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THYESTES
HERCULES ON OETA
OCTAVIA

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J.G.F.

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Senecan Plays:

Ag = *Agamemnon*	*Pha* = *Phaedra*
Herc = *Hercules*	*Phoen* = *Phoenician Women*
Med = *Medea*	*Thy* = *Thyestes*
Oed = *Oedipus*	*Tro* = *Trojan Women*

Probably Not By Seneca:

HO = *Hercules on Oeta*	*Oct* = *Octavia*

CONTENTS

OEDIPUS

INTRODUCTION

Background

An oracle came once to Laius, king of Thebes, that he would die at the hands of his own son. Laius and his queen Jocasta therefore handed the infant to Phorbas, their chief shepherd, to be exposed on Mt Cithaeron with a metal rod driven through his ankles. But instead Phorbas passed him to another shepherd in the service of Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth. Being childless, the royal couple raised the infant as their own son, and he was named Oedipus, Swollen-foot, for his injuries.

As a young man, Oedipus received an oracle from Delphi that he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother. He fled from Corinth, believing his parents to be Polybus and Merope. During his travels he was driven violently off the road in a remote area by an old man in a chariot, whom he killed in angry retaliation: the old man, unknown to Oedipus, was Laius. When his travels brought him to Thebes, Oedipus freed the city from the murderous Sphinx by solving the riddle she posed, and the grateful Thebans bestowed on him the vacant throne and the hand of Queen Jocasta in marriage.

Many years have passed since then, and sons and daughters have been born to Oedipus and Jocasta. But

now an all-consuming plague has descended on Thebes, as a result of this ongoing, albeit unwitting, incest. Oedipus must find a solution for this new threat to the city. To this end he has sent Creon, the brother of Jocasta, to consult Apollo's oracle at Delphi.

Summary

Act 1
Oedipus expresses his anxieties over his predicted fate and the present plague in Thebes. However, he vigorously rejects Jocasta's charge of spinelesssness.

Ode 1. The chorus describes the plague's deadly effect on the people of Thebes, animals and plants.

Act 2
Creon reports the response of the Delphic Oracle, that Laius' murderer must leave Thebes. Oedipus pronounces a curse on the unknown murderer. Tiresias orders a divinatory sacrifice; his daughter Manto describes to him the omens of the sacrificial fire and the animals' entrails. Unable to name the murderer, Tiresias proposes to summon Laius' ghost.

Ode 2. An ode in honour of Bacchus as a Theban god associated with the vital forces of nature.

Act 3
Creon reluctantly announces the results of the necromancy: Laius' ghost has accused Oedipus himself both of the murder and of incest. Oedipus imprisons Creon on suspicion of conspiracy with Tiresias.

Ode 3. The chorus believes the cause of the plague

is not Oedipus, but the gods' longstanding anger against Thebes.

Act 4
By questioning Jocasta, the old Corinthian who received Oedipus as an infant, and the shepherd Phorbas who handed the infant to the Corinthian, Oedipus realises the truth.

Ode 4. Praise of modest status, as opposed to the perils of high status.

Act 5
Scene 1. A messenger describes Oedipus' self-blinding.
Choral interval: the power of Fate.
Scene 2. Jocasta speaks to Oedipus and commits suicide. Oedipus takes himself into exile.

Comment

Seneca's play is recognisably based on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (whether at first hand or through intermediaries), but also diverges from it in large measure. Stern critics would see these divergences as signs of degeneration from the standards of a renowned ancestor. But it will be more fruitful to inquire what the significance of these divergences might be, granting Seneca an artist's right to shape something new out of inherited material.

Sophocles' Oedipus is initially a benign ruler amidst his people, self-confident and determined. In complete contrast, Seneca's Oedipus at the beginning of his play is isolated and already obsessed with anxiety and guilt. This is in keeping with the inward turn of Seneca's dramas and their

concern with mental states (see vol. 1 p. 5). Oedipus' unease is due in part to his possession of supreme power, and in part to his awareness of the prophecy that dooms him to kill his father and marry his mother. These two sources of fear reinforce each other: he suspects that as king he is somehow responsible for the plague, and he links that responsibility with the crimes he is fated to commit.

In Sophocles' play there is a thematic contrast between knowledge and ignorance, and a related contrast between sight and blindness. Oedipus, who earlier had sufficient insight to solve the Sphinx's riddle, sets himself to solve the new mystery of the plague, and succeeds by unremitting intelligent inquiry; but Tiresias, though blind, has an even sharper insight into the truth. In Seneca, however, Oedipus' inquiry is handled in a brief, perfunctory fashion in just a hundred lines (768–867), while Tiresias' blindness has exactly the opposite significance to what it had in Sophocles: "For one lacking sight, much of the truth lies hidden" (295). Indeed Seneca's play emphasises concealment and the "hidden." Kingship itself hides many evils behind its attractive facade (7). Creon finds the Delphic Oracle's response "entangled" and cryptic (212–216), whereas in Sophocles he thinks it clear (96, 106). Potentially revealing omens are concealed in the body and womb of the sacrificial heifer, and even when they are brought to light, their significance is hidden from the expert interpreter Tiresias. Truth must therefore be sought from an even remoter hiding place, the nether world. Even when plainly stated by the ghost of Laius (who first tries to conceal himself, 621), the truth remains hidden from Oedipus and the chorus (709) because it seems incredible. The chorus' own language of "unnatural parturition" and sons returned to the

mother's bosom (731, 746–747) has a significance hidden from it.

The deep disquiet of Seneca's Oedipus arises not only from his consciousness that much is hidden, but also from his position as king. In Senecan drama kingship is regularly a source of unease for the ruler, because he is a lightning rod for external dangers to the state, and also because he is inevitably oppressive to, and feared by, his subjects. Oedipus automatically assumes that Laius was feared in this way (243). The tree that dominates the Dircaean grove is emblematic of kingship: it both protects lesser trees and at the same time oppresses them with its heavy shade (542–544). Power cannot be shared (as *Thyestes* and *Phoenician Women* attest), so that the ruler is isolated from potential peers as well as from subjects, an isolation that fuels his paranoia. Once Oedipus comes to believe that Creon is plotting against him, he finds grounds for suspicion even in Creon's political inactivity, even indeed in his loyalty (682–686). This is the kind of paranoia depicted in Suetonius' and Tacitus' accounts of several Roman emperors. From Seneca on, tyranny is a recurrent theme in both historical and imaginative literature at Rome. The Nero of the *Octavia* echoes Oedipus verbally[1] as well as in some of his attitudes.

[1] *Quidquid excelsum est cadat*, *Oct* 471: *omne quod dubium est cadat*, *Oed* 702. It has been suggested that the Oedipus of Seneca's play was intended as a specific parallel to Nero, who killed his mother as Oedipus does in a sense (*Oed* 1044–1045), and allegedly committed incest with her. But the play was probably written before Nero's reign (see vol. 1 pp. 12–13). The similarity of Nero's actions to mythical precedents reflects the nature of power itself.

In an *Oedipus* play the Oedipal overtones of this view of power become apparent. As the possessor of political power both oppresses and fears those below him, so with the possessor of power in the family. Laius must either kill his son or be killed by him: it is not difficult to see this as a metaphor for any dominating father. Laius could not even share the road with an unknown young man (770). Seneca's play, then, combines political and psychological issues in a way that is based in Sophocles but goes beyond him.

The meanings attached to Oedipus' self-blinding are also very different in Sophocles and Seneca. In Sophocles Oedipus explains that he could not bear, for shame, to look upon his family, whether in the world of life or of death; but his self-blinding also fits the play's thematic association of blindness with inner sight, that is, knowledge of truth. In Seneca that thematic association disappears, as we have seen. His Oedipus fastens on blindness as an *adequate* self-punishment: death by the sword would be too brief, whereas blindness is a prolonged death, a death-in-life (936–949). In fact it places him in a no-man's-land between the world of the living (characterised by light and sight) and the dead (949–951): this is emotionally acceptable, since it isolates him from painful contact, and it also has connotations of ritual appropriateness, namely segregation of deathly pollution from the life-giving cosmos, rather as Laius said Oedipus should be denied connection with earth and sky (658; see Mader 1995).

Is Oedipus' self-punishment in any sense admirable? Responses to such questions necessarily vary according to the audience, particularly in the unstable world of Seneca's tragedies. The combination of intense passion with the

grotesque physicality of eyes starting from their sockets seems likely to alienate any possible admiration or even sympathy. Oedipus' vehement insistence on violent self-punishment is no more virtuous than that of Hercules in Act 5 of *Herc*, or than the vehement insistence on punishing *others* which we encounter so often among Seneca's *dramatis personae*.

There is a further aspect also. With the truth revealed, Oedipus seizes eagerly upon an identity as "the iniquity of the age" (875), a unique *monstrum* or prodigy; this identity offers renown, however terrible, and certainty after long doubt. Similarly he seizes on the unique punishment of self-blinding as appropriate to that identity (942–945). "Such vision as this is right for Oedipus" (1003); and in a sense he himself *becomes* Oedipus, the mythic figure of terrible deeds. Here we see that heroic *mis*-identification of the self with externals, with actions (often terrible), which lies at the heart of Senecan tragedy (see vol. 1 p. 7). As Medea achieves an untrammelled but insane selfhood by cutting her relationship to Jason and the children, so Oedipus achieves a kind of absoluteness in the isolation of his no-man's-land. Even as he goes into exile, the thought of relieving Thebes of the plague (1052–1058) is preceded and followed by concern about his own condition in exile. His self-absorption continues in *Phoenician Women*, where he says that while giving up kingship of Thebes, he retains kingship over himself (105)—by which he means not the philosophical self-governance defined in Ode 2 of *Thyestes*, but an intransigent isolation.

A striking difference between Seneca's play and Sophocles' lies in the scenes of animal sacrifice and necromancy,

which are at the heart of Seneca's play but have no counterpart in Sophocles. These Senecan scenes do not advance the plot, but rather magnify and intensify the horror of the situation. The sacrifice does so by showing Oedipus' terrible deeds reflected in the natural world. A connection with the outside world has already been established, of course, in descriptions of the plague, and even in the play's opening line, where the Titan-sun is as full of doubt as Oedipus himself. But the sacrifice and examination of entrails brings out fully the monstrosity of what has happened, thrusting in our face the corruption of the very organs of life. This scene is based on something much more substantial than the "pathetic fallacy," which imaginatively attributes human feelings to nonhuman nature. The practice of divination through viscera, especially the liver, was well established at Rome, with a college of 60 accredited diviners (*haruspices*) as well as many nonofficial practitioners; individual Roman officials and emperors often had a *haruspex* on their staff. Seneca's scene, then, is based on a religious practice that occurred regularly in the Roman world; and the notion it implies, of a physical interconnection between human and nonhuman worlds, would not have seemed alien to a Roman audience, even if some were intellectually sceptical of its validity.

Between the scenes of sacrifice and necromancy, and in the sharpest contrast to them, stands the choral hymn to Bacchus. Bacchus is here associated with nature's vitality, with all that is lost or polluted in Thebes: heaven's light, bright colours, vigorous ivy and springtime flowers, an abundance of water, milk, and wine. He meets the violence of the pirates not with violence but with the lively energy of nature, into which they too are drawn by metamorphosis

into dolphins (449–464).[2] The extreme contrast between this hymn and the juxtaposed scenes, then, suggests a dualistic opposition between the force of life and that of death. In this picture death, along with its concomitants such as disease, is not depicted as part of nature's processes, but rather as an opposing force that has its own separate dark world (the underworld) in contrast to the sunlit upper world of creative nature. For cogency's sake we might call these forces Eros and Thanatos, as long as we do not set too much store by the labels.

This dualistic construction of Eros and Thanatos could be explored in many directions. One important connection is with the dualism of comedy and tragedy as dramatic genres. The story that ends the Bacchus ode (487–503) is the archetypal story of countless comic dramas: the handsome, insouciant young man (here a god) rescues the imperilled maiden, falls in love with her and marries her, overcoming the hostility of the threatening father (usually hers, but sometimes his own, as here). This is a story about life processes in human society: the younger generation establishes itself as adult, and marriage allows and encourages procreative sex. Tragic drama, including Seneca's, is often concerned with the opposite story: the marriage bond is broken in some way (*Herc*, *Med*, *Pha*, *Ag*), young people are destroyed (add *Tro*, *Phoen*, *Thy*), the sexual drive is directed outside marriage (Agamemnon, Clytemnestra) or misdirected within the family (Phaedra, Oedipus). If Freud was not completely mistaken, the potential for such misdirection of Eros is present in each family that

[2] Some critics, however, find sinister overtones in this episode: see Mastronarde (1970) and Henry and Walker (1983).