The Daemon of Cithaeron in Seneca’s *Phoenissae*

Reading Seneca’s *Phoenissae* is problematic because it is evidently incomplete. However, the tragedy is sufficiently cohesive to permit analysis of thematic and structural elements. In particular, characters never address one another by name, but rather by the familial relationship of parent, child, or sibling; nor does any character refer to another by name, with the notable exception of Jocasta’s mention of Oedipus. Proper names are reserved for the dead. This restricted use of proper names of characters within the play brings into prominence the two instances when Oedipus addresses by name Cithaeron, when he addresses himself by name, and when Jocasta identifies him by name. The restricted use of proper names name in address transforms Cithaeron from a geographical entity into a character or force which hovers over the first half of the tragedy, and Oedipus becomes a part of its force. He belongs with the catalog of dead relatives associated with Cithaeron. Like a cult *daemon* he lies hidden on the mountain to overhear his sons fulfill his curse and battle for Thebes.

Oedipus immediately connects himself with Cithaeron when he claims it as his (*meus Cithaeron*, 13) and as his home (*sedes meas*, 30).He calls himself its *supplicium vetus* (33)*.* He characterizes this mountain as the site of brutal deaths in the Cadmean family: Acteon, Agave, Zethus, Ino*.* Oedipus apostrophizes and anthropomorphizes the site where he was intended to die and describes it as *semper cruente saeve crudelis ferox,/cum occidis et cum parcis* (34-35). Cithaeron is cruel and can both kill and spare. This is no longer a geographic locale, but a bloody and savage entity which kills and spares.

Oedipus’ personification of and identification with Cithaeron is strengthened when he objectifies himself speaks of himself in third person and expresses his internal struggle to die or live, to end his sons’ conflict or to propel them into battle. First, he paradoxically proclaims that Oedipus’ only safety is not to be saved for he must avenge his father’s death on Cithaeron (89-91). In the same vein, he later chastises himself for blinding and not killing himself (*audies verum, Oedipu*, 178). However, at Antigone’s urging to save Thebes, he relents; he will live and end the struggle over Thebes (*hic Oedipus Aegaea transnabit freta/iubente te*, 313-14). But he abruptly changes when a messenger arrives to request his assistance for Thebes. Oedipus’ response is to curse his sons and Jocasta (354-58) and to remain hidden on Cithaeron to hear the battle. Oedipus and Cithaeron will witness and nurture the continuing destruction of the Cadmean family.

The tragedy suddenly shifts from Oedipus to Jocasta outside Thebes. In her attempts to prevent the war between her sons, she evokes Oedipus. If the brothers will not listen to her, she asks *an dico et ex quo* (450), as though the mention of his name would terrify them and have the power to end the conflict. When attempts are futile she warns *occurrat tibi/nunc Oedipus, quo iudice erroris quoque/poenae petuntur* (553-55). Oedipus and his name are imbued with the destructive force he with which had characterized Cithaeron and with which he has joined himself.

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