Ius Vitae ac Necis: Oedipus as *Paterfamilias* in Seneca's *Phoenissae*

Seneca's *Phoenissae*, with its unfinished state and textual issues, has long been neglected by scholars in favor of Seneca's other tragedies. Much of the early scholarship on the *Phoenissae* focused on the question of whether the two extant halves—the first (1–362) focusing on Oedipus and the second (363–664) on Jocasta—were meant to be part of the same play and, if so, how they were to connect (e.g., Paul 1953, Opelt 1972; see Frank 1995a: 1–15). More recently, scholars revisiting the *Phoenissae* to perform deeper literary analysis have noticed the play's focus on and problematization of familial roles: Frank (1995b) argues that Seneca uses frequent familial identifiers to emphasize the "genetic chaos" of the house of Oedipus, while Ginsberg (2015) demonstrates that Antigone's elegiac language subverts her claims to filial piety. In this paper, I build upon these insights about familial dynamics to offer a new reading of the play's first half, proposing that Seneca casts Oedipus' refusal to return to Thebes to stop the impending civil war between his sons as a refusal of his role as *paterfamilias*. In this way, I conclude, Seneca construes the familial conflict of the *Phoenissae* in specifically Roman terms.

I demonstrate that what Frank (1995a) calls Oedipus' "obsessive insistence on his paternity" is complicated by a paradoxical commitment to shirking his responsibilities as *paterfamilias*. Although the play opens with Oedipus emphasizing his fatherhood (*caeci parentis regimen et fessi unicum / patris levamen, nata*, 1-2), he concludes this statement of paternal responsibility by commanding Antigone to abandon him (*desere infaustum patrem*, 3). Seneca therefore presents Oedipus as utilizing his paternal authority over Antigone not only to advocate for his self-imposed exile, but also to justify his subsequent abandonment of his role as the male head of the family. When Oedipus later commands Antigone to stop attempting to help him, he

claims that “the right of my life and death is mine” (*ius vitae ac necis / meae penes me est*, 103-4). The phrasing *ius vitae ac necis*, I emphasize, duplicates Roman legal terminology: *ius vitae necisque* referred to the power over life and death given to the *paterfamilias* (Thompson 2006). While Oedipus stresses the *ius vitae ac necis* he possesses over his own life (*meae*, 104), he refuses to enact that same right over his sons, even though doing so could prevent the war that will devastate Thebes. Later, when a messenger arrives from Thebes to persuade Oedipus to return, his refusal indicates that one who has committed such extreme crimes should not be a teacher of good values to his sons (*ego ille sum qui scelera commiti vetem / et abstinere sanguine a caro manus / doceam? magister iuris et amoris pii / ego sum*, 328-331). In doing so, Oedipus rejects a crucial responsibility of Roman fatherhood, namely that of instructing one’s sons on proper moral actions and values (Dixon 1992).

By identifying in the first half of Seneca’s *Phoenissae* key moments in which Seneca casts the familial conflict of the play in Roman terms, particularly in respect to Oedipus’ role as *paterfamilias*, we can better understand Seneca’s efforts to adapt Greek tragedy to his own sociopolitical circumstances. By framing the conflict in this uniquely Roman way, I conclude, and forging a recognizable connection to Roman values, Seneca exploits the cultural and political importance assigned to fathers in Rome in order to portray Oedipus as a Roman father who deliberately abandons his duties. Moreover, implicit ties between the mythical past and Seneca’s imperial present, when the emperor serves as *paterfamilias* not only of his own family but of all Rome, further underscore the ethical implications of Oedipus’ choice to abandon both kin and country.

Select Bibliography

Dixon, Susan. 1992. *The Roman Family*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fantham, Elaine. 1983. "*Nihil Iam Iura Naturae Valent*: Incest and Fratricide in Seneca's *Phoenissae*." *Ramus* 12: 61–76.

Frank, Marcia. 1995b. "The Rhetorical Use of Family Terms in Seneca's *Oedipus* and *Phoenissae*." *Phoenix* 49: 121–30.

———. 1995a. *Seneca's 'Phoenissae' Introduction and Commentary*. Leiden.

Ginsberg, Lauren. 2015. "Don't Stand So Close to Me: Antigone's "Pietas" in Seneca's *Phoenissae*." *TAPA* 145: 199–230.

Opelt, Ilona. 1972. "Zu Senecas Phoenissen." In *Senecas Tragödien*. ed. Eckard Lefèvre. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Paul, Adolf. 1953. *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart von Senecas Phoenissen.* Bonn: R. Habelt.

Saller, Richard P. 1999. "Pater familias, mater familias, and the gendered semantics of the Roman household." *CP* 94: 182–197.

Tomasz, Sapota and Słomak Iwona Beata. 2020. "*Phoenissae*, *Phoenissa*, *Thebais*: the Title of Seneca's *Phoenician Women*." *Philologica Classica* 15: 89–95.

Thompson, Steven. 2006. "Was Ancient Rome a Dead Wives Society? What did the Roman *Paterfamilias* Get Away With?" *Journal of Family History* 31: 3–27.