

Oedipus' Fifth Ode and the Issue of Poetic Originality

“We’re driven by Fate, therefore yield to Fate.” With this line the chorus starts their final reflection on the unalterable nature of Fate thereby illuminating the reasons that have led modern scholars to interpret the final choral intervention in Seneca’s *Oedipus* in philosophical terms. Davis (1993), for example, includes this lyric piece in his chapter “philosophy” and Boyle (2011) refers to it as a “philosophical ode.” Its main theme (the unalterable nature of destiny) as well as its language (imbued with Stoic vocabulary), however, have led scholars to very different conclusions. While some (e.g. Töchterle 1994 and Braund 2015) argue that the chorus’ view is consistent with Stoic teachings, others (e.g. Sklenář 2008) point to some inconsistencies between the chorus’ position and the view of orthodox Stoicism, therefore signaling the fundamental difference between the Stoic rational and optimistic cosmology and the sadistic and arbitrary Fate of Seneca’s tragedies. Ultimately, then, the chorus seems to corroborate the position of those scholars who argue for an opposition between the two sides of Seneca (the philosopher and the tragedian).

While recognizing the presence and the importance of the philosophical language, this paper attempts to explore a new path while arguing for the possibility of a metadramatic interpretation of the ode that ultimately leads to a reconciliation between the two sides of Seneca. In particular, while examining the ambiguous and multivalent nature of the vocabulary employed within the ode and its immediate surroundings, I maintain that the ode can lead to a reflection on the unalterable nature of the literary tradition, while guiding the audience to recognize and appreciate the originality of Seneca’s poetic rewriting of the Oedipus’ myth. I argue that this interpretation is encouraged by the occurrence within the ode of multivalent words such as *Fatum* (Boyle 2011) and by that of images and vocabulary related to the sphere of weaving that are traditionally employed by Latin authors in reference to poetry and poetic production. It is also inspired by an abundance of vocabulary meta-

poetically charged that includes references to paths, *ingenium*, *furor*, and originality, and that is employed in the immediate context. My analysis shows that the play may be reflecting on the impossibility for a tragic poet to completely overturn what has been established by the previous literary tradition while recognizing the possible paths that can lead to poetic innovation.

This paper aims to suggest that the dystopic universe depicted by the tragedies may be more literary and less human in nature than it has been often recognized.

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