

## Tiresias, Ancient Witches, and their Deviant Bodies

There is significant linguistic overlap between Tiresias' prophetic rituals and those of ancient witches (broadly understood). This is an ostensibly strange pairing requisite of further study. Tiresias is a many-storied figure, appearing thirteen times in ancient Greek and Roman myth. Most often, he is an old, blind man in a position of authority whom tyrants do not heed.

When Tiresias' gender is mentioned explicitly in these works, all but one understand Tiresias' transsexuality as it is depicted in Ovid with greatest detail (Ovid, *Met.*, 3.316-338). This story appears prior to Ovid, attributed in antiquity to Hesiod by Pseudo-Apollodorus (fragment 211a) and Tzetzes (fragment 212) in reference to the now-fragmentary *Melampodia* (Most, 2018). Hyginus also reiterates this story. As it goes, Tiresias enters the narrative as a youth, then is transformed by unseen forces into a woman for seven years, and then is a man once more.

Tiresias' body is the site of gender deviance and transsexuality even in his old age, when he is rendered male and no transsexuality is referenced explicitly. Ancient authors present Tiresias' gender as deviant. When Tiresias is the blind prophet of Sophocles, Euripides, Statius, Pindar, Seneca, and Lucian, he might appear at an uncritical, first glance to be firmly male. He falls easily into the role of a father to his daughter Manto, an authority figure, and a priest employed by the state. What complicates this image, in some texts to a greater degree than others, is the use of grotesque and gendered language to describe Tiresias' divinatory rituals. To give a tangible example: both Manto (*lacte quater sparsas*, Statius, *Theb.*, 545) and Medea (*invergens tepidi carchesia lactis*, Ovid, *Met.*, 7.247) pour milk onto flaming altars. Manto completes this ritual in the custom of her parent (*de more parentis*: Statius, *Theb.*, 465). Manto and Tiresias invoke Hecate thrice in this passage alone.

Perhaps, then, Tiresias's gender deviance remains in the minds of authors who do not explicitly mention such. In order to further substantiate Tiresias' occupation of the same linguistic space as witches, this paper mentions briefly the few times where witches themselves appear as references or within the narrative in relation to Tiresias, building on the work of Beek (Beek, 2022). These references are found in Homer's *Odyssey* (10.492-3), Statius' *Thebaid* (503-506, 550-551), Lucian's *Dialogi Mortuorum* (28.2). It is, after all, the divine sorceress Circe who first introduces Tiresias in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Tiresias, like a Medea or an Erichtho, possesses a deviant body, diverging from norms. One need only to pick up their copy of Euripides or Lucan to understand how these witches' streaming hair and bare feet indicate the perverse nature of their rituals and their inability to fulfill conventional gender roles for women in their time and place. Tiresias, similarly, embodies difference. His blindness is the indirect and embodied result of his prior transsexuality.

This shared language makes an odd group of Tiresias (at first glance, a male authority acting within government-approved religious structures) and the witches (quite the opposite). This paper proposes one strategy to understand this odd coupling: reading such linguistic similarity in conjunction with Tiresias' gender deviance. Tiresias' queer body performs similar rituals to those of witches, queer in their own right (Stratton, 2007); it follows that these authors would make intertextual connections between the two parties, wittingly or not.

## Works Cited

- Beek, Everett A. "Si Crimina Demas: Necromancy in Roman Literature and Statius' Transgressive Manto," *Nemo Non Metuit: Magic in the Roman World*. Hungary, Trivent Publishing, 2022.
- Homer. 2017. *Homerus, Odyssea*. Edited by Martin L. West. Berlin: W. de Gruyter.
- Lucian. *Dialogues of the Dead. Dialogues of the Sea-Gods. Dialogues of the Gods. Dialogues of the Courtesans*. Translated by M. D. MacLeod. Loeb Classical Library 431. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961.
- Most, Glenn W. *Hesiod: The Shield, Catalogue of Women, Other Fragments*. Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. "vol. 1: Books 1–8, transl. by FJ Miller, revised by GP Goold." Cambridge (MA) (1916).
- Statius (Publius Papinius Statius). 2003–2004. *Thebaid*. Vol. 1: Books 1–7. Vol. 2: Books 8–12. Achilleid. Edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey. Loeb Classical Library 207, 498, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Stratton, Kimberly B. *Naming the witch: magic, ideology, and stereotype in the ancient world*. Columbia University Press, 2007.