

The Peril of the Light: The Long and Tortured Road to Enlightenment in Seneca's *Oedipus*

In Seneca's last act of *Oedipus*, when the messenger declares Oedipus the victor after he's torn out his own eyes, one can't help but think that the messenger, at the very least, has a warped sense of what a victor is. There Oedipus stands, vomiting forth blood and gore from his eye sockets, and declares "spare my fatherland, I pray: now I've done just things, I've payed the penalties that are owed; I've found a night fit for my marriage bed" (974-7). Yet Oedipus is victorious, because he's managed to carve out (literally) his punishment for the wrongs he's committed as well as a space for himself to recede from the horrors and turmoil of his life at Thebes. Finally, through the intentional and violent deprivation of his own sight, he can begin to achieve some sort of enlightenment and peace. While Oedipus may never entirely rise above his own corporeality and emotional vicissitudes, his auto-deoculation frees him from what the messenger calls "the peril of the light" (*periculum lucis*, 973), the light which, up to this point, has so corrupted and enslaved him, his family, and his kingdom. We don't usually associate light with danger or corrupting and enslaving forces, but if we think about light in terms of sight, and what light reveals to us and exposes us to, the connection begins to become clearer. With his eyes gone, his gaze may more easily turn inward, and he may take up his *meditatio* more easily. Up until this point, what Oedipus has seen, and thus has been enticed and ensnared by, has been the cause of his downfall. But at the end of the tragedy, as Oedipus excises his own eyes, he enacts a metamorphosis through and upon himself, physically, mentally, and emotionally, from disempowered to empowered, from corrupted to pure, and from ignorant to active acquirer of knowledge. That the violent blinding of oneself leads to all of these outcomes is counterintuitive, but the aim of this paper is to show that Oedipus is correct, that he is "victor."

Most scholarship sees Seneca's Oedipus as pathetic, a victim of fate, the universe, and his own mistakes. I'd like to rehabilitate him, to show that he does achieve his victory at the end. Rosenmeyer writes: "the effect of the dramaturgy is to strip Oedipus of his lone, towering standing, and to engulf him in a cosmos of which he is shown to be a pulsating, but feeble, constituent." (1989: 98). Schiesaro agrees: "Oedipus, however quickly reveals his true nature as an impotent spectator, repeatedly threatened by events outside of his control" (2003: 98). Busch, though, provides the most fruitful argument for my purposes when he writes, "When Oedipus blinds himself, he is radically refusing the limitations of sense perception and the superficial modes of knowledge based upon it," (2007: 261-2).

I agree with Busch, that Oedipus doesn't fail. He punishes himself; he successfully creates a space for retreat; and he cleanses Thebes and himself of the pollution and *vitia* that have invaded them. I argue that Oedipus' self-blinding inoculates him against those passions and vices that the light allows into his body through the vulnerable orbs of his eyes, and, once rid of this vulnerability, Oedipus becomes impervious to the danger of the light, the danger of the passions, and the danger of vices. This is why, at the end of the tragedy, he can cleanse the city of Thebes of its pollution and leave with the pollution as his guides, because he is now immune to it. The scabs and scars that cover the holes where his eyes once were, and, as we shall see, the scars that cover the holes where his feet were pierced provide him with protection so that he may find rest and solace in his exile even while in the company of such pernicious *vitia*. The wounds and traces of wounds are not a vulnerability, but a moral and physical suit of armor for him as he casts himself and the pollution of the accompanying *vitia* out of Thebes as scapegoat.

Bibliography

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