

Translation from the Greek

V. Reynolds

Oedipus in Evolution. By Christopher Badcock. *Basil Blackwell: 1990. Pp. 221. £29.95, \$37.95.*

I ASSUME most readers of *Nature* feel they can get on quite well without Freud. Perhaps, indeed, most people can. Yet we are told incessantly by media pundits and even some academics and "talking heads" that our whole way of looking at ourselves this century is Freudian, that Freud has changed us. So the question arises whether modern science has anything to say about this, whether we must just accept that we are somehow post-Freudian, or whether we can do better than that.

Badcock's self-appointed task, started in earlier volumes and continued in this one, is to show that Freud was right, and to show this by recourse to sociobiology. His technique is to demonstrate that things like the Oedipus complex, penis envy, castration complex or regression, are Freud's way of describing what sociobiologists like Robert Trivers have subsequently shown to be evolved propensities, the outcome of natural selection.

Who was Oedipus? A character in a Sophoclean play who unwittingly killed the King his father, as a result of a prophecy, where three roads met, on the way from Thebes to Delphi. What was Oedipus thinking of, to kill his father? He wasn't thinking, he didn't even know; he was driven, driven by fate, by prophecy. Link number one with evolution; to be driven, not to be a wholly free agent; evolution has two drivers, survival and reproductive success.

Oedipus later found out that it was indeed his father he had killed and, worse, that he had gone on to marry his own mother. So deep was his shame that he put out his eyes. In addition, he had brought famine and despair to the people of Thebes, and blinding himself expiated his sin. This is Greek tragedy at its finest. Badcock's preoccupation with sociobiological reinterpretation must pale by comparison, and indeed so must Freud's own work, though that at least has elements of the bizarre about it.

Freud took the Sophoclean story and made of it an interpretation of an aspect of childish behaviour, the longing of the young boy to possess his mother exclusively and to oust his father from the family. Each of us, said Freud, and Badcock accepts this without question, goes through this phase, after the earlier oral one. Having emerged from a total preoccupation with sucking the mother's nipple, boys start to get sexually possessive, and mothers respond warmly to their

offspring's amorous advances. Why should these things (shocking to Freud's generation, boring to ours) go on? Because, says Badcock, young children have been selected during evolution to behave in ways that deter the mother from

I am arguing that Oedipal behaviour in little boys . . . should be looked at from the point of view of its costs and benefits to the individual child in terms of parental investment. According to this way of looking at things, Oedipal behaviour would constitute a kind of "rehearsal" or "advertisement" of the boy's potential reproductive success, aimed at securing preferential parental investment because of the potentially much greater reproductive success which an individual male can have in the context of a polygamous mating system. (Page 87.)

(Polygamy is here used to include officially monogamous systems in which there is extramarital sex.) We know the

The Mansell Collection

sociobiological arguments by now, and it is rather tedious to have them explained all over again. I would not want to question whether sociobiology itself has anything useful to tell us about the human condition, or the processes of child development; I take it as given that it has. We can readily accept that young children behave in ways that maximize their access to parentally derived benefits, that is, the facts of

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

sibling rivalry and parent-offspring conflict as applied to ourselves.

But can we accept that this is what Freud was saying all along? I don't see how we possibly can. Sociobiology has its roots in biology, and therein lies its strength. It derives its concepts and theories from the ideas of Darwin and those who have followed after. Freud, writing about Oedipus in 1900, might have, could have followed Darwin, but he chose a very different path — an intuitive path not a scientific one — based on his own idiosyncratic interpretations of people's dreams and

The infant Oedipus rescued from the mountain by a shepherd, where Apollo had warned that Oedipus would kill his father.

investing in another child, so as to maintain the maximum amount of parental investment for themselves.

In Freud's equation, Oedipus is you and me; we are driven to (want to) kill our father and to (want to) marry (that is, possess) our mother. The twin pillars of the equation are: unwitting = unconscious and driven = evolved. The unconscious human psyche has evolved in such a way that now, during childhood, as it develops, it sets itself these two unattainable goals — patricide and incest. Does sociobiology really support this? According to Badcock it does; Freud has been vindicated by sociobiology.

neuroses. Freud thus has to be classed with those thinkers who eschewed the scientific tradition, not with those who embraced it. Today, Freud is history. If some of his insights seem akin to the findings of sociobiology, he is not thereby vindicated, other than in the sense that one or two of his hunches were near the mark. Badcock demonstrates commendable loyalty to the old man, but I fear that there is nothing anyone can do to put him back on his pedestal. □

V. Reynolds is in the Department of Biological Anthropology, University of Oxford, 58 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6QS, UK.