When she learned the king's power,
Jocasta lost delight in being queen.
Laius was a cold, dry man. Looking at him
brought the image of her baby, his feet
pierced and bound, her baby left to die
in the mountain slope. They would
have no other children.

I remember Laius drunk that night, crying
for Chrysippus, the source of his curse.
Wanting this boy, he took me instead
and threw me on my back to have his way.
I am fifteen and afraid to resist
and tell myself it is my husband's right;
the gods decree a wife obey her spouse.

Sober, Laius recalls Apollo's threat:
our son will kill him, beget upon me.
Nine months drag like oxen ploughing.
With icy eyes Laius watches me swell.
I fear the gods and beg Hera for a girl,
but as foretold, I give birth to a son.
Laius takes the child to bind its feet.
The baby cries, and Laius turns away.
He summons a servant and orders me to hand
my baby over, threatening me when I cry.
The king will keep his own hands clean.

At the public altar, Laius
offered ritual bulls and lambs in ritual
slaughter. The everburning fire raged
so the offerings charred, and Jocasta
trembled at the gods' displeasure.

Upon the gates this dawn, a strange creature
appeared and woke all Thebes. In raucous voice
she cried, "A riddle. Who'll solve my riddle?"
At first our people came to gawk, then marvel.
Some trembled, children hid their heads and cried.
I've heard old tales the minstrels sing of her,
but never did expect to really see

a Sphinx - part woman, bird, and lion too...
And what she asks is strange as well: four legs,
then two, then three. What can it be? No one
knows the answer. No one.

The Sphinx brought pestilence and
drought. Rivers and streams and dry, vines
shriveled. But until her riddle was solved,
the creature would not leave. On the gates
she stayed, her destructive song echoing
from empty wells.

My life is a toad. All day and all night
the Sphinx. We cannot escape her song.
Song! More like wail or whine or scream.
Laius is useless as always. Deceitful
man, I hate him, hate his touch.

On the sunswept road to Delphi,
Laius was killed. The servant reporting
the death begged Jocasta to let him tend
flocks in the hills. Sending him on his way,
she shut herself in the palace.

The prophecy was false. How can that be
if the gods control all things? For surely chance
does not...no, no. Yet Laius killed our son
and not the other way. That sin diseased
his soul. I bless the gods that I,
at last, am free.

I dream of my baby night after night.
He is dancing for the gods with bound feet.
I do not understand how he can dance so.
When he jumps, he trips, falling in a heap.
The gods just laugh and turn away to drink.
I sit ravelling knots. The knots become a rope.
I wake shaking and muffle my tears in the sheets.
"Man" answered the young stranger whose red hair caught the sun's rays, and the riddle was solved. True to her promise, the Sphinx dashed herself to death. Thebes was free.

Hailing their hero, the people elected Oedipus king. Gratefully, he accepted the rule and with it the hand of Thebes' queen, Jocasta.

I see the young Oedipus in radiant sunlight, Apollo blinding me to all but young and vital strength. Deep in myself I feel a pulsebeat, something asleep begins to wake, as though a dormant seed sends up a shoot, opens a leaf. I love this youth. My sun, I rise to him and with him.

From a land of rock and misery, Thebes became a bower. Brilliant poppies dotted the land. The wells filled, crops flourished, and the flocks grew fat again.

Before the people's eyes, Jocasta became young. Her dark hair gleamed, her eye was bright and her laughter cheered the halls of the palace.

Oedipus has become my Apollo warming my days and nights. I am eighteen again with poppies in my hair. I am the poppies, bright little blooms with milk in them. Like them, I seem to spring from rocky ground. Like their color and his hair, our love flames.

Sweet Aphrodite, you rush through me, a stream until you burst like foam that crests the sea. Your blessing washes what was once a barren ground. I walk among the roses, feel your blush upon my cheeks. Oh lovely goddess, I send you swans and doves.

Thebes prospered these years: the gnarled olive bent lower with fruit. Lambs frisked in the fields and pipers' songs rang through the hills. Jocasta had four children. Psalms of joy were sung and danced for the gods.

With four children, the hours run away. Their hunger, games and tears take all my time. In bed, with Oedipus, I sleep in peace. He was at first my headstrong bull, but now he is what a man, a king, should be. I like to see him walking in the yard, his funny stiff gait, his hair burnished by Apollo's brilliant rays.

Mine turns grey but he doesn't seem to mind. Our love has brought to me the joy that I missed when I was young and thought I'd never know. At last, I lay to rest my little boy, his shadow vanished now from all my dreams.

Years of plenty at an end, Thebes was inflicted with drought. The earth burned as crops withered, cattle and sheep sickened.

While days were once too short, now each one drags a slow furrow, the earth heavy with heat, lament and prayer. When I go to the fields the women clutch my gown and plead my help. Too many children sicken. The healthy droop. At home, girls sit listless, my sons tangle while Oedipus complains that his ankles twinge. He limps and growls just like a wounded pup.

Jocasta, very grey now, walked with a more measured step. More than a loving wife, she was also counsellor to Oedipus.

Blaming himself because the land is parched, Oedipus frets alarmed he's failed the gods.
in some unknown way, searching within himself. In turn, I pray, lighting fire after fire, but none burn true. I call on Aphrodite and offer her doves, but they flap their wings and peck each others' eyes. When I ask Apollo to dim his eye, his answer scalds.

No relief at hand, Oedipus sought aid from Delphi. The report came back a confusing riddle about Laius' death. Suspecting treason, Oedipus feared conspiracy against his own throne.

Oedipus needs someone to blame. He calls Creon traitor, Tiresias false seer. I take him in my arms and stroke his hair. He tells me what Tiresias has foreseen. I laugh and tell him I too once believed that prophesy controlled our lives, that seers had magic vision the rest of us did not. I tell the story of Laius, how it was foretold he would die at his son's hand and how the baby died when one week old.

As I speak I feel so strange, as though my tale came from another life about someone else. My words do not comfort, they flame new fears. He relates what drove him from home, tales that he would kill his father and bring rank fruit from his mother's womb. He fears that he has been cursed. Dear gods, how can I comfort him?

From Corinth, a messenger brought news of Polybus' death, the king whom Oedipus called father.

You say that Polybus is dead. Dare I greet death with joy? Can that be blasphemy? My heart flies into song: His father's dead - my Oedipus lives safe. His prophesy is false. Is false as Laius' was. Oh bless your fate, dear love, you need no longer fear.

Corinth wished Oedipus to return and rule. Fearing he would sleep with his mother, Oedipus refused. Nothing to fear, the messenger assured. Merope was a barren woman.

Jocasta began to tremble. Her hands rose to cover her mouth.

What's this? What's this? What words do I hear? How can I shut his silly mouth, tell him Go. Leave. We will not heed your words. My tongue stops, rooted in my mouth.

I look at Oedipus. He does not see me watching him. His face is strained, his eyes are glaring blue. I try to stop the questions. "Oedipus, I beg you, do not hear this out."

When Oedipus insisted, the messenger told the story of the king's infancy, -- how he, a shepherd then, had helped to save the king's life when a baby, a baby with bound feet.

Oh God. Oh cold, gold god. Apollo, you chill me. My mind is ice, and I hear my mouth say freezing words to Oedipus. To my husband. My son. "God keep you from the knowledge of who you are. Unhappy, Oedipus, my poor, damned Oedipus, that is all I can call you, and the last thing I shall ever call you."

Her face ashen, Jocasta rushed into the palace, her hands showing her the way to her own quarters. She ordered the guards to let no one in. Ignoring all offers of help, she commanded her women to leave her alone.

I can't believe. I can't believe. Oh God. He is my son. I've loved my son but not as mothers should, but in my bed, in me.
All that I loved most, his youth that made
our love the summer sun, wrong, all wrong.
Vile. He caressed me here and here. And I
returned his touch. Odious hands. My flesh
crawls with worms.

My God, we've had four children.

In her chamber, she looked at her
bed, sat on it, then jumped up as though
stung. Covering her eyes with her hands
she shook her head back and forth, again
and again, her body rocking.

Oh, Oedipus, what good was our love if
it comes only to shame? To children whom
all Thebes can curse? Such children, even ours,
are rightly damned.

Although we could not know who we were
and loved in innocence, still we are monsters
in the eyes of god and man. Our names will mean
disgrace and guilt forever.

Walking to her dressing table,
the stood before it picking up small
objects: combs, a gold box, a pair of
brooches. Noticing a bracelet given her
by her father when she was a bride,
she let forth a dreadful groan.

Oh Laius, Laius, you brought this one on me.
My fate was sealed my wedding day. Chrysippus
was innocent as I; for you this curse
was uttered, a curse that falls on me. Oh,
that I must bear the shame, that I must be
destroyed by your corruption. And our son,
because you sinned, is ruined, damned.

My marriage day...what choices did I have?
As many as the night you came to me.
The only choice a woman has is that she wed
accepting what the gods and men decree.
It is not just. It can never be right.

Moving decisively, she walked to the
doors and bolted them, straining against
their heavy weight. The women on the other
side called to her, but again she bade them
go away.

Falling on her hands and knees, she pummeled
her stomach as though to punish her
womb. As she did, she called her child --
ren's names, one name, Oedipus, again
and again.

I thought him buried, forgotten. But no,
for countless days and nights these many years
he's thrust himself on me instead. My bed
once stained with birthing blood is now forever
stained; what once was love became a rank
corruption.

Rising painfully, sore, she turned
to the small altar in her chamber.
Smashing a jar which held incense, she
began in a voice of char to call on
Apollo and Aphrodite.

As she raised her eyes, she raised
her fist and shook it against
the silent air.

Apollo, you blinded me to his scars,
his age, any resemblance to Laius.
And you, Aphrodite, cruel sister of the sun,
set my woman's body afire, matching my
ripe years and hungers with his youth and strength.
Paralyzing my mind, you inflamed my heart.

The years I prayed to you and praised you
were all charade. You so enjoyed my dance.
We are all fools to trifle with, your joke.

We tremble to question what the future holds.
As though it matters, we think asking will spoil
our luck, but your injustice mocks all hope.

I hear a chant pounding inside my head.
Five babies. Five abominations.
As though a chorus raises call to prayer.
      Five babies. Five abominations.

      No call to prayer. It is a call to curse
      the gods. No longer will I be their fool.

      From her robe, she removed her
      braided belt. As she looped its strands,
      she heard, from the courtyard, a man’s
      voice scream in anguish. Undeflected, she
      tied the necessary knots, slipping the loop
      back and forth. Satisfied, she settled
      the noose around her neck.

      Five babies cursed by heavenly whim,
      cursed in their lives without chance or hope.
      Mothers ought not love their children so.

      Gathering her skirts, she climbed
      up on the stool.

      And wives be more than merely bedside pawns.
      Those who cannot shape their lives are better
      dead.

      She stepped onto the air.

-----RUTH F. EISENBERG
      [b. 1927]
“Jocasta” Explication

Ruth Eisenberg’s “Jocasta” is broken up into 5 sections. It begins with Jocasta expressing discontent at her husband Laius for not only oppressing her against her will, when pertaining to that of sexual tendencies, but also for leaving their baby son on a mountainslope. After this, she mentions that a Sphinx comes to plague Thebes, because no one can solve the riddle, the Sphinx brings drought and pestilence. After the Sphinx, the author mentions that Laius was killed on a road, and Jocasta expresses her happiness, because she believes the prophesy will not come true. She yearns for her baby night after night, and the thought of her baby plagues her. Section 2 begins by telling how Oedipus not only solves the riddle of the Sphinx, but also becomes king and marries Jocasta. She immediately mentions that she is quite in love with him. The two bear four children and live a very happy marriage. In part 3, Thebes once again is in shambles, but rather than a drought this time, Thebes is troubled with a plague. Jocasta discusses Oedipus’s story, in how he attempted to seek aid from Delphi and when matters got worse, he blamed Creon and Tersias. She becomes increasingly worried about her husband and wonders in what way she can comfort him. Section 4 talks of how Jocasta still believes that her beloved Oedipus is safe from the prophesy, considering it is apparently false. Slowly she realizes that this is untrue and that the prophesy could very well be true. In the 5th and final portion, Jocasta realizes that Oedipus is her son and becomes extremely ashamed of herself for her inadvertent incestuous mannerism. She questions what good their love is if it is tainted with shame and then mentions that their children are cursed. She blames Laius for her misfortunes and realizes that regardless of the situation, this happening was destined by the prophesy. She curses the gods, makes a noose out of her belt, and then commits suicide.

In Eisenberg’s poem, much of it is imbued with feminist ideas and feminist principles. Among these tenets (deriving from “Raping Barbie”) are role isolationism, rage against patriarchy, and finally anti-objectification. First the theme of role isolationism, which encompasses the idea that based on gender, one’s opportunities to strive towards success and individuality are inherently hindered, is described in this work. Jocasta mentions, “...and tell myself it is my husband’s right;/ the gods decree a wife obey her spouse...” (13-14). Another tenet of the feminist ideal is indicative of the idea that women are not treated as equals; rather they are seen as entities that fulfill a man’s every desire. This, in laymen’s terms, is called anti-objectification. Throughout, she is just seen as an entity to that of Laius, and does not merit any human status around him. He treats her like a sexual object. Jocasta mentions this one again by saying, “Wanting his boy, he took me instead/and threw me on my back to have his way./ I am fifteen and afraid to resist...” (10-12). Jocasta finally exemplifies the final tenet, which is rage against patriarchy, when Laius is murdered. That gives her the chance to find a lover, who treats her slightly better than Laius.

The style that Eisenberg uses is one that shows the story of Oedipus through the eyes of Jocasta. Jocasta not only discusses her feelings, but also clearly narrates a good chunk of the poem. The poem, though, quite often shifts from the first person point of view to the third person point of view. Also, Eisenberg utilizes various metaphors such as “My life is a toad”. By utilizing this, the story turns into quite the elaborate and detailed piece of work.

Finally, in comparison to Sophocle’s interpretation of Oedipus Rex, Eisenberg’s ”Jocasta” is extremely similar to it. The poem discusses the story of Oedipus in a more concise fashion, but nonetheless it is quite detailed. Furthermore, the poem portray Oedipus as an extremely helpless soul. The poem differs from Sophocles’ interpretation, considering that in the poem , Jocasta’s viewpoint is highlighted and most of the concern of the poem encompasses the tenets of feminism. It also shows the rationale behind every single one of Jocasta’s decisions. Overall, this was a refreshing poem, considering that rather than looking at Oedipus from the traditional masculine view, “Jocasta” puts a completely new spin upon that of the traditional Oedipus story.