the head of a woman and the body of the lion who asks travelers a riddle, and if they are unable to answer, she would eat them. This causes many problems in the Theban city as people just recently had lost their kings. The trap of the Sphinx hinders people from entering and leaving the city, which damages trade.)

<sup>55</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 986-988.

The fMRI results revealed that pain increased activity in 20 regions in the adults' brains, and 18 of the same regions in the infants' brains. The brain regions activated in the infants' brains in response to a poke on the foot are involved in processing sensations and emotions. The two regions that did not activate in the infant brains—the amygdala and the orbitofrontal cortex—help individuals interpret the stimuli. Sezgi Göksan et al. therefore conclude that infants experience pain in similar ways to adults, though they may not experience all the emotions that adults have when they are in pain. It is, therefore, important to give infants suitable pain relief during potentially painful procedures.<sup>56</sup>

Although Oedipus is too young to recall this tragic episode psychologically,<sup>57</sup> one can conclude that it must have been an extremely painful experience for a newborn baby to experience. As the messenger who brings him to Corinth explains the origins of his name, “your ankles had been pierced, and I untied you. And it was from this fate that you received your name.”<sup>58</sup> Along with that, the physical scar is prominent and visible throughout his life and will later become a crucial detail to identify his birth.

Unfortunately, despite Oedipus' parents ordering the tragic death, he survives the tragic death only to meet a harder future. His mother is unable to recognize his physical and facial characteristics when he appears grown-up, thus leading her to marry him. One can argue that he is simply an infant when he is abandoned and that it is nearly impossible for his mother to recognize him. Babies often go through many changes, and by adulthood, they look completely different. In contrast, the shepherd who gives up Oedipus, who similarly to

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<sup>56</sup> Sezgi Göksan et al., “fMRI Reveals Neural Activity Overlap between Adult and Infant Pain,” *eLife* (eLife Sciences Publications, Ltd, April 21, 2015), <https://elifesciences.org/articles/06356>.

<sup>57</sup> The story does not directly specify any psychological or mental event related to his trauma.

<sup>58</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 988-990. In fact, Oedipus' name, chosen by his adoptive parents, means “swollen foot” in Greek.

Jocasta has not seen Oedipus past his third day, accepts him as the boy he gifted to the Corinthian shepherd upon the messenger's revelation. Yet, Jocasta spends a long time in denial of Oedipus' real origin. Jocasta also notices the resemblances between the late king Laius and Oedipus. While describing Laius, she mentions, "his hair was dark, with the first sprinkles of white, his appearance not unlike yours."<sup>59</sup> Yet, she fails to see the similarities in her son. His mother does not doubt his true origins and believes him to be a citizen of Corinth. Jocasta's failure to make the connection, even upon evidence being presented, could be her guilt sense protecting her from admitting the truth and remembering the terrible act she committed.

However, in the primary source, it is not clearly stated if Jocasta is aware of Laius' assassination plan or of the specifics regarding Oedipus' supposed death, but it can be concluded that there is a highly likelihood that she knew the details behind her husband's murder. When the messenger from Corinth reveals to Oedipus that he is not the biological son of king Polybus and that he found Oedipus from another shepherd with his feet pierced,<sup>60</sup> Jocasta becomes reluctant and advises Oedipus not to search any further. She tells him, "what does it matter of whom he speaks? Pay no heed. These pointless, foolish words deserve to be forgotten,"<sup>61</sup> and she continues with, "by the gods, if you care for your life, do not let your thoughts linger on this. My own anguish is enough."<sup>62</sup> Within this dialogue, Jocasta confesses that her worries are caused by the knowledge of Oedipus' childhood tragic event. She is specifically triggered by the detail of the messenger finding him with his feet pierced. Thus, there is a high likelihood that she is aware of the details of her son's premeditated death. She

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<sup>59</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 726-727.

<sup>60</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 979-1027 for reference.

<sup>61</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 1010-1011.

<sup>62</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 1014-1015.

warns him from searching further information as it might expose the violent act her husband and she committed to their baby.

In contrast, previously in the play, Jocasta was very encouraging and supportive of Oedipus in seeking out the messenger as he was worried about being Laius's killer. As Jocasta does not believe him to be the murderer, she arranges for Oedipus' to meet the witness to clear him of his suspiciousness, "I will quickly send for him...I would never do anything not pleasing to you!"<sup>63</sup> Upon learning the specific details of Oedipus' death, she also wishes for Oedipus, "unfortunate man, may you never find out who you are."<sup>64</sup> It is clear that Jocasta, by this point in the play, is aware of Oedipus' real origin and the only detail that triggered her memory is the fact that Oedipus is pierced in the feet, and no other factor pointed to the evidence. The only way she could have made the connection is if she is aware that her son's feet were injured.

In addition, one of the main issues within the play is that the mother fails to connect Oedipus' scarred feet belonging to her long-lost son. On the contrary, the Theban shepherd recognizes Oedipus' scar and deformation on his feet as an identifying trait. His mother, who is very likely to be aware of her newborn baby's feet being pierced, fails to make this connection. The scars might have not been visible on the first side. Yet as Oedipus' mother, Jocasta, engaged in a sexual relationship with him. Thus, she must have seen him without clothes, yet she never questions the scar. Within the play, it is not mentioned that the scar on Oedipus' feet has been a problematic issue. There is no evidence that this topic was formerly discussed between Oedipus and Jocasta. Her failure to recognize her son shows the lack of care and love that this mother presents for her son. It also strongly hints that the mother does not think or remember the son she had once killed even upon finding Oedipus' real origin.

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<sup>63</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 828-830.

<sup>64</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 1022.

Accordingly, modern views on the loss of one's offspring show that "the death of a child is a traumatic event that can have long-term effects on the lives of parents."<sup>65</sup> Normally, a mother, like Jocasta, should be upset to lose her child or show some signs of remorse. On the contrary, Jocasta is not pleased to find her son alive but instead proceeds to kill herself upon learning the truth about Oedipus. Although the act she performed to have children with her own son is unacceptable and incestuous, she does not show even the slightest sign of happiness upon finding her lost son alive. Not recognizing Oedipus' scared feet shows Jocasta never truly cared about him. She cannot recall the crime she committed on her son despite the sight of Oedipus' pierced feet.

Another issue raised by the story is that no one in Thebes knows about king Laius' son, nor are they aware that Oedipus existed and the tragic fate he had to encounter. This shows that Oedipus' tragic fate does not sadden his parents as they are not affected by the loss. Upon finding Oedipus' real birth, the Chorus of Thebes is shocked by the revelation that king Laius had a son, "woe, son of Laius, I wish, how I wish, I had never set eyes on you!"<sup>66</sup> His parents do not even inform the citizens of their kingdom of the birth of their son. In antiquity, it would be typical for a king to announce to the kingdom the birth of a male heir. Laius' failure to inform Thebes about the birth could indicate that although he was personally grief-stricken for the removal of his son, he concealed the details publicly out of extreme fear for his own safety.

For instance, one would expect that parents are hurt and feel desolate upon losing their babies. As research on parents who lost their children show, "research on the impact of

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<sup>65</sup> Catherine H Rogers et al., "Long-Term Effects of the Death of a Child on Parents' Adjustment in Midlife," *Journal of family psychology* : JFP : journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43) (U.S. National Library of Medicine, April 2008), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2841012/>. Page 1.

<sup>66</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 1181-1182.

bereavement as a trauma has emphasized significant negative psychological and health outcomes. For instance, Stroebe...found that bereaved persons, especially those with extreme emotional loneliness and severe depressive symptoms, are at risk for suicidal ideation. Li...found that bereaved parents, especially mothers, were at increased risk for a first psychiatric hospitalization as compared with nonbereaved parents.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the loss of her son should have affected Jocasta negatively. The reason for Laius’ and Jocasta’s unsympathetic behavior is because, in antiquity, child infanticide and mortality rates are high. Therefore, it is typical for ancient parents to often lose children. Parents are required to move on and try for new children. This justifies why Oedipus’ parents are not upset about his death.

Additionally, parents in ancient Greek society, and within the world of tragedies, are encouraged not to grieve the loss of their child. As the author Euripides reports in *Andromache* through the dialogue of Menelaus, “it would be stupid to let enemies or their sons live when you can kill them so easily and remove all fear from your house!”<sup>68</sup> According to this viewpoint, it is wiser for king Laius to remove his son, who is an enemy and a threat to the realm. As the author G.M. Sifakis explains “Menelaos...only restating [was restating] a belief with general currency in antiquity,”<sup>69</sup> Menelaus’s views are rather normal in ancient Greece and among kings; it is crucial for a king to protect his kingdom and title. Although Oedipus’ father's actions show a lack of care and neglect toward his son, his actions from an ancient Greek perspective are acceptable and normalized. He does not have to feel guilty or upset upon losing his son as he is performing his job, which is to remove threats and enemies

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<sup>67</sup> Catherine H Rogers et al., “Long-Term Effects of the Death of a Child on Parents' Adjustment in Midlife,” 2.

<sup>68</sup> Euripides, *Andromache*, 521-522, trans. George Theodoridis (Bacchicstage), <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/EuripidesAndromache.php>.

<sup>69</sup> Sifakis, G.M. “Children in Greek Tragedy.” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, no. 26 (1979): 67–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43646175>. Page 69.

from his kingdom. King Laius, similarly, does not have to report to the Theban people that he had a son, as the son is dangerous to Thebes.

Likewise, this protective behavior is also seen by Oedipus. When he is king of Thebes, he wishes to find the man contaminating Thebes and remove him. As Sophocles writes, "I command that what man among you knows who killed Laius....reveal to me. He will be sent from this land in safety... I shall prohibit any man of this land in which I hold power and the throne, to receive him, address a word to him..."<sup>70</sup> Therefore, taking into consideration king Menelaus' words and the actions of king Laius and Oedipus, it is the job of a Greek basileis (king) to take all necessary actions for the safeguarding of their kingdom, even if that means killing his own son.

The fact that numerous myths describe the salvation of exposed babies could be seen to originate in social guilt about some practices--a way of indicating that an exposed child is given a chance at survival. Despite Oedipus' treatment by his biological parents, he is saved and taken into a family. His adoptive family's care contradicts the abusive behavior shown in Greek mythology. This new family appears as a loving and caring family. Examples of this can be seen when Oedipus almost found his real heritage, and his adoptive parents protect him. As Oedipus recalls, "they [his adoptive parents] dealt harshly with the man<sup>71</sup> who had spat out those words<sup>72</sup> to and I was assured, yet the words kept nagging me, circling my mind." When Oedipus is on the verge of discovering his true heritage, his adoptive parents shield him. In this new family, he is cared for and loved by his adoptive parents and they raise Oedipus as their own. The shepherds that save Oedipus provide him with the ideal and

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<sup>70</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 222-234.

<sup>71</sup> Drunken man mentioned earlier who almost told Oedipus about his real origins

<sup>72</sup> Refers to the lines 759-765: "at dinner there was a man who had drunk too much, and over wine he called me a counterfeit son of my father....but the next day I went to my mother and father and questioned them."



perfect childhood for Oedipus. Although his parents are the king and queen of Thebes, Oedipus escapes from his abusive and uncaring parents into a royal, loving family at Corinth.

In the same way, out of the benevolence of his new parents, Oedipus is destined to become the king, upon the death of his adoptive father. As the messenger from Corinth comes, he claims Oedipus is the new king, “word has it that the men of Corinth wish to proclaim Oedipus their king.”<sup>73</sup> Usually, the throne is passed to their own biological child, a reason why many early Greek kings have many wives and children. Yet, in this case, his family is more than willing to make a stranger the next king. The family does not know anything about his origins as the shepherd who took him is unaware of the baby’s real parentage. His adoptive parents might also know that he is not originally from Corinth, but that he is a Theban citizen, from the messenger. One’s origin is crucial in Greece, especially for royalty. Examples of this can be seen when Oedipus finds out about his real origin and that he is not the child of the Corinthian king. He mentions to Jocasta that she might be disgusted by his low birth. As Sophocles writes, “though she, proud as women are, seems ashamed of my lowly birth.”<sup>74</sup> Yet, the king of Corinth adopts Oedipus as his own son, not even as a slave or as a regular citizen in Corinth. King Polybus passes the throne to Oedipus even if there is no confirmation that Oedipus is a Corinthian by birth. His new parents never tell Oedipus about his origins and even when he is exposed to the truth, the king of Corinth denies the veracity.

### **GREEK MYTHOLOGY’S FURTHER LITERARY INFLUENCES:**

As the Romans, who adopted many cultural identities from the Greeks, conquered lands and peoples across the Mediterranean, many of these Greek mythological stories spread

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<sup>73</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 893-894.

<sup>74</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, 1032-1033.

in these places. Many of the themes existing in Greek mythology often influenced further works of literature, especially in Europe, throughout time. The theme of child abuse and mistreatment also appears in other later works, especially those of the Brothers Grimm. During their time, the Grimm Brothers' works were read by most children in Germany and Europe. Children nowadays still read their stories. For the Brothers Grimm, "in some ways their book was intended to be part of the European civilizing process, and to a certain extent, the formative body of their tales, which have been translated into 150 languages, has become an international educational primer."<sup>75</sup> Although the Disney and more modern versions of these stories are more sympathetic and created to appeal to a more innocent age group, the original works present very dark ideas and concepts, similar to the ones within Greek mythology. Child abuse in the Brothers Grimm manifests in the forms of abandonment, cannibalism, and attempt at murder — key elements also presented in Greek mythologies. The books of *Hansel and Gretel* suggests topics of cannibalism and abandonment, and *Snow White* focuses on cannibalism and the murder plot of her mother.

For example, the story of *Snow White* introduces a mother who is unhappy because her daughter is considered by the mirror to be the fairest person in the kingdom and decides to kill her child. Contrary to the more popular Disney version, where Snow White has a stepmother, in the original version of the Brothers Grimm, Snow White is hated by her own biological mother. Normally, a real mother would have more love for her own child rather than a stepmother would have for another woman's child. In this case, the real mother no longer feels that she has the power and position held by her previously as the fairest one. As the Brothers Grimm write in the original version of *Snow White*, "when the queen heard the mirror speak this way, she became pale with envy, and from that hour onward, she hated

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<sup>75</sup>Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 25.

Snow White, and when she looked at her and thought that Little Snow White was to blame that she, the queen, was no longer the most beautiful woman in the world, her heart turned against Little Snow White.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, the mother made plans to kill her daughter to regain her title as the most beautiful maiden in the kingdom. The purpose of Snow White’s mother closely aligns with the same scope that Ouranos and Kronos held. All three of these parents felt threatened by their children’s ability to overpower them and take their title. Therefore, they are willing to eliminate their children to keep their position. These parents are not acting like loving parents that accept their children’s triumphs and accept their own defeats.

In addition, another interesting similarity that the tale of *Snow White* poses to Greek mythology is cannibalism. In Hesiod’s writings of Kronos, Kronos is represented with cannibalism: “Cronos swallowed them all down as soon as each issued from Rheia’s holy womb onto her knees.”<sup>77</sup> As the Brothers Grimm write in *Snow White*, “her [mother] jealousy kept upsetting her, and so she summoned the huntsman and said: ‘Take the child out into the forest to a spot far from here. Then stab her to death and bring me back her lungs and liver as proof of your deed. After that I’ll cook them with salt and eat them.’”<sup>78</sup> Snow White’s mother simply does not decide to kill her upon finding out that her daughter stole her title, but also decides to consume her. Killing her daughter is not enough but she needs to engage in an act of cannibalism. This is similar to Kronos, who unlike his father does not send his children to Tartarus, but rather devours them inside his body. Meanwhile, Ouranos sends his children back to the Earth, inside the biological domain of their mother. Although Kronos might have decided to keep his children safely trapped inside him, it is unclear why Snow White mother

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<sup>76</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 180.

<sup>77</sup> Hesiod, “Theogony - Users.pfw.edu,”

<https://users.pfw.edu/flemingd/Hesiod%20Theogony.pdf>. Lines 463-464.

<sup>78</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 180.

needs to eat her after killing her. *Snow White*'s murder plan also resembles the similar way Oedipus was supposed to die. As Snow White is ordered by her mother to be stabbed to death, Oedipus is pierced in the feet.<sup>79</sup> The Brothers Grimm stories follow the similar pattern as Greek mythology where children often abused take revenge on their parents.

Snow White, similarly to Kronos and Zeus, is initially a helpless child that is unable to act against her parents, but eventually, she does survive her mother's murderous plans and avenges her mother. As Kronos and Zeus physically damage their fathers, Snow White also wounds her mother at her own wedding, "iron slippers were then heated over fire. The queen had to put them on and dance in them, and her feet were miserably burned, but she had to keep dancing in them until she danced herself to death."<sup>80</sup> Oftentimes, these tales of child abuse end with the child acquiring the status or position held by their parents, but also physically punishing their parents. Snow White's mother is forced to dance in burning slippers until she dies, Ouranos is castrated by Kronos, and Zeus cuts his father's body and tosses him into Tartarus.

Accordingly, the story of *Hansel and Gretel* presents similar Greek mythological motifs such as abandonment, opposing parents' love, and cannibalism. The notorious work called *Hansel and Gretel* by the Brothers Grimm recalls the story of two siblings that are abandoned by their father in a forest. Hansel and Gretel's family is very poor and unable to provide food to feed everyone. As their mother speaks to the father, "listen to me, husband, early tomorrow morning you're to take both the children and give them each a piece of bread. Then lead them into the middle of the forest where it's most dense. After you build a fire for

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<sup>79</sup> See section about Oedipus.

<sup>80</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 185.

them, go away and leave them there. We can no longer feed them.”<sup>81</sup> Once again, contrary to modern children's versions, it is the real mother, and not the stepmother plotting the evil plan.

Second, the story brings up a common theme present in Greek mythology: abandonment. The mother suggests to the father that the children should be abandoned in the forest. The mother is willing to sacrifice the children’s lives instead of her own. As in Greek mythology, parents act out for their own selfish needs. Similarly, there is a contrast in parental behavior toward children. In *Hansel and Gretel*, when they first return home following their parents' betrayal, “their father rejoiced with all his heart when he saw his children again, for he had not liked the idea of abandoning them alone in the forest. Their mother also seemed to be delighted by their return, but secretly she was angry.”<sup>82</sup> In Greek mythology, oftentimes, one parent, such as Gaea and Rhea, is angered by their husbands’ behavior and actually wishes to raise their children, meanwhile, Ouranos and Kronos are ruthless toward their offspring. The Brothers Grimm story incorporated this contrasting behavior of both parents toward their children that might have been influenced by earlier mythologies.

Third, *Hansel and Gretel* also includes the theme of cannibalism. The witch the children encounter on their journey back home plans on devouring them. The Brothers Grimm write, “as soon as she had any children in her power, she would kill, cook, and eat them.”<sup>83</sup> As the witch tells Gretel, “I want to fatten him [Hansel] up, and when he’s fat enough, I’m going to eat him. But now I want you to feed him.”<sup>84</sup> As for Gretel, “the witch

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<sup>81</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 73.

<sup>82</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 74.

<sup>83</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 75.

<sup>84</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 75.

wanted to shut the oven door once Gretel was inside, for she wanted to bake her in the hot oven and eat her, too.”<sup>85</sup> Oftentimes, in these stories, children are eaten by non-human characters, such as evil witches or monsters. There are many other accounts of cannibalism in Greek mythology besides the most notorious one of Kronos eating his children,<sup>86</sup> such as the Minotaur requiring human flesh as food. As Apollodorus reports, “the Athenians every year sent seven youths and as many damsels to be fodder for the Minotaur.”<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, Pausanias confirms, “it was finally agreed that they [the Athenians] would bring seven girls and seven boys to the Minotaur who was said to dwell in the Labyrinth at Knossos.”<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, Lamia, the Queen of Libya, is a child-eating-woman, “for when all the children born to her had died, weighed down in her misfortune and envying the happiness of all other women in their children, she ordered that the new-born babes be snatched from their mothers' arms and straightway slain.”<sup>89</sup> Many other primary and secondary sources also report that Lamia also ate these children after killing them, “...people say, she ate them [children] head to toe.”<sup>90</sup> As the Roman poet, Horace, describes her, “no living child from the Lamia’s full belly!”<sup>91</sup> Also, the story of the Cyclops Polyphemus presented traits of cannibalism, as Polyphemus “reached out towards my men, grabbed two like a pair of puppies and dashed

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<sup>85</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 76.

<sup>86</sup> See earlier section about cannibalism in *Snow White*.

<sup>87</sup> Apollodorus, “Apollodorus, the Library 3,” APOLLODORUS, THE LIBRARY BOOK 3 - Theoi Classical Texts Library, <https://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus3.html>. Lines 3.15.8.

<sup>88</sup> Pausanias, “Description of Greece: A Pausanias Reader,” The Center for Hellenic Studies, November 3, 2020, <https://chs.harvard.edu/description-of-greece-a-pausanias-reader/>. Lines 1.27.10.

<sup>89</sup> Diodorus Siculus, “(Book XX, Continued),” LacusCurtius • Diodorus Siculus - Book XX Chapters 19-44, [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus\\_Siculus/20B\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/20B*.html). Line 41.3.

<sup>90</sup> “Lamia,” Greek Mythology, <https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Monsters/Lamia/lamia.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Horace, “Horace: Ars Poetica,” Horace (65 BC–8 BC) - Ars Poetica, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.php>. Line 340.

them on the ground: their brains ran out and soaked into the earth. Then he cut them up limb by limb, and made them ready for supper. He devoured them like a mountain lion, bowels and flesh and marrows-bones, and left nothing.”<sup>92</sup>

Equally important, ancient Greek mythology has many stories where monsters or gods are cannibals. These stories went on to further influence the works of the Brothers Grimm. The Brothers Grimm lived in the 1800s, yet used many ancient mythologies — whether Greek, Roman, or Norse — to draw inspiration for their stories. Jack Zipes introduces his collective Grimm Brothers’ stories as, “in their letters, essays, and books, written between 1806 and 1812, the Brothers began to formulate their views about the origins of literature based on tales, legends, myths, and pagan beliefs, or what was once oral art and to a certain extent continued to be a precious art form.”<sup>93</sup> Roots and origins of cannibalism within stories often adapted ideas from early myths. Therefore, there is a likelihood that the themes and concepts, especially dark ones, have been inspired by Greek mythologies.

Using fear to raise children is a form of child abuse. As the 2010 Leiden University and TNO (Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research) research summarize, “emotional or psychological abuse: an adult regularly berates the child, acts in a dismissive and hostile manner towards the child or intentionally scares the child.”<sup>94</sup> In some ways, the Brothers Grimm stories and Greek mythologies that described cannibalism are stories that cause fear in children. They are told to children to inflict fear and force them to obey. These stories with their sinister themes and messages act as a host to pass fear to children.

Therefore, based on the definition above, these stories are a form of child abuse themselves.

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<sup>92</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse (New York, NY: Signet Classics, 2007). Page 112.

<sup>93</sup> Dezsö Andrea et al., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> Government of the Netherlands Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, “What Is Child Abuse?,” Child abuse | Government.nl (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, June 8, 2016), <https://www.government.nl/topics/child-abuse/what-is-child-abuse>.

Moreover, the theme of cannibalism, especially children being eaten, is rather popular among children as it frightens them. Scary stories are effective as “kids are instinctively drawn to scary things because they rely on the continuing safety of the real world.”<sup>95</sup> These stories of children being eaten are an efficient plot device used by parents to scare a child into obeying them. For example, telling a child that if they go into the woods, a witch will eat them. Although there are no witches in the woods, there might be dangerous animals, roads, or people. Stories like this effectively scare children into not going into the woods. Similarly, among the ancient Greeks, these stories of cannibalism might have existed to force children or adults to obey and fear authority. Beside the Brothers Grimms stories, child abuse is prominent in many other cultures and stories. Thus, Greek mythologies might have had influences or been influenced by other stories.

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<sup>95</sup> “Tales Dark and Grim: Why Kids Love, and Need, Scary Stories.” ParentMap. <https://www.parentmap.com/article/tales-dark-and-grim-why-kids-love-and-need-scary-stories>.



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