Don't Stand So Close To Me: Antigone's *Pietas* in Seneca's *Phoenissae*

Critics have long noted that Seneca foregrounds the theme of incest in his Theban dramas to a greater degree than previous authors (Fantham 1983; Hirschberg 1987; Barchiesi 1988; Frank 1995; Boyle 2011). In fact, the Oedipus of the *Phoenissae* – wandering in exile with his daughter Antigone – opens the play with fears about replicating his past sins with his daughter (*timeo post matrem omnia, Phoen.* 50). And yet despite the persistence of this theme, Seneca's Antigone is often read as an unpolluted, singular exemplum of filial fidelity separate from her *nefanda domus*' incestuous patterns (Paul 1953; Fantham 1983; Hirschberg 1987; Barchiesi 1988; Frank 1995; Mader 2010). This paper challenges this pervasive assumption by investigating how Seneca rewrites Antigone's legendary *pietas*. In particular, I argue that Seneca manipulates the language of elegiac devotion to create out of Antigone's pledges of fidelity a disturbing scene of would-be seduction that threatens to realize Oedipus' fears. In doing so, I shed new light on how Seneca reclaims a canonical figure from the literary tradition for his own poetic program.

Seneca follows tradition by having Antigone pledge to be Oedipus's eternal companion in exile. Nevertheless, her description of their future wanderings blends this well-known aspect of the Theban legend with a further *topos* from Latin erotic poetry: the *amator*'s pledge to follow the beloved anywhere (*Phoen.* 61-73; cf. Prop.2.26B.29-44; Tib.1.4.41-56; Verg.*Ecl*.10; Ov.*Am*.1.9.9-16, *Am*.2.16.19ff and McKeown 1987 vol 2. ad Ov.*Am*.1.9.9-14). She pledges to be Oedipus' *fida comes* over rugged terrain, high cliffs (67), ridges difficult to climb (67), and chasms in the earth (70). Her promises even capture the symbolism behind this elegiac trope – the idea that the difficulty of the journey itself, full of oppositions and extremes, is a fundamental part of the nature of the *amator*'s devotion. Antigone's elegiac rhetoric also puts her in dialogue

with an earlier Senecan heroine who more famously pledged elegiac fidelity to a man who must remain sexually unavailable to her: Seneca's Phaedra (*sequar Phaed*. 700 and *sequor, Phoen*. 76; *[per]* <u>rupesque</u> *et amnes, unda quos* <u>torrens rapit</u>, *Phaed*. 701 and *hic alta* <u>rupes</u> *arduo surgit iugo… hic* <u>rapax torrens</u> *cadit, Phoen*. 67-71; <u>genibus</u> <u>aduoluor</u> <u>tuis</u>, *Phaed*. 703 and *nata, quid* <u>genibus</u> <u>meis</u> *fles* <u>advoluta</u>, *Phoen*. 306-7).

By having Antigone reuse the language of Phaedra's besotted appeals to Hippolytus and the elegiac type-scene behind it, Seneca turns the Antigone-Oedipus relationship into an even more extreme exploration of the confusion between familial and elegiac *amor* at the heart of his earlier tragedy. And yet unlike elegiac *amatores* and unlike Phaedra, Antigone seems entirely unaware of her language's erotic pedigree. Instead, she has internalized Roman literature's elegiac code as the natural mode in which members of her family address one another. To her, *pietas* and amatory devotion have become one and the same. While the fragmentary state of the *Phoenissae* does not allow us to know how far Seneca planned to take this Oedipal sequel, the playwright's manipulation of Antigone's most famous legendary attribute merits further investigation.

One of Seneca's hallmark characteristics as a dramatist is to show the seams of his work, to create places in which the audience is expected to recognize previous versions of a myth or character to which Senecan drama reacts, or to see the various generic *contaminationes* that contribute to Senecan tragedy (see esp. Schiesaro 2003; Littlewood 2004; Trinacty 2014; Boyle 2011 and 2014; Hinds 2011). In many ways Thebes provides Seneca with the ultimate staging ground for these practices – a literary landscape imbued with the Theban legends of previous poets and previous poems (Hinds 2011). This paper, in turn, seeks to bring the *Phoenissae* back

from the margins and to contribute to the wider current reconsideration of Seneca's intertextual poetics.

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