

“Night Journey”

Choreography and costumes by Martha Graham

Music by William Schumann

Set by Isamu Noguchi

Original lighting by Jean Rosenthal

Original Premiere Date: May 3, 1947, Cambridge High School, Cambridge, Massachusetts

*“And loudly o’er the bed she wailed where she  
In twofold wedlock, hapless, had brought forth  
Husband from a husband, children from a child.  
We could not know the moment of her death  
Which followed soon,”*

*--Sophocles*

*Night Journey* (1947) was choreographed towards the middle of Graham’s career when both her style and technique was already focused, organized, and codified. The themes she was interested in working with at the time evolved from recognizable female icons in history and literature. She was invested in portraying both the strength and struggle of these famous female characters. Both the inner workings of the female heroine’s psyche and the art inherent in the emotional and internal human experience inspired Graham. In Graham’s own words, “Art is the evocation of man’s inner nature. Through art, which finds its roots in man’s unconscious--race memory--is the history and psyche of race brought into focus,” (Brown, 50).

Graham’s sessions with a Jungian psychotherapist might have launched her Classical cycle of psychoanalytical dramas and myth inspired subjects in general. *Dark Meadow* (1946), *Cave of the Heart* (1946), *Errand into the Maze* (1947), and later *Clytemnestra* (1958), *Phaedra* (1962), *Cortege of Eagles* (1967), and *Phaedra’s Dream* (1983) were Graham pieces along the same vein of mythical heroines and their psychological tribulations (Mazo, 179). When Graham set about choreographing Jocasta’s story, she had already played strong female literary figures such as Medea in her 1946 creation *Cave of the Heart*. The role of Medea and of Queen Jocasta

were well suited to Graham's personal style that she had well etched out by that time in her career.

In *Night Journey*, rather than telling the story of Oedipus, as written by Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, Martha Graham focused on the perspective of Oedipus' mother and wife Queen Jocasta. Jocasta was yet another one of Graham's tragic heroines who faced immense grief and inner-torment in an unnatural situation. It was, however, one of the first Greek tragedies Graham worked on, so most critics site *Night Journey* as an inventive piece with a wealth of tragic and complex characters in addition to the one female protagonist. At the time *Night Journey* was conceived, Graham had recently become serious with her significantly younger lover, fellow dancer, and student Erick Hawkins. Hawkins played the role of Oedipus with Graham as Jocasta originally, and the couple married a year after the premiere of *Night Journey* when Graham was in her mid 50s. The huge age difference between Hawkins and Graham might have allowed Graham an interesting perspective and connection to Jocasta, who was also much older than Oedipus. Jocasta and Graham were united by the psychoanalytical effects of taking on the role of a wife as well.

The characters of *Night Journey* included Queen Jocasta, King Oedipus, the blind seer Tiresias (who and carried a tall wooden staff, and wore a long and heavy coat and a mask with covered eyes to show his blindness), and the all-female Greek Chorus with one prominent chorus leader. Siegel summarized the movement qualities and gestures of each character in *Night*

*Journey* with a mix of description and interpretation:

Oedipus with his rigid torso, strutting, stamping legs, and crude, peremptory energies. Tiresias, who sees most and least, takes up huge amounts of space when moving or standing still, yet never becomes personally engaged in the tragedy.

The Chorus, reflecting, foretelling, reacting to the events, always in extreme body shapes and percussive energies. Jocasta is the only character who is not clear; she's indecisive, passive, doomed from the start

(Siegel, 209). Many of Jocasta's gestures appeared to linger, drift, or wander, but suddenly she would thrust her legs outward in a series of deep yet expansive developes to the side (the "vaginal cries", wrenching her upper body in one direction then another. Longing, lust,

passionate outcries, shame, and helplessness seem to be churning at the core of all Graham's movement initiations as Jocasta. Jocasta and the Chorus fell as though fainting backwards into a lung their knees with their pelvis thrust forward at the same level of their quadriceps. It looked like a severely taut and extremely vulnerable position. In Jocasta's solo moments, she engaged in gnarled shape making by twisting and curving her limbs inward toward her torso or outward as though wringing-out her body. As she occasionally turned and corkscrewed her developing limbs, her hanging scarves pinwheeled around her body moments after. Dance critic Deborah Jowitt better explains how this movement style fit into the context of Graham's usage and overall aesthetic:

Between 1943 and 1948, Graham made some remarkable dances about interior warfare...most involve in a monumentally symbolic way a woman's (and/or an artist's) coming to terms with something inside herself either by accepting it or killing it. The movement especially for the heroine figures Graham herself once played, which are inevitably more detailed than the other characters--is resolutely unpretty. These women wrench their bodies from side to side, run with tight, blind steps this way and that, shudder, twitch, fall. The dancing shrieks with ambivalence and a kind of fatal reticence. The women press their legs together, cross their hands over their bellies, retreat from what they appear to crave

(Jowitt's, 40). Jowitt interpreted the women's 'shuddering' and the unharmony of their gesture sequences in unison as representative of the sick predicament the women (Jocasta in particular) went through while confronting both natural and unnatural desires.

Other characters in the piece may or may not have depicted as interesting and complex of a struggle as Jocasta's, but their characterizations and purpose were made clear by repeating movement qualities and gestures. Tiresias carried a weighted coat and a large heavy staff which helped demonstrate the seriousness of his message along with a sense of impending doom that knocked forward steadily. Also, his reoccurring expansive promenades in arabesque showed off his power and purpose. He was unyielding, and had no mercy. His character in itself took on the symbolic weight of an unstoppable devastating destiny. For example, Tiresias acted unfazed by the Chorus' pleading gestures and was quite resolute when Jocasta went for his staff and

struggled with him to try and halt him or alter the truth. Oedipus was almost an object of lust for Jocasta because his movements were strong, bold, and muscled. The six female with a leader Chorus, also known as the *Daughters of the Night*, helped remind the audience of impending doom by heaving and clenching their bodies. The Chorus and Jocasta dance with black laurel leaves that they ambivalently flipped back and forth between crossed and open shapes.

The set pieces were all white or gray. There were a few short hourglass-shaped and lyre-shaped stools lined up along the diagonal from upstage left to right center stage (one stool that is offset became the symbolic pillar which Oedipus carried Jocasta over to as though it were he were making her Queen of this stool/thrown), a raised and tilted rectangular structure that looked like enlarged and stacked human bones (Jocasta's bed), and in some versions there was an oval-shaped wheel upstage right. The wheel usually represents the 'wheel of fate' in Classic myths and adds to the encroaching misfortune of Jocasta and Oedipus. According to Graham in her autobiography Blood Memory, the place and setting of *Night Journey* is supposed to be the "sacred room" where Jocasta lived, loved, and was a mother: "I would like to believe that she was born in this room: perhaps she was, perhaps she wasn't. Her love life was consummated here. The birth of her children occurred here. And she rushed here to meet the final destiny of her life, her suicide," (Graham, 213). The set was minimalist, used both symbolically and functionally, and did not seem to crowd any of the dancing.

Schumann's music was wild, fierce, harsh, and melodramatic. Richly toned voices of strings sang in sweeping, dissonant shrills and occasionally took on a percussive quality with harsh stokes in a seemingly arhythmic structure. Even though the music became a bit more dreamy and softer when Jocasta interacted with her bed or with Oedipus with the memories of a lover, the music was more atmospheric than programatic; changes in dynamics were closely observed and simultaneously executed during certain sections of the piece. Overall, the music was highly emotional and functioned as amplification of Jocasta's state of mind.

*Night Journey* was a perfect model of the quintessential Martha Graham work. It contained nearly all of Graham's signature moves. Dancers bourreed on their knees, piqued onto

a diagonal side pitches, contracted their torsos on one leg, made bold and sharp gestures with cupped hands, and danced among a highly streamlined and symbolically significant sets in similarly symbolic costumes. Most critics and historians agree that the form or structure of *Night Journey* had an interesting and impressive way of presenting the narrative content. Graham did not reveal that narrative in a linear way. Jocasta's story was relived from the past forward after Tiresias interrupted Jocasta's initial suicide attempt and demanded that she perhaps take another look back at her sins.

Jocasta "relived her destiny" before committing the final act of suicide, ([Martha](#) video). The opening image of the piece-- when Jocasta's torso gently rocked and swayed as she lifted a long silk cord with her arms in a 'V' toward the high diagonal; her wrists, meanwhile, were torqued and presented outward as though she were surrendering to something--returned moments before the very end when Jocasta wrapped the cord around her neck and hanged herself. Jocasta ritualistically disrobed by slipping off her dark and gold embroidered dress. Graham used the disrobing image as a symbolic of how Jocasta relinquished her title as a Queen moments before her death, (Graham, 216). Overall, it was ironic, interesting, and eerie how the movement acts of Jocasta's suicide had some of the most airy, delicate and graceful qualities out of the entirety of the piece. You would think that a hanging Graham hanging would be fierce and overwhelmingly taunt and drawn-out, yet Graham simply tossed the ropes over her shoulder and around her neck in a soft and quiet manner then fell back in a lunge to her knees. Graham described the moment Jocasta was waiting for as the "peace and the forgetfulness of death." (Graham 213).

This piece was considered to be one of Graham's "masterworks" because it condensed an epic story with complex ideas into just a few minutes of clear and understandable movement ideas. *Night Journey* was also highly praised as an example of Graham's ability to double, triple, and even quadruple the symbolic significance of props, set pieces, costume pieces, and gestures. She treated all of the elements she worked with as though she were a modernist poet or a cubist painter. The way she crafted multiple meanings for the silk rope prop, for example, allowed one simple item to not only change its representation within certain contexts but also layer its

significance overall. The rope was firstly and lastly used as a hanging tool for Jocasta, it then became symbolic of an umbilical cord when it connected Jocasta to her son and husband Oedipus, throughout it indicated the thread of fate that trap and entangle Jocasta and Oedipus--it is this thread of fate that Oedipus cursed inevitably when he threw it to the ground before blinding himself and wandering off stage to make his final exit--and finally the cord is symbolic of Jocasta's "crime against civilization and life" (Graham, 213).

Of course, not all critics and historians were completely convinced of Graham's symbolic crafting. In Jack Anderson's "Some Personal Grumbles About Martha Graham" (1967) from his collection of reviews Choreography Observed, Anderson poked fun at the presence of rope in Jocasta's bed:

In *Night Journey* Oedipus and Jocasta on their marriage bed get entangled in some cords. These cords are really umbilical cords. And, for me, they are also faintly comic: is the palace housekeeping so bad that the servants leave ropes in the Royal Bed? (Graham's devotees will here accuse me of frivolity, yet it is my conviction that, before it can function as a symbol of a broader meaning, an object must first make sense simply as an object)

(Anderson, 119). The fact that Jocasta used the rope as an actual and tangible object to strangle herself, its place in the bedroom probably makes sense. Nevertheless, when Jocasta and Oedipus are entangled among it, the meanings are a bit of a stretch. The meaning might be conceived as unclear or uncertain because the rope would seem to bind together Jocasta and Oedipus as wife and husband, mother and son, while also tying them to their destiny.

Beyond the abstraction of physical props in Graham's piece, she also developed strong themes. The theme of seeing and not seeing was developed in several symbolic props and gestures throughout *Night Journey*. Graham adopted this important theme from Sophocles' play version of the Oedipus story, *Oedipus Rex*. A mask covered the blind seer Tiresias, the Chorus members covered up their eyes with cupped hands to try and shield themselves from the tragedy they knew was unfolding, and Oedipus blinded himself by symbolically gouging out his eyes with a decorative brooch from Jocasta's garment. Critic and dance historian Marcia B. Siegel

sited a number of instances when both Tiresias and Oedipus are covered and blinded under their cloaks:

Near the beginning of his seduction dance, Oedipus wraps his head in his cape. This is usually a phallic image with Graham, but here it also refers to his inability to see Jocasta's true identity. At his most dangerous moment, he is most blind

(Siegel, 208-9). Some critics are in debate as to whether or not the males in this story, who are blind or eventually blinded, are weaker than Jocasta.

Siegel mentioned in her chapter on *The Epic Graham* in The Shapes of Change that Graham portrayed female victims and subservient sexual relationships in her post Hawkins engagement works. According to Siegel it indicated that Graham "harbored sexual conflicts," and "her way of representing her position and the alternatives open to her anticipated some of the most radical feminist ideas of a generation later," (Siegel, 202). It is hard to say whether or not Jocasta was made to be subservient or completely dominated by Oedipus due to the juxtaposition of two character traits: 1) Jocasta's welcoming gestures and apparent sexual pleasure and indulgence, and 2) Oedipus' clear display of brute strength, phallic gesturing with various limbs, and moments of lunging over Jocasta, covering her in his robe, and preventing her from moving out from beneath his flexed foot and leg clamped over Jocasta's chest. Ramsay Burt argues against Siegel's point of view claiming that Jocasta looks at Oedipus with desire and is "clearly the strongest role in *Night Journey*." Burt goes on to explain how Jocasta did not enter into her relationship with Oedipus blindly, but chose "not to conform to societal norms;" she also does not need to become blind in order to gain knowledge (like Tiresias, Oedipus, or any other Classic Greek character who wanted to gain the power of 'sight' from the Gods) (Burt, 46). Historian Sally Banes also argued that "Graham [made] space in this dance for something that Freud forgot in his analysis of the Oedipus complex: women's sexual pleasure...what is highlighted in *Night Journey* is not the son's desire but the mother's," (Banes, 158). The frequent movement motifs in which Jocasta yields back onto the floor as though presenting her pelvis forward as well as when she kicked one leg up and contracted in Graham's "vaginal cry" moment demonstrated not

only a willingness but a need for some kind of sexual encounter. Banes points out that Jocasta occasionally crossed her hand over her groin "...a gesture ambiguously suggesting both shame and the recollection of sexual ecstasy," (Banes, 159). Overall, it seems that even though Jocasta seems dominated by her husband/son's powerful advances and gestures during suggestions of the wooing and sexual acts, she is not subservient to any will but her own conflicted desires.

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