

Look No Further Than Yourself: Seneca's Oedipus, Deoculation and the Futility of Introspection

Seneca's Oedipus, who, although attempting to do his best for his family and state, lives his life blindly, unable to see how he might escape the influence of his appetites and desires. This blindness is realized in the last act of the tragedy, when Oedipus violently tears out his eyes, and, by doing so, attempts to take control of his own body, which, up to this point, had been variously subject to his urges towards violence, tyranny, and incest. In this last desperate attempt to master his desires and urges, Oedipus achieves merely fleeting happiness and contentment. He declares himself victor in his internal war against himself even as he's vomiting blood from his wounds and scraping the cavities where his eyes once were. In this one vignette, Oedipus unknowingly acknowledges, acts out, and falls prey to the very demons that pursue him: patricide, incest, misunderstanding, and ignorance. The extrusion of the eyes, which, in Sophocles' tragedy, functions as a symbol of enlightenment, serves in Seneca's tragedy as the opposite: it allows Oedipus to further ignore his inability to see, understand, and thus he continues to lack control over any aspect of his life or body at all.

I first examine Oedipus' futile attempt at understanding and meting out a suitable punishment for himself for the sins he's committed, a situation which progresses from a somewhat benign image of a man grieving to that of one hemorrhaging gore and blood from his face, a profound misunderstanding of what he must do to expiate for his sins. It is here that we see the beginnings of Oedipus' perception that his current behavior, lamenting what he's done to his family and Thebes as a whole, is inadequate. It is through this grieving process that Oedipus decides, though, that the tears aren't heavy enough to serve as payment for the wrong he did, and he plaintively asks "and is it enough to weep?" (*et satis flere est?* 954). Apparently, not, because, in the very next line, he decides that his tears are a "trivial" or too "light" a liquid (*levis*), and he

needs to give up something more heavy and expensive, only to look no further than the source of tears and the subject of this clause, his eyes.

As he approaches the gruesome task of tearing out his eyes, he sheds all caution and reason, embodying the rage and violence he must deploy to accomplish it and, in so doing, displays the rage and ignorance that drove him to kill his father.. To do so, it becomes more and more evident that Oedipus must go to war with himself, as the competing impulses for self-preservation and self-punishment begin to play out physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and it is at this point we see the violence inherent in the king that allowed him to slay his father. We can see this battle raging on his face, the casualties of which are apparent in his eyes, on his cheeks, and throughout his whole visage (957-64). His cheeks are subject, and “they burn with savage fire” (*ardent ... igne truculento genae; 958*). Though the “*ardent*” and “*igne*” certainly indicate that he’s flushed, the metaphor further implies that the embattled king’s face is setting itself on fire, as if someone were burning it to the ground in an act of war. At the very least, the language of burning indicates an extremely heightened emotional state, which, according to Stoic doctrine, Oedipus should at least attempt to master, and, at the very most, it indicates Oedipus is self-destructing from the inside out, burning himself in an emotional act of self-immolation.

The burning imagery, which, as I described above, can be read as a self-immolation, is also an indication of the erotic, a desire join sexually with his own flesh and a metaphorical expression of the incest of which he’s so ashamed: “but opposite, the eyes stand out fiercely and track their hands intently, reciprocally.” There is a definite antagonistic, but at the same time, erotic nature to how Oedipus’ body is behaving toward itself. The body parts are attacking one another, but, at the same time, they want to join together. His struggle is playing out on his face and hands. There are destructive, gleeful, and erotic impulses at work within Oedipus, as his eyes

rush to meet their wounds, and he persists in the very behavior he is so desperately trying to stop and atone for: to attack and to engage in perverse sex with the self or others, to eradicate identity, to be blind, to have no self-awareness.