

The Body and the City: Disease, Fury and Self-mutilation in Seneca's *Oedipus*

Simona Martorana

Durham University

simona.martorana@durham.ac.uk

A prominent feature in Senecan drama, monstrosity is articulated within the *Oedipus* by the disfiguring effects of the plague (*Oed.* 29-81), Manto's ritual (353-380), and Oedipus' mutilated body (915-979). Linked to moral corruption, physical monstrosity is determined by a break of natural laws (Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1990; Boyle 2011; DeBrohun 2018). By focusing on the description of the plague and its narratological pendant, that is, Oedipus' self-blinding, this paper shows that this kind of monstrosity is textually and semantically marked by a continuous blurring of boundaries between human and non-human (animal, inanimate objects); between moral and physical universe. This conflation hypostasises the collapse of conventional intra-familial relationships within the drama (Gardner 2019), as well as positing a fluid notion of (human) body.

While Oedipus' fury at lines 915-926 and 957-962 closely recalls the symptoms of anger described by Seneca in the *De Ira* (e.g., 1.1-7) as a mental disease affecting the soul and therefore not pertaining to human nature, the comparison between Oedipus and a lion also enhances the overlap between human and non-human, human and beast, monster. This displacement of the borders of human experience, as well as the concept itself of 'human', responds to the prologue of the tragedy, where Oedipus describes the plague affecting Thebes by incorporating it in his subjective experience (Walde 2012).

As a materialisation of Oedipus' spiritual illness, the city stands at the threshold between imagination and reality, and physical and moral dimensions. The prosthetic value of Thebes as a projection of Oedipus' 'moral' disease is counterbalanced by Oedipus' self-mutilation at the end of the drama, whereby the relationship between physical pain and moral corruption appears to be overturned once more: having defeated his anger and found a suitable punishment for his crimes, Oedipus' empty orbits carry the stigma of his guiltiness as tangible signs onto his body.

Works cited

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