

I Think Therefore I Am Not:
Faulty Self-Construction in Seneca's *Phaedra*

A defining feature of Senecan tragedy is its protagonists' obsessive rumination over their own sense of self. Scholars such as (Fitch and McElduff, Trinacity, Segal 2008) illustrate both the intensity and the extent to which Senecan characters will go to assert their own identities, while (Bexley 2009 and 2022, Star) have sought to explore this unique facet further by linking the obsessive self-construction of the characters to Seneca's Stoic philosophy. The obsession that Senecan characters have with self construction can be considered Stoic because fictional characters can be understood as the reflection of the Stoic person (Bexley, 2022, 3). This premise is especially true when considering one play in particular, the *Phaedra*. Much ink has flowed concerning how the character of Phaedra constructs her own identity and its implications on our understanding of the play (Armstrong, Gill, Fitch and McElduff, Segal 2017). Consequently, the focus on Phaedra's self construction has left room for further analysis of the other primary character of the play Hippolytus. Thus, the aim of this paper is to argue that Hippolytus can be read as an example of a character who exhibits faulty self-construction, that Hippolytus is a character who deliberately engages the process of self-construction but is unable to fully assume a coherent identity.

Moreover, the form of Hippolytus' faulty character construction is Stoic in the sense that his identity(s) lack any notion of self-reflection, a vital aspect of Stoic self-construction (Bartsch). In addition to this, Hippolytus switches between inherently faulty identities when the occasion suits his own interests. Moving from his initial modesty-based identity which he erroneously assumes from his mother and espouses from the beginning of the play to a hastily thrown-together facsimile of his father Theseus at the end (*Phaedra* 1060-70). In order to prove both that Hippolytus' self-construction leads to an inherently faulty identity and that this identity fails along Stoic lines, this paper will offer a close reading of the *Phaedra* in conjunction with Seneca's philosophical works and examine the ways in which Hippolytus asserts his identity (*Epistles*: 120.22, 16.2-3, 11.10 and

4-5, 108.14-15, 14.12, and *De Ira* 2.27.2), why that identity is faulty, and subsequently how that factors into the tragic events of the play—indeed, its genre as tragedy (see Gunderson). Approaching the *Phaedra* in terms of understanding that characters such as Hippolytus are unable to engage in successful self-construction, this paper hopes to better understand how Seneca conceived of not just being, but not being. What makes somebody someone and someone no one? In the sense of one's ability to possess and create their own identity for themselves.

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