

## Discussing the 'Other' in Roman Tragedy: Ethnography and anxiety in Seneca's *Phaedra*

Based on the “geographical erudition” of a Roman tradition that had been already established in poetry by Virgil, Ovid, and Horace (Cattin 1963, 686), Seneca incorporated into his theatrical agenda numerous references to ‘foreign’ areas and ethnic groups. Scholars examining Seneca’s use of non-Romans focus on Seneca’s methodology and errors (Cattin 1963), literary background and sources (Syme 1987), accuracy and patterns (Grant 2000), and Seneca’s apparent belief in the *Medea* that expansionism and mixture of cultures have a “negative effect on Rome” (Benton 2003). Noticeably, no focused attention has been paid to the *Phaedra*. Examining the use of ethnography in this play reveals an aspect of the discussions of other cultures and ethnicities especially after the geographical expansion of the Roman empire, and how a rather technical tradition of prose literature is transformed and incorporated into the poetry of the Neronian period. (cf. Thomas 1982, who, nevertheless, does not examine Senecan tragedy).

Building upon these scholars, in this paper I suggest that the tragic figures in Seneca’s *Phaedra* generate an ethnographic discourse in order to reflect upon their own selves, gender identities and gendered representations. In providing a theatrical commentary on the ethnographic characteristics of the ‘Others’, Seneca has his characters express anxieties about cross-cultural relationships, the possible corruption of the ‘Roman self’, and about gender stereotypes.

First, I argue that Hippolytus’ hybridity (half Greek, half Scythian) triggers an ethnographic evaluation where the Scythians are considered uncivilized and savage, while a mixture of ethnicities has ambiguous connotations. For instance, the Nurse through the utterance

*genus Amazonium scias* (*Phaedra* 232) invites both Phaedra and the audience to recall the previous tradition on the Amazons and Hippolytus' wild reaction expected from a descendant of the Amazons. When declaring her desire to adopt an Amazon's attire and follow Hippolytus into the forests (398-403), Phaedra undermines her femininity and her kingly dignity, and subverts them into such elements as wildness, warlikeness, and nomadism. In confessing her love to her stepson, Phaedra considers the mixture of ethnic characteristics a combination of elements leading equally to Hippolytus' glory (*ex aequo decus*, 658). On the contrary, Theseus through the idea of the "cyclical process" (Hammond 2022, 212) regards his son's hybridity as a cause of his criminality (905-907) and explains Hippolytus' sexual misconduct through environmental determinism (*...o taetrum genus / nullaque victum lege melioris soli*, 910-911).

Second, I claim that Seneca uses various peoples of Eastern lands as the anti-Romans whose habits and cultural characteristics jeopardize the appropriate morals of the Roman 'self'. For instance, during her delirium, Phaedra connects her homeland, Crete, with Syria (85-91), and places her "Cretan world of monstrous and illicit passion in the East" (Paschalis 1993, 143). Thus, Seneca has Phaedra shorten the geographical distance and share with the Syrians stereotypes about "wanton sexuality" (Andrade 2013, 323). In trying to restrain Phaedra from her passion, her Nurse refers to Getae, Taurians and Scythians (165-168) as an example of any immorality ever committed which Phaedra must not surpass. In keeping up with a Roman tradition of attacking Eastern clothing because of the alleged female degradation (see for instance Sen. *Ben* 7.9; Plin. *Nat.* 11.75-78), Seneca presents furious Phaedra as being dressed in material (clothes and jewelry) coming from Tyre, China, India, and Syria (387-393). Seneca joins the Eastern flavor of his tragic figure's appearance with a degraded morality, while Phaedra willingly adopts markers of foreignness when she wishes to take off her clothes and follow

Hippolytus into the woods (398-403), thus shifting her 'self' from female illicitness to male savageness.

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