

Oedipus' Metamorphoses: Reflections on the Authorial Role of Seneca's Oedipus.

This paper aims to analyze the character of Oedipus from a meta-theatrical point of view, and the role that emotions play in leading the tragic action. The idea that Seneca's plays constitute a highly meta-dramatic form of theatre, and that some of the characters in these plays perform an authorial role has been recognized by other scholars, and especially by A. Schiesaro¹. In his book, Schiesaro portrays Oedipus as a "less typical and more complicated case", mainly because of the specific passion that leads his actions, i.e. fear, and because, unlike other characters, "he does not enjoy the privileged, omniscient point of view of the author". Indeed, fear and lack of an omniscient viewpoint are generally traits that are shared by characters that play the victim-role, and therefore do not lead, but, instead, suffer the tragic action in Seneca's tragedies, as witnessed by cases like those of Jason, Hippolytus, Andromache, and, of course, Thyestes. In this paper I argue that it is only in the first part of the play that Oedipus partially differs from other characters who perform authorial roles, such as, for example, Medea and Atreus. In fact, if, ideally, we divide the play into two parts – the one that precedes the discovery of the truth, and the one which follows it, we can notice that only in the first part is the action led by a character – Oedipus - who is fearful only at times, while at other times he is angry. However, in the second part, as soon as Oedipus discovers the truth about his identity, he turns into a type of playwright that is more similar to Medea and Atreus. Once he is made aware of his *scelus*, he abandons fear, and allows the *dolor* that stems from knowledge to originate the *ira* and consequently the *furor* that have been indicated by Schiesaro as the typical "motor of the tragedy". Therefore, I suggest in this paper, Oedipus, after discovering the truth about himself, undergoes a metamorphoses that turns him into a similar type of playwright as Medea and Atreus. In fact, it is at this point that, after yielding to an anger-driven *furor*, he puts aside any hesitation, and starts a poetic competition

¹ Schiesaro, 2003. See also Petrone, 1984; Palmieri, 1989; Curley 1986; Boyle, 2011.

that eventually sees him *consciously* accomplishing that *grande nescio quid*, whose plotting and enactment characterizes tragedies such as the *Medea*, the *Thyestes* and others written by Seneca. In arguing my points, I look closely at, and analyze the use of specific key-words, expressions, and dramatic elements² that consistently occur in Seneca's tragedies, and that I deem part of a linguistic code that Seneca uses to develop a meta-theatrical discourse in his tragedies. Examples of this linguistic code are references to the *audacia* of an enterprise; mentioning of the *morae* and *metus* (which have a tendency to delay it), and of the *ira*, *furor*, and *ingenium* (which have the opposite effect of precipitating it), along with expressions such as *peractum est*, or *bene est* (which indicate the end of the enterprise), and images such as those of paths, animals, stars (or divine heights), and the sea, which have already been used by other poets engaged in poetic discourse, and that appear to be employed by Seneca with the same aim in mind, i.e. discoursing about poetry.

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² On the use of specific dramatic elements that characterize Seneca's tragedy, see Petrone, 1984.

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