

Cadmean Mothers in Seneca's *Oedipus*

In the final Act of Seneca's *Oedipus* the chorus likens Jocasta to the Cadmean mother Agave who had torn her son's head from his body (1005-6). This is the culmination of repeated implicit comparisons of Oedipus with Pentheus. It reiterates Laius' bitter charge that the troubles besetting Thebes stem not from hatred of the gods but from a mother's love, the greatest sin (628-30). Examining the paradigms of ancestral Theban maternal love defines Jocasta's failure to understand her crime which is compounded by her suicide. This parallels Oedipus' own crimes of parricide and incest and his quest to learn the truth. Recognizing and understanding the crime becomes as important as the crime itself.

In pursuit of the truth Oedipus sends Creon and Tiresias to ask Laius who had killed him. Tiresias summons a parade of Theban dead. Preceding Laius are Theban mothers who caused the death of their children. First Niobe appears still proudly (*superba* 614) counting her children. Her head is *grave* (614) suggesting her grief induced metamorphosis into a rock (Töchterle *ad loc*), but there is no hint of her now weeping for her dead children. She is followed by Agave, an even worse mother according to Creon who reports the scene. She comes forth still *furibunda* (616) accompanied by bacchantes. Agave gives no sign that she recognizes that she had killed her son Pentheus instead of a lion. She is oblivious to the still raging Pentheus following her. Both Niobe and Agave are trapped in the defining and transformative moments of their lives. There is no grief, there is no guilt for they do not see or understand their crimes.

Seeing and understanding the truth recurs throughout the tragedy, reinforcing Oedipus' laborious efforts to recognize the truth even when it has been told to him. Creon describes Laius' murder as a *facinus occultum* (287), an act so unexpected that no one could identify the killer (Boyle *ad loc*). Acteon cannot comprehend why his dogs pursue him until he fittingly sees

his antlered head in the water of the pool in which he had seen Artemis bathe (760-61).

However, seeing the evidence is not equivalent to understanding. Once freed from madness, Agave and the bacchantes look upon Pentheus' mangled body and see only an *ignotum nefas* (444). Despite the evidence they, like Oedipus, are uncomprehending of their complicity.

Jocasta, the next in line of these Theban mothers, also resists comprehending the truth. Once she has heard the old Corinthian tell Oedipus how he became the child of the king and queen of Corinth, she warns him to stop his quest for the truth before he regrets learning who his father is. She knows where his questions will lead, but she does not acknowledge it. Although Oedipus has heard the same information, he still struggles with the riddle of Laius' murder. Like Agave, both Jocasta and Oedipus refuse at first to comprehend what is evident.

Finally, enough evidence has been brought, and Oedipus can no longer be blind to who he is. In rage he prays that Agave return, that he be killed (933). He rushes into the palace and atones for killing his father by blinding himself. Soon after he returns to the stage, Jocasta rushes out of the palace. The chorus likens her to Agave. She appears as though in answer to Oedipus' prayer. Moreover, as she rushes out of the door (*saeva prosiluit* 1004), the chorus echoes Creon's description of the Spartoi as they emerge from the underworld in response to Tiresias' summoning the Theban dead. Jocasta is now linked with the raging madness of Thebes' beginning, the impious birth (731) of children born from the earth. Jocasta's rage stops once she sees her blinded son. For the first time she calls him her son (1010). Although she appears to understand the crime, she protests that fate is to blame and there is no guilt (1019). When Oedipus repudiates this evasion, she demands that he kill her. He refuses, and she commits suicide. However, there is no resolution or atonement in this act. Oedipus does not flinch from the truth—he is responsible for his mother's death, and he now has become a double

parricide (1044). Like Agave who believes she killed a lion not Pentheus, like Niobe who still proudly counts her children, Jocasta does not comprehend the consequences of her suicide which now magnifies her son's guilt. In the play she is caught in this defining moment of her crime.

Cited Sources

Boyle, A.J. *Oedipus*. Oxford, 2011.

Töchterle, K. "Zum Medium von Senecas 'Ödipus': Signale innerhalb und asserhalb des Textes", *WS 110*: 133-44.