

Oedipal Rage in *Twelve Angry Men*

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Twelve Angry Men was written in 1954 by Reginald Rose as a teleplay for *Studio One* on CBS TV. After the TV production earned an Emmy for “Best Screenplay,” the play became the source of a rich history of adaptations. A stage play (by Sherman L. Sergel) was published in 1955. The TV script was adapted for film by Sidney Lumet in 1957. This script was produced by Henry Fonda and starred Fonda as well as featuring a stellar supporting cast, including Lee J. Cobb. There have been two subsequent film remakes. In 1997, William Friedkin directed a version entitled *In the Jury Room* which is set in California, and was inspired by the O.J. Simpson case. The 3 cast includes Ossie Davis, George C. Scott, and Jack Lemon. In 2008, the “tense, minimalist” script of the play was expanded for a Russian film by Nikita Kikhalkov (Ty Burr). This remake addresses the “lurching” toward Democracy” in post-soviet Russia. It features a Chechnyan boy who is on trial for stabbing to death his Russian army-officer stepfather. Reginald Rose does not specify the boy’s ethnic identity in the Studio One script, but the original TV play, the stage play, and the earlier film adaptations all define the boy’s alien otherness as an important element in the psychological texture of the play.

A drama which explores the possible guilt of a son in the stabbing death of his father is clearly making a return to the subject matter of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Rose’s play, shows a jury of twelve angry men locked into a room to decide whether to convict a boy of parricide or to conclude that the evidence leaves “reasonable doubt” of the boy’s guilt. It seems, to cite Freud and Otto Rank, that this play shows another instance in which “the Oedipus complex has provided [a] dramatic [author] with a wealth of themes in endless modifications, softenings and disguises” (“Archaic Features” 208). It seems likely that Rose’s *Twelve Angry Men* has attracted producers and audiences because of its engagement with the disturbing subject matter presented in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. A son is on trial for the murder of his father. The jury’s probing into the evidence and the testimony from the trial is a realist’s analogue to Creon’s visit to the Oracle at Delphi to learn the identity of the murderer of Laius.

The stage play opens with the offstage voice of the judge who defines the categories of patriarchal and judicial authority:

... [P]remeditated homicide... is the most serious charge tried in our criminal courts. You have heard a long and complex case, gentlemen, and it is now your duty to try and separate the facts from the fancy. One man is dead. The life of another is at stake. If there is reasonable

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doubt in your minds as to the guilt of the accused – then you must declare him not guilty (Rose, 1955).

The twelve jurors enter the chamber in a kind of ritual isolation. The jurors are given no names. Except for the Foreman of the Jury, each of them is identified only by his juror number. The click of the lock on the jury-room door startles some of the jurors. It draws their attention to the parallels between their own isolation and the imprisonment of the accused boy. They experience an awareness of their own guilt. Juror Three asks, “What do they think we are, crooks?” (11). Freud writes in “The Ego and the Id” that “the Oedipus complex... belongs to the unconscious. He adds, “In the expressions of his unconscious, the normal man is not only far more immoral than he believes but also far more moral than he has any idea of” (*The Works* 230). The awesome presence of the legal system in the sound of the locking door awakens the jurors’ unconscious awareness of their own guilt as well as awakening their sense of kinship with the imprisoned boy and their moral outrage at the crime of which he stands accused. Even before the jury begins to discuss the evidence, Juror Two asserts, “An awful way to kill your father – a knife in his chest” (Rose 13).

The nameless jurors participate in a process which reveals that they are also bearers of Oedipal angers. Their first ballot shows that eleven jurors believe that the boy is “Guilty” of killing his father (Rose 14). When Juror Eight is asked what makes him “think the boy is innocent,” he answers simply, “He’s nineteen years old” (Rose 14). The boy’s youth, for this juror alone, is an argument for his innocence. By the end of their deliberations and disagreements, however, the twelve jury members conclude that there is reasonable doubt and, therefore, the boy is “not guilty” (Rose 63).

This conclusion seems to indicate *Rose’s* optimism concerning Oedipal guilt. The boy is not guilty of murder in this instance of biological forces meeting in the particulars of this family and this moment of social history. But the result is not easily achieved. The jurors must struggle with their own Oedipal rage and envy. Erik Erikson says that “Moralistic man refuses to see how... as an emotional and political being he undoes with infantile compulsions and impulses what his thought has \ invented...” (*Childhood* 404). Numerous infantile impulses are depicted in the play. The most intense is Juror Three’s scream of rage upon being restrained at the end of Act Two: “Let me go! Let me go! I’ll kill him” (43). He is enraged by Juror Eight’s assertion that he wishes to execute the boy for personal reasons. There are other instances of emotional explosions. Juror Ten’s assertion that Jurors Six and Eight are “absolutely insane” (40) is one example. Ten is enraged that the jurors are proposing to re-enact the crime as it had been described in the old neighbor’s testimony against the boy.

At the beginning of the third Act, two of the jurors rebuke such emotional attacks by their fellow jurors. “I don’t see why we have to behave like children,” observes Juror Four. “Nor do I... We should not make it a personal thing” (44-45), responds Juror Eleven.

Oedipal rage is present in the jurors, but *Rose’s* play demonstrates that the Jurors are able to articulate techniques to **limit** the expressions of such symptoms. It is possible that Reginald Rose could have been influenced by Erik Erikson’s theories concerning historical shifts – from Oedipal inevitability to historical innovations – in order to escape of the epidemiologies of Oedipal rage. Erickson’s ideas were quite well known during the early nineteen-fifties (Fulford). The jurors in *Rose’s Twelve Angry Men* achieve a hesitant flexibility or openness to reach their conclusion. They learn from their own emotions and achieve “Reasonable Doubt” concerning the guilt of the boy charged with the murder of his father.

In his comments upon the life-history of the boy, Juror Eight employs the term “anger” as it is used in the title reference to “twelve angry men” of the jury. Several jurors note that the boy’s father “slapped” or “punched” the boy on the night of the murder (see 22 and 30), but Juror Eight provides an interpretive description of the sources of the boy’s anger: “This boy’s been kicked around all his life. He’s a tough, *angry* kid. You know why slum kids get that way? Because we knock ‘em over the head once a day, every day” (13. *Emphasis added*). Juror Four is the first to affirm that his own emotional experience parallels the sources of the boy’s anger. He says, “... it was hard for me.

Everything I've got I fought for. I worked my way through college... I fought, yes, but I never killed" (16). There is a gap between the struggle of "working [his] way through college" and the assertion of a need to "fight" for "everything [he] got" in the world, but Four does acknowledge the sources of his own anger and his defensiveness.

Juror Three, is the most emotionally explosive man in the group. He does not cite any specific conflicts in this instance, but simply blurts out, "I know what it's like. I never killed nobody" (16) The absence of transitions in his speech indicates both his anger and his reluctance to connect his emotions to his behavior. Like Juror Four, he does not identify his father as a source of his pain. He does mention his own harsh behavior as the father of a boy who "[w]hen he was fifteen... hit [him] in the face" and whom he has not seen for three years (Rose 21). The comments of Juror Twelve supplement his earlier anxieties about losing his job in advertising because of his legal obligation of jury duty. His comments on employers come closer to the plight of the boy punched by his father: "I've been kicked around, too", he says and then he specifies the aggression of the "big boy that buys the advertising" (16). Juror Eleven is a refugee from World War II Germany. In this personal history he parallels Erik Erikson who fled from Germany in 1933 (Fulford). Juror Eleven refers to the culture that he fled, and refers to the need for some amelioration of its violence: "In my country, in Europe, kicking was a science, but let's try to find something better than that" (16). In this desire to escape his personal anger, Juror Eleven seems to be suggesting that the jury might try to "find something better" in their responses to the boy who has been accused of murdering of the father who had abused him.

Juror Ten shifts from reporting his experiences with violence to attacking the other jurors. His comments seem to indicate that he has become exasperated by the Eriksonian suggestion that the jury should "find something better" than a violent retribution against the boy. Juror Ten expresses a harsh bigotry:

I don't mind telling you this, mister. We don't owe the kid a thing. He got a fair trial, didn't he?... Look, we're all grown-ups here. You're not going to tell us that we're supposed to believe him, knowing what he is. I've lived among 'em' all my life. You can't believe a word they say" (16).

This outpouring of resentment and abuse is directed at the youth and his ethnicity. This speech shows that this jury might have become unified by bigotry. Freud states that Oedipal "hatred" can operate to *unify* a group against an individual or a community (*Group Psychology*, 32). Ironically, this sustained expression of Juror Ten's ethnic rage enables the Jury to move toward "Reasonable Doubt." in its conclusion (Rose 99-100). The ferocity of Juror Ten's bigotries impels the others to experience a disgust which enables them to achieve a humane sensitivity.

The Jurors also question the appropriateness and the authority for defining legal evidence and procedures. Reginald Rose's father, William, was an attorney, but it is not clear that Rose himself is expressing an Oedipal challenge to his father's profession in the issues of law and justice addressed in the play. The murder knife, a switchblade, is found stuck into the body of the father, for example, and it is "is a pretty strong piece of evidence" according to Juror Five. The boy admits to having bought a knife the evening of the murder, but Juror Four notes that "the storekeeper was arrested... when he admitted selling it to the boy," and he testified that the knife was unusual, "the only [knife] of its kind that "he had in stock" (Rose 22-23). After the shopkeeper had been arrested, his testimony that the murder weapon was "the only [knife] of its kind" he had in stock seems unreliable. It contributes to the prosecution's case. After Juror Eight presents an identical knife which he found at a "junk shop around the corner" from the boy's home (24), the shopkeeper's comments appear even less reliable.

Greater unreliability results from questions about the testimony of the old man who lives downstairs and the woman who lives on the other side of the elevated railroad track. Their testimony raises questions about how physical limitations and emotional needs might affect their reliability as witnesses.

Juror Seven questions the appropriateness of the growing list of uncertainties: “Why didn’t [the boy’s] lawyer bring up all these points?” (Rose 36). The question indicates an oedipal submission to the cultural roles of patriarchal authorities: “If the lawyer didn’t bring up this issue, then we have no right to.” In asking the question, Juror Seven seems to reveal a source of his “anger” in his powerlessness as a child. Erikson observes that it is important to remember that “every adult... was once a child... A sense of smallness forms a substratum in his mind” (*Childhood* 404). Another reversion to immaturity seems to be indicated in Juror Seven’s desire to cut short the deliberations because he has “tickets to a Broadway hit” (13). Juror Three, who expresses a deep rage and hatred of “tough kids” (21), reveals a childish regression in proposing to play tic-tac-toe rather than participating in the jury’s deliberations (31).

Rose’s play probes the accuracy of the witnesses against the boy. Although Sophocle’s Oedipus discovers the unreliability of what *he* has seen and heard, Rose’s Jurors learn that the physical limitations of the witnesses invalidate their testimonies. The old man who lives in the apartment below that where the murder took place, is shown to be unreliable about what he claimed to have heard and how quickly he could walk to the hallway to see the escape of the murderer. The old man claimed to have heard the boy “say” or “yell” at his father, “I’m going to kill you”. But the roar and screech of the passing elevated train make his hearing of such a voice unlikely (32-3). The old man’s also asserted that, after hearing the body of the murdered man fall to the floor, he walked in 15 seconds to the hallway and saw the boy fleeing. The old man who used two canes to walk in the courtroom, seems to be Rose’s allusion to the Sphynx’s riddle to Oedipus concerning walking in Sophocles play.

Erik Erikson develops the relationship between walking and the riddle in *Oedipus*:

To be “one who can walk” becomes one of the steps in child development which through the coincidence of physical mastery and cultural meaning... and social recognition contribute to... self esteem (*Identity*, 49).

In affirming his ability to walk and to see the fleeing boy, the old man’s introduces a deceptive assertion of self-esteem. His childish need for recognition seems to have compelled him to make these assertions (Rose 33-4).

The woman who claims to have seen the stabbing of the father while she was lying sleeplessly in bed is described by one of the jurors as having “dents” at the bridge of her nose from wearing eyeglasses (Rose 62). Because it is unlikely that she would wear her glasses while trying to sleep, her testimony is determined to be unreliable. She is not a Tiresias, the “blind seer” of Sophocles’ play who verifies the guilt of *Oedipus*.

Reginald Rose’s *Twelve Angry Men* employs the sturdy social realism which is characteristic of works from the Golden Age of television. The play also seems to express the intellectual and moral aspirations of Eriksonian psychoanalysis in the post World War II era. The utopian aspect of the play’s ending – the boy is not guilty – reflects Erik Erikson’s theoretical aspiration to define a “sociogenetic evolution” (*Identity* 39 and 43) in the human engagement with Oedipal conflicts. Such an aspiration also is suggested in Erikson’s comments on the “therapeutic orientation” of psychoanalysis itself:

Freud, the doctor, revealed for the mercantile and early industrial period what havoc the hypocritical morality was wreaking, not only in his era, but in all human history. In doing so, he founded what Phillip Reiff has described as the *therapeutic orientation*, which goes far beyond the clinical cure of isolated symptoms (*Identity*, 33).

Reginald Rose’s *Twelve Angry Men* seems to depict a cultural moment in which it is possible for the members of a community to escape their personal and cultural histories to liberate themselves and their judgments of a boy from mindless rage and Oedipal injustice.

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