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Preferred Panel: 15. Greek and Roman Epic

Oedipus in Ovid's 'Thebaid'

When discussing the debt of Ovid's 'Thebaid' to *Oedipus Rex* (=OR), scholars concentrate on 'Echo and Narcissus' (Gildenhard/Zissos). However, they have not noted that Cadmus and Pentheus are also cast in Oedipal terms, both on a verbal and a thematic level. This conforms to the tragic background of *Metamorphoses* iii (Hardie, 165-72; Keith, 258-69), and presents viewing and identity as intrinsic problems of Thebes.

Like Oedipus, Cadmus kills a monster and ends up in self-inflicted exile. Significantly, his family's fate causes Cadmus' misery (*Met.*iii.131-5). The similarities between the two characters are also underscored through verbal parallels that highlight Ovid's inventive reuse of OR (*Met.*iii.135-7~OR 1528-30, not merely an *unexpected* piece of proverbial wisdom, as Bömer *ad loc.* implies).

Pentheus emblemizes the tyrannical aspect of Oedipus. As king he addresses a group of citizens, old and young, engaged in religious activity (*Met.*iii.531-63; cf. OR 1-77). Like Oedipus, he reacts to Teiresias' advice by mocking his blindness (*Met.*iii.515-6~OR 374-5; cf. 371 and 412; *Met.*iii.525~OR 747). Teiresias prophecies the future to Pentheus, only to be reviled.

Oedipus features prominently in Theban myth (Zeitlin, 130-1), and Sophocles often verbalizes his sufferings in terms of seeing/viewing (OR 367, 792, 824, 830-3, 1077, 1334-5). Interestingly, several of Ovid's Thebans (Actaeon, Semele, Narcissus, Pentheus) die while viewing inappropriate spectacles. Moreover, Oedipus's confounded identity (*simultaneously* father and brother to his children, son and husband to his wife) finds many parallels in Ovid's account: the mixed identity of the Thebans themselves (descendants of humans *and* offspring of the serpent's teeth); Actaeon resembles a nymph about to be raped at a *locus amoenus* (Heath, 61-2) and is transformed into an animal while retaining his *human* consciousness; Jupiter's questioned divine identity results in Semele's death; Narcissus is *simultaneously* lover and beloved; the Maenads *view* Pentheus as an animal. Thus, while not explicitly narrated, Oedipus's story is an important subtext for Ovid's 'Thebaid.'

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