

BLINDNESS AS THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH IN SENECA'S *OEDIPVS* AND *PHOENISSAE**

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the complexity of the thought processes that lead Seneca's Oedipus to choose the mors longa of blindness as punishment for his crime (in his blindness, he is to live in a kind of ostracism, separately from both the living and the dead). It offers an analysis of the consolation of this existence on the threshold between life and death, notably with reference to the end of the Oedipus, but also of the sorrow of this liminal existence. The latter is described in Seneca's Phoenissae, which suggests an escape, by death stricto sensu, from the threshold represented by blindness, by which Oedipus now feels trapped.

By examining these three topics, the article shows how the threshold between life and death which Oedipus chooses at the end of Seneca's Oedipus and experiences in the Phoenissae mirrors the ambivalence and the errors of his life before he blinded himself. Ultimately, it also illustrates Oedipus' continuing failure to achieve self-knowledge.

Keywords: blindness; threshold; Seneca; Oedipus; identity; punishment; enigma

Of all the ancient authors known to have written of Oedipus, Aeschylus might be the earliest reference to his self-inflicted blindness (*Sept.* 783–4). This punishment is absent in Homer and Hesiod, for example. Aeschylus' version was followed by Sophocles, who, in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, established the contours of the myth as we know it and made his Oedipus a deeply tragic symbol of the paradoxical idea that the blind man is actually the one who can see reality as it is.

The blind man who sees beyond what others can see, either by divine inspiration or by attaining self-knowledge, is a very fertile symbol. Poets such as Homer and Stesichorus were presented as blind, and visionary, inspired by the Muses. Blind too was the most accomplished of singers, Demodocus in the *Odyssey*. The great prophet Teiresias was blinded by Hera for favouring Zeus in their dispute over which of the sexes experienced more pleasure during sex (cf., for example, *Ov. Met.* 3.316–38).¹ Zeus, touched by his support, gave Teiresias the gifts of prophecy and longevity. This is also the case with Evenius, as reported by Herodotus (9.93–4): punished by the inhabitants of Apollonia with blindness, he is compensated by Apollo with the gift of prophetic clairvoyance.

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¹ According to some variants of the myth, Teiresias went blind when he saw Athena naked in the bath (cf. e.g. Callim. *Hymn* 5.70–82). It is worth noting that it is possible to trace a mythological pattern linking blinding as punishment specifically with sexual transgressions (voyeurism, incest, rape, and so on). See e.g. G. Devereux, 'The self-blinding of Oedipus in Sophocles: *Oedipus Tyrannos*', *JHS* 93 (1973), 36–49.

However, in treating the myth of Oedipus, Seneca reconfigures the ancient conception of blindness, notably seen in the Sophoclean Oedipus. In Seneca's hands, blindness no longer has much to do with the imperfect knowledge of mankind and the limits of human ability to apprehend reality; nor is it a privilege enabling one to see what no one else can.²

Seneca's take on Oedipus' blindness focusses on punishment and atonement, in the light of the Stoic principles that if a man falls from grace it is because he deserves it, and that each and every crime will be punished.³ In Senecan drama the characters can be held accountable for their acts, and they are.⁴ This is one of the reasons why his tragedies are markedly different from the ancient Greek theatre and even from earlier Latin theatre.⁵

When the shame of her second marriage comes to light, Jocasta commits suicide.⁶ But the transgressor Oedipus, son and husband of his own mother, does not see death as punishment enough and chooses another form of atonement, blindness, which, at the end of Seneca's *Oedipus*, brings him a form of consolation and relief.

This choice of blindness over death is not new in Seneca. The chorus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* enquires of the already-blinded king the reason for such a preference

² Cf. G. Mader, 'nec sepultis mixtus et uiuis tamen | exemptus: rationale and aesthetics of the "fitting punishment" in Seneca's *Oedipus*', *Hermes* 123 (1995), 303–19, at 305–6: 'In Seneca ... the nexus knowledge/ignorance is not a comparable issue [to that of Sophocles' *OT*], nor can the self-blinding be explained primarily in these terms ... The blinding amounts to an act of self-definition.' See also G.A. Staley, 'Making Oedipus Roman', *Pallas* 95 (2014), 111–24, at 113: 'Seneca does not simply translate Sophocles, he adapts him, he Romanizes him, he writes a tragedy of a different sort: not Oedipus as a hero searching for the truth, but Oedipus as spectator to the revelation of a truth which he already suspects.'

³ Cf. C. Pimentel, '*Quo uerget furor?*' *Aspectos estoicos na 'Phaedra' de Séneca* (Lisbon, 1993), 28–9: 'O homem sofre sempre o castigo merecido e inevitável, já que é ele quem, livremente, escolhe a via do *uitium*. Que não é nunca obra dos deuses, mas sempre dos homens. Tudo se joga no domínio do humano, o crime e o castigo.'

⁴ Several scholars (such as F.-R. Chaumartin, 'Philosophical tragedy?', in G. Damschen and A. Heil [ed.], *Brill's Companion to Seneca* [Leiden and Boston, 2014], 653–72; F. Giancotti, *Saggio sulle tragedie di Seneca* [Rome, 1953]; M. Nussbaum, 'Poetry and the passions: two Stoic views', in J. Brunschwig and M. Nussbaum [ed.], *Passions & Perceptions: Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind. Proceedings of the Fifth Symposium Hellenisticum* [Cambridge, 1993], 97–149; N. Pratt, 'The Stoic base of Senecan drama', *TAPhA* 79 [1948], 1–11; N. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* [Chapel Hill, 1983], among others) read Seneca's plays as invested with a didactic-pedagogical, moralizing function that distinguishes them from the Attic theatre. This perspective is summarized by J.A.S. Campos, 'Séneca, Brecht e o teatro épico', *Classica* 23 (1999), 9–26, at 11: 'Anti-aristotélico e anti-horaciano na teoria, o teatro de Séneca visa ... objectivos diferentes da tragédia clássica grega, e mesmo da tragédia latina tal como praticada por Énio, Pacúvio ou Ácio. De há muito tem sido apontada como finalidade deste teatro uma intenção de ordem pedagógica ... decorrente da própria intencionalidade didáctica através do *exemplum* praticada pelos pensadores de obediência estoica.'

⁵ J.G. Fitch and S. McElduff, 'Construction of the self in Senecan drama', *Mnemosyne* 55 (2002), 18–40, at 21 state that 'An increasingly intense concern with the self can be observed in the evolution of tragic drama since the fifth century B.C. During this evolution, the focus of tragedy moves away from interaction between the *dramatis personae*, towards the self in isolation and the psychology of the passions. There is an increasing use of those dramatic techniques which show the *personae* as thinking aloud, rather than interacting with others'.

⁶ E. Fantham, '*nihil iam iura naturae ualent*: incest and fratricide in Seneca's *Phoenissae*', in A.J. Boyle (ed.), *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays in Senecan Drama* (Victoria, Australia, 1983), 61–76, at 69 notes Seneca's sexual colouring of Jocasta's suicide: 'Sophocles' Jocasta had hanged herself ... a death not designed to point to specific sexual guilt ... Seneca returns more than once to the womb as symbol of a woman's guilt. It is as though the offence of sexuality and motherhood outside the norm, Roman *stuprum*, were the female counterpart to the male's offence of murder.'

(*OT* 1366–7). The Sophoclean Oedipus justifies himself initially by arguing that, if instead of blindness he had opted for death, his shadow would have gone to Hades endowed with sight, and as such he would have to face the souls of his father and mother (*OT* 1370–3); he also justifies his choice on the assumption that blindness appeared to him a more immediate punishment, in the sense that, having discovered the parricide and incest, and learned of Jocasta's suicide, he wishes to cut himself off from life and the pleasure of sight because of the magnitude of his faults (*OT* 1374–85). Oedipus even wishes to be unable to hear, to be completely oblivious to the world and the evils that have tormented him (*OT* 1390).⁷

In Sophocles, Oedipus speaks of the enormity of his crime, a point that is developed and stressed by Seneca: 'Against the twain [my mother and my father] I sinned, a sin no gallows could atone' (οὐκ ἔμοι δοῦν | ἔργ' ἔστι κρείσσον' ἀγχόνης εἰργασμένα, *OT* 1373–4).⁸ In fact, Seneca is the only author to express the idea of blindness as a threshold between life and death, and also the idea of this threshold as the most just and appropriate sentence for Oedipus.

Given the novelty of such an idea, this article will first discuss how this threshold is characterized and then illustrate the antagonistic feelings aroused in Seneca's Oedipus by his expectations of this threshold, in the *Oedipus*, and by his actual experience, in the *Phoenissae*.

BLINDNESS AS A THRESHOLD

In the account given by the Messenger in Sen. *Oed.* 915–79, the description of Oedipus blinding himself is preceded by a reference to the initial hesitation of the hero, as he seems to accept the possibility of a conventional death. In lines 926–34, Oedipus goes on to express a desire to die by the sword, a blazing fire, stoning, or by other means. He ends his speech with the *sententia*, in true Stoic manner, that *mors innocentem sola Fortunae eripit* ('Death alone can rescue the innocent from Fortune', *Oed.* 934). And it is on this assumption that he raises a sword to kill himself.

Yet this gesture is suddenly seen as too easy, 'so brief a penalty' (*breues | poenas*), to make amends for such repugnant crimes (*Oed.* 936–7). The death of the parricide Oedipus would repay the death of Laius, but it would not compensate for the harm caused by the incestuous Oedipus: the ruin caused to his mother/wife, his brothers/sons and his land, blighted by plague (*Oed.* 938–41).⁹ Moreover, if, in killing his father

⁷ This is a wish that is also later expressed by the Oedipus of Seneca's *Phoenissae*, and more than once (224–9 and 231–3): *ego ullos aure concipio sonos, | per quos parentis nomen aut nati audiam? | utinam quidem rescindere has quirem vias, | manibusque adactis omne qua uoces meant | aditusque uerbis tramite angusto patet | eruere possem! | ... inhaeret ac recrudescit nefas | subinde, et aures ingerunt quicquid mihi | donastis, oculi* ('Do my ears take in any sounds through which I can hear the name of parent or son? If only I could cut off these pathways, drive in my hands and root out every avenue for voices, every narrow passageway open to words! ... The evil is embedded in me and breaks open repeatedly, and my ears force on me all that my eyes have spared me'). All translations (with some modifications) are taken from J.G. Fitch, *Seneca: Tragedies*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 2002 and 2004).

⁸ Translated by B.A. Storr, *Sophocles: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone* (Cambridge, 1961).

⁹ A.J. Boyle, *Seneca Oedipus* (Oxford, 2011), 325: 'Like Theseus in *Phaedra*, an "easy death" (*mors facilis*, *Pha.* 1208) is not sufficient. Failure to be satisfied is a constitutive feature of the Senecan tyrannical man, whether seeking vengeance or atonement—and every Senecan tyrant knows that there are greater punishments than death.' See also Mader (n. 2), 306: 'When Seneca alters

and marrying his mother, he has reversed the laws of nature and subverted the cosmic order, Oedipus now longs for a new, unknown, punishment by which nature might ‘change yet again’ (*nouetur, Oed. 945*).

If death can be seen as the most appropriate penalty in some circumstances, it is not a punishment that can be suffered again and again. In Oedipus’ case in particular, it is imperative to find a way to prolong death, by endowing it with a weight it seemed to lack: ‘You must be allowed to live once more and die once more, to be reborn repeatedly so you can pay a new penalty each time’ (*iterum uiuere atque iterum mori | liceat, renasci semper ut totiens noua | supplicia tibi pendas, Oed. 945–7*; cf. Sen. *Controu. 10.4.22 ut soluendo sis in poenas, quotiens tibi renascendum est*).¹⁰

It was, therefore, important to find a ‘lingering death’ (*mors longa, Oed. 949*), defined by Oedipus himself as ‘a way to wander without mixing with the dead, and yet removed from the living’ (*uia | qua nec sepultis mixtus et uiuis tamen | exemptus erres, Oed. 949–51*).¹¹ I find in these two lines, central to the argument of this article, the notion of the threshold that Oedipus sees in blindness. Blindness constitutes a punishment by means of which, deprived of one of his senses, he will no longer be part—at least fully—of the world of the living; although he may commune with the darkness that characterizes it, he will not really belong to the world of the dead either, for he will not be dead in the literal and common sense. His will be an unusual punishment, a condemnation to an intermediate state between life and death, a condition that will exclude him from the consolation of both.

In the words of Oedipus himself, he will begin to die, but fall short of his father (*citra patrem, Oed. 951*), another important passage in the construction of the concept of blindness as a threshold, here understood as a border space between two clearly distinct worlds, those of the living and the dead. This threshold is therefore marked by the uncertainty, the imprecision of not belonging to either—which, in Oedipus’ opinion, is the best form of punishment, precisely because of its existential ambiguity, its denial of a clear and stable identity. Oedipus struggles with his own tangled identity (‘I shall utter the dark words of my fate, which none can solve ... Even I, who triumphed over the Sphinx, would be slow and stumbling in interpreting my fate’, *obscura nostrae uerba fortunae loquar, | quae nemo soluat ... | ego ipse, uictae spolia qui Sphingis tuli, | haerebo fati tardus interpres mei, Phoen. 123–39*). Who is he? Husband or son? Father or brother? Alive or dead? Blind or all too clear-sighted?

In the *Phoenissae*, too, Oedipus recognizes that there is something wrong with his existence, that his blindness is a kind of limbo. The significant use of the neuter relative pronoun *quod* expresses a lack of definition, and also uncertainty, doubt: *quid segnīs*

the Sophoclean sequence and places the self-mutilation before Jocasta’s suicide, one effect of his modification is to deprive the blinding of its impulsiveness and to transform it into an act which proceeds from a transparent and explicit rationale.’

¹⁰ See also *Ov. Pont. 1.2.37–40 uiuimus ut numquam sensu careamus amaro, | et grauior longa fit mea poena mora. | sic inconsumptum Tityi semperque renascens | non perit, ut possit saepe perire, iecur* ‘My life is such that I never lose the bitterness of sensation and my punishment becomes worse through its long duration. So Tityus’s liver unconsumed and ever growing anew perishes not, in order that it may have the power to be ever perishing’, transl. A.L. Wheeler, *Ovid: Tristia, Ex Ponto* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953).

¹¹ The term *mors longa* is taken from Virgil (*Aen. 8.488 longa morte*) and is also used by Statius in *Theb. 1.48* to designate Oedipus’ blindness, and is adapted for *funus longum* in Teiresias’ description of Oedipus at *Theb. 4.614* (cf. 11.696). Blindness is also figured as *mors longa* at *Phoen. 94–5: funus extendis meum | longasque uiui ducis exequias patris* ‘You are protracting my funeral, prolonging the exequies for your still-living father’.

traho | *quod uiuo?* ('Why am I dragging out this thing that I live?', *Phoen.* 47–8). Later, Oedipus again questions his continuing existence, considering himself a burden on the citizens of Thebes and upon the earth: *quid terram grauo* | *mixtusque superis erro?* ('Why encumber the earth and wander mingling with the living?', *Phoen.* 235–6). In *mixtusque superis* he again likens his blindness to a limbo state, the adjective *mixtus* emphasizing his difference from *superis*, the other living: he is something else, he does not belong among them.

Also in the *Phoenissae*, Antigone notes the peculiar nature of Oedipus' liminal state, he who is deprived in life of all those things of which usually only death deprives men: *ab aspectu omnium* | *Fortuna te summouit, et quidquid potest* | *auferre cuiquam mors, tibi hoc uita abstulit* ('Fortune has removed you from the sight of all, and everything that death could take from anyone, life has taken from you', *Phoen.* 211–13).

The threshold between life and death which Oedipus chooses at the end of Seneca's *Oedipus* and experiences in the *Phoenissae* mirrors the ambiguity and errors of his life before he blinded himself. He now wanders cut off from both the living and the dead, deprived of both land and sky, and belonging to neither, not knowing who he is. Previously, he thought he was Jocasta's husband, when he was truly her son; he thought he was his children's father, but he was also their brother; he considered himself an enlightened man, able to overcome the Sphinx, and able to help the distressed people of Thebes, but he was nothing more than an outcast, blind to reality and to the world, even when he still was able to physically see.

In one of Oedipus' monologues, several expressions define and characterize the threshold represented by blindness, with emphasis on doubt, ambiguity, uncertainty and darkness: 'lingering death' (*mors longa*, *Oed.* 949), 'without mixing with the dead' (*nec sepultis mixtus*, *Oed.* 950), 'removed from the living' (*uiuis* | *exemptus*, *Oed.* 950–1) and 'night' (*noctem/nox*, *Oed.* 973 and 977), this last a metaphor for blindness, a penalty worthy of the shame of the conjugal bed that Oedipus had shared with his own mother. In the *Phoenissae*, this night-blindness is qualified by the adjective *alta* 'deep' (*alta nox*, *Phoen.* 144) to underline the isolation of being deprived of sight.

Regarding this idea of blindness as night, it is noteworthy that the chorus of the *Oedipus* also refers to Oedipus as 'bereft of the light' (*luminis orbis*, *Oed.* 997) when he enters the scene leaning on a staff, having blinded himself; that Oedipus refers to blindness as 'darkness' (*tenebris*) in line 1012; and that, in the passages that anticipate Oedipus' blindness, namely the sacrifice of two animals and the subsequent *extispicium*,¹² we find similar images: for example, a dense smoke surrounds Oedipus' head and rests more thickly on his eyes, hiding this 'filthy light' (*sordidam lucem*, *Oed.* 327); and the sacrificial bull is frightened by the light of day and seeks to avoid the rays of sunlight (Manto's description, *Oed.* 337–9).

If I give special importance to the references to darkness, very marked in the description of blindness, it is because I consider this to be a central element in the construction and characterization of the concept of the threshold. The punitive act of self-blinding leaves Oedipus in an intermediate state where he still belongs to the world of the living, but only mingles with the living, for he lacks a vital sensory capacity that would allow him to engage fully in society. He is still alive, but one step closer to

¹² On the self-blinding of Oedipus as a replication of Teiresias' *extispicium*, see Staley (n. 2), 120–2.

death. Oedipus is surrounded by darkness, as if he were in the underworld. In this darkness he is subject to doubt and uncertainty, from which sight would release him. As he cannot see, he even needs the support of an object that those who do not live on the threshold do not need, a staff, a symbol of a necessarily more fragile, precarious and troubled existence.

The idea of slowness and powerlessness is also associated with blindness-as-death and the threshold in *Oedipus*. See, for example, how in Manto's description of the sacrificial ritual, having received two blows, the bull hesitates, 'plunges erratically here and there, and though weakened can scarcely yield up his struggling life' (*huc et huc dubius ruit | animamque fessus uix reluctantem exprimit*, *Oed.* 343–4), a passage that foreshadows some of the difficulties Oedipus will experience at the threshold of blindness, emphasized by Seneca's word choices: the expression *huc et huc*, the adjectives *dubius* and *reluctantem* (*animam*), and the adverb *uix* all point to doubt, uncertainty, confusion and struggle.

Laius' ghost, in the curse he casts upon Oedipus, says that, after the discovery of the truth, his son will wish to flee from Thebes with quick steps, but he, Laius, will place 'cumbersome delays' (*graves pedibus moras*, *Oed.* 655) before his feet and 'hold him back' (*tenebo*, *Oed.* 656): 'He will creep unsure of his path, testing his dismal way with an old man's stick. You must dispossess him of the earth; I his father will deprive him of the sky' (*repet incertus uiae, | baculo senili triste praetemptans iter. | eripite terras, auferam caelum pater*, *Oed.* 656–8). This last line of Laius' speech prefigures and highlights the idea of the *mors longa* and of the tangled identity that I have already noted as marked characteristics of the threshold of blindness.

Would this mean that blindness, rather than a choice made by Oedipus, is the fulfilment of Laius' prophecy, reinstating his authority, even if post-mortem?¹³ Laius' final words ('You must dispossess him of the earth; I his father will deprive him of the sky') match Oedipus' own reflections in lines 949–51 ('Search for a way to wander without mixing with the dead, and yet removed from the living'). This is typical of the rhetorical dimension of Senecan tragedies. Who is this new, blind Oedipus? Where is his home? Where does he belong? Is he alive, or is he dead?

In essence, blindness is described in the *Oedipus* as a sort of death, associated with the dark characteristics of the night and with the slowness of a penalty which conventional and immediate death could not provide but which Oedipus needs, in order to try to atone for his crimes. He is stuck between two states, two worlds, carrying the shame and the burden of someone who has violated human laws. It is not surprising therefore that in Laius' speech allusions to Oedipus' future exile and blindness are combined with references to Roman legal precepts about the punishment for parricide, which generally consisted of being sewn into a sack along with a dog, a cock, a viper and a monkey, and thrown into the river or the sea (Justinian, *Inst.* 4.18.6).¹⁴

According to Cicero, this punishment, the *poena cullei*, was aimed at ensuring that the man who had committed the atrocity of killing the one who had begotten him, was himself deprived of the sky, the sun, the water and the earth, precisely the elements that

¹³ C. Segal, 'Boundary violation and the landscape of the self in Senecan tragedy', in id., *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* (Ithaca and London, 1986), 315–36, at 323 says that the apparition of the vengeful Laius is 'virtually a foreshadowing of the Freudian superego, a harsh, demanding, guilt-raising father figure, a projection of the son's own conviction of his inherently evil nature'.

¹⁴ Boyle (n. 9), 264.

give life (*Rosc. Am.* 70–2). Owing to horror and aversion to the idea of contamination, the parricide is not fed to wild beasts; he is not thrown naked into the water, a measure believed to purify in other circumstances, to prevent him from polluting the sea itself; he is deprived of the *caelum* and is unable to draw breath from heaven while still alive; and he is deprived of the *terra* in death. The parricide thus dies in such a way that the earth does not cover his bones, which are tossed about by the waves so that they are never washed.

As we can see, the typical Roman punishment for parricide also involved the idea of a threshold, a limbo between elements, worlds or states, and an aversion to the idea of contamination, also clearly identified in the *Oedipus*, both in Laius' speech (*Oed.* 647–53) and in Oedipus' farewell at the end of the play (*Oed.* 1052–8).¹⁵

BLINDNESS AS AN ILLUSION OF RELIEF

Let us now consider the moment when Oedipus blinds himself. After discovering the truth, the king of Thebes deliberates on the most appropriate punishment to inflict on himself.

In Sophocles, there is no deliberation, in so far as Oedipus' self-blinding is an immediate reaction to Jocasta's death (*OT* 1268–74). In Seneca, however, the blindness of Oedipus is completely independent of Jocasta's suicide, which happens later.¹⁶ I agree with Boyle that, although it may be described by Seneca (*Oed.* 954–7), as it is described in Sophocles,¹⁷ in terms of a symbolic act of self-castration—and, as such, an appropriate way of punishing incest—blindness is, above all, a kind of exile and therefore a more appropriate punishment than death.¹⁸

Facing the intensity of the light of truth and under the unmistakable dominion of the *affectus* of anger (note the pleonastic expression *ira furit* [*Oed.* 957], the symbolism of the metaphor of fire in *ardent minaces igne truculento genae* [*Oed.* 958], and the asyndeton *uiolentus audax uultus, iratus ferox* [*Oed.* 960], emphasizing, even more, an irrational state of mind), Oedipus 'digs out' (*eruentis*, *Oed.* 961) his eyes, which he calls *maritales* ('of a married man', *Oed.* 956), and, not satisfied with simply tearing out his eyes, he then scratches the empty sockets with his nails, as the blood flows abundantly down his face (*Oed.* 954–74).¹⁹

¹⁵ Mader (n. 2), 310 considers that 'pollution and purification are axial motifs in Seneca's *Oedipus*'.

¹⁶ Cf. Boyle (n. 9), lxvi: 'The Sophoclean Oedipus' instant reaction is transformed into Senecan fusion of *furor*, *ira* and *ratio*, violent passion and precise calculation, a highly deliberated act of self-punishment, in which the *poena* itself, figured as both exile and castration, responds directly to the crimes of parricide and incest.'

¹⁷ Cf. Boyle (n. 9), cviii: 'Worth mentioning, too, is Freud's interpretation of Oedipus' self-blinding as a substitution for castration, which gains extra purchase in Greek and Roman texts because of the ancient association of the phallus and the eye.' This correlation of eye and phallus has also been noted by W. Deonna, *Le Symbolisme de l'œil* (Paris, 1965), 68–70. However, Boyle does not seem very committed to Freud's idea, perhaps because of what Mader (n. 2), 304 n. 4 describes as 'the tendency of psycho-analytical criticism to *isolate* (and so overemphasize) the nexus incest/self-blinding, and to regard the latter as a symbolical act of self-castration'. Regarding this theme, see also R.G.A. Buxton, 'Blindness and limits: Sophocles and the logic of myth', *JHS* 100 (1980), 22–37.

¹⁸ See J.M. Claassen, 'Exile, death and immortality: voices from the grave', *Latomus* 55 (1996), 571–90, at 571: 'Exile and death were closely related. Because exile frequently served as pre-emption of or substitute for the death penalty, it was often portrayed in literature as the virtual equivalent of death.'

¹⁹ The Senecan method runs contrary to that of Sophocles' Oedipus, who uses the *fibulae* of Jocasta's dress to blind himself (cf. *OT* 1268–9).

The darkness (*tenebrae, atra nube*) that envelops him pleases (*iuuant*) Oedipus. He is satisfied not by death itself but by the ‘lingering death’ he chooses in blindness (*Oed.* 998–1003):

bene habet, peractum est: iusta persolui patri.
iuuant tenebrae. quis deus tandem mihi
placatus atra nube perfundit caput?
quis scelera donat? conscium euasi diem.
nil, parricida, dexteræ debes tuæ:
lux te refugit. uultus Oedipodam hic decet.

Good, the task is done: I have paid my father his last rites.
I cherish my darkness. What god, kindly disposed to me at last,
has poured a cloud of blackness over my head?
Who pardons my crimes? I have escaped the witness of the daylight.
Parricide, you owe nothing to your right hand: the light itself fled from you.
Such vision as this is right for Oedipus.

Shortly afterwards, when uttering his last speech, blind, and in the condition of double parricide after the suicide of Jocasta with the same sword that had killed Laius,²⁰ Oedipus presents himself as the saviour of Thebes, but no longer its king, because he now belongs in another kingdom, that of darkness (*Oed.* 1049). He prepares to go into exile, taking with him all the evils of the plague which, in fact, had already been anticipated by Laius’ ghost (see *Oed.* 647–53).²¹ Curiously, at the end of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the plague seems to have been forgotten. In Seneca, on the other hand, the theme of the plague runs through the entire play and, ultimately, gives some dignity to the eponymous hero (*Oed.* 1052–61):

quicumque fessi pectore et morbo graues
semianima trahitis corpora, en fugio, exeo:
releuate colla, mitior caeli status
post terga sequitur. quisquis exilem iacens
animam retentat, uiuidos haustus leuis
concipiat. ite, ferte depositis opem:
mortifera mecum uitia terrarum extraho.
Violenta Fata et horridus Morbi tremor,
Maciesque et atra Pestis et rabidus Dolor,
mecum ite, mecum. ducibus his uti libet.

All you who are weak at heart and heavy with sickness,
dragging frames only half alive, see, I am leaving for exile:
lift up your heads, a kindlier condition of the skies
will come in behind me. You who feebly

²⁰ In Sophocles (*OT* 1263–4), as in Homer (*Od.* 11.278–9), Jocasta hangs herself. Because her suicide is a spontaneous act and carried out under the dominion of the kind of passions that Stoicism disapproved of (*Oed.* 1004–8), Seneca’s Jocasta does not consider that she could still be useful to her children, one of the conditions which, according to Stoicism, should stop one from pursuing the idea of suicide. It is, however, worth noting the objection that the still-living Jocasta in the *Phoenissae* is not particularly useful, inasmuch as she cannot make her sons Eteocles and Polynices renounce their fratricidal struggle. But the truth is that she does try to, which, in part, confirms what I have just said. In fact, in the *Phoenissae*, much less useful to their children is Oedipus who, as we shall see, completely rejects the idea of intervening to try to heal the rift between his sons, as he actually believes Eteocles and Polynices to be worthy of their father.

²¹ On Oedipus abandoning Thebes as a scapegoat whose departure removes all pollution from the city, see e.g. Mader (n. 2), 310–19.

retain the breath of life on your sickbeds may freely take in
 life-giving draughts of air. Go, bring help to those abandoned to die:
 I am drawing with me the deadly maladies of the land.
 Savage Fates, the shuddering tremor of Disease, Wasting
 and black Plague and ravening Pain,
 come with me, come with me: I rejoice to have such guides as these.

In Oedipus' final speech, there is a clear contrast between two different worlds. One of life marked by health, brightness and levity (*mitior caeli status, uiuidos haustus, leuis*), and another of sickness, sorrow, pain and death, characterized by words, and personifications, that carry the weight (note the choice of words such as *grauus* and *trahitis*) of the terrible consequences of the plague (*fessi pectore, morbo, semianima corpora, mortifera uitia, horridus Morbi tremor, Macies, atra Pestis, rabidus Dolor*).

I would like to focus for a moment on the last word of the play, *libet*. This Fitch translates as 'rejoice', a choice I do not fully agree with. Latin has a vocabulary for the kind of unrestrained happiness that the word 'rejoice' conveys in English (for example *gaudeo, gaudium, laetitia*), and *libet* ('it pleases', 'it is agreeable') is rather restrained in comparison. In this context it is worth noting that Boyle's reading of this scene speaks of relief rather than of joy, which is significant for the contrast I draw between Oedipus' feelings about his blindness in the *Oedipus* and the *Phoenissae*.²²

In any case, *libet* is a strange word to end on, even within Seneca's tragic corpus, as emphasized, for example, by Boyle or Henry and Walker, who say that it marks a tone 'quite alien to Greek tragedy', of a piece with the idiosyncrasies generally identified in Seneca's plays, especially when compared to the Attic theatre.²³ As Boyle stresses, 'in a dark and ironic sense', Oedipus wins. Boyle also notes that, in a superficial reflection of Stoic resignation before fate, Oedipus experiences a certain relief in his newly acquired status as saviour of Thebes and in the fact that he has found a punishment he feels is worthy of his crimes.²⁴

RETHINKING BLINDNESS AS PUNISHMENT

The state of mind in which we find Oedipus immersed in the *Phoenissae* (in thematic terms, the sequel to the *Oedipus*) is diametrically opposed to the previous relief. In the *Phoenissae*, blindness no longer appears to be the ideal solution; it no longer satisfies Oedipus. Deeply distressed, he questions his choice, berating himself, and tries to find another punishment that is more effective and more just.

Let us look at the most significant passages outlining this morbid state of mind. Right at the beginning of the play, Oedipus laments: 'How little I accomplished with this hand! I cannot see the daylight that witnessed my wrongdoing, but I can be seen' (*quantulum hac egi manu! | non uideo noxae conscium nostrae diem, | sed uideor, Phoen.* 8–10).²⁵ In lines 31–3, Oedipus invokes Cithaeron as a refuge, desiring to die, in

²² Boyle (n. 9), lxvii.

²³ Boyle (n. 9), 361. D. Henry and B. Walker, 'The *Oedipus* of Seneca: an Imperial tragedy', *Ramus* 12 (1983), 128–39, at 136.

²⁴ Boyle (n. 9), 361. Cf. Boyle (n. 9), lxvii.

²⁵ M. Frank, *Seneca's Phoenissae: Introduction & Commentary* (Leiden, 1994), 81 stresses that 'Seneca may be adopting the notion, common in Greek thought, that the polluted are unfit to look

his old age, where he should have died when exposed there as a newborn (see also *Phoen.* 243–60).²⁶ A little later, three lines give continuity to, and expand, the ideas of delay, slowness and confusion of the *mors longa* announced in the *Oedipus*: ‘Drop these idle delays in your long postponed punishment, and accept death in full. Why am I dragging out this thing that I live?’ (*omitte poenae languidas longae moras | mortemque totam recipe. quid segnis traho | quod uiuo?*, *Phoen.* 46–8). Oedipus also says that his own daughter, Antigone, in trying to help him, only contributes to prolonging his funeral, presiding over the long wake of a living father (*Phoen.* 94–5). And in lines 89–92 we have confirmation of the reasoning that choosing blindness was inadequate: ‘The only safety for Oedipus is not to be saved. Let me avenge my father, who is still unavenged. My right hand, why so remiss in exacting punishment?’ (*unica Oedipodae est salus, | non esse saluum. liceat ulcisci patrem | adhuc inultum. dextra quid cessas iners | exigere poenas?*). Finally, and to sum up the meaning of these lines, I consider the following passages to be central.

In the first passage, Oedipus associates blindness with the darkness of the night and stresses the idea of deepness, the deepness of the night and of the Underworld. He considers that any punishment that does not involve plunging him into Tartarus, or even more deeply, is one that falls short of his crimes, and that what has long seemed a duty (*oportet*) is now also, and finally, his will (*libet*). He is determined to die (*Phoen.* 143–6):

nam sceleri haec meo
parum alta nox est: Tartaro condi iuuat,
et si quid ultra Tartarum est. tandem libet
quod olim oportet. morte prohiberi haud queo.

For this night is not deep
enough for my crime; I long to hide in Tartarus,
or whatever lies beyond Tartarus. What was long my duty is at last my desire.
I cannot be restrained from death.

In the second passage, we see the intensification of Oedipus’ guilt (*totus nocens sum*),²⁷ of his death wish and of his desire for an adequate and exemplary punishment (*qua uoles mortem exige*) (*Phoen.* 157–60):

non destino unum uulneri nostro locum:
totus nocens sum: qua uoles mortem exige.
effringe corpus corque tot scelerum capax
euelle, totos uiscerum nuda sinus.

I do not fix on any one place for wounding;
all of me is guilty, exact death where you will.

on the sun, the source of purity ... Alternatively, this may be a more general reminder of Oedipus’ sightlessness and pollution, *diem* being a contrast to the *noctem* of his blindness and of his moral uncleanness.’

²⁶ See Frank (n. 25), 86–7: ‘The substance of Oedipus’ supplication ... is an inversion of the usual kind of prayer, in which a deity is asked either to grant something positive or to avert an evil ... Seneca here manipulates a traditional form in order to impress powerfully upon his audience the bizarre paradox of Oedipus’ situation.’

²⁷ Frank (n. 25), 123–4 notes Oedipus’ ‘macabre generosity, allowing his hand to deliver its death-dealing blow in whatever part of his body it wishes, since his whole being has been polluted by his parricide and incest’.

Break open my body and tear out this heart,
capable of so many crimes, lay bare all my coiling guts.

The third passage sees Oedipus offer a tribute to his father, an apology and the recognition that the punishment chosen is insufficient, that the payment of his debt by blinding was only partial (*nec me redemi parte*), but that now he is ready to pay it in full (*debitum exige*), with death (*Phoen.* 166–71):

et tu, parens, ubicumque poenarum arbiter
astas mearum: non ego hoc tantum scelus
ulla expiari credidi poena satis
umquam, nec ista morte contentus fui,
nec me redemi parte: membratim tibi
perire uolui. debitum tandem exige.

And you, my father, wherever you stand to witness my punishment:
I did not believe that such a crime as mine could be properly expiated
by any punishment, ever; I was not satisfied with this much death,
I did not redeem myself by partial payment: I wanted to die
for you limb by limb.
But now at last exact your debt.

The fourth passage has Oedipus encouraging himself (*audies, Oedipu*), inciting himself to do more, to go further. Blindness as punishment is insufficient (*minus*), if he does not dig through the empty sockets with his fingers and tear the brain itself (*Phoen.* 178–81):²⁸

audies uerum, Oedipu:
minus eruisti lumina audacter tua,
quam praestitisti. nunc manum cerebro indue:
hac parte mortem perage qua coepi mori.

You will hear the truth, Oedipus:
you plucked out your eyes less boldly
than you offered them. Now plunge your hand into the brain.
Bring death to completion through that part where I began to die.

Finally, Oedipus repeats his dissatisfaction with the punishment of blindness (*Phoen.* 241–2):

nullas animus admittit preces
nouamque poenam sceleribus quaerit parem.

My spirit listens to no prayers:
it is seeking a new punishment to match my crimes.

²⁸ Cf. e.g. Seneca's *Troades*, where the death of Astyanax is given a similarly bloody description. The young son of Hector and Andromache is led by Ulysses to the top of a tower on the crumbling walls of Troy. Faced with imminent death, for his executioner will push him from the top of the tower, Astyanax takes the initiative to jump. His bones are shattered and crushed by the violence of the fall. The features of his body and face, which used to recall his father, become unrecognizable. His neck breaks with the impact on the rock (*soluta ceruix silicis impulsu, Tro.* 1115). His head opens, casting out his brains (*caput | ruptum cerebro penitus expresso, Tro.* 1115–16). On Seneca's apparent obsession with human mutilation and dismemberment, see e.g. G.W. Most, 'disiecti membra poetae: the rhetoric of dismemberment in Neronian poetry', in R. Hexter and D. Selden (edd.), *Innovations of Antiquity* (New York and London, 1992), 391–419.

Indeed, in the first part of the *Phoenissae*, in which some affinities are detected with, for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*,²⁹ Seneca presents a blind and prostrate Oedipus, lamenting his fate, and to whose eager yearning for death Antigone is firmly opposed.³⁰ And when, at the end of this first part of the play, a messenger announces the arrival of Polynices in Thebes and informs Oedipus that the city begs his favour to prevent the fratricidal war (*Phoen.* 320–7), he states that there is nothing to be done, that his children are only trying to follow his example, and so he even expects them to dare something worthy of their father (*Phoen.* 331–7). Moreover, his attention is solely focussed on discerning whether he has done well or ill in having preferred blindness to death. In truth, Oedipus does nothing to prevent the fratricidal war between his sons. Returning to a semblance of the maternal womb (a cave surrounded by foliage), Oedipus acts like a maleficent spirit, a demiurge of the outcome of the play, clearly presenting a contrast to Jocasta, who actively tries to prevent her sons from fighting.

In fact, the main theme of the first part of the *Phoenissae* (1–362) is suicide: Oedipus is determined to end his life by continuing what he has started when he tore out his eyes, if necessary, thrusting his hand inside his own head through the empty eye sockets, as seen in lines 178–81 quoted above.³¹ Oedipus is dissuaded by Antigone from pursuing death, however. Frank states that the dialogue between father and daughter is static and declamatory, but that Seneca infuses it with dramatic interest by gradually introducing what will be the second theme of the play, fundamental from line 363 onwards: the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices.³²

Frank also notes that, at the beginning of the play (*Phoen.* 1–48), it is not immediately clear why, after the passage of time, Oedipus again feels the same deep suffering and despair he felt when he first discovered his true identity (*Oedipus'* theme); according to Frank, the very intensity of Oedipus' *furor* thus generates dramatic interest, while we wait to learn the cause of his malaise. Seneca explores this suspense to the limit: he begins by referring to the conflict between the brothers without associating it to Oedipus' desire for death (*Phoen.* 53–8); he then alludes to the fratricidal conflict in the context of Oedipus' death wish, but without establishing any explicit relation between them (*Phoen.* 105–18); and, lastly, only in lines 273–306 does Seneca point to this conflict as the cause of Oedipus' impulse towards suicide.³³

²⁹ On Seneca's treatment of the Theban legend, see e.g. Frank (n. 25), 16–29.

³⁰ Cf. G.W.M. Harrison, 'Themes', in G. Damschen and A. Heil (edd.), *Brill's Companion to Seneca* (Leiden and Boston, 2014), 615–38, at 622: 'In Fantham's reading of the play, as it survives (1983: 61–76), Oedipus blinded himself to expiate the curse on his family. The enmity between his two sons makes him realize that his self-mutilation was for nothing. In anger he curses his sons to commit even greater outrages than he did, greater than his because his acts were [committed] unknowingly trying to avoid pollution, while they will deliberately kill each other, thereby ending the curse by ending the lineage.' See also Fantham (n. 6), 63: '[Antigone's] pleas to choose life and reject death are the moral principles familiar from Seneca's prose works, inappropriate to the extent that they presuppose a morally normal addressee.'

³¹ Various forms of death are considered throughout the play and, at times, even listed by Oedipus or Antigone (cf. e.g. *Phoen.* 67–73, or 110–21), which illustrates Seneca's claim in *Ep.* 70.24 that *nihil obstat erumpere et exire cupienti. in aperto nos natura custodit ... non deerit ad mortem ingenium, cui non defuerit animus* 'When a man desires to burst forth and take his departure, nothing stands in his way. It is an open space in which Nature guards us ... If you do not lack the courage, you will not lack the cleverness, to die', transl. R.M. Gummere, *Seneca: Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

³² Frank (n. 25), 75.

³³ See Fantham (n. 6), 62: 'Seneca has explored independently in the Oedipus scenes [of the *Phoenissae*] the experience of *nefas* (call it sin, or guilt or crime) and the different explanations that can be offered for its transmission to the brothers.'

It would be more exact to say ‘one of the causes’. There are other causes behind Oedipus’ self-destructive drive. One of them is evident in the initial lines of the play, which opens with Oedipus’ plea to his daughter to leave him alone (*Phoen.* 1–8).³⁴ This cause is made known at the end of this speech from Oedipus (*Phoen.* 48–50):

nullum facere iam possum scelus?
possum miser, praedico: discede a patre,
discede uirgo. timeo post matrem omnia.

Am I incapable now of committing a crime?
I am capable, wretched man, I give warning: leave your father,
leave while a virgin. After my mother I fear everything.

A little further on, the terrible suspicion that he may rape his daughter is once more confirmed. Elated by Antigone’s words and by her determination to accompany him unconditionally, even in death if necessary (*Phoen.* 51–79), Oedipus asks how could something so pious have been born of him (*Phoen.* 80–2). But fear of some new ignominy is suggested (*Phoen.* 84–8): ‘Nature is changing, following new laws ... so that something can be added to my misery’ (*ipsa se in leges nouas | Natura uertit ... | ut ad miserias aliquid accedat meas*).³⁵

As we can see, there are at least three overriding reasons that form the basis of Oedipus’ desire for suicide and his loss of the consolation he felt at the end of the *Oedipus*. If the fratricidal struggle is hinted at throughout the first part of the *Phoenissae*, only being explicitly mentioned at the end, the fear of a new incest and the feeling of guilt are more readily assumed.³⁶

FACING A NEW ENIGMA

To conclude, I want to emphasize once more the different perspectives of the character Oedipus between the two Senecan plays on the Theban theme. In the *Oedipus*, despite considering suicide, the king rejects the idea because death would be a brief punishment

³⁴ Frank (n. 25), 75 stresses that ‘from the passive surrender to his fate’ (expressed in *Phoen.* 11 ‘let my blind feet travel where they will’, *patere caecum qua uolet ferri pedem*) Oedipus suddenly changes, in line 12, to a delirious desire to actively seek death; that the abrupt change in state of mind and tone, ‘characteristic of the declamatory style’, is supported by *ibo, ibo*; and that Oedipus’ earnest desire to seek death is expressed by the use of words that denote speed and action: *celer* (*Phoen.* 13), *egit* (*Phoen.* 17), *cucurrit* (*Phoen.* 19), *fugas* (*Phoen.* 21), *fugiens* (*Phoen.* 23), *insiluit* (*Phoen.* 24).

³⁵ Fantham (n. 6), 65 notes that lines 355–8 (*frater in fratrem ruat. | nec hoc sat est: quod debet, ut fiat nefas | de more nostro, quod meos deceat toros, | date arma matri!*) suggest the horror of the possibility of another rape in the *Phoenissae*, the rape of Jocasta by her own sons: ‘The phrase [*ut fiat nefas de more nostro*] should provide a climax of awfulness beyond the other wicked deeds which [Oedipus] demands from his sons. And it should involve a *nefas* committed against their mother, parallel to his own actions. Oedipus’ sin against his mother was incest; the enormity would be outdone if his incestuous sons were to emulate him and do sexual violence to their mother/grandmother.’

³⁶ M. Frank, ‘The rhetorical use of family terms in Seneca’s *Oedipus* and *Phoenissae*’, *Phoenix* 49 (1995), 121–30, at 126 emphasizes the rhetorical use of family terms in Seneca’s *Phoenissae*: ‘Characters constantly both address and refer to one another in terms which indicate their consanguinity, and words indicating family relationships occur more frequently in *Phoenissae* than in other Senecan tragedy ... Particularly in the first half of the play (1–362), words denoting kinship are used as a rhetorical device to stress the genetic chaos which reigns in the Theban royal house.’

and a feeble compensation for the evil he has inflicted on his mother, his children and his plague-ridden country. He opts therefore for a *mors longa*, blindness, which allows him to cohabit with the dead, among them his father Laius, and with the living, but without truly belonging to either group.³⁷ In the *Phoenissae*, however, Oedipus seems to come to the conclusion that the *alta nox* he has inflicted upon himself is an insignificant reparation for his crimes and that death would, perhaps, be the best solution.

It is in this sense that Ker states that the two plays about Oedipus map the most delayed death of all of Seneca's tragedies, a 'death' beginning with self-inflicted blindness at the end of the *Oedipus* and dragging on into the *Phoenissae*, in which it is not completed. Ker concludes:³⁸

The possible separation of the (early?) *Oedipus* and (late?) *Phoenissae* in the chronology of Seneca's career may add to the effect: the protracted death not only creeps slowly across Oedipus' body, but spans the length of Seneca's tragic corpus.

I hope that the evidence and the argument presented in this article make a strong case for a slightly different reading from the 'slow death' hypothesis proposed by Ker. The transition from the relief with which the *Oedipus* ends to the anguish that marks the first part of the *Phoenissae* shows that, in the question of his just punishment, Oedipus is faced with a new enigma more intricate and difficult to solve than that presented by the Sphinx, whose resolution brought him so much glory but also so much suffering. In the *Oedipus*, the king finds what seems like a fitting punishment; in the *Phoenissae*, he realizes it is inadequate.

The ultimate punishment suffered by Oedipus is precisely this unfulfilled desire for an adequate punishment. In this context, what is the significance of blindness as a threshold state? Has Oedipus actually found the perfect punishment but, once again, is too deluded to realize it? If so, he has not progressed far from the character represented in *Oedipus*. This is an interesting dramatic irony. Ultimately, blindness becomes representative of Oedipus' continuing failure to achieve self-knowledge. Little is left to him but to creep in blindness, an uncertain and obscure threshold, a deep and long night, the antechamber of death.

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³⁷ Cf. J. Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca* (Oxford, 2009), 135: 'Yet the *mors longa* that would separate him from his father in the underworld (949–51) also requires him to be vigilant against future encounters with Jocasta (1014–18). The wandering Oedipus of *Phoenissae* in fact enjoys separation from Jocasta (who in this play lives on, but never appears with Oedipus), and he now strives after death.'

³⁸ Ker (n. 37), 135.