

## Fragile Masculinity Meets the Strongest Man: Hercules and Omphale in Seneca's *Phaedra*

When Hercules 'puts on a dress' in Sen. *Ph.* 316-29, Hercules should be engaging in a complex ritual of prescribed gender-bending, first pushing away his masculinity and then reasserting it (Cyrino 1998; Hallet 1997). However, a close reading of the passage reveals that Seneca forces his audience to immediately question Hercules' successful reassertion of masculinity through the use of contradictory intertextual accounts (in particular, Ov. *Fasti* 2.305-5 vs. Ov. *Heroides* 9.57-118). This questioning forces an examination of cultural assumptions about crossdressing and causes Seneca's audience to question the entire construct of the the elegiac lover and masculinity in general. McAuley (2012) has already shown how the entirety of the *Phaedra* questions masculine power and male social place. My paper builds on McAuley by showing how Hercules' elegiac identity serves as a microcosm of the play as a whole undermining masculine identity and paving the way for Seneca's audience to accept the premise of the larger masculinity crisis of the *Phaedra*.

Initially, Seneca seems to bolster Hercules position as a heroic crossdressing *vir* by relying on cultural expectations and practices. Seneca's audience is already aware that there is nothing wrong with male crossdressing, a view which is confirmed both within Seneca the Younger's own writings (Sen. *Ep.* 122.7; *Ep.* 47.7; *De Beata Vita* 7.13.3) and without (Sen. *Contr.* 9.17; *Contr.* 5.6; [Quint.] *DM* 23; see also, Bernstein 2013; Beard 1993). Additionally, I demonstrate that Seneca literally dresses his Hercules with words and phrases drawn straight from elegy (e.g. Prop. 2.16.43; Tib. 1.1.51; Cat. 61.10) which cast Hercules as an elegiac lover, a virile masculine figure who merely pretends to be at the mercy of his *puella* while still retaining the violence and power appropriate for a *vir* (Ancona 2005; Gold 2012; Wyke 2002).

However, Hercules' identity as an elegiac lover is immediately undercut when Seneca introduces clear references to Ov. *Heroides* 9.57-118, an embarrassing effeminizing account of the Hercules and Omphale incident, within his Hercules vignette. Hercules' place as elegiac lover is further undermined when Hippolytus, by no means a secure masculine figure, is also cast as an elegiac lover (Littlewood 2004; Davis 1984). Seneca makes this connection explicit by using unique phrases to describe both Hercules and Hippolytus (e.g., *Ph.* 803-4 to 320) forcing the audience to view Hippolytus and Hercules in a similar vein and question the very concept of elegiac love.

Seneca has set the scene for a war fought over masculine identity. Masculinity is fortified through the use of the *Fasti*, elegy, and cultural expectations while being simultaneously besieged by the *Heroides*, failed elegiac values, and Phaedra's continued conquest of the masculine. Seneca has provided his audience both a defense of and a prosecution against Hercules' masculinity. His audience, well trained in the art of declamation, could not fail to sum up the relevant question: since Hippolytus was powerless to change the course of action, did Hercules choose to be conquered by Omphale, or did she do the conquering? Seneca leaves his audience questioning Hercules' masculinity and ultimately questioning Hercules' autonomy. And as Seneca himself notes in *De Beata Vita* 7.13.7, for a Roman *vir* questioning one's masculinity is tantamount to losing it. As soon as Hercules' masculinity appears fragile, it breaks. Hercules' own identity crisis substantiates the audience's fear that, at least within the *Phaedra*, a secure masculine identity is impossible.

## Bibliography

- Ancona, Ronnie and Ellen Greene. 2005. *Gendered Dynamics in Latin Love Poetry*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Beard, Mary. 1993. "Looking (Harder) for Roman Myth: Dumezil, Declamation, and the Problems of Declamation." in F. Graf (ed.) *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft: Das Paradigma Roms*. Teubner: 44-64.
- Bernstein, Neil W. 2014. *Ethics, Identity, and Community in Later Roman Declamation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cyrino, Monica Silveira. 1998. "Heroes in D(u)ress: Transvestism and Power in the Myths of Herakles and Achilles." *Helios* 31.2:207-41.
- Davis, P.J. 1984. "The First Chorus of Seneca's Phaedra." *Latomus* 43.2:396-401.
- Gold, Barbara K. ed. 2012. *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Hallet, Judith P. and Marilyn B. Skinner. 1997. *Roman Sexualities*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Littlewood, C. A. J. 2004. *Self Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McAuley, Mairead. 2012. "Specters of Medea: The Rhetoric of Stepmotherhood and Motherhood in Seneca's Phaedra." *Helios* 39.1:39-72.
- Wyke, M. 2002. "Mistress and Metaphor in Augustan Elegy." in Laura K. McClure (ed.), *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.