*Approba populo manum: A*uthors and Audiences in Senecan Tragedy

Though scholars everywhere recognize the metatheatricality of Seneca's tragic characters Medea and Atreus (Schiesaro 1997: 93), previous work has neglected to consider the social historical implications of Seneca's self-consciousness on the part of characters in his role as a Neronian author. Revisiting intertextuality with Seneca's epistolary corpus (esp. *Epistulae Morales* 7, 84, 100, and 114, with Trinacty 2014, 13-15), this paper identifies where Seneca's exemplary tragedic characters interact with in-text audiences to cast new light on the conditions of communication and criticism of Latin literature and its public (cf. Auerbach 1965) in the early Empire.

Seneca's explicit theory of reading and writing in *Ep*. 84 delineates the process of gathering source material and producing new work. When Medea creates the poison that devastates Jason's new family in *Medea*, her process closely resembles Seneca's description of the bees in that letter. The nurse describes how Medea collects various frightening ingredients from all over the world to create something wholly new: a work that inspires a powerful reaction from the earth itself (705-39). Just as the bees "mel faciendum/ idoneos carpunt," "pluck the flowers that are able to make honey" (*Ep.* 84. 3), so too does Medea "mortifera carpit gramine" "pluck the deadly herbs" (707). Later in the letter, Seneca describes how readers should be selective and only mix up, "**in unum** saporem varia illa libamenta **con**fundere," the most special ingredients in order to create an original work (84.6). Medea does the same: "**con**gerit **in unum** fructis infaustae mala" "she unites the evils of bad-fated plants" (705-6). Medea uses the best practices (as outlined later by Seneca in his letters) to craft an effective product.

Both Atreus and Medea contemplate committing massive crimes that will cement or alter their reputations and relationship with the in-text audience. Medea crafts herself both as the most vicious figure in Crete but also the preeminent form of Medea (905-10). Atreus, even when he has already killed Thyestes' children, continues to demand more of himself by plotting to feed them to their father (885-591). Their obsession with novelty has been called a reflection of the competitive nature of Greek and Roman culture (Fitch and McElduff 2002) and taken to reflect an awareness of their competition with previous authors (Boyle 1997: 208). However, as much as Seneca may be concerned with being compared to Euripides or Ovid, it is his own readers who will criticize and assess him as an author. The readers' demand for greater and greater levels of violence as well as novelty in how that violence is achieved (both concepts articulated in *Ep.* 7) must shape the style and content that Seneca deploys. Medea and Atreus' unsatiable need for violence speak to Seneca's own need to please or serve his audience's ravenous and undesirable cravings while also presenting ideal instances of literary production.

Works Cited

Auerbach, E. (1965). *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages.* New York.

Boyle, A. J. (1997). *Tragic Seneca: an essay in the theatrical tradition.* London; New York: Routledge.

Fitch, J. G., & McElduff, S. (2002). Construction of the Self in Senecan Drama. *Mnemosyne*, *55*(1), 18–40.

Schiesaro, A. 1997. Passion, Reason and Knowledge in Seneca's Tragedies. In S. Braund & C. Gill (Authors), The Passions in Roman Thought and Literature (pp. 89-111). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trinacty, C. (2014). *Senecan Tragedy and the Reception of Augustan Poetry*. Oxford.