

Nescient Oedipus: Contested Selfhoods of Seneca's Unwitting Dramaturge

This paper will explore the manner in which Seneca's *Oedipus* expands upon Seneca's philosophy on the role of an internalized Other in the construction of the Self. Through a close reading of Oedipus' appropriation of Stoic technologies of the Self, I will demonstrate how *Oedipus* problematizes Seneca's arguments regarding the internalization of a *vir bonus* as a vehicle in the formation of the Stoic sage. The conclusions will not only further refine recent approaches to Seneca's tragic corpus, but also work toward resolving the perceived tension between the author's philosophical and tragic works.

Seneca's Stoicism, as developed in *Epistles* and *De Ira*, emphasizes a cultivation of the Self through reflexive strategies of self-command, self-monitoring, and self-naming (Star 2006). The Stoic *proficiens*, to follow Bartsch's use of Frankfurt's terminology, internalizes an ideal Other, a *vir bonus*, to generate second-order desires, that is, desires about which desires to have. The presence of the internalized second-order Other drives the first-order Self to accomplish the Stoic's ideal *telos*: "the congruence of first- and second-order desires" (Bartsch 2006).

Within the scope of Senecan tragedy, Bartsch's appropriation of Frankfurt's terminology in analyzing Seneca's *Medea* has proved quite fruitful. In this work, Medea vows to "become" the sorceress of literary fame (*Medea fiam*, 171) —hence Wilamowitz's dictum that she had "read" Euripides' *Medea*— as she achieves her goal (*Medea nunc sum*, 910), but does so through a perversion of Stoic techniques. Bartsch concludes that the heroine functions as a "sobering counter-example" as her second-order framework is constructed to fulfill undeveloped, first-order desires.

Medea's ability to assume an "authorial role" in constructing herself and her tragedy is predicated on the fact that she is intimately aware of what it means to "become Medea"

(Schiesaro 2003). While Medea knew her exact mytho-literary identity and was able to mold herself accordingly, Seneca's Oedipus has either not "read" or not comprehended Sophokles. In a virtuoso meta-textual machination by Seneca, Oedipus, ironically true to literary form in his lack of self-knowledge of his literary-self, unwittingly constructs himself and his tragedy. Oedipus insists that he is only the riddle-solver and, thus, throughout Seneca's *Oedipus*, the tragic hero, in the face of self-doubt, internalizes the Oedipus of the Sphinx as his *vir bonus* in order to fulfill his first-order desire to avoid his oracle.

To construct his second-order framework and quell the anxiety derived from Apollo's oracle, Oedipus, in the opening monologue, relies upon a variety of reflexive techniques --most notably self-naming-- as he recounts his victory over the Sphinx. Throughout the work, each time Oedipus engages in self-naming, this self-directed action is intimately connected to his perception of his tragic identity (216, 943, 1003). In fact, this journey from ignorance to knowledge can be charted through this technique as Oedipus, after his self-blinding, says, "*Vultus Oedipodam hic decet*" (1003). This marks not only his recognition of the proper literary Oedipus but also a merger between the Self of literary precedent and immediate dramatic context.

Oedipus engages in Stoic reflexive strategies to construct a second-order framework derived from a misconception of his proper identity within the mytho-literary tradition. In effect, Oedipus' lack of self-knowledge, that is, the fact that he already has accomplished what he is seeking to avoid, drives him toward an even more destructive identity. Moreover, Oedipus' blinded construction of a second-order framework for the purpose of achieving his first-order desire of avoiding parricide and incest irrespective of his true identity not only prolongs the Theban plague but also extends his ignorance of himself. Thus, the tragedy of *Oedipus* provides

an *imago* of Senecan philosophy that underscores the critical importance of self-knowledge prior to the construction of an internalized *vir bonus*, due to the tragic implications of improper self-identification.

While the exact nature of the relationship between Seneca's philosophy and tragedy is hotly contested, this paper works to further Star's argument in support of a "dialogical relationship" between the genres as he asserts that "Seneca is neither negating, inverting, nor denying his philosophical ideals; rather, he is expanding them" (Star 2006). The reading offered above demonstrates that Seneca's tragedies, rather than mere refutation or proof of orthodox Stoic doctrine, provide a setting in which the epistemology of specific ethical strategies might be explored.

Bibliography

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