

Oedipus' Fifth Ode and the Issue of Poetic Originality

1) Seneca's *Oedipus*: the fifth ode.

a) Sen. Oed. 980-997

*Fātīs āgīmūr: cēdītē fātīs;
non sollicitae possunt curae
mutare rati stamina fusi.
quicquid patimur mortale genus,
quicquid facimus venit ex alto,
servatque suae decreta colus
Lachesis dura revoluta manu.*

*Omnia secto tramite vadunt
primusque dies dedit extremum:
non illa deo vertisse licet
quae nexa suis currunt caulis.*

*it cuique ratus prece non ulla
mobilis ordo:
multis ipsum metuisse nocet,
multi ad fatum venere suum
dum fata timent.*

*Sonuere fores atque ipse suum.
duce non ullo molitur iter
luminis orbus.*

By Fate we are led: yield to Fate;
Solicitous cares cannot
Modify the firm spindle's threads.

Whatever we suffer, as mortal beings,
Whatever we do comes from above*,
And Lachesis preserves the decrees of her distaff
having rolled them back with her unyielding hand.

All things go through a carved path
And the first day has given the last:
The god is not allowed to alter those things
Which run connected by the causes that generate them.

It goes for each one established, by no prayer
Movable, the ordered sequence of events:
For many it was fear itself that brought about harm
Many came to their own fate,
While fearing fate.

The doors have made a sound and he himself
without a guide attempts his own path
bereft of his eyes.

2) On the purpose of the Stoic language

Sklenář, R. 2008, 183: "the purpose of its Stoic language is to underscore the difference between Stoicism's rational and optimistic cosmology and the universe to which humanity and divinity alike are consigned – a universe presided over by a sadistic and arbitrary Fate."

Sklenář, R. 2008, 183: "the fifth ode of Seneca's *Oedipus* emerges as a summation of Seneca's dystopia"

3) The spinning Fates

a) Ov. Tristia 5.10.45-46

*o duram Lachessin, quae tam grave sidus habenti
fila dedit vitae non breviora meae!*

Oh harsh Lachesis, when I have such adverse stars,
not to have granted a shorter thread to my life.
(Translation by A.S. Kline, 2003)

b) Sen. Apocol. 4. 1-2.

*At Lachesis redimita comas, ornata capillos,
Pieria crinem lauro frontemque coronans,
candida de niveo subtemina vellere sumit
felici moderanda manu, quae ducta colorem
assumpsere novum. Mirantur pensa sorores:
mutatur vilis pretioso lana metallo,
aurea formoso descendunt saecula filo.*

But Lachesis, her hair adorned, her tresses neatly bound,
Pierian laurel on her locks, her brows with garlands crowned,
Plucks me from out the snowy wool new threads as white as
snow,
Which handled with a happy touch change colour as they go,
Not common wool, but golden wire; the Sisters wondering gaze,
As age by age the pretty thread runs down the golden days.

*Nec modus est illis, felicia vellera ducunt
et gaudent implere manus, sunt dulcia pensa.
Sponte sua festinat opus nulloque labore
mollia contorto descendunt stamina fuso.
Vincunt Tithoni, vincunt et Nestoris annos.
Phoebus adest cantuque iuvat gaudetque futuris,
et laetus nunc plectra movet, nunc pensa
ministrat.
Detinet intentas cantu fallitque laborem.
Dumque nimis citharam fraternaue carmina
laudant,
plus solito nevere manus, humanaque fata
laudatum transcendit opus. "Ne demite, Parcae"
Phoebus ait "vincat mortalis tempora vitae
ille, mihi similis vultu similisque decore
nec cantu nec voce minor. Felicia lassis
saecula praestabit legumque silentia rumpet.
[...]Haec Apollo. At Lachesis, quae et ipsa
homini formosissimo faveret, fecit illud plena
manu, et Neroni multos annos de suo donat.*

World without end they spin away, the happy fleeces pull;
What joy they take to fill their hands with that delightful wool!
Indeed, the task performs itself: no toil the spinners know:
Down drops the soft and silken thread as round the spindles go;
Fewer than these are Tithon's years, not Nestor's life so long.
Phoebus is present: glad he is to sing a merry song;
Now helps the work, now full of hope upon the harp doth play;
The Sisters listen to the song that charms their toil away.
They praise their brother's melodies, and still the spindles run,
Till more than man's allotted span the busy hands have spun.
Then Phoebus says, "O sister Fates! I pray take none away,
But suffer this one life to be longer than mortal day.
Like me in face and lovely grace, like me in voice and song,
He'll bid the laws at length speak out that have been dumb so
long,
Will give unto the weary world years prosperous and bright.
[...] Thus Apollo. But Lachesis, quite as ready to cast a
favourable eye on a handsome man, spins away by the
handful, and bestows years and years upon Nero out
of her own pocket. (Translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1920)

c) Ov. Tr. 5.3. 19-20:

*scilicet hanc legem nentes fatalia Parcae
stamina bis genito bis cecinere tibi*

This was the destiny for sure that the Parcae, who spun
the fatal thread, twice ordained for you, at your double birth.
(Translation by A.S. Kline, 2003)

d) Tib. 1.7. 1-2

*Hunc cecinere diem Parcae fatalia nentes
Stamina, non ulli dissoluenda deo.*

The Fates sang of this day as they wove the thread,
one that can't be unwound by any of the gods.
(Translation by A.S. Kline, 2001)

- e) Cf. also Iliad 24. 209-210, where Hecuba speaks of Hector's wretched destiny as something that the Moira spun (the verb used is *epineo*), when Hecuba was giving birth to him, and Catull. 64. 305-382, where the Parcae spin Achilles' destiny.

4) Weaving as a metaphor for elaborate poetic production

a) Rosati, P.1999, 245.

It is common knowledge that the linked metaphors of spinning and weaving are among the most widely diffused in the Greek and Latin vocabulary for literary activities and there is no need to compile an exhaustive list. Homer already uses the image of weaving thoughts and words to refer to a conceptually elaborate and rhetorically effective speech, but it is above all in Greek lyric poetry that the image of weaving poetry is widely found. [...] There are many examples from Pindar and Bacchylides through to the "woven tale" of Callimachus. Besides the specific image of weaving that of interlacing also appears in Pindar to express the idea of the elaborated composition, of the art of placing words together. [...].

In Latin the most common image for writing poetry is *deducere (carmen)*, drawn as is well known from the technique of spinning; the most famous example is the programmatic drawing of the sixth eclogue, where Apollo dissuades the poet Virgil from singing of epic "kings and battles."

b) Virg. Buc. 6.2-4

*Cum canerem reges et proelia, Cynthus aurem
uellit, et admonuit: "Pastorem, Tityre, pinguis
pascere oportet ovis, deductum dicere carmen."*

When I sang of kings and battles the Cynthian grasped
my ear and warned me: 'Tityrus, a shepherd
should graze fat sheep, but sing a slender song.'
(Translation by A.S. Kline, 2001)

c) Ovid. Met. 1.1-4

*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas
corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illas)
adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi
ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen!*

d) Varro, L.L. 7.36.

*Antiqui poetas vates appellabant a versibus
viendis*

5) Metapoetic use of avian and sailing imagery

a) Hor. Carm. 4.2. 1-4 and 4.25-32

*Pindarum quisquis studet aemulari,
Iulle, ceratis ope Daedalea
nititur pennis vitreo daturus
nomina ponto. [...]
multa Dircaeum levat aura cycnum,
tendit, Antoni, quotiens in altos
nubium tractus: ego apis Matinae
more modoque
grata carpentis thyma per laborem
plurimum circa nemus uvidique
Tiburis ripas operosa parvos
carmina fingo.*

b) Prop. 3.3 21-24.

*cur tua praescriptos evectast pagina gyros?
non est ingenii cumba gravanda tui
alter remus aquas alter tibi radat harenas.
tutus eris: medio maxima turba marist.*

c) Hor. Carm. 4.14.1-4

*Phoebus, volentem proelia me loqui
victas et urbis increpuit lyra,
ne parva Tyrrhenum per aequor
vela darem.*

6) Poetic pathways

a) Prop. 3.1.14.

non datur ad Musas currere lata via.

b) Prop. 3.3.25-26.

*dixerat, et plectro sedem mihi monstrat eburno,
quo nova muscoso semita facta solo est.*

c) Virg. Georg. 3.8-9.

*Temptanda via est qua me quoque possim
tollere humo, victorque virum volitare per ora*

d) Cf. also Pindar (O.6.23, I.5.23, Paeon 7b.11)

I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms. You, gods, since you are the ones who alter these, and all other things, inspire my attempt, and spin out a continuous thread of words, from the world's first origins to my own time.

(Translation by A.S. Kline)

The ancients used to call poets *vates* from the activity of twisting together/weaving lines.

Whoever attempts to compete with Pindar, o Iulus, flies with the wax wings made by Daedalus and is destined to give his name to the sea. [...]

Much winds sustain the flight of the Theban swan, and waft him, oh Antony, all the times is led high in the sky: as for me, in the guise and manner of the Matine bee, which gathers the pleasant thyme through much toil, by the groves and the riverbanks of the well-watered Tiber, I modestly fashion an elaborate song.

Why is your verse wrenched from its destined track? Your mind's little boat's not to be freighted. Scrape an oar through the water, the other through sand: you'll be safe: the big storm's out at sea.

(Translation by A.S. Kline, 2008)

Apollo, as I was planning to speak of battles and conquered cities, reproached me with his lyre, warning me off against entrusting my small sails to the Tyrrhenian sea.

It was never given us to reach the Muses by a broad road.
(Translation by A.S. Kline, 2008)

He said it then showed me a place, with his ivory plectrum, where a new path had been made in mossy ground. (Translation by A.S. Kline, 2008)

I must try a path, by which I too can rise from the earth and fly, victorious, from men's lips.
(Translation by A.S. Kline, 2001)

7) Bacchus and Apollo gods of poetry

a) Ov. Am. 3.8. 23

*ille ego Musarum purus Phoebique sacerdos
ad rigidas canto carmen inane fores?*

Am I, the pure priest of Apollo and the Muses, to sing
idle songs at unyielding doors? (A.S. Kline 2001)

b) Prop. 3.2.9

*Carminis interea nostri redeamus in orbem, [...]
miremur, nobis et Baccho et Apolline dextro,
turba puellarum si mea verba colit?*

Let me return, meanwhile, to the world of my poetry:
no wonder if, befriended by Bacchus and Phoebus, a crowd of
girls should cherish my words?

(Translated by A.S. Kline 2002)

On Apollo, see also Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo* ll. 108-112 and *Aitia*, frag. 1 and Virg. *Ecl.* 6. 3 ff. among many others. On Bacchus, see also Hor. *Carm.* 2.19 and Prop. 3.17.

8) Virgil's Gallus

a) Sen. Oed. 980 ff.

Fatis agimur: cedite fatis;

*non sollicitae possunt curae
mutare rati stamina fusi.*

[...]

non illa deo uertisse licet [...]

b) Virg. Ecl. 10. 62-69

*"Iam neque Hamadryades rursus nec carmina nobis
ipsa placent; ipsae rursus concedite, siluae.*

Non illum nostri possunt mutare labores,

[...]

Omnia uincit Amor: et nos cedamus Amori."

"Now again neither Hamadryads, nor songs please me: once
more you yourselves depart, woods.

Our labors cannot modify that god.

[...]

Love wins over everything: and let us yield to Love."

By **Fate(s)** we are led: yield to Fate(s);

Sollicitous cares cannot

Modify the firm spindle's threads.

The god is not allowed to alter those things [...]

9) Oedipus' characterization

a) Soph. Oed. 994-996

*εἶπε γὰρ με Λοξίας ποτὲ
χρῆναι μιγῆναι μητρὶ τήμαυτοῦ τό τε
πατρῶον αἶμα χερσὶ ταῖς ἐμαῖς ἐλεῖν.*

Loxias once said that I
was fated to lie with my mother,
and to spill my father's blood with my own hand.

b) Sen. Oed. 15 ff.

*infanda timeo: ne mea genitor manu
perimatur; hoc me Delphicae laurus monent,
aliudque nobis maius indicunt scelus.
est maius aliquod patre mactato nefas?*

I fear the unspeakable: My father slain
by my hand. The Delphic laurels warn me
and announce* another, greater crime.
Is there a greater sin than patricide?

* *Indico, ere* = also "to impose, enjoin, inflict." Cf. Lewis &
Short, *A Latin Dictionary*.

10) The announcement of Oedipus' self-blinding

a) Sen. Oed. 878-9

*Redde nunc animos pares,
Nunc aliquid aude sceleribus dignum tui!
I, perge, proper regiam gressu pete.*

Now make your valor match,
Now dare a deed worthy of your crimes.
Go, hurry, rush to the palace. (Translated by Boyle, 2011)

b) Sen. Oed. 926

Quid poenas moror?

Why put off punishment? (Translated by Boyle, 2011)

c) Sen. Oed. 933

*Nunc redde Agauen. "Anime, quid mortem
times?"*

Now make Agave return. "Why fear death, my soul?"
(Translated by Boyle, 2011)

d) Sen. Oed. 942-951

*Solvendo non est illa quae leges ratas
Natura in uno vertit Oedipoda, novos
commenta partus, supplices eadem meis
novetur. iterum vivere atque iterum mori
liceat, renasci semper ut totiens nova
supplicia pendas— utere ingenio, miser.
quod saepe fieri non potest fiat diu;
mors eligatur longa. quaeratur uia
qua nec sepultis mixtus et uiuis tamen
exemptus erres: morere, sed citra patrem.*

Let nature not be annulled, whose fixed laws
change only for Oedipus. Let that inventor
of new births find new punishments for me.
You must live again, you must die again
and be eternally reborn - to be punished
Each time anew. Use your wits, you wretch.
What cannot happen often must be slow.
Choose a long death. Find a way not to mingle
with the dead, and yet wonder
quite removed from the living. Die - this side of your father.
(Translated by Boyle, 2011)

11) The play is over (?)

a) Sen. Oed. 998. *Bene habet, peractum est:*

All is well, it is done.

b) Sen. Med. 1019. *Bene est, peractum est.*

All is well, it is done.

c) Sen. Thy. 889. *Bene est, abunde est*

All is well, it is enough.

d) Sen. Oed. 998. *vultus Oedipodam hic
debet*

This face befits an Oedipus (Translated by Boyle, 2011)

12) Jocasta

a) Sen. Oed. 1005-1006

*Jocasta vecors, qualis attonita and furens
Cadmea mater*

Jocasta, like the frenzied Cadmean mother
(Translated by Boyle, 2011)

b) Sen. Oed. 1031

*Mors placet: mortis via
quaeratur – agetum, commode matri manum,
si parricida es: restat hoc operi ultimum.*

Death is resolved; I must find a way.
Come, lend mother a hand,
if you're a parricide - finish your work.
(Translated by Boyle, 2011)

13) Oedipus' protest

Sen. Oed. 1044ff.

*Fatidice te te praesidem ueri deum
compello. solum debui fatis patrem.
bis parricida plusque quam timui nocens
matrem peremi, scelere confecta est meo.
o Phoebé mendax fata superauí impia.*

I call on you, you, god presider of truth,
Teller of Fate. My father alone I owed to Fate.
I'm a double parricide, and guiltier than I
feared: I killed my mother, by my crimes she has been destroyed.
Oh deceitful Phoebus! I've surpassed the impious fates!

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*Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.