Seneca’s *Oedipus* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*

**Some Background**
- The date for the play is uncertain.
- In Seneca’s own prose writing, there is no mention of his own plays.
- Boyle suggests that it is an earlier play, probably Claudian (41 BCE -54 BCE): a time when imperial support for the *ludi* continued and increased.

**Major Differences**

**Oedipus**
- He is fearful, anxious, and knows he is to blame for the plague. (1-81)
- Also, he explains the Delphic prophecy which caused him to flee Corinth; however, Seneca does not mention the drunken-man rant concerning Oedipus’ parentage, which in Sophocles is the reason for his visit of the Delphic oracle.

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<th>Latin</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<td>hic me paternis expulit regnis timor. (22)</td>
<td>“This fear drove me out of my father’s kingdom.”</td>
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<td>cuncta expavesco meque non credo mihi. (27)</td>
<td>“I fear all things and I do not believe in myself.”</td>
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<td>fecimus caelum <em>nocens</em>. (36)</td>
<td>“We have made the air harmful.”</td>
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**Jocasta:**
- Quid iuvat, coniunx, mala gravare questu? regium hoc ipsum reor: adversa capere, quoque sit dubius magis status et cadentis imperi moles labet, hoc stare certo pressius fortum gradu; haud est virile terga *Fortunae* dare. (81-86)

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<td>Horrore quatior, <em>fata</em> quo vergant timens, trepidumque gemino pectus affectu labat: ubi laeta duris mixta in ambiguo iacent, incertus animus scire cum cupiat timet. (206-209)</td>
<td>“I quiver in fear of where fate now points; My trembling heart falters with split feelings. When good and bad mix ambiguously, The unsure mind fears the knowledge it craves.” (Boyle)</td>
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When Creon returns from the oracle:

- He is trepidumque gemino pectus affectu labat: ubi laeta duris mixta in ambiguo iacent, incertus animus scire cum cupiat timet. (206-209)
Tiresias and Manto

- Tiresias and his daughter Manto perform a sacrifice and interpret the signs on stage.
- Tiresias does not have all the answers: quidnam loquar? (330)

sed ecce pugnax ignis in partes duas
discedit et se scindit unius sacri
discors favilla—genitor, horresco intuens:
libata Bacchi dona permutat cruar
ambitque densus regium fumus caput
ipsosque circa spissior vultus sedet
et nube densa sordidam lucem abdidit. (312-327)

Iuvenca ferro semet imposito induit
et vulnere uno cecidit, at taurus duos
perpessus ictus huc et huc dubius ruit
animamque fessus vix reluctantem exprimit. (341-344)

Tiresias:
Nec alta caeli quae levii pinna secan
nec fibra vivis rapta pectoribus potest
ciere nomen; alia temptanda est via:
ipse evocandus noctis aeternae plagis,
emissus Erebo ut caedis auctorem indicet. (390-394)

But look! The flame splits into two-fighting;
The embers of a single rite divide
In hate. Father, I shudder as I watch.
The Bacchic libations turn to blood
And the dense smoke envelops the king’s head,
Settling around his eyes more thickly,
Its dense cloud blocking the filthy light.”
(Boyle)

“The heifer thrust herself on the poised blade
And fell with one blow. But the bull suffered
Two blows, charging wildly this way and that,
Weakened but loth to yield his struggling life.”
(Boyle)

“Neither light wings slicing through heaven’s heights,
Nor organs ripped from living flesh can raise
His name. We must try a different way.
Summon the king from everlasting Night,
Free him from Erebus to name his killer.” (Boyle)

The Ghost of Laius

- Creon takes part in the ritual to summon Laius’ ghost; afterwards, he is reluctant to speak.

subito dehiscit terra et immenso sinu
laxata patuit—ipse torpentes lacus
vidi inter umbras, ipse pallentes deos
noctemque veram; gelidus in venis stetit
haesitque sanguis, saeva prosiluit cohors
et stetit in armis omne vipereum genus,
fratrum catervae dente Dirceae satae.
tum torva Erinys sonuit et caecus Furor
Horrorque et una quicquid aeternae creant
celantque tenebrae: Luctus avellens comam
Disease sickly drooping its lumpen head,
Gravis Senectus sibimet et pendens Metus
Self-wilting Age and hanging Fear—and Plague,
Avidumque populi Pestis Ogygii malum.
(582-594)

“Suddenly Earth gapes and opened wide
With a vast chasm. Down in the dark—myself—
I saw pallid gods, I saw stagnant pools
And real night. My icy blood stopped and froze
In my veins. A ferocious troop leapt out
And stood under arms, the whole viper’s brood,
Bands of brothers sown from Dircean teeth.
Then grim Erinys screamed and blind Fury
And Horror with all that eternal darkness
Congeals and conceals: hair-rendering Grief,
Disease sickly drooping its lumpen head,
Self-wilting Age and hanging Fear—and Plague,
The fiend lusting for Ogygia’s folk.”
(Boyle)
Creon describes Laius:

stetit per artus sanguine effuso horridus,  
paedore foedo squalidam objectus comam,  
et ore rabido fatur…(624-626)

proinde pulsum finibus regem ocius  
agite exulem quocumque funesto gradu;  
solum relinquat: vere florifero  
virens reparabit herbas, spiritus puros dabit  
vitalis aura, veniet et silvis decor. (647-651)

“He stood there, a thing of horror, limbs caked  
With blood, his grimy hair matted and foul—  
And speaks in rabid tones…” (Boyle)

“So banish the king from your borders at once,  
Exile him. Each plot of earth his cursed steps  
Abandon will bloom with flowers of spring,  
Grass will green again. Men will breathe purely  
The vital air; beauty will clothe the woods.” (Boyle)

The Revelation

- Oedipus does not believe Creon when he relates that the ghost of Laius pointed to him as his killer. Since no one made him uncertain about his parentage at Corinth, for him there is no possible way that is related to Laius and Jocasta. Therefore, he does not believe that he is guilty of killing his father and marrying his own mother as Laius states.
- He is so enraged that he throws Creon into jail. (707)
- However, he realizes that he could be guilty:

Curas revolvit animus et repetit metus,  
obisse nostro Laium scelere autumant  
superi inferique, sed animus contra innocens  
sibique melius quam dei notus negat,  
redit memoria tenue per vestigium…  
(764-768)

“My mind revolves with doubt and recalls its fears.  
Powers above and below claim I murdered Laius. But my mind’s innocent. It knows itself better than the gods do and says ‘No!’ Yet the memory returns—the track is faint…” (Boyle)

- As Oedipus is figuring out if he is the murderer, an old Corinthian comes telling him of Polybus’ death and that Merope is not his mother. They send for the shepherd who gave Oedipus to the Corinthian messenger.
- Seneca reverses the order in which Oedipus blinds himself and Jocasta kills herself.

violentus audax vultus, iratus ferox,  
tantum furentis; gemuit et dirum fremens  
manus in ora torsit, at contra truces  
oculi steterunt et suam intenti manum  
ultro insecurunt, vulneri occurrunt suo.  
scrutatur avidus manibus uncis lumina,  
radice ab ima funditus vulsos simul  
evolvit orbes; haeret in vacuo manus  
et fixa penitus unguibus lacerat cavos  
alte recessus luminum et inanes sinus,  
saevitque frustra plus quam satis est furt.  
(960-970)

“His gaze violent, ruthless, angry, fierce—  
As he now prepared to dig. He groaned,  
And, with dire screams, turned his hands on his face.  
His eyes throb wildly and track their own hands  
Intently; they rush to meet their wounds.  
With hands clawed in lust he gouges his eyes,  
He rips the orbs from their deepest roots  
And rolls them out together. His hands cling,  
Lodged inside the holes; their nails tear at  
The eyes’ deep cavities and empty sockets—  
With pointless fury and excessive rage.” (Boyle)
• Jocasta stabs herself, having seen Oedipus in his horrible condition after he tore his eyes out.
• Oedipus himself closes the play, further proclaiming that the plague and all the troubles will leave Thebes with him.

Main theme

Fate

• Words *fatum* and *fata* appear some 26 times in the play.
• Davis: “Fate as malevolent force which seeks to destroy individuals.”
• Feature of Stoicism: “universe is a continuum: all phenomena are bound together in a material and causal network whose behavior is determined by a pre-set formula, ‘fate,’ presided over by a benevolent force…called Providence. There is no such thing as ‘chance’ or randomness.” (Ahl 2008)

Conclusion

• Seneca’s *Oedipus* is much more grim and dramatic in nature than Sophocles’ tragedy.
• It is more grotesque and has more detailed imagery.
• It is more emotionally driven and deals more in depth with the psychological state of the character.

Bibliography


