

# Seneca's *Phoenician Women* — Genre, Structure, Thematic Unity

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This article revises current perspectives on the generic status, composition, and subject matter of *Phoenician Women* by Seneca. It adopts a new approach, focusing on selected elements of text organisation. In particular, emphasis is given to the construction of characters and the analogies and contrasts between them which were already of interest to ancient poetics and rhetoric. Moreover, the article refers to observations, accurate but isolated and largely ignored, made by scholars who recognised Seneca's originality and suggested that his plays might have been inspired by the declamatory tradition and should be read in the context of evolving post-classical literature. By adopting this perspective, it becomes possible to bring together a large number of partial conclusions that are related to *Phoenician Women* as well as other plays by Seneca. What is more important, the work brings to light the purposeful composition of the drama and its thematic unity, allowing us to return to the MS versions that until now have been replaced by conjectures, which often distort the meaning of the text. After dismissing the emendations and adopting a new method of reading, Seneca's *Phoenician Women* can be regarded as complete and well-organised. The play has certain characteristic features of a tragedy, of all Seneca's dramas, it is the one most inspired by the genre of declamation and the poetics of Seneca the Elder's anthology, and it is an example of the use of plot material typical of tragedy for presenting the problem of *pietas* in all its complexity.

*Keywords:* Seneca the Younger, *Phoenician Women*, declamatory tradition in drama, Roman tragedy.

## 1. Introductory remarks

The purpose of this article is to revise widely accepted hypotheses about the generic status, composition, and main themes of Seneca's *Phoenician Women*. These are hypotheses which are fundamental to the understanding of the work, but they are based on conjectures that distort its meaning. As a starting point, two thus far unconnected observations are used which we find correct, but not properly acknowledged.

1) The first was made by Tarrant, who was sceptical about treating classical Athenian tragedy as an indisputable source of inspiration for Seneca and the background for the

discussion on Roman drama. The author emphasises that the dramatic techniques used in the works preserved under Seneca's name (e. g., the division into five acts and the role of Choruses) point to a considerable transformation of genre that took place in the span of several centuries after the three Greek tragedians. *Phoenician Women* may be complete but, compared to other plays by Seneca, the work may constitute the most radical departure from the norms of classical Athenian tragedy. Thus, the lack of Choruses or the type of ending — brimming with tension, similar to the final scenes in *Medea*, *Agamemnon*, or *Thyestes* — need not imply that the drama was unfinished.<sup>1</sup> This reasoning is plausible in the light of the reading of *Phoenician Women*. In this play, we deal with an elaborate configuration of opposing attitudes and statements (see below). The piece conforms to the rule according to which the action should take place in one day,<sup>2</sup> a rule which is generally respected in all of Seneca's works, irrespective of the author's experiments with dramatic time.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the action takes place in three settings is of minor importance considering that, for instance, in *Troades*, the place of action may seem different in various acts, or difficult to identify.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the heroes' speeches from both parts of the play complement each other to provide the necessary situational context, and the particular plot elements are not contradictory.<sup>5</sup> Then, Tarrant's conclusions may also be supported by the vast material concerning the circulation of literary texts in Rome in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. At this time, many plays, presumably including Seneca's, were also presented as recitations even though they were originally intended for the stage. Moreover, it had become a common practice (possibly from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC onward) to perform parts of longer works in front of the public, which probably was connected with another custom: selected dramatic scenes were written as showpieces, which had a negative effect on

<sup>1</sup> See Tarrant 1978, 213–263. The scholar (1978, 230, n. 88) speaks of “The unresolved situation at the end of the final scene” — in our view, this observation is largely correct, but a closer analysis reveals a more complex picture. The construction of the plot in *Phoenician Women* is twofold (Antigone and Jocasta — in the first and in the second part of the play, respectively — take parallel actions to save their close ones and to rescue the city) and at the same time complete, because both protagonists run out of persuasive options; for more detail, see Sapota, Słomak 2020, 93–94. The impression of an open ending, in turn — in *Phoenician Women* but also in Seneca's other plays, not mentioned by Tarrant — results from the lack of a clear moral message or an explanation of the meaning of the events, usually present in Greek tragedies cf. e. g., Aesch. *Sept.* 1066–1077; Soph. *OT* 1524–1530; Soph. *OC* 1760–1767; Eur. *Phoen.* 1758–1763. On Seneca's experimental approach to literary tradition, cf. Owen 1968, 291–313; Owen 1970, 118–137; Shelton 1975, 257–269.

<sup>2</sup> From the dialogue between Antigone and Oedipus, it can be inferred that the conflict between Eteocles and his brother were aggravated earlier and that Polynices with his army are already on the way to Thebes (Sen. *Phoen.* 56–58; 280–286); given that, it is not unlikely that shortly after this conversation Oedipus learns about Polynices' arrival at the city walls (320–326) and on the same day Courtier informs Jocasta about the imminent battle (387–400).

<sup>3</sup> See Arist. *Poet.* 1449b12–13 and Schmidt 2014, 545–546; cf. Shelton 1975, 257–269 and Owen 1968, 294–296.

<sup>4</sup> See Fantham 1982, 37–39; cf. Keulen 2001, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the features of the play are clearly visible, especially in comparison with the Greek *Phoenissae*. E. g., Jocasta's expository monologue is shorter in Seneca (*Phoen.* 363–386) than in Euripides (*Phoen.* 1–87) and focuses on different elements; moreover, unlike in Euripides, the queen does not elaborate on Oedipus' life story as this would have been superfluous since Oedipus presents it himself in the first part of the drama (Sen. *Phoen.* 244–287; 295–302). Several other arguments for the inner unity of Seneca's *Phoenician Women* are also given by Mesk 1915, 298–300 and Frank 1995, 3–8, who, however, assume that the play has been preserved in fragments. This unity, in turn, had previously been challenged by, e. g., Heinsius 1611, 515–516; Peiper, Richter (in their first edition of Seneca's tragedies) 1867; Leo 1878, 77, 82.

the play's unity.<sup>6</sup> Both types of presentation may have influenced the process of shaping new dramatic techniques and genre forms.<sup>7</sup> One may ask whether this process — *scil.* multiplication of genre forms and genre mixing — might have been additionally affected by theoretical reflection, according to which the category of drama (*genus dramaticon* or *mimeticon*) applied not only to various types of tragedy or comedy, but also to shorter dialogues in epic metre and, to a lesser extent, to traditional epic poems as they included dialogic parts (*genus commune* or *mixtum*).<sup>8</sup>

2) The second observation refers to the roots of the play in the declamatory tradition. It has been hypothesised that the text of *Phoenician Women* is a remnant of two declamations composed in verse:<sup>9</sup> in the first one, the conflict revolves around the problem of whether Oedipus' suicide is a right choice, while in the other, Jocasta strives to dissuade her sons from their fratricidal war. However, it is worth noting that inspirations going back to the declamatory tradition are noticeable in all plays by Seneca. This is convincingly demonstrated by, among others, Pratt<sup>10</sup> who chooses declamation and its poetics as the background for his discussion of the melodramatic aspects of Seneca's works, the argumentation techniques he uses, and his characteristic means of expression. Equally insightful is Goldberg's approach,<sup>11</sup> focusing on the playwright's declamatory *colores*. We propose to see these inspirations in a still broader perspective, *scil.* in relation to the structural-thematic conception of the play, which we regard — like Tarrant — as coherent and complete. This proposal seems well-founded in the light of the above-mentioned findings on the role of declamation as a source of inspiration for Seneca; most importantly, however, it is supported by the clearly confrontational nature of the character's speeches and the fact that their incompatible points of view concern not two matters but one: the understanding of *pietas*.<sup>12</sup> In this perspective, the structural-thematic conception of the play resembles that presented by Seneca the Elder in his anthology: it accumulates arguments (*colores*) for and against a particular case, offering no final message in the form of a resolution or a moral. Declamators whose speeches are invoked in the anthology<sup>13</sup> address such issues as children's obedience, limits to the punishment the father can impose on his children, and solidarity or conflicts between siblings.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as in *Phoenician Women*, the problems they strive to resolve often result from differences in the understanding of *pietas*. We suggest, therefore, that Seneca the Younger's play should be treated not as a conventional tragedy, but as a drama which — inspired by the declamatory

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Arist. Poet.* 1451b34–1452a1.

<sup>7</sup> See Tarrant 1978, 230, 260–261; cf. Boyle 2006, 145, 186–187.

<sup>8</sup> See Valerius Probus: Keil 1848, 7; Diom.: GL I 482–483.

<sup>9</sup> See Heinsius 1611, 515–516; Leo 1878, 77, 82.

<sup>10</sup> See Pratt 1983, 141–163; 196–197; cf. also Canter 1925, 55–69; Boyle 2006, 193–197. The fact that the declamatory tradition had been a source of inspiration for Seneca was already noticed by Leo (1878, 158–159), who, however, did not go further than expressing generalities.

<sup>11</sup> See Goldberg 1996, 274–284.

<sup>12</sup> This category and related terms, just like other expressions for kinship, very often appear in *Phoenician Women*. Thus far, their high frequency has been interpreted as “obsessive” repetition, a symptom of the sense of guilt related to incest (see Frank 1995, ad *Phoen.* 1, 2, 182–215; cf. also Fitch 2002, 277). However, the motif of incest is not foregrounded in the play beyond what is directly relevant to the plot (the myth of Labdacids).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also Sussman 1995, 181–182.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sen. *Contr.* 1. 1; 1. 4; 1. 6; 1. 7; 1. 8; 2. 1; 2. 3; 2. 4; 2. 6; 3. 2; 3. 3; 3. 4; 3. 7; 3. 8; 4. 3; 4. 5; 5. 2; 5. 3; 5. 4; 6. 1; 6. 2; 6. 3; 6. 7; 7. 1; 7. 3; 7. 6; 7. 7; 8. 3; 8. 5; 9. 4; 10. 2; 10. 3.

tradition and the poetics of the anthology — preserves selected generic characteristics of tragedy (such as the metre of dialogues, the time of action, and the plot which belongs to traditional tragic  $\mu\theta\theta\omicron\iota$ ) and presents irreconcilably different approaches to the central concept of *pietas*.

## 2. *Pietas* of the characters — arguments for and against

### A) Antigone

It is customary to assume that from the perspective of *pietas*, Antigone's and her father's attitudes are radically different: Oedipus unwittingly demonstrates *impietas* towards his parents and intentionally fails to fulfil the paternal duties of supervising and taming his sons, while his daughter is described as *pia*.<sup>15</sup> However, in the play the dispute concerns both the seemingly obvious *impietas* of the former king of Thebes and the ostentatious *pietas* of Antigone. This is a fact thus far ignored by scholars. The *pietas* of the princess is, indeed, very strongly emphasised both in her *ethopoeia*<sup>16</sup> — the heroine presents herself as a dauntless guide of her blinded father, ready to risk her life to stop Oedipus from committing suicide, as well as a dutiful sister and citizen (51–79; 182–215; 288–294) — and in the utterances of Oedipus (1–3; 80–82; 309–311) and Jocasta (536–537). However, while Oedipus heaps praise on Antigone, he also accuses her of *impietas* as she disrespects her father's will.<sup>17</sup>

*peccas honesta mente, pietatem vocas  
patrem insepultum trahere. qui cogit mori  
nolentem in aequo est quique properantem impedit;  
occidere set vetare cupientem mori.  
nec tamen in aequo est; alterum gravius reor:  
malo imperari quam eripi mortem mihi.  
desiste coepto, virgo: ius vitae ac necis  
meae penes me est. regna deserui libens,  
regnum mei retineo. (97–105)*

“You do wrong, though with honourable intentions; you call it loyalty to drag about your unburied father. One who hinders a man in haste to die is the equal of one who forces an unwilling man to die. Forbidding a man to die who desires to is the same as killing him. No, the two are not equal, I think the first more harsh: I would rather have death imposed on me than withheld from me. Cease your efforts, girl. The rights over my own life and death belong to me. I abandoned the kingship gladly, but I keep the kingship over myself.” (Translation here and further on is that of Fitch 2002.)

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<sup>15</sup> See Fitch 2002, 276–277; cf. also Pratt 1983, 102. Fitch makes an additional remark that in Oedipus' family all manifestations of *pietas* are untrustworthy and the way it is displayed gives it an incestuous tinge. However, with regard to Antigone, this reservation cannot be confirmed on the basis of Seneca's play or literary tradition.

<sup>16</sup> On *notatio* or *ethopoeia*, cf. *Rhet. Her.* 4. 63–65; *Quint. Inst.* 9. 2. 58–62.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also Sen. *Phoen.* 146–153.

Elsewhere, Seneca repeatedly expressed the opinion that it is the free choice between life and death that makes the wise man independent of fate.<sup>18</sup> In light of this view, the accusation made by the hero of Seneca's play sounds severe. Then, one cannot dismiss Oedipus' arguments on the grounds that he is guided by *affectus* or *libido moriendi* rather than *ratio*.<sup>19</sup> His awareness of having lost *causae vivendi*, his moral suffering (the sense of guilt caused by patricide and incest as well as the shame brought upon him by his sons), the belief that he was doomed by fate at birth, and the sense that only death can free him from his destiny<sup>20</sup> do not fit Seneca's definition of *libido moriendi*.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Oedipus yields to his daughter's pleas, but his decision can be seen not only as an act of heroism (cf. 311–319), but also as a failure. The former king makes it clear that in succumbing to Antigone's wishes, he puts himself into the hands of fate (308–309), having earlier remarked that so far fate has turned all his best intentions against him (cf. 84–89). What is more, Oedipus' submission can be interpreted differently also in the context of various statements by Seneca in his philosophical works. He sometimes (either explicitly or implicitly) treats overcoming suicidal thoughts as a test for *virtus*;<sup>22</sup> on another occasion, however, he speaks with respect of, for instance, Cremutius Cordus, who took his life against his daughter's will.<sup>23</sup> Finally, in surrendering to his daughter, Oedipus becomes a disobedient son himself (38–39: *Quid me, nata, pestifero tenes / amore vinctum? quid tenes? genitor vocat*. "Why, daughter, do you hold me bound by this pestilential love? Why hold me? My father calls."). Seen in this light, his concession appears to be a painful compromise, and Antigone's actions — limiting her father's independence from fate, exposing him to further suffering, preventing him from atoning for his wrongdoings to Laius, and undermining his paternal authority — can be considered disputable with regard to the category of *pietas*. It is also worth noting that Antigone's attitude in Seneca seems inappropriate when compared with the submissiveness of Sophocles' Antigone, who does not object while Oedipus prepares for death upon hearing the thunder of Zeus (cf. Soph. *OC* 1456–1490; 1598–1647). Additionally, the declaration made by Seneca's heroine that she will not abandon her father *si revulso Iuppiter mundo tonet / mediumque nostros fulmen in nexus cadat* (59–60, "even if Jove should thunder, rending the heavens, and the bolt should fall right between our close bodies") can be regarded as a manifestation of the same *impietas* towards the gods that was displayed by Euripidean Capaneus, whose arrogance earned him exemplary punishment (Eur. *Phoen.* 1172–1186).<sup>24</sup> Despite prevailing arguments in sup-

<sup>18</sup> See, e. g., Sen. *Ep.* 26. 10; 70. 6–7; 91. 21; 104. 29–34.

<sup>19</sup> As proposed by, e. g., Frank 1995, ad *Phoen.* 77–79 and Pratt 1983, 102.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Sen. *Phoen.* 30–43; 216–240; 279–287; 295–306 and Seneca's various comments on the sound reasons for and the right to suicide: Sen. *Ep.* 58. 32–36; 70. 4–28; *Ira* 3. 15. 4; *Prov.* 6. 7–9. It is also worth noting that there is a range of similarities between Oedipus' argumentation and that used in two *declamationes* — Sen. *Controv.* 8. 4; ps.-Quint. *Decl.* 4.

<sup>21</sup> In one of his letters, Seneca is critical of suicide, which he considers not a departure but an ill-judged escape; in particular, he discourages suicide based on *affectus*, *qui multos occupavit, libido moriendi* (Sen. *Ep.* 24. 25. "the weakness which has taken possession of so many, — the lust for death." Trans. Gummere 1918). However, he uses the term *libido moriendi* to refer to an aversion to life, boredom with and contempt for life, or the belief that life is futile (*taedium vitae; nausia; contemnere vitam; iudicare vivere supervacuum*) — Sen. *Ep.* 24. 22–26.

<sup>22</sup> See examples in Frank 1995, ad *Phoen.* 77–79; Sen. *HF* 1300–1317; Sen. *Ep.* 78. 2; 104. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Sen. *Marc.* 1. 2; 22. 6–8.

<sup>24</sup> There are some similarities between *Phoenician Women* by Seneca and Euripides (enumerated by Morrica 1918, 7–14). We may be dealing here with the author's erudite play with the recipient; if this were

port of Antigone's position, the question of her *pietas* has the features of the declamatory *controversia*, whether one considers arguments invoked by characters in the play or refers to other statements by Seneca and other literary works based on the same plot.

## B) Oedipus

In *Phoenician Women*, three accusations are made against Oedipus: 1) he violated *pietas* by unintentional patricide and incest; 2) he sired incestuous children who inherited the moral flaws of their parents, and thereby contributed to the *impietas* of civil war; and 3) he deliberately avoided the duty of controlling his sons and preventing the war they incited. Accordingly, we distinguish three groups of defensive arguments, which differ — as the accusations do — in their formulation (*explicite* or *implicite*).

1) The first accusation is expressed emphatically and directly by Oedipus himself, who accepts the charges levelled at him by Phoebus and Laius (134–137; 216–225; 251–273). It is answered, also explicitly, by Antigone who argues that her father's intentions prove his innocence (203–205). Moreover, she puts him in a favourable light, claiming that he dared to oppose fate and — by renouncing worldly goods — regained his freedom (193–195). It is worth emphasising that the arguments presented by Antigone must have been especially convincing for Seneca's audience, as they reflected the views and opinions voiced by the author in his prose texts.<sup>25</sup> Oedipus is also defended by Jocasta, who qualifies his deeds as *error* rather than *scelus* (538–540; 553–555) and calls attention to the fact that violating *pietas* inadvertently, by the will of fate, differs radically from breaking the rules deliberately, as in the case of their sons:

*error invitos adhuc  
fecit nocentes, omne Fortunae fuit  
peccantis in nos crimen; hoc primum nefas  
inter scientes geritur.* (451–454)

“Previously it was an error that made us guilty without our intent, the blame was entirely that of Fortune transgressing against us; this is the first outrage committed knowingly amongst us.”

2) The arguments invoked by Antigone and Jocasta serve also as a response to the second self-accusation formulated *explicite* by Oedipus (295–300; 331–338). Additionally, this charge is questioned implicitly: in her *ethopoeia*, Antigone presents herself as *pia filia civisque* with her *pietas* praised both by Jocasta and, with some reservations, by Oedipus (see above); in this light, blaming Oedipus for Eteocles' and Polynices' *impietas* is disputable as it rests on the dubious premise: “like parent, like child.”<sup>26</sup> 1&2) The legitimacy of

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the case, Antigone's declaration should be treated as an intertext and interpreted with reference to the cited passage in *Phoenician Women* by Euripides or, perhaps, Accius.

<sup>25</sup> Cf., e. g., (on the value of a deed, which depends on the intentions) *Sen. Constant.* 7. 4–6; *Ira* 1. 19. 5–6; 3. 12. 2; *Ep.* 90. 46; 95. 57; (on the disdain for worldly goods, which is indispensable to free oneself from fate) *Ep.* 104. 34; 118. 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> Other examples of this topos are presented by Frank (1995, ad *Phoen.* 82–84). Fantham (1983, 65, 71) emphasises that Eteocles and Polynices' wickedness results from the fact that they were born from an incestuous relationship but argues that Antigone's attitude does not have to falsify this implication if one assumes that in her family evil is only inherited by males. However, to be plausible, this assumption should be confirmed by more than one example. In fact, it is not: Antigone's mother — like Oedipus — is also guilty of incest committed unwittingly.

the criticism expressed by the former king is as well called into question by his *ethopoeia*. It must be pointed out that Oedipus repeatedly amplifies both his misdeed and his abhorrence of it (8–10; 134–137; 219–233; 260–274; 328–332). Furthermore, he declares that he is prepared to accept the most severe punishment (37–38; 142–145; 155–164; 167–171). By pointedly condemning the crime against *pietas* and demanding the highest punishment for having committed it himself, the hero follows the convention (expressing disapproval of the deeds of the wicked is recommended in textbooks of rhetoric as advantageous for those who defend shameful cases)<sup>27</sup> and presents himself as a noble man, in particular in view of the fact that his ἦθος contrasts sharply with the character of his son, who explicitly declares that he values power over *pietas*, cf. 664: *Imperia pretio quolibet constant bene* (“Power is well purchased at any price.”). Oedipus’ willingness to accept the punishment for violating *pietas* owed to parents appears even more heroic if one confronts it with the image of Laius, who — merely on the basis of Phoebus’ words — sent his son to a cruel death (251–256). Against this background, Oedipus, who wants to die in order to satisfy Laius’ demand for vengeance (39–43), appears a perfectly obedient son, an attitude which is often expected by fathers in declamations.<sup>28</sup> The hero, then, in two other ways confirms that *pietas* is of great importance to him. Firstly, he abandons his intention to kill himself, moved by his daughter’s *pietas* rather than being persuaded by her rational arguments, which he dismisses (e. g. 188–242; 288–306):

*sola tu affectus potes  
mollire duros, sola pietatem in domo  
docere nostra. nil grave aut miserum est mihi  
quod te sciam voluisse.* (306–312)

“You alone can soften my hard heart, you alone in our family can teach me natural feelings. Nothing that I know you want is grievous or painful for me.”

Secondly, he is enraged at the mention of his sons because of the *impietas* they demonstrate by their unscrupulous ambition to seize power. It is worth bearing in mind that Oedipus himself, having learned that he had come to power as a result of a crime, renounced the throne (274–278). He also declares that — besides his will to atone to Laius — his sons’ *impietas* is another reason why he intends to hasten his death:

*non patris illos tangit afflicti pudor,  
non patria: regno pectus attonitum furit.  
scio quo ferantur, quanta moliri parent,  
ideoque leti quaero maturi viam  
morique propero, dum in domo nemo est mea  
nocentior me.* (301–306)

“No respect for their ruined father touches them, no thought for their country: in their hearts is a raging frenzy for the throne. I know where they are headed, what they are ready to perpetrate, and for that very reason I am seeking a path to an early death, hastening to die, while there is no one in my house guiltier than I.”

<sup>27</sup> Cf., e. g., *Rhet. Her.* 1. 9; *Cic. Inv.* 1. 17. 24.

<sup>28</sup> See *Sen. Controv.* 1. 6; 1. 7; 3. 3. Cf. in particular *Sen. Controv.* 1. 1; 1. 8; 2. 1; 4. 5; 7. 1.

The hero's *ethopoeia* is, so far, internally consistent and coherent: he is a man who attaches importance to values covered by the category of *pietas* and forcefully condemns any act of violating its principles. Considering this consistency, the positive opinions of the king expressed by Antigone and Jocasta, and the rule according to which the dramatic hero's character should remain unchanged throughout the play unless circumstances justify otherwise,<sup>29</sup> it is difficult not to treat the final part of Oedipus' utterance (332–347), where he encourages his sons to destroy the city, as ironic.<sup>30</sup> In fact, such coherence could be called into question but only if one replaced the MS reading in the final lines of the king's speech (358) with a conjecture. According to the unanimous tradition of the MSS (with the exception of the codex Oratorianus, which is of secondary value),<sup>31</sup> line 358a reads *date arma patri*. Today, editors<sup>32</sup> usually adopt the emendation proposed by Gronovius (1682, ad loc.) who justifies it as follows: *Quid enim restat post mutuum fratrum parricidium, quo facinus illud augeatur, si 'patri dent arma'? Aut qui dabunt, postquam ipsi perierunt? ... Suspicio Senecam scripsisse: 'Date arma matri; quibus ipsa semet interficiat.* If this conjecture were accepted, one would have to assume that Oedipus' character has undergone a radical change (unjustified by new circumstances): he would refuse to return to Thebes, thus exacerbating the violation of *pietas*.<sup>33</sup> However, Gronovius' arguments are weak: in Oedipus' gradational enumeration (354–358), the expression *frater in fratrem ruat* need not mean "the brothers killing each other"; instead, it may refer to the fight between the sons, which is what Jocasta has in mind when she says *fratresque ... in se ruentes* (549–550). And if we assume that *frater in fratrem ruat* refers to the direct fight between the brothers, their conflict may be interpreted as a more serious *nefas* than *bellum civile*. Also, when Jocasta points out that her sons' crime has already in part been accomplished, she first refers to the siege of Thebes (thus underlining the fact that the war has already begun) and mentions Polynices' and Eteocles' fight at the end of her gradational enumeration (543–550). Then, if we understand *date arma patri* as "give the weapon to the father," namely so that he can prevent the civil war and fratricide by fighting against his sons, the phrase will refer to a *nefas* that can be regarded by Oedipus as *de more nostro* and *quod meos deceat toros* — since he had already raised his hand against a family member and he would be guilty of killing the child, like his father, whom he replaced in the marital bed. What is important is that the hero utters *date arma...* when he is seized by a wave of anger at the end of his emotional reply (328–347; 350–358). His increased agitation at this point

<sup>29</sup> See Arist. *Poet.* 1454a26–36; cf. Hor. *Ars* 125–127.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. other similar instances of ironic encouragement by Seneca's characters, e. g., *Sen. Tro.* 888–900; 1000–1005; 1165–1168.

<sup>31</sup> In this MS, the word *matri* occurs, albeit corrected to *patri*, see Zwierlein 1986; Giardina 2007, ad loc.

<sup>32</sup> E. g., Zwierlein 1986; Chaumartin 1996; Giardina 2007; Fitch 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Frank (1995, ad *Phoen.* 358) accepts Gronovius' emendation (see above) and paraphrases *date arma matri* (following Opelt 1972, 95) as "attack the mother" (and, by extension, 'kill the mother). It is worth adding that *date arma patri* was interpreted in a similar way by Trevet ad loc.: Mascoli 2007). In this perspective, Oedipus' final words (358–362) would reflect extreme misanthropy and the basest emotions: the hero does not return to Thebes on purpose, in order to make it possible for his sons to murder Jocasta. According to another, equally controversial, interpretation (Fantham 1983, 65), Oedipus expresses a wish that his sons should make an incestuous assault on Jocasta. Aricò (1997, 25–29), in turn, proposes that the conjecture *matri* should be rejected in favour of the MS reading, but at the same time he ignores the entire construction of Oedipus' character in the play and assumes that by saying *date arma patri*, the former king encourages his sons to fight against each other.

is plausible in the light of current events, as his suspicions concerning the wickedness of his sons (278–287; 295–305) have just been confirmed: the city of Thebes is besieged and Eteocles and Polynices are about to begin their fratricidal fight (320–327). Even though Oedipus is enraged, his integrity prevails: he refuses to return to the city (358–362) to prevent his wish from coming true, since if it did, it would compound the crime (*impietas*).<sup>34</sup>

3) The fact that Oedipus' intervention, undertaken in order to prevent *impietas*, could lead to a crime of a different nature undermines the third argument against the hero, not directly expressed but implied in a scene in which Oedipus refuses to attempt to prevent the civil war (288–294, 320–362). It is worth adding that the king's reasoning is justified in the light of his earlier remark, namely, that in his family, all efforts that are supposed to serve *pietas* bring reverse effects:

*ipsa se in leges novas  
Natura vertit: reget in fontem citas  
revolutus undas amnis et noctem afferet  
Phoebea lampas, Hesperus faciet diem;  
ut ad miserias aliquid accedat meas,  
pii quoque erimus.* (84–89)

“Nature is changing, following new laws: rivers will double back and return their swift waters to their source; Phoebus' lamp will bring night, Hesperus will set up the day; so that something can be added to my misery, we will actually be a natural family.”

### C) Jocasta

Oedipus' decision can be contrasted with Jocasta's, but their attitudes cannot be reduced to a simple opposition *pia* — *impius*.<sup>35</sup> The former king chooses to remain passive; he makes no effort to avert the civil war and fratricide, but he takes this course of action in order to prevent *impietas*: fighting against his sons (or killing them). By contrast, Jocasta actively attempts to prevent the civil war and fratricide, but she is aware of the risk involved as her intervention may result in another type of *impietas* if Eteocles and Polynices, in addition to fratricide and the plight of Thebes, are responsible for the death of their mother (407–414; 456–457; 475–476). In fact, this catastrophe probably will take place, as can be inferred from Courtier's remark (434–442) and from the final words of the dialogue between Jocasta and her son (662–664). This, in turn, may call into question the heroine's *pietas*, even though Jocasta presents herself as an exemplary mother

<sup>34</sup> This is why the observation made by Leo (1878, 221) — that there is a contradiction between Oedipus' command *date arma* and his decision to hide in the forest (358–362) — is, in our opinion, unjustified. At this point, one may also refer to a possible interpretation of Oedipus' words: *quod possum, audiam* (362). Fitch (2002) translates this phrase as “I shall ... hear as best I can.” Frank (1995, ad *Phoen.* 362) understands it in the same way. According to this interpretation, Oedipus would listen to the sounds of his sons' fight with pleasure (and in doing so, he would contradict his earlier *ethopoeia*). However, in seemingly similar examples invoked by Frank in support of this understanding, there is no change of tense that can be found in Seneca, cf. (analogies pointed out by Frank) *quod potero adiutabo senem* (Ter. *Haut.* 416) and *Cura, quod potes, ut valeas* (Cic. *Fam.* 6 (14. 4) 6) as well as (other examples): *male quod potero facere faciam* (Plaut. *Asin.* 138); *munus nostrum ornato verbis, quod poteris, et istum aemulum, / quod poteris, ab ea pellito* (Ter. *Eun.* 214–215); *in id maxime quod poterit incumbet* (Quint. *Inst.* 2. 8. 13). In this case, the words *quod possum* should rather be interpreted as a reservation, *scil.* “if I may.”

<sup>35</sup> Fitch 2002, 276–277 draws a similar conclusion but refers to only one point of criticism of Jocasta's *pietas*: as a mother.

and citizen who strives to reconcile her sons and save the city (see in particular 407–412; 443–477; 480–585; 599–643). Moreover, the queen openly blames herself with respect to four points. The first concerns her *pietas* as a mother as she is forced to treat one of her sons unfairly (379–382; 459–461) and ultimately mistreats Polynices, as can be inferred from his words (586–595). The second point concerns incest (367–368), but this accusation is mitigated by the queen herself, who later explains that this crime was committed unconsciously (451–453). The third point is related to responsibility for her sons' *impietas* (368–369), and the fourth one refers to Jocasta's failure as a citizen, since the queen must choose between loyalty to her son and to Thebes (369–370; 522–525).

#### D) Polynices

Polynices' *impietas* is perhaps the most obvious case throughout the play. In light of the circumspect accusation formulated by Antigone (53–58), criticism expressed by Oedipus (280–286; 295–303), and observations made by Courtier, who is a witness to Jocasta's intervention (434–442), the Polynices' and Eteocles' characters are identical: both value power over *pietas*. Jocasta accuses Polynices of *impietas* towards family members and his homeland (550–585; 617–619), and Polynices confirms this accusation himself (654–659; 661–662; 664). However, it is worth pointing out that there are also lines spoken in his defense: Jocasta reminds the audience that the conflict was initiated by Eteocles, who mistreated his brother (378–379; 384–385; 483–487; 511–513). Polynices, in turn, points out that if he had been loyal to his family, he would have been punished as a traitor; by contrast, if his brother had acted disloyally, he would have been rewarded (586–590). In this case, then, it is not Polynices' *impietas* that is called into question, but the absolute principle of following *pietas* in a world which apparently allows some individuals to ostentatiously ignore it.

Finally, the problem of attribution needs to be addressed. Lines 651b–653a, 654–659, 661–662, 664, the most aggressive statements made by Polynices,<sup>36</sup> are usually assigned to Eteocles following the widely accepted<sup>37</sup> conjectures and against the tradition of MSS. These emendations have been adopted on the basis of the observation that in Euripides the ruthless craving for power, in Seneca demonstrated by Polynices, is in fact ascribed to Eteocles;<sup>38</sup> hence, it has been assumed that an attribution error occurred in the process of transmission. This assumption is confirmed, among others, by the fact that Polynices' ruthlessness is allegedly incompatible with Jocasta's sympathy for him (501–513).<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the MS tradition is consistent at this point. In codex Etruscus, the scene heading before line 363 mentions Eteocles (the name does not appear later in the text), while he is absent from A-branch of the MSS.<sup>40</sup> Still, in most cases, codex Etruscus includes the

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<sup>36</sup> According to codex Etruscus; similarly in A MSS which assign to Polynices lines 651b–652a, 654–659, 662b–664 or 651b–562a, 654, 660–664. Cf. n. 40.

<sup>37</sup> See, e. g., Zwierlein 1986; Chaumartin 1996; Giardina 2007; Fitch 2002.

<sup>38</sup> See H. Grotius (*Notae in Senecae atque aliorum Tragoedias*. MS Lat 215. Houghton Library, Harvard University) ad *Phoen.* 652; Schmidt 1860, 20; cf. Eur. *Phoen.* 503–525.

<sup>39</sup> See Frank 1995, ad *Phoen.* 651–653 and 654–659.

<sup>40</sup> Codex Etruscus is the oldest preserved codex that carries Seneca's tragedies and the main representative of one of the two MS families. A-branch is the second, evidently interpolated family. On the MS tradition of Seneca's tragedies, see MacGregor (1985, 1135–1241); Tarrant (1976, 23–86); cf. Zwierlein (1984, 6–181); Philp (1968, 150–179).

names of silent characters in the headings, whereas A MSS ignore them.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Eteocles may be regarded as a *persona tacita*, a character introduced originally, whose presence on the stage is confirmed by Courtier and Jocasta (see, e. g., 438–439; 443–464; 483–501). If we now turn to the problem of Jocasta’s sympathy for Polynices, this argument is of no value because elsewhere the queen sternly reprimands her son (see above and vv. 618–619: *crimine alieno exulas, / tuo redibis*, “your exile is due to another’s crime, but your return will be due to your own”). Furthermore, the attempt to make Seneca’s text closer to Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* with regard to Polynices’ utterances is controversial for four reasons. Firstly, the two texts are considerably different in terms of the plot structure.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, there are more phrases or sentences in Seneca which, although apparently similar to Euripides’ ones, are attributed or addressed to different characters.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, Polynices’ *ethopoeia* differs in the two texts even in passages which are not changed by the conjecture. Namely, in Seneca — unlike in Euripides (*Phoen.* 81–83; 170–171; 261–637) — Polynices does not appear in the city at his mother’s request to start peace negotiations, but Jocasta first meets him at the battlefield (Sen. *Phoen.* 464–466; 486–487; 501–502), which may imply that the hero is more implacable than his counterpart in Euripides. This hypothesis is confirmed when we compare Polynices’ words in both dramas. In Euripides, the prince speaks of his love for Thebes, expresses concern about his mother, and asks after his father and sisters (*Phoen.* 357–360; 366–378); by contrast, in Seneca, he shows no attachment to the city or family. The Euripidean Polynices is satisfied with his marriage, which has improved his situation (*Phoen.* 400–425), while his counterpart in Seneca compares his marriage to captivity (595–598). These elements of his *ethopoeia* add to his credibility as an aggressor who will stop at nothing to seize power: he is *impius* and has no place to return to. Thirdly, Courtier and Oedipus judge the attitudes and characters of the two brothers in a similar way (see above). Thus, there is no need for both sons to speak, and Polynices’ character — reconstructed on the basis of the lines spoken, in succession, by Antigone, Oedipus, Messenger, and Jocasta and, finally, on the basis of his self-presentation — must be regarded as consistent. Lastly, the conjecture that attributes Polynices’ lines to two largely similar characters (*scil.* Polynices and Eteocles) blurs the opposition-based system of relations between members of the Theban royal family: father, mother, daughter, and son. The roles of Antigone and Jocasta, who initiate the action in both parts of *Phoenician Women*, are more distinctive if we juxtapose their *pietas* — manifest in the determination

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<sup>41</sup> Silent characters, ignored in A-branch of the MSS, are usually indicated in codex Etruscus with the adjective *tacitus*, but this is not always the case. Thus, in *Thyestes*, before line 404, there is a mention of Thyestes, Tantalus, and Plisthenes tacitus (codex Etruscus) and of Thyestes and Plisthenes filius (A-branch). In *Agamemnon*, before line 910, there is a mention of Electra fugiens and Orestes tacitus (codex Etruscus) and of Electra (A-branch). In *Phaedra*, before line 864, the following characters are mentioned: Theseus, Phaedra, and Nutrix tacita (codex Etruscus) and, in the other family, Theseus and Phaedra (A-branch). In *Hercules furens*, before line 618, there is a mention of Amphitryon, Hercules, Megera, and Theseus (codex Etruscus) and of Amphitryon, Hercules, and Theseus (A-branch). The name of a silent character (Polyxena) is clearly missing in codex Etruscus in *Troades*, before line 861. See also Leo 1878, 84.

<sup>42</sup> See Sapota, Słomak 2020, 91, n. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. 1) Jocasta’s speech (420–426) and the lines spoken by Antigone and Chorus (Eur. *Phoen.* 163–167; 807–810); 2) Oedipus addressing Antigone (311b–312a) and Polynices addressing Jocasta (Eur. *Phoen.* 386); 3) Jocasta to Polynices (642b–643a) and Polynices to Jocasta (Eur. *Phoen.* 437); 4) Oedipus’ (345b) and Polynices’ (or, according to some readings, Eteocles’) words (Eur. *Phoen.* 624b); 5) Oedipus about Antigone (1; 11) and Tiresias about his daughter (Eur. *Phoen.* 834–835); 6) Jocasta to Polynices (575–576; 625–633) and Jocasta to Eteocles (Eur. *Phoen.* 561–567).

to save their close ones and Thebes — and the *impietas* demonstrated by Oedipus and Polynices, who refuse to help the city or bring danger upon it. At the same time, the heroes call into question the impeccable attitudes of the two women: as a daughter and as a mother. In fact, it is only between Antigone and Jocasta that no major opposition can be noticed. The characters of Oedipus and Polynices contrast sharply both in terms of their attitude to power (the former resigns from the throne that he earned through *impietas* and the latter will resort to any kind of *impietas* to seize it) and their intentions when committing their crimes (Oedipus violated *pietas* inadvertently while Polynices consciously breaks its rules). The characters of Oedipus and Jocasta also form an opposition, though it turns out to be more complex than it has thus far been assumed (both Oedipus' *impietas* and Jocasta's *pietas* are called into question). Finally, the most visible contrast seems to be between the characters of Antigone and Polynices.

### 3. Concluding remarks

An in-depth analysis of *Phoenician Women* demonstrates that the conjectures discussed above, adopted to solve interpretation problems or to make Seneca's and Euripides' texts similar, should be rejected. They introduce far-reaching changes in the semantic plane of the drama, are ill-considered from the point of view of the overall organisation of meaning, and make the play seem deficient in cohesion or planned composition. Their rejection, the return to MS readings, and a change in research perspective offer a consistent view of the theme of the work and of the means adopted to develop it; they also help to bring together and confirm some of the partial hypotheses proposed by other scholars. This change in perspective involves taking into account the construction of characters as well as the similarities and contrasts between them, setting the play in the context of the phenomena of post-classical literature, and considering other sources of inspiration for Seneca besides tragedy. If this approach is taken, *Phoenician Women* can be regarded as complete and well-organised: a drama with some characteristics of tragedy, which of all Seneca's plays was to the greatest extent inspired by the declamatory tradition (in particular the form represented by Seneca the Elder's anthology) and which used a tragic plot and various *colores* to problematise and explore the concept of *pietas*.

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