

Seneca's Oedipus: "The Only Voice I Hear Is My Own"

The subtitle of this talk is taken from Wolfgang Rihm's opera *Oedipus*, based on Sophocles' text, where Oedipus speaks of his feelings of alienation from Theban society. However, the sentiment he expresses there—"the only voice I hear is my own"—has little relevance to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, where various people come to Oedipus with news to which he listens and is destroyed because of what they tell him. (Teiresias' early prediction of his eventual doom marks a notable exception to Oedipus' habit of good listening to others.) Yet Rihm's Oedipus offers a close match to Seneca's alienated Oedipus, who pays markedly little attention to what others tell him but learns rather by a process of listening to *himself*. In this regard, Seneca's Oedipus resembles some of the protagonists of Shakespeare's greatest dramas.

Seneca's influence on Elizabethan drama has been well documented. For example, A.J. Boyle points out that Kyd, Marlowe, Shakespeare and other Elizabethans found Seneca's declamatory style exemplary for their own declamatory age. In this talk, I explore an aspect of Seneca's possible influence on the Elizabethans that has thus far gone unnoticed: his habit of learning by self-overhearing rather than by listening to others. As Harold Bloom has argued, the extraordinary consciousness of Shakespeare's most profound creations—characters like Hamlet, Cleopatra, and Iago—is exhibited most vividly through their habit self-overhearing, by which they apprehend an unexpected otherness. Such self-overhearing is exemplified most vividly through the soliloquy, of which Hamlet, for example, speaks seven over the course of his four-thousand-line play. Self-overhearing—learning by listening to the self—is characteristic also of Seneca's Oedipus, who utters nine soliloquies or asides over the course of a drama just a little bit over a thousand lines. Through soliloquy, Oedipus' mind grapples with itself and reveals a consciousness bifurcated between mask and man, between tyrant of Thebes and inner man.

Works Cited

Bloom, Harold, *How to Read and Why* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Boyle, A.J., *Seneca: Oedipus. Edited with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Rihm, Wolfgang. *Oedipus* (Arthaus Musik, 2013).