

“The Complex Oedipus: Who Is(n’t) Oedipus in the *Thebaid*?”

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1. CAPANEUS: *Theb.* 10.921-26¹

coeperat Ogygiae supra fastigia turris
arcanum mugire polus caelumque tenebris
auferrī: **tenet ille tamen, quas non videt, arces,**
fulguraque attritis quotiens micuere procellis,
‘his,’ ait, ‘in Thebas, his iam decet ignibus uti,
hinc renovare faces lassamque accendere quercum.’

(cf. 2.55-57, 10.472, 12.260, 12.286)

*Above the summit of the Ogygian tower the heavens began
a secret rumbling and the sky to be withdrawn in darkness.
Yet Capaneus still grasps the heights he no longer sees,
and whenever lightning flashes from the chafed tempests:
‘These flames,’ he says, ‘ay, these, it now beseems me to
use against Thebes, from them to renew my torch and
kindle my wearied oak.’*

2. POLYNICES: *Theb.* 1.312-16, 326-35, 408-20 + 426-27

(A) Interea patriis olim **vagus exsul** ab oris
Oedipodionides furto deserta pererrat
Aoniae. iam iamque animis male debita regna
concipit, et longum signis cunctantibus annum
stare gemit...

(B) ...seu praevia ducit Erinys,
seu fors illa viae, sive hac immota vocabat
Atropos. Ogygiis ululata furoribus antra
deserit et pingues Baccheo sanguine colles. (329)
inde plagam, qua molle sedens in plana Cithaeron
porrigitur lassumque inclinat ad aequora montem,
praeterit. hinc arte scopuloso in limite pendens
infames Scirone petras Scyllaeaque rura
purpureo regnata seni ditemque Corinthon
linquit et in mediis audit duo litora campis. (335)

(C) ...hic vero ambobus rabiem Fortuna cruentam
attulit: haud passi sociis defendere noctem (409)
culminibus; paulum **alternis in verba minasque**
cunctantur, mox ut **iactis sermonibus** irae
intumuere satis, tum vero erectus uterque
exsertare umeros nudamque lacescere pugnam.
celsior ille gradu procera in membra simulque
integer annorum; sed non et viribus infra (415)
Tydea fert animus, tososque infusa per artus
maior in exiguo regnabat corpore virtus.
iam crebros ictus ora et cava tempora circum
obnixi ingeminant, telorum aut grandinis instar
Rhipaeae, flexoque genu vacua ilia tundunt... (420)
...crutatur et intima vultus
unca manus penitusque oculis cedentibus intrat.

(cf. 2.505, 2.555-56, 4.375-76)

*Meanwhile, long now a wandering exile from his native
land, the son of Oedipus stealthily strays over lonely
reaches of Aonia. Already his mind envisages the
royalty overdue and groans at the long year’s halt and
the loitering of the constellations.*

*Does a guiding Fury lead him on, or is it the chance of
the road, or was inexorable Atropos summoning him
that way? He leaves the glades where Ogygian madness
howls and hills fat with Bacchic gore. Thence he passes
the tract where Cithaeron stretches out, gently sinking
into the flat, and inclines his weary steep to the sea.
From here the rocky path is high and narrow. He leaves
Sciron’s ill-famed cliffs and Scylla’s fields where the
purple ancient ruled and wealthy Corinth; and in mid
land hears two shores.*

*Here Fortune brought bloody rage to both [Tydeus and
Polynices]. They brooked not to ward off the night under
a shared roof. For a brief while they delay, exchanging
verbal threats; presently, when their wrath had swelled
enough with hurling of speech, each rose and bared his
shoulders and challenged to naked combat. The one
walked taller, long of limb and in prime of years; but no
lesser strength backs Tydeus’ bold spirit, and valour
instilled through every member reigned all the greater
in his small frame. Now strenuously they shower blows
thick and fast on face and hollow temples, like darts or
Rhipaeae hail, or on bended knee pound unprotected
loins. Even as when his lustral terms return to the
Pisaeae Thunderer and the dust warms with the crude
sweat of men—but yonder the discord of the crowd
spurs on the tender youth...The clawing hand searches
the inmost places of the visage and enters deep into the
yielding eyes.*

¹ All text and translations from Shackleton Bailey (2003) with minor revisions.

3. PHORBAS: *Theb.* 7.245-48, 359-73

(A)...iuxtaque comes quo **Laius** ibat armigero; nunc virgo senem regina **veretur**. quae sic orsa prior: 'spesne obstatura Pelasgis haec vexilla, **pater**?...

(B) Dicenti **maduere genae, vultumque per omnem pallor iit**, vocisque repens singultus apertum (360) intercepti iter; refovet frigentis amicum pectus alumna senis; redit atque exile profatur: 'o mihi sollicitum decus ac suprema voluptas, Antigone! seras tibi demoror improbus umbras, fors eadem scelera et caedes visurus avitas, (365) **donec te thalamis habilem integramque resignem**: hoc satis, et fessum vita dimittite, Parcae. sed dum labor iners, quanti (nunc ecce reviso) transabiere duces: Clonin atque in terga comantes non ego Abantiadas, non te, saxosa Caryste, (370) non humiles Aegae altumque Capherea dixi. et iam **acies obtunsa negat**, cunctique resistunt, et tuus armatis iubet ecce silentia frater.'

4. OEDIPUS: *Theb.* 1.46-87

Impia iam merita scrutatus lumina dextra merserat aeterna damnatum nocte pudorem **Oedipodes** longaue animam sub morte trahebat. illum indulgentem tenebris imaeque recessu sedis inaspectos caelo radiisque penates (50) servantem tamen assiduis circumvolat alis saeva dies animi, scelerumque in pectore Dirae. tunc vacuos orbes, crudum ac miserabile vitae supplicium, ostentat caelo manibusque cruentis pulsat inane solum saevaue ita voce precatur: (55) '**Di**, sontes animas angustaque Tartara poenis qui regitis, tuque umbrifero Styx livida fundo, quam video, multumque mihi **consueta vocari** annue, Tisiphone, perversaque vota secunda: si bene quid merui, si me de matre cadentem (60) **fovisti gremio** et traiectum vulnere plantas firmasti, si stagna peti Cirrhaea bicorni interfusa iugo, possem cum degere falso contentus Polybo, trifidaeque in Phocidos arto longaezum implicui regem secuique tremantis (65) ora senis, dum quaero patrem, si Sphingos iniquae callidus ambages te praemonstrante resolvi, si dulces furias et lamentabile matris conubium gavisus ini noctemque nefandam saepe tuli natosque tibi, scis ipsa, paravi, (70) mox avidus poenae digitis cedentibus ultro incubui miseraue oculos in matre reliqui: exaudi, si digna precor quaeque ipsa furenti

Beside [Antigone] in attendance is Laius' onetime armour-bearer [Phorbas]; now the royal maiden reverses him, an old man. She speaks first: 'Father, is there hope that these banners will withstand the Pelasgi?

As he spoke his cheeks grew moist and a pallor went through all his face, a sudden sobbing interrupted the passage of his voice. His nursling revives the chilled ancient's loving heart. He returns and weakly speaks: 'Antigone, my anxious pride and last pleasure, all too long do I delay for your sake my belated end (perhaps to see the same crimes and ancestral deeds of blood), waiting to give you up ready for wedlock and unharmed. That is enough; and discharge me, Parcae, from the life I am weary of. But while I sink helpless, what mighty leaders (now I see them again, look!) have passed by! I said naught of Clonin and the long-haired sons of Abas, naught of you, rocky Carystos, nor of lowlying Aegae and lofty Caphereus. And now my dull eyes refuse and they all stay still and your brother, see, orders the army silent.'

Oedipus had already probed his impious eyes with guilty hand and sunk deep his shame condemned to everlasting night; he dragged out his life in a long-drawn death. He devotes himself to darkness, and in the lowest recess of his abode he keeps his home on which the rays of heaven never look; and yet the fierce daylight of his soul flits around him with unflagging wings and the Avengers of his crimes are in his heart. Then does he show the sky his vacant orbs, the raw, pitiable punishment of survival, and strike the hollow earth with bleeding hands, and utter this wrathful prayer: 'Gods that rule guilty souls and Tartarus too small for punishments; and Styx, livid in your shadowed depth, you that I see; and Tisiphone, on whom I so often call: give me your nod and favour my warped desire. If I have done aught of service, if you cherished me in your lap when I dropped from my mother and strengthened me when they pierced my feet; if I sought Girrha's pool poured out between two mountain peaks and in quest of father (though I might have lived content with the impostor Polybus) entwined the aged king in that narrow place of triply sun-dered Phocis and cut off the trembling old man's head; if under your tutelage I had cunning to solve the riddle of the cruel Sphinx; if I joyfully entered sweet madness and my mother's lamentable wedlock, enduring many a night of evil and making children for you, as well you know; if thereafter, avid for punishment, I pressed down upon yielding fingers and left my eyes upon my hapless mother:

subiceres. orbum visu regnisque carentem
 non regere aut dictis maerentem flectere adorti, (75)
 quos genui quocumque toro; quin ecce superbi
 —pro dolor!—et nostro iamdudum funere reges
 insultant tenebris gemitusque odere paternos.
 hisne etiam funestus ego? et videt ista deorum
 ignavus genitor? tu saltem debita vindex (80)
 huc ades et totos in poenam ordire nepotes.
 indue quod madidum tabo diadema cruentis
 unguibus abripui, votisque instincta paternis
 i media in fratres, generis consortia ferro
 dissiliant. da, Tartarei regina barathri, (85)
 quod cupiam vidisse nefas. nec tarda sequetur
 mens iuvenum: modo digna veni, mea pignora nosces.

5. JUPITER: *Theb.* 1.197-225

At Iovis imperiis rapidi super atria caeli
 lectus concilio divum convenerat ordo
 interiore polo. spatiis hinc omnia iuxta,
 primaeque occiduaeque domus et fusa sub omni (200)
 terra atque unda die. mediis sese arduus infert
 ipse deis, placido quatiens tamen omnia vultu,
 stellantique locat solio; nec protinus ausi
 caelicolae, veniam donec pater ipse sedendi
 tranquilla iubet esse manu. mox turba vagorum (205)
 semideum et summis cognati Nubibus Amnes
 et compressa metu servantes murmura Venti
 aurea tecta replent. mixta convexa deorum
 maiestate tremunt, **radiant** maiore sereno
 culmina et **arcano florentes lumine** postes. (210)
 postquam iussa quies siluitque exterritus orbis,
 incipit ex alto (grave et immutabile sanctis
 pondus adest verbis, et vocem Fata sequuntur):
 ‘**Terrarum** delicta nec exsaturabile Diris
 ingenium mortale queror. quonam usque nocentum
 exigar in poenas? taedet saevire corusco (216)
 fulmine, iam pridem Cyclopum operosa fatiscunt
 bracchia et Aeoliis desunt incudibus ignes.
 atque adeo tuleram falso rectore solutos
 Solis equos, caelumque rotis errantibus uri, (220)
 et Phaëthontea mundum squalere favilla.
 nil actum, neque tu valida quod cuspide late
 ire per illicitum pelago, germane, dedisti.
 nunc **geminas punire domos, quis sanguinis auctor
 ipse ego, descendo.** (225)

*Hear oh hear, if my prayer be worthy and such as you
 yourself might whisper to my frenzy. Those I begot (no
 matter in what bed) did not try to guide me, bereft of
 sight and sceptre, or sway my grieving with words. Nay
 behold (ah agony!), in their pride, kings this while by my
 calamity, they even mock my darkness, impatient of their
 father’s groans. Even to them am I unclean? And does
 the sire of the gods see it and do naught? Do you at
 least, my rightful champion, come hither and range all
 my progeny for punishment. Put on your head this gore-
 soaked diadem that I tore off with my bloody nails.
 Spurred by a father’s prayers, go against the brothers,
 go between them, let steel make partnership of blood fly
 asunder. Queen of Tartarus’ pit, grant the wickedness I
 would fain see. Nor will the young men’s spirit be slow
 to follow. Come you but worthy, you shall know them my
 true sons.’*

*Now at Jove’s decree the chosen hierarchy of the gods
 had assembled in council in the hall of the whirling
 firmament, at the sky’s centre. From this point all is at
 close distance, the halls of rising and setting, land and
 sea spread out under every heaven. He himself proceeds
 towering through the midst of the deities, making all
 things quake though his countenance be serene, and
 places himself on his starry throne. Nor dare heaven’s
 denizens follow suit straightway, but wait until the
 Father himself with tranquil gesture orders licence to be
 seated. Presently a crowd of wandering demigods and
 Rivers kin to the lofty Clouds and Winds keeping their
 roars under fear’s restraint fill the golden edifice. The
 dome trembles with the mingled majesty of the deities,
 the towers shine in a larger blue, and the portals bloom
with a mystic light. Silence was ordered and mute in
 terror fell the world. From on high he begins. His holy
 words have weight heavy and immutable and the Fates
 follow his voice: ‘Earth’s sins and the mind of man that
 no demons of vengeance can satiate I do protest. How
 much longer shall I be driven to punish the guilty?
 Weary am I of raging with flashing bolt, the busy arms
 of the Cyclopes have long been faint and the Aeolian
 anvils out of fire. And indeed I suffered the loosing of
 the Sun’s horses under a false driver, the burning of the
 sky as the wheels ran wild, the world caked with
 Phaëthon’s ashes. It availed not; nor yet that you, my
 brother, with your strong spear let the sea go at large
 through territory not its own. Now I descend to punish
 two houses, my own blood.*

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