

### Tiresias v. Narcissus: Knowledge, Power, and Sexuality in Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3

While the story of Tiresias' snake-induced sex change goes back as far as Hesiod (fr. 275 M-W) and was even the subject of a Latin elegy (O'Hara 1996), its best-known and most extensive treatment is found in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.316-38. While the main details--the striking of snakes; the quarrel between Jupiter and Juno; the blindness compensated by prophetic vision--are apparently consistent with the earliest versions of the story, their situation within the Theban tales of Book 3 acts in ways both obvious and subtle to further Ovid's poetic and ideological agendas. The Tiresias we encounter here is described in Roman terms, yet remains thoroughly Greek, and is tied to the Oedipus cycle in his practice of agonistic, zero-sum prophecy. Further, he serves as the poem's first example of metamorphosis that does not involve crossing a species barrier: his gender change sets the stage for the successful gender change of Iphis in Book 9, and for the less obvious failed gender transition of Narcissus immediately following in Book 3.

The story of Tiresias follows immediately upon those of Semele and Actaeon, and like those tales exhibits a cynical view of the gods' ability to inflict casual, collateral damage on humans. Yet while Tiresias is a victim of divine caprice--a mere marital quarrel leads to his blindness--he loses no time in inflicting similarly capricious damage on others. Although his encounter with Jupiter and Juno is a sort of pastiche of Roman legal procedure and terminology (Coleman 1990), his story, like the rest of the Theban *logos* of Book 3, remains firmly within a Greek context. As Gildenhard and Zissos (2000) have shown, the figure of Oedipus is a looming absence throughout Book 3, and Tiresias' prophecy is not only a potent reminder of Oedipus' relevance to the tale, but continues the sort of agonistic, zero-sum prophecy exhibited in Sophocles' *Oidipous Tyrannos*. There Tiresias acts at the behest of Apollo, who (as Peradotto

1992 shows so well) not merely predicts Oedipus' doom, but actively causes it. In Ovid Tiresias first puts his newfound gifts to use in predicting Narcissus' doom, responding to Liriope that her son will see old age "*si se non noverit,*" deliberately invoking Apollo by turning on its head the famous Delphic maxim *gnōthi sauton*. This is not a warning to aid Liriope or Narcissus, but rather a prediction designed to show off Tiresias' prophetic skills; Ovid points to this as the first example of his growing reputation, framing Narcissus' story with the introductory *Ille per Aonias fama celeberrimus urbes* (3.339) and the concluding *Cognita res meritam vati per Achaidas urbes / attulerat famam, nomenque erat auguris ingens* (3.311-12).

There is in addition an important element of gender and sexuality in the first of Tiresias' prophecies. Narcissus' self-infatuation is an erotic attraction and, as I have argued elsewhere, he is stuck at the point where he is first expected to be an active, desiring lover instead of the passive object of male desire he has been up to this point. He is in effect making a change of gender--from *erastēs* to *erōmenos*, in the Greek pederastic context Ovid takes pains to establish. Rather, he is trying and failing to make the change, and becomes eternally stuck (even in the next world, where he gazes at himself in the river Styx). Tiresias, by contrast, achieves his transition with a simple flick of his staff, and enjoys an apparently rich sexual existence as a woman before making an equally easy return to manhood. (In this way his metamorphosis anticipates the equally successful and uncomplicated change of Iphis in Book 9.) Further, his experience as a woman establishes him as an expert on sexuality, one who "knows both kinds of sex" (*Venus huic erat utraque nota*, 3.3), placing him in a superior position to Narcissus in the complex of self-discovery, sexuality, and blindness as punishment lying at the center of the Oedipus story. While Narcissus' quest for eros and self-knowledge reads as a failed philosophical quest (Bartsch 2006.84-95), Tiresias' stands above him in his smugly superior prophetic and sexual knowledge.

## Bibliography

- (Anon, forthcoming). "Roger *Anne Rogem?* Ovid's Narcissus in a Pederastic Context."
- Bartsch, Shadi 2006. *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Coleman, K. 1990. "Tiresias the Judge: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.322-38," *CQ* 40.571-77.
- Gildenhard, I., and Zissos, A. "Ovid's Narcissus (*Met.* 3.339-510): Echoes of Oedipus,' *AJP* 121: 129-147
- O'Hara, J. J. 1996. "Sostratus *Suppl. Hell.* 733: A lost, possibly Catullan-era elegy on the six sex changes of Tiresias," *TAPA* 126.173-21.
- Peradotto, John 1992. "Disauthorizing Prophecy: The Ideological Mapping of *Oedipus Tyrannus*," *TAPA* 122 (1992) 1-14.