

Tiresias' role as a poet within Seneca's *Oedipus*

In the last decade, within the field of Seneca's studies, an increasing number of scholarly contributions has drawn attention to the metapoetic aspects of Seneca's plays, all the while showing how a closer examination of his tragic production, and of its language, helps to illuminate aspects of tragic poetics and reception. Among these contributions, readings of the plays, such as those offered by the works of Schiesaro (2003, 2006), Littlewood (2004), Staley (2011), and, more recently, Trinacty (2015), have been particularly valuable, but their metapoetic readings of the plays originated different, and at times opposed, conclusions on the evaluation of Seneca's tragic poetics.

One of the poetic figures that has been subject to examination is Tiresias. The old and blind prophet from Thebes plays a major role within the *Oedipus*, where he appears in two important scenes: the *extispicium* and the necromancy. A closer examination of this character led two scholars, Schiesaro (2003) and Staley (2011), to very different conclusions concerning the evaluation of the role that this character plays in understanding Seneca's poetics. In fact, while the former argues that Seneca portrayed Tiresias as a poet, thereby illuminating through him the activity of Seneca as a tragic poet, the latter, instead, opposes this view by claiming that Tiresias represents a model interpreter.

This paper argues that, within Seneca's *Oedipus*, Tiresias can indeed offer insights into Seneca's activity as a tragic poet, while concurrently maintaining that Staley's understanding of him as a "model interpreter" does not constitute an impediment to this argument. In fact, the depiction of Tiresias as a model interpreter may respond to Seneca's will to use Tiresias as an asset in illuminating one of the aspects related to the poetic creation, namely the analysis and interpretation of the material that Roman poets inherited by the literary tradition that preceded

them. Moreover, it is my contention that, through the role that Tiresias performs during the necromancy, Seneca may have intended to bring to the attention of the reader some of the problems entailed by the relationship with the literary tradition that preceded him.

In arguing my points, I examine passages from the *Oedipus* (particularly the scenes of the *extispicium* and of the necromancy). My goal is to show how, within them, Seneca exploited the multireferential nature of Latin language, made of words and images that the Augustan poets had used to discuss metapoetic issues in their works, in order to develop his own discourse about tragic poetics and its relation with the previous literary tradition.

Many scholarly works have showed the major role that water and avian imagery played within the text of the Augustan poets engaged in developing a metapoetic discourse, and, more recently, light has been shed on the use of arboreal images as well (see Fenton 2008, e.g.). Based on the importance of forests and fountains as traditional places for literary inspiration, I argue that the arboreal and water imagery that constitutes Seneca's lengthy description of the *locus horridus* (contained within the context of the necromancy in the *Oedipus*) may be much more than a simple rhetorical adornment. In fact, on one hand, references to different trees and their shades may hide allusions to the previous literary tradition. On the other hand, references to sluggish waters (*pigrum fontem*) surrounded by muddy pools (*limosa palus*), as well as to locations that are "unknown to the light of Apollo," may be a hint to the "un-Callimachean" aesthetic that characterizes them.

Within my examination, I aim to show how a study of the language associated with Tiresias, as well as with the scenes where Tiresias plays a major role, illuminates aspects of the relation between a poet and the previous literary tradition. By doing so, this paper provides more

evidence of the complexity of Seneca's plays, as well as of the importance of scenes that some scholars too often dismissed as pure and mere rhetorical embellishment.

Bibliography

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