

# Jocasta: A Film by Elise Kermani

Charles Bardes

In a simple story, the elements are strung together in a narrative sequence. Picture “Jack in the Beanstalk”, or an episode from “Gilligan’s Island.” The storyteller need only relate one episode after the other, like beads on a string. But in a complex story, the elements are layered one on top of the other, and the storyteller must simultaneously relate the horizontal, temporal elements and the vertical, associative strata.

The Oedipus story is a very complex one indeed.

Elise Kermani’s great accomplishment is to tell a part of the Oedipus story, seen from the viewpoint of his mother Jocasta who becomes his wife, while portraying the multiple layers above and beneath the tragic actions. Her focus is less on the hero who unwittingly marries his mother, and more on the awful and awe-inspiring saga of Thebes. How the city’s founder was Cadmus, a Phoenician, who was the first to bring the alphabet to Greece. How he slew a dragon and planted its teeth, how these sprouted to become the city’s first citizens, how the plow that carves the field also cuts the page to record words, how the weapon a warrior carries cuts a body that bleeds and speaks. How Oedipus was exiled, how his two sons contested his throne and brought down his dynasty in bloody consummation.

One speaks of sacred spaces. *Jocasta* is filmed at the Great Barn of the Shaker settlement in New Lebanon, New York. The Shakers, who in nineteenth century America created one of the purest cultures the continent has known, were master craftsmen, and their Barn is the largest stone building ever made on these shores, before or since. Nearly destroyed by fire in the 1970s, the Barn's great and unroofed walls survive to form the setting for the film. Here *Jocasta* plots vengeance with her sons, here she lights a fire that sanctifies the action and echoes the building's own destruction, here *Antigone* appears and disappears, here great trombones sound and resound against the solemn walls, here a raven perches in a pane-less window, here *Euripides* sits at a stone table and writes the story once again.

Until the very end, the film's text is that of the *Phoenician Woman*, but it finishes on quite a different note. *Kermani's* *Jocasta* considers suicide, her *Euripidean* fate, but instead inscribes upon her body the new alphabet, an act of reconciliation born of dragon's teeth. The marks are strange, like runes, but beautiful, poignant, and in the end pacific, bringing the bloody business of *Thebes* and of all our ruined cities to a hopeful and forward-looking conclusion. The story can be told, it is incised on the teller, and the act of inscription is the way out.

Charles Bardes, is the author of *Pale Face: Masks of Anemia*, published by Bellveue Literary Press Pathology, in 2008.

*Jocasta* is available for purchase at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) - more info at [www.elisekermani.com/jocasta.html](http://www.elisekermani.com/jocasta.html).

