
Opening Extract from...

A Conspiracy of Friends

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Published by Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-84697-182-2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library.

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

1. *The Only Unpleasant Liberal Democrat*

Oedipus Snark had a number of distinctions in this life. The first of these – and perhaps the most remarkable – was that he was, by common consent, the only truly nasty Liberal Democrat member of parliament. This was not just an accolade bestowed upon him by journalists in search of an amusing soubriquet, it was a judgement agreed upon by all those who knew him, including, most notably, his mother. Berthea Snark, a well-known psychoanalyst who lived in a small, undistinguished mews house behind Corduroy Mansions, had tried very hard to love her son, but had eventually given up, thus joining that minuscule group – mothers who cannot abide their sons. So rare is the phenomenon, and so willing are most mothers to forgive their sons any shortcoming, that this demographic – that is to say, in English, *these people* – is completely ignored by marketeers. And that, as we all know, is the real test of significance. If marketeers ignore you, you are not worth bothering about; you are nothing; you are – to put it brutally – a *non-demographic*.

So intense was Berthea's distaste for her son that she had once seriously contemplated arranging a DNA test to see whether there was any chance that Oedipus had been mixed up with her real infant in hospital and given to the wrong mother. She knew that this was clutching at straws, but she had read about such errors in a popular psychology magazine and concluded that there was a chance, just a chance, that it had happened to her. The author of the article had for years researched the psychological profile of those who had lived a large part of their life under a false belief as to the identity of

their father and had only later discovered the mistake. In the course of discussing this not entirely uncommon problem, the author had casually mentioned two cases of a rather different error, where the woman thought to be mother was discovered not to be mother after all.

One of these cases had been of a boy who had been given by his mother to her sister in an act of generosity. The donor, who had six children already, had decided that her childless sister's need for a baby was greater than her own and had generously – and not without some relief – donated this seventh child. It had worked to the satisfaction of all, and when the truth slipped out – as the truth sometimes does in spite of our best efforts to conceal it – the reaction of the boy, now a young man of eighteen, had been admirable. There had been no recriminations, or sense of betrayal: he had gone straight to the florist, purchased a large bouquet of flowers and handed it to the woman who he had assumed all those years was his real mother. *Love*, he had written on the accompanying card, *is thicker than blood.*

Berthea could not imagine Oedipus doing such a thing. In fact, she found it difficult to remember when her son had last given her a present; not that she held it against him, even if she had noted it as a point that she might at least touch upon in a suitable chapter of the unauthorised biography of him that she was currently writing. And here was the second of his distinctions: there are few, if any, examples of hostile biographies written by mothers. Berthea, though, was well advanced in her plans, and the manuscript of the work provisionally entitled *My Son Oedipus* was already two hundred and ten typewritten pages long.

Those pages took us only as far as the end of Oedipus's schooldays. He had been sent to boarding school when he was ten, spending a short time at a very dubious prep school in the West Country before winning a scholarship to Uppingham.

The prep school, now closed down by the authorities, was found to be a money-laundering scheme dreamed up by an Irish racehorse owner; and while the boys were for the most part entirely happy (not surprisingly, given that the headmaster took them to the racetrack three times a week), their education left a great deal to be desired. Oedipus, though, had thrived, and had won the Uppingham scholarship by arranging for another boy at the school, an intellectual prodigy, to impersonate him in the scholarship examination. This had the desired result and brought, rather to the surprise of his mother, an offer of a full scholarship, covering the cost of tuition and boarding.

"I know I'm failing as a mother," Berthea confessed to a friend at the time. "I'm perfectly aware of that. But, quite frankly, much as I love my son, I'm always relieved when Oedipus goes off to school. I know I shouldn't feel this, but it's as if a great load is lifted from my shoulders each time I see him off. I feel somehow liberated."

"I'm not surprised," said the friend. "And you mustn't reproach yourself. Your son is a particularly unpleasant child – I've always thought so."

This verdict on Oedipus was shared by almost all his contemporaries at school. When Berthea had advertised in the school association magazine for "recollections – no matter how frank – of the schooldays of Oedipus Snark, MP", she had been astonished by the unanimity of opinion.

"I remember Oedipus Snark quite well," wrote one of her informants. "He was the one we all disliked intensely. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, as I gather that you're his mother, but we really couldn't stand the sight of him. What on earth possessed you to have him?"

And there was this from another: "Can you give me his current address? I promise I won't pass it on to anybody. I just want to know – for my own purposes."

Of course, Berthea did not pass on her son's address to that particular correspondent. She did not want Oedipus to meet any physical misfortune; she wanted him simply to be exposed, to be made to confront his shortcomings, to *accept responsibility*. And was there anything wrong with that? she wondered. Does it make me any the less of a mother for wanting to see justice done?

She had thought long and hard about what it was to be a mother. And from that, inspired by the article she read about disproof of maternity, the idea came to her that there had been a fairly long pause between the point at which Oedipus was taken from her in the maternity ward and the moment he was returned to her bedside. It was, she remembered, at least an hour, and during that time, as a nurse informed her, another three babies had been born.

"We've been worked off our feet, Mrs Snark," said the nurse. "Four babies in two hours! All of them boys. A population explosion, that's what it is."

Berthea now thought: four boys, all lying in those tiny cots they put newborn babies in; physically indistinguishable, at that age, one from the other; identified only by a little plastic bracelet which could so easily slip off, be picked up and put on the wrong baby. Surely it could happen. Or was that just wishful thinking?

2. *Nothing Can Be Everything; Everything Can Be Nothing.*

Berthea had not been surprised when she heard that Oedipus was going into politics, as she had come to know enough about politicians to understand that her son had all the

qualities needed for that calling. Her psychotherapeutic practice in Pimlico was conveniently close to a large complex of flats – Dolphin Square – in which a number of politicians lived during the parliamentary term. This had proved to be a godsend when she had first set up, as it was simplicity itself for tired MPs, returning from the Commons, to slip unseen through Berthea's unmarked doorway and spend an hour unravelling the skeins of memory. Some of them went away much better, or at least relieved of some private angst or uncertainty; others found that the famous talking cure merely induced dependence on the therapist. On occasion this had put Berthea in an awkward position, as highly placed politicians – sometimes senior members of the government – would ask her to make decisions for them. It was not widely known, for instance, that at least one previous chancellor of the Exchequer had asked her to help him with a difficult choice in the making of the budget. This minister, who arrived for therapy in a plain black government car, had slipped into the habit of calling Berthea *Mother*, a practice that she had tried unsuccessfully to stop.

"It's very difficult, Mother," he said. "I have to maximise tax receipts without giving the impression that I'm picking on anybody. What do I do?"

"Do you really need to gather tax?" she asked.

He had not hesitated in answering. "I do. And to tell the truth I enjoy it. I like to see the figures accumulating. I want to hold on to the money."

"And not give it away again?"

This had been followed by a short silence. Berthea waited. She had sometimes waited forty minutes for an answer and it was almost always worth it. Even when nothing is being said, she remembered learning in her analysis training, it's all being said. Nothing can be everything, she reminded herself; and everything can be nothing.

Eventually the chancellor spoke. "No, I do not like to give

it away again." He lowered his voice. Now it was as if he were talking to himself; engaged in some private soliloquy. "It's mine, you see, Mother. Mine."

That unguarded revelation, like many of the little remarks that can give so much away, told her all she needed to know about her patient. She would have to move him gently, she decided; she would have to nudge him away from the retentive phase into the sunny uplands of the next stage, when retentive impulses would fade and he could give more freely. The responsibility, though, wore heavily on her. Bankers and chancellors of the Exchequer were by nature retentive; if she encouraged this man to be something different, then would he be an effective chancellor? What if he became liberal – profligate, even – with the nation's financial resources?

It was intriguing but nowhere near as interesting as the sessions she later had with one of the ministers in the Foreign Office. This man, although not yet foreign secretary, was clearly heading for that office, and was being tried in a junior, but nonetheless influential post. He was a vivid dreamer, and rather unusually had no difficulty recalling his dreams in fine detail.

"I was walking through a field," he said. "I was by myself, but I felt quite happy, perhaps even carefree. It was like that feeling you have at the end of term, when you're at school."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, it's a feeling of lightness, of possibility. You no longer have exams to worry about. Summer stretches before you in all its promise. It's a marvellous feeling – a feeling of complete freedom."

"I see. So you were in a field, and you felt like that. Free."

"Yes. And suddenly I looked up and saw house martins darting about the sky. They were not swallows – they were house martins. I remember saying to myself, 'Those birds are house martins.' You know how they fly? They swoop and dip,

all so quickly, so very quickly. One moment they're above you and the next they're at the other edge of the sky."

She encouraged him to continue. "A field. House martins."

"That's right," he continued. "And then I saw that at the end of the field there was a line of trees. These followed the course of a river, a rather broad river, I think. And there was a group of people sitting on the bank having a picnic. I could tell even from the other side of the field that they were having a picnic. Rather like Monet's painting. You know the one? Where the women picnickers have no clothes on."

"Manet."

"No, Monet."

Berthea shook her head. "Monet's picnickers are all clad," she said. "Nobody has taken off their clothes in Monet's picnic. Or not at the stage when Monet painted it. Perhaps that came later; history does not record."

"Manet then."

Berthea nodded. Nudity was a common feature of dreams; there was no surprise in that. "So you saw a group of people on the bank of the river. Did you join them?"

He nodded. "I walked over and sat down with them. There were plates of sandwiches and glasses of wine. They welcomed me; I felt perfectly at home. Then one of them said, 'There is more than enough for all of us. Please join us. There is nothing to pay.'"

Berthea listened gravely. "And then?" It would not have surprised her had there been a sudden change in the tenor of the dream. Harmonious dreams were often abruptly spoiled by some dark development: a snake lurking in the garden.

"I joined them," said the minister. "But I remember asking, 'Are you sure there's enough for everybody?' They smiled, and reassured me that there was."

"I'm glad to hear it." She paused. "And who were they, these people? Did you know them?"

"They were Belgians," said the minister. "I knew this because one of them said, 'We are from Brussels.'"

Berthea said nothing, but she made a note in her records. *Dreams of the European Union*, she wrote. *Belgians enjoying a gourmet picnic, some unclothed.* She thought for a moment and then added: *Insecurity. Feelings of exclusion.* And then added: *Euro-envy?*

3. The Moment of Realisation

In every change that takes place – whether it be a change in human affairs or a change in the condition of the world – there is presumably some moment when a Rubicon is crossed. In the grand evolutionary scheme of things, there must have been a time – an actual day, no doubt – when, having emerged from the primeval slime, there were more of us who found dry land congenial than preferred the watery habitat we left behind. There must have been a moment, too, when more of us stood upright than on all fours; or when more of us could use jawbones as tools than could not. Or in language, the Great Vowel Shift that occurred in English over centuries must have known a point when more speakers used the new vowel sounds than the old.

Such significant changes may be almost geological in their pace, even if they do have their moment of no return. In human relations, time is considerably accelerated and feelings can change, if not exactly with the wind, at least quite quickly. And there, too, one might pinpoint the moment when we become aware that we no longer feel that which we felt only a few days, or perhaps even hours, before. So most of us have

had the experience of coming to the realisation that we no longer like or love another whom we liked or loved before. *Eingang*, as John Betjeman observed in "In the Public Gardens", we were in love again, and *Ausgang* we were out.

Berthea could identify the moment when she admitted to herself her dislike of her son, Oedipus. It came at a curious moment, while she was talking on the telephone to Oedipus, who, having recently been adopted as a parliamentary candidate, was giving a party for constituency volunteers. These were the people who stuffed leaflets into envelopes and trudged around the streets putting these envelopes through the letter-boxes of the voters. They were worthy people, Berthea thought; committed citizens who had ideas about the world and how it should be governed. They were not her type, of course; Berthea could not engage in the problems relating to drains and primary schools that fired the imaginations of these people, but she recognised the importance of such matters and could listen, though with a slightly glazed expression, while the faithful volunteers expostulated on them at some length. Most of what they said, of course, had an underlying theme, which was that society should, if at all possible, be given better drains and primary schools. This was unobjectionable enough, indeed it was positively laudable, but Berthea could not help but notice that such people devoted rather less energy to the issue of how we were to earn or make the things that we wanted to give to those who currently lacked them. If that issue was raised with the enthusiasts, as Berthea occasionally tried to do, then it was their turn to become glassy-eyed.

Initially, Berthea had had no idea why Oedipus had invited her to this particular party. It might have been pride, she thought; to give her the chance to see the adulation which he received from some of these volunteers.

"That nice Mr Snark," she had overheard one of them say, "he's so *sensitive*."

She had looked wide-eyed at the maker of this comment and felt a strong urge to correct her. "But he's far from nice," she wanted to say. "He really isn't."

She knew, though, that she could not say it, not even to herself . . . And yet, having *thought* the words, had she not uttered them to herself?

But she accepted the invitation to the party, which was held in the rooms in a run-down office building that the landlord, a Liberal Damocrat, made available at a reduced rent. And then, once she had accepted, Oedipus disclosed his hand.

"Do you think you could possibly bring along a bottle or two?" Oedipus asked over the telephone.

Berthea was accommodating. "Certainly. It's a bring-your-own affair, is it? Would you like me to make cheese straws too?"

"Cheese straws? If you want to. I suppose some of them might like a cheese straw or two." He paused. "But wine would be more useful, I think. Could you manage a dozen bottles, do you think?"

She absorbed this request in silence.

"Mother?" asked Oedipus. "Still there?"

She tried to keep her voice even. "Yes. How many people are you expecting?"

"About thirty."

She made a mental calculation. The conventional wisdom was that one allowed one bottle of wine for every three guests. This meant that the majority who wanted, say, two glasses over the evening would get them, with a bit to spare. Now if Oedipus was inviting thirty people, and was expecting her to bring a dozen bottles, it meant that he himself would be providing no wine at all. This was tantamount, she realised, to his getting *her* to fund *his* party for *his* volunteers. The only reason he had invited her, she decided, was to get her to buy the wine. He had not asked her because he thought she might enjoy herself; he had not asked her because he was fond of

her; he had asked her because he wanted something from her. And that was the way it had been not only with her but with everyone; all the way through. Oedipus was a user of people, including his mother.

And that was the moment when she realised that she disliked her son. At the end of the telephone conversation, having agreed to do as he asked, she went through to her bedroom and looked despairingly in the dressing-table mirror. It was a technique that she had often recommended to patients: Look at yourself, she would say. Look at yourself in the mirror and then tell yourself what you see.

She stared into the mirror. A middle-aged woman, quite handsome, with high cheekbones and eyes around which . . . well, wrinkles had begun to move outwards, little folds in the flesh, tiny fault lines; an intelligent face – she had to admit that – the face of one who had been trained for years to understand others . . . And now the time for self-understanding and honesty had come. "I do not like Oedipus," she said, whispering the words. "I do not like my son."

The effect of this admission was curious. Immediately she admitted it, she felt a weight lift from her. She was no longer in awe of him. She no longer felt guilty. She was free.

She went to the party, and was met by Oedipus at the door. He looked at her anxiously.

"Everyone's here," he said, sounding slightly peevish. He glanced behind her, as if expecting her to be accompanied by a retinue of some sort.

"Just me," she said. "Nobody else."

He frowned. "The wine?"

She shrugged. "Oh, that. Sorry, I was a little bit short of cash and decided not to get it. You'll have to make do with what you've brought along yourself. I'm sure that'll be fine."

"But I didn't bring any," he hissed. "The guests have nothing to drink."

Berthea smiled. "But there's a tap in there, isn't there? What about water? Surely Liberal Democrats are quite happy with water."

He raised his voice, attracting glances from a small knot of party volunteers standing near the door. "It's not funny!"

"Isn't it?" asked Berthea airily. "Actually I think it's really rather amusing. The same problem as the wedding at Cana of Galilee." She paused. "Perhaps there'll be a miracle and the water will turn—"

"What have weddings got to do with this?" snapped Oedipus. "You've really let me down, Mother. I trusted you, and this is how you repay me."

Berthea looked at him coldly. Was this how Liberal Democrats addressed their mothers? It was all very well occupying the moral high ground on electoral reform, but what really mattered, she thought, was how you treated your mother. Conservatives, she had observed, were very good to their mothers, and to their nannies as well. And Labourites were equally fond of their mothers, and sometimes made their mothers government ministers or put them in the House of Lords. So kind! Sometimes, though, they could be a little less than understanding when mothers made reactionary or *bigoted* remarks, as mothers sometimes do. But that was a small fault, as faults go.

4. *In a Spirit of Failure*

If Oedipus Snark was a flawed character, the same could certainly not be said of William French, Master of Wine (Failed). That particular failure – his regrettable performance in the MW examinations – was his own fault and nobody