

Incestuous Poetics: Seneca's *Oedipus* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Seneca's *Oedipus* responds creatively to the Greek and Latin literary tradition surrounding the house of Laius and Theban history in general. While the shadow of Sophocles' *O.T.* looms large (Boyle 2011 *passim*), the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is likewise manifest throughout the play. Ovid famously ignored the tale of Oedipus in the Theban books of the *Metamorphoses*, but Seneca pointedly reinserts his Oedipus into a decidedly Ovidian Thebes, namely, a Thebes in which transformation is of paramount importance (Jakobi 1988). In doing so, he makes his Oedipus both a metamorphic figure and a tragic figure, and points to the continuity of Thebes as a locus for both tragedy and transformation (Hinds *forthcoming*). This continuity can be seen especially well in the second and third choral odes of Seneca's *Oedipus*, as the chorus places the events happening on stage within the context of Ovid's Theban history.

The second choral ode is a festive hymn to Bacchus that has often appeared out of place in the bleak world of Seneca's play, but is intricately tied to the spirit of metamorphosis inherent in both the tragic genre and Bacchus' own history. Bacchus is described as a god interested in mimesis (*imitatus*, 419; *simulata*, 420) and dressed in tragic robes (*syrma*, 423). The chorus stresses his role in the tragedies of Pentheus (444) and Ino (446), both stories depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3.511-733, 4.416-542). Emphasizing his role as a god of transformation, Seneca lavishes attention on the "dolphinsification" of the Etruscan pirates (449-67), capping Ovid's version at *Met.* 3.577-700. In trying to appeal to Bacchus as a harbinger of change (fitting for the plague-stricken populace), however, the chorus underestimates the tragic connotations of his presence, especially, for those holding power in Thebes. This metatheatrical and

metapoetic choral ode highlights both *how* Seneca manipulates Ovidian intertexts in his tragedy and *why* such manipulation matters for our understanding of Bacchus' role in Oedipus' fate.

The third choral ode directly responds to the revelation that Oedipus is guilty for the plague. Instead of heaping opprobrium upon Oedipus, the chorus believes him to be innocent (*non tu tantis causa periclis*, 709) and that the wrath of the gods (*deum irae*, 711-2) is to blame. This wrath can be seen in the history of Thebes and the chorus details events such as Cadmus' slaughter of the serpent and Actaeon's death that have analogues in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I argue, however, that the "new monsters" (*nova monstra*, 724) created against Thebes now will be found in Oedipus himself. His transformations in the play from king to exile, father to patricide, husband to son, son to matricide, and leader to scapegoat represent the various tragic extremes within the human world. That being said, he is also portrayed as a "entangled evil, a monster more muddled than his own Sphinx" (*implicitum malum / magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua*, 640-1). In the course of the play, Oedipus becomes a surrogate Sphinx, an identification underlined by intertexts with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and, like the hybrid Sphinx, he is an amalgam of different roles and shows the intersection of Theban history, incest, and the anger of the gods.