

Serpent, Staff, and State: Tiresias at Rome

Charles-Elizabeth Boyles

2315131

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Abstract: The figure of Tiresias appears as early as Homer, but takes on new forms in the hands of Roman writers. Focusing on representations of Tiresias from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, especially book III, Seneca the Younger's *Oedipus*, and Statius's *Thebaid* book IV, this work explores the ways in which Roman writers reuse, but also deviate from, Greek antecedents, including Euripides, Sophocles, Callimachus, Pseudo-Apollodorus, and, of course, Homer. The features added or emphasized by Roman writers, such as Tiresias's daughter Manto taking on a critical role in two of the three works under examination here, the use of necromancy, and Tiresias's unstable gender position, are explored by means of Julia Kristeva's conception of abjection and Guy Debord and the Situationists' lens of recuperation. These relatively contemporary critical frameworks offer insight into how Tiresias as a character is leveraged by Roman writers to try to find a way through the contradictions of imperial Roman culture and its commands. Tiresias emerges as a troubled and troubling figure, saying things that reinforce the status quo while acting in ways that transgress and transcend conventional boundaries, such as those between binary genders, forbidden and allowable activities, and even life and death.



Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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1. Introduction

Tiresias appears very early in the Greco-Roman corpus, summoned from Hades by Odysseus in the *nekuia* of *Odyssey* book XI, and appears relatively consistently thereafter, typically in contexts that either reiterate one of a handful of origin stories, or trying (and usually failing) to get one or another Theban ruler not to do whatever impious, criminal, or downright unspeakable thing he intends to do. Here, I examine how the character is repurposed in Roman literature, focusing especially on Tiresias' appearances in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* book III, in Seneca's *Oedipus*, and in Statius' *Thebaid* book IV, arguing that, in these interrelated texts, a distinctly Roman vision of a figure simultaneously abject and respected emerges, pointing to social and generic instabilities in imperial Roman literature and culture in a way that is in conversation with, but highly distinct, from Greek antecedent texts.

To do so, I draw initially from Luc Brisson's structuralist examination of the myth of Tiresias in my discussion of the figure's origins, a term I use as a kind of shorthand for how the figure emerged into the Tiresias we recognize. In that 1976 monograph, Brisson elegantly collected and synthesized the motifs and attributes running through several version of Tiresias' origins. My work here is, to an extent, under his influence, in that I too am seeking patterns in representations of Tiresias, and while Brisson's interpretation of a given version of the story is not always one I agree with,¹ *The Myth of Tiresias* has been a companion through much of this writing. As I turn to an examination of Tiresias' actions in Roman texts, I explore both the relationships between these Seneca and Statius' Roman imaginings of the character, as well as Tiresias' appearances in Greek literature and especially his speech and behavior in the hands of Sophocles and Euripides, mining Parkes' conception of the cross-contamination of epic and tragedy in Roman literature.² Both origins and activities are covered in the "texts" section, which immediately follows this introduction.

Subsequently, I turn to some of the throughlines of the character in Roman representations, specifically gender subversion or deviance and alignment with necromancy as a practitioner, rather than as its subject. I interpret these throughlines using Kristeva's concept of abjection and the Situationist concept of recuperation. Abjection, per Kristeva, is "a 'something' that I don't recognize as a thing"—corpses are abject, but, as she writes, "it isn't... the absence

¹ See especially pp. 9-13, in which Brisson is read in contrast with O'Hara, 1996

² Parkes, 2021, p. 108

of cleanliness or health which makes something abject, but that which disturbs an identity, a system, an order. That which doesn't respect limits, placements, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the mixed."³ Tiresias, with his ambiguity of gendering and his willingness to seek knowledge from the dead, certainly dwells in abject territory. Recuperation, on the other hand, refers to the process by which destabilizing elements in art and culture are brought back into the fold of the status quo: "the ruling ideology sees to it that subversive discoveries are trivialized and sterilized, after which they can be safely spectacularized. It even manages to make use of subversive individuals—by falsifying their works after their death, or, while they are still alive, by taking advantage of the general ideological confusion and drugging them with one or another of the many mystiques at their disposal."⁴ Although "recuperation," sometimes translated as "cooption," was so defined to refer to the actions of capitalism as a system, it is nonetheless applicable to the conditions of artistic production in imperial Rome and the constraints those conditions placed on what could be said and how.

I proceed to argue that, in the Roman imaginary, Tiresias presents as a transgressive figure *saying* conventional things but *doing* things that put the lie to his verbalized support for the status quo. He speaks as someone who is simultaneously disquieting to his interlocutors and requires respect from them; he says things that support convention, but does not himself conform to those conventions. Tiresias emerges as a troubled figure in the Roman literary imagination, saying one thing and doing another, as Ovid, Seneca, and Statius grapple with the instability and contradictions at the heart of imperial Rome.

³ Kristeva, 1980, pp. 10-2

⁴ Debord, 1957, p. 26

2. Texts

2.a. Origins

Let us turn now to what Brisson, in his analysis of the Tiresian variations, offers as examples of the “A” version⁵: Tiresias’ encounter with the snakes on Cyllene, his time as a woman, his appearance as an arbiter between Zeus or Jupiter and Hera or Juno, as appropriate, and his receipt of the power of divination. The texts under consideration here Brisson sets as versions Ao5, Pseudo-Apollodorus’ transmission of Hesiod’s depiction⁶, and Ao6, the version relayed by Ovid in book 3 of *Metamorphoses*⁷. I have selected these two versions because, in *Metamorphoses*, Ovid provides for many contemporary readers a categorical retelling of the story, and I am persuaded by the argument presented by Ziogas who, in *Ovid and Hesiod: the Metamorphosis of the Catalogue of Women*, maintains that “Hesiodic poetry is the ‘host’ genre of the *Metamorphoses*”⁸. While his work positions Ovid in relation to the *Catalogue of Women*, drawing out the parallels and inversion to which Ovid subjects a Hesiodic source, here I wish to draw attention to parallels between Ovid’s depiction of Tiresias in *Metamorphosis* 3.316-338. I base my argument here on fragments of the *Melampodia* which come to us from Pseudo-Apollodorus’ *Bibliotheka*, as drawn from Glenn W. Most’s text in the Loeb *Hesiod: The Shield; Catalogue of Women; Other Fragments*⁹ – but despite the fragmentary and paraphrased nature of the source, the comparison is nonetheless fruitful.

In the midst of his recounting of the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices, Pseudo-Apollodorus offers a description of the character of Tiresias, recounting versions of the figure’s origins from both Pherecydes, in which Tiresias was blinded by Athena and then given the gift of prophecy through the language of the birds and which is under consideration here in the rendition offered by Callimachus¹⁰, and Hesiod’s version of events. As Pseudo-Apollodorus characterizes the version from *Melampodia*:

Among the Thebans was a seer, Tiresias.... Hesiod says that he [Tiresias] beheld snakes coupling and, having injured them, was turned into a woman from a man, and, again

⁵ Brisson, 1976, p. 23

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 14-17

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 18

⁸ Ziogas, 2013, p. 14

⁹ Most, ed., 2007, pp. 286-7

¹⁰ See pp. 8-9

lying in wait for those same snakes coupling, became a man. For this reason, Hera and Zeus, arguing whether the woman or the men enjoy more coming together in coupling, interrogated him. He said that, in every nineteen times of coupling, the man enjoys nine but women, ten. Then Hera blinded him, while Zeus himself taught him to prophesy.

(Translation mine)

Tiresias' role in the Theban war, as covered by Statius, will be discussed later,¹¹ but it is useful to consider the tone and vocabulary of this brief synopsis. Tiresias is a μάντις; when he strikes the snakes apart, it is τρώσας – the snakes are injured, an action characterized by the aorist participle of τιτρώσκω, a word that can also be used of miscarriage and of injury unto death. The snakes are engaged in the same activity about which Zeus and Hera argue: συνουσία, itself a participle of σύνειμι, a more or less polite term with a range of meanings from “sexual intercourse” to “cohabitation.”¹² And Zeus and Hera are truly arguing, Pseudo-Apollodorus characterizing their activity as ἀμφισβητέω, a sterner term than the ones we will see Ovid use. Hera unequivocally strikes Tiresias blind, ἐτύφλωσε, as the aorist verb makes plain; Zeus very clearly makes Tiresias into the figure we see in the tale, when “he himself taught him to prophesy” (τὴν μαντικὴν αὐτῷ ἔδωκεν).

While it must be borne in mind that Pseudo-Apollodorus is paraphrasing, it is nonetheless useful to bear these specific turns of phrase in mind as we turn to Ovid. At *Met.*3.318-338,¹³ he writes:

... forte Iovem memorant diffusum nectare curas
seposuisse graves vacuaque agitasse remissos
cum Iunone iocos et 'maior vestra profecto est, 320
quam quae contingit maribus' dixisse 'voluptas.'
illa negat. placuit quae sit sententia docti
quaerere Tiresiae: Venus huic erat utraque nota.
nam duo magnorum viridi coeuntia silva

¹¹ See pp. 20-3

¹² Liddell-Scott, 2010, p. 79

¹³ Text from Henderson, 1994, pp. 26-7

corpora serpentum baculi violaverat ictu 325
 deque viro factus (mirabile) femina septem
 egerat autumnos; octavo rursus eosdem
 vidit, et 'est vestrae si tanta potentia plagae'
 dixit, 'ut auctoris sortem in contraria mutet,
 nunc quoque vos feriam.' percussis anguibus isdem 330
 forma prior rediit, genetivaeque venit imago.
 arbiter hic igitur sumptus de lite iocosa
 dicta Iovis firmat: gravius Saturnia iusto
 nec pro materia fertur doluisse suique
 iudicis aeterna damnavit lumina nocte; 335
 at pater omnipotens (neque enim licet inrita cuiquam
 facta dei fecisse deo) pro lumine adempto
 scire futura dedit poenamque levavit honore.

...perhaps they recall how Jove, dispelling cares with nectar,
 has put aside weighty matters and brought up light ones,
 trading jokes with Juno, and said, "Greater, surely, is your
 pleasure than what comes to men."

She denies it. It pleased her that the opinion of learned
 Tiresias be asked; Venus was known to him from both sides.
 For, in the greenwood, the entwined bodies of
 two great serpents had he violated with a blow of his staff,
 whence from a man he was made – a miracle! – into a woman
 for seven autumns' span. In the eighth, again he saw them
 and said, "If the power of your injury is so great
 that it changes the lot of its author to its contrary,
 now again will I strike you." The snakes stricken again,

he returned to his prior form and the likeness he was born with came back.
 The arbiter, so obtained with regard to the suit, affirms
 Jove's joking dictum. Saturnia is felt to have been pained
 more gravely by the evidence, and by her own
 justice damned his lights to eternal darkness.
 But the almighty father (for not even he is permitted to counter
 any divine deeds done by another god), for his stolen sight
 gave him to know the future, and lightened punishment with honor. (Translation mine)

Let us examine the language Ovid uses to recount this story. From his first mention, Tiresias is positioned as learned (*docti*, 322), which stands to reason as *venus huic erat utraque nota*, “Venus was known to him from both sides” (323), due to his experiences with man- and womanhood. This is, in fact, the first transformation purely of gender—rather than species or Linneaeian Kingdom—to appear in *Metamorphoses*, despite its programmatic statement that it will treat of the transformations of the body. Ovid elaborates, recounting the tale we know from Hesiod via Pseudo-Apollodorus, but does so in a characteristically elegant and clever way, entwining the *duo magnorum... coeuntia... corpora... serpentum*, “the entwined bodies of two great serpents,” across two lines, only to be *baculi violaverat ictu*, “violated with a blow of his staff.” *Violaverat* here stands in some contrast to the sense of Hesiod's ostensible injury (τρώσας): while the latter has connotations of miscarriage, as mentioned, Ovid relies on a more sexually-loaded term, which may connote simple harm or injury by violence,¹⁴ but is also used politely in oratory to accuse an opponent of impropriety.¹⁵ On the other hand, Ovid calques σύννεμι with *coeuntia*, but only for the snakes: Jupiter and Juno argue to what extent *voluptas contingit* (321), “pleasure comes to,” the sexes. This verb, with its connotations of touch and even of striking, points to Tiresias' interaction with the snakes, alluding to the violence of Tiresias' blow while still flirting with the sexual register: Adams notes that in late Latin, *contingo* is common as a term for sexual contact.¹⁶

¹⁴ Smith and Lockwood, 2005, pp. 808-9

¹⁵ Adams, 1982, p. 223

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 227

The placement of *baculi* in line 325 is mirrored by the exclamatory *mirabile* in 326: Tiresias' transformation (which Ovid tells us endured for seven years) into a woman is characterized as astonishing, even marvellous; that this miraculous change is placed in metrical parallel and emphasized even more than Tiresias' staff is, if the pun can be pardoned, strikingly funny, but also points to the singular nature of Tiresias' later insight into both binary genders.

Tiresias' response to encountering the snakes again shows some of the pragmatic approach to the miraculous, bizarre, and divine that characterizes his approach to the numinous, as we shall see in discussion of Tiresias' activities at Thebes in the next section.¹⁷ Curious, but in keeping with Ovid's overall theme of explorations of bodily transformation, is the positioning of gender as chance, a coin toss: *sortem in contraria mutet* (329), "changes the lot... to its contrary," is a charming turn of phrase, but also suggests that the speaker has considered it in his time as a woman and arrived at that conclusion. And while line 331, with its redundant sense—*forma prior rediit genetivaeque venit imago*, "he returned to his prior form and the likeness he was born with came back"—again points to this doubling of qualities. As when encountering the snakes, whose first quality the reader learns is their two-ness, here again a duality is emphasized.

All this serves to prove just how learned (*doctus*) are Tiresias' opinions in Jupiter and Juno's dispute: he has seen both sides of this argument, and is uniquely capable of answering their question. He is, indeed, the *arbiter* (332), and it is his word that affirms Jove's remarks (*firmit*, 333). Unsurprisingly, however, Juno is not one to be crossed, and she answers the contradiction with punishment, striking Tiresias blind in the arresting turn of phrase, *aeterna damnavit lumina nocte* (335), "[she] damned his lights to eternal darkness."

For Ovid, it is only through Jupiter's mercy that Tiresias is granted the gift of second sight, and it is with the caveat that he cannot undo what another god has done (*licet irrita cuiquam / facta dei fecisse deo*, 336-7). Still, Tiresias' "lights" are restored, and his "punishment lightened by honor" (338). Indeed, Tiresias is honored, as Giusti notes, by becoming the first non-divine seer mentioned in the *Metamorphoses*,¹⁸ as well as, she suggests, a stand-in for the poet himself.¹⁹ Curiously, in Ovid's version of the story, Tiresias offers little to no prophecy: as Gildenhard and Zissos point out in the introductory material to their text and commentary, *Ovid*,

¹⁷ Begins p. 13

¹⁸ Giusti, 2018, p. 19

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27

Metamorphoses, 3.511-733, “the legendary seer utters no prophecies, but merely offers Pentheus advice, all the while acknowledging the scant hope that the young king will heed it.”²⁰

As we contrast these versions of Tiresias’ origins, it is worth bearing in mind that Ovid is also interacting with Brisson’s “B” version, most fully recounted in Callimachus’ Hymn V, “The Bath of Pallas” (also recounted in Pseudo-Apollodorus’ *Bibliotheca*²¹), although he does so at a remove: Ovid replaces Tiresias with Actaeon, and Athena with Diana. Giusti notes that the “choice... clearly fulfills the two aims of *variatio* and metamorphosis needed in his epic poem,” but also suggests that it allows him to interpolate biography in a post-exilic revision, “with Actaeon falling into the *error* of witnessing something he should not have, and Tiresias being guilty of uttering the *carmen* that told the different attitudes of men and women about the art of love.”²² While a seer functioning as a stand-in for the poet himself is not uncommon, as Lovatt tells us,²³ it is also worth bearing in mind that, as Ogden notes, citing Cassius Dio, there was imperial concern about divination, and especially divination of the emperor’s death, leading Augustus to ban the use of divination to predict death at all²⁴—which is to say that it may not only be Actaeon’s witness but Tiresias’ actual actions as a seer in Thebes which constitute a stand-in for authorial *error*.

While Giusti makes this argument to support her thesis that this use of Tiresias as an authorial avatar suggests post-exilic revision to *Metamorphoses*, Ovid’s editorial process is beyond the scope of this work; his recension of a recognized version of the Tiresias story, as Giusti and others have suggested the Actaeon interlude constitutes, is not. As Brisson notes, “... the first version recounts Tiresias’ change of sex, his blinding, and the gift of divination, while the second only retains the two latter elements.”²⁵ Barchiesi draws attention to the parallel between the Ovidian Actaeon and the Callimachean Tiresias: “Ovid’s version depends directly on one made famous in Callimachus’ *Bath of Pallas*,”²⁶ he writes, and goes on to say that, “Callimachus leaves no doubt that the stories of Teiresias (he who, ‘wretched man, without wishing it saw what was not permitted,’ *Hymn* 5.78) and Actaeon are parallel.”²⁷ Janan suggests

²⁰ Gildenhard and Zissos, 2016, p. 48

²¹ Brisson, 1976, pp. 21-3

²² Giusti, 2018, p. 33; I will return to Giusti’s reading on p. 26

²³ Lovatt, 2001, p. 115

²⁴ Ogden, 2001, p. 156; Clary, ed., 1968, pp. 56-7

²⁵ Brisson, 1976, p. 26

²⁶ Barchiesi and Rosati, 2024, p. 253

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 254

that both Actaeon and Tiresias are positioned as further examples of Thebes' "empty law,"²⁸ which she forwards as part of a Lacanian reading of Ovid's vision of Thebes as a dark parallel of Rome.²⁹ This law, which Tiresias unwittingly violated by separating the snakes and Actaeon broke by seeing Diana at her bath, is empty in that it is a "form empty of content," laws that cannot be known until they are broken, and Tiresias and Actaeon both follow "the arc of unwitting transgression and inexorable punishment."³⁰ That Tiresias can be seen as positioned in this way, in light of the Augustan proscription on diviners predicting death, suggests further alignment with the poet as a fellow unwitting transgressor against unclear law; we will return to this point.

But while Ovid gets substantial mileage out of Actaeon, transforming Callimachus' mere nine lines (*Call. Hymn V.* 107-116) into 121 (*O. Met.* III.131-252), he transforms Athena's explanation of her action into Jupiter's apology. Compare Athena in Callimachus: "Godlike woman, the deed could not be undone" (*Call. Hymn V.* 103-4), she says, after clarifying that that is due to laws laid down by Kronos himself (*ibid.* 100). Ovid, on the other hand, after noting that Juno is more wroth than one might hope, explains that, "not even he is permitted to counter / any divine deeds done by another god" (*O. Met.* III. 336-7), even if he is *omnipotens*, "all-powerful." He is nonetheless governed by what is or is not *licet*, "permitted," and while Ovid neglects to assign the power of that permission, the rules of divine mandate and countermandate are nonetheless clear—and Tiresias is caught between them. As Brisson notes, "... as all transgression calls for a repression, Tiresias must submit to punishments and humiliations at the hands of gods and men."³¹

Brisson does, however, offer a "C" version: that relayed by Eustathius, ostensibly by Sostratus, about whom only guesses are possible. O'Hara, in his 1996 article about proposed authorship and influence of this version, suggests that the Sostratus in question is Sostratus of Nysa, a *grammaticus* about whom little is known.³² Brisson dismisses this version as probably a fabrication by Ptolemy Chennus,³³ but nonetheless devotes quite a bit of analysis to it, noting that, "In the end, it must not be believed that the fact that this third version seems to be the work

²⁸ Janan, 2009, p. 158

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75

³¹ Brisson, 1976, p. 45

³² O'Hara, 1996, p. 204

³³ Brisson, 1976, p. 78

of a falsifier weakens our analysis. On the contrary, it strengthens it. Basically, in this hypothesis, we would have here an example of the transformation of a myth in its pure state, that is of a transformation effected in total freedom with respect to all tradition but which, in spite of it all, does not escape the structure of the myth that it affects.”³⁴

In this version, Tiresias—who is only explicitly identified as Tiresias once—is transformed from one sex to another six times, and then finally into a mouse. Beginning life as a girl, he is transformed into a man after rebuffing Apollo’s advances, having learned music from the god. Already, this version is off to an unusual start, as O’Hara notes: not only do we have a kind of refiguring of the Cassandra story, in that a girl rebuffs Apollo himself; we also have music lessons, instead of what we might expect Apollo to teach a young girl, i.e. prophecy. O’Hara suggests that this may be a simple error, though as he notes, Brisson differs.³⁵

It is due to this trespass against Apollo that Tiresias—or whoever she was—is turned into a young man, which brings us to the second transformation, and back into more familiar territory: Tiresias is called up to judge the conflict between Zeus and Hera (or Jupiter and Juno, as the case may be) that we have discussed previously. But in this version, that judgement results in Tiresias being turned into a woman; we are told that she becomes pregnant by a man and has a son named Strabo, on account of his squinting, which was caused by Hera’s displeasure. Brisson notes that the boy’s poor eyesight is as close as this version comes to the blindness that is so characteristic of Tiresias in other versions, because to describe Tiresias as actually blind would render a subsequent episode incoherent.³⁶ O’Hara, on the other hand, uses the child’s name to build his rather ramshackle case for identifying the “Sostratus” to whom Eusthatius refers as Sostratus of Nysa, as mentioned previously.³⁷

Tiresias is then transformed into an ugly man—one so ugly, he is given the name Python, or “Monkey”—after laughing at a statue of Hera. In the entry on the word, Liddell and Scott refer the reader to Pindar’s second Pythian ode, line 72, which offers the temptation to guess at a possible reference in Eusthatius’s Sostratus’s original text, especially since, as Steiner notes, “the animal’s most signal property... is its ugliness,”³⁸ and that, “monkeys... are implicated in acts of

³⁴ Ibid, p. 80

³⁵ O’Hara, 1996, p. 184

³⁶ Brisson, 1976, p. 87

³⁷ O’Hara, 1996, p. 211

³⁸ Steiner, 2011, p. 244

mockery and abuse.”³⁹ Further, the reference to monkeys as improperly adored by children follows immediately on a reflection on the myth of Ixion, whose trespasses against god and good manners might offer a counterpoint to the Tiresias narrative. Of course, without access to whatever original there may be, this must remain speculation, though O’Hara notes in discussing this sequence that, “the most prominent recurring motif in this summary/poem is that of the anger of a deity against the mortal Tiresias.”⁴⁰ This is an interpretation of both this version and the figure as a whole to which I will return later,⁴¹ much as Tiresias is, in his next transformation, returned to a female form, this one notably attractive. Of interest here is the fact that this transformation is specifically described as an action Zeus takes out of pity for Tiresias (ἐλεηθεῖσαν δὲ ὑπὸ Διός),⁴² a fact about which O’Hara expresses ambivalence.⁴³

Tiresias’ next transformation in this version has her transformed into the Tiresias we know, or something like him, as punishment for killing her would-be rapist, Glyphius, who is endeared to Poseidon in some way. O’Hara notes that the episode is almost *sui generis*: “My search for other stories, historical or literary, in which a mortal woman kills an attempted rapist has yielded few even reasonably close parallels,”⁴⁴ he writes, citing only six rather distant comparisons—and one of those is simply a remark on the lack of physical resistance to rape in *Metamorphoses*.⁴⁵ In Brisson’s construction of things, this section marks the passage from a fast and loose reiteration of his “A” version and into a reimagining of his “B” version: “In the first sequence of this episode, Tiresias is attacked, in the bath, by Glyphius, who he kills. And in the second sequence, the Moirae... change him into Tiresias and take away his divinatory gift,”⁴⁶ going on to note that, by inverting the sexes and vectors of attack in this sequence from the version recounted by Callimachus, Sostratus is able to position his own version of the myth as the real one.⁴⁷ The suggestion that only this version is the true one is both reinforced and complicated by Tiresias’ immediate regaining of his divinatory abilities, here from Chiron. O’Hara notes that this is both in keeping with, and variant from, Chiron’s usual position as the

³⁹ O’ Hara, 1996, p. 245

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 188

⁴¹ See p. 36

⁴² Ibid., p. 177

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 188-9

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 190

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 193-4

⁴⁶ Brisson, 1976, p. 88

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 88-9

mentor of great heroes;⁴⁸ the fact that Tiresias is immediately called upon to judge a beauty contest explains why his traditional blindness was inflicted—more gently and at a remove—on his son, rather than on Tiresias himself. But since the beauty contest is between Aphrodite and the Graces, Tiresias here can make no choice that will not anger a divinity, and in punishment is turned into an old woman, though one of them takes pity on him by giving him, as an old woman, very nice hair, as well as moving him to Crete.

It is there, in the seventh and final transformation, that Tiresias is transformed into a mouse after one Arachnos sleeps with her and then boasts that he has slept with Aphrodite (she turns him into a weasel for his boasting). Brisson links the name Arachnos to the story of Arachne and Athena, in which the former is transformed by the goddess into a spider for her hubris; here, he says, both parties have acted contrary to Aphrodite's wishes, and so they must both be punished. Not only are they animals but, as Brisson notes, they are animals who would be naturally hostile to one another in the Greek mind;⁴⁹ he further points out that mice are notoriously gifted both with respect to sexual incontinence and divinatory skill.⁵⁰ O'Hara links the punishment to the Homeric hymn to Aphrodite, in which Anchises is warned by Zeus that he would be punished (with death) if he boasted of sleeping with Aphrodite, with the signal difference that Arachnos is "punished for boasting falsely."⁵¹

O'Hara also links the version of Tiresias' story recounted above with Catullus 63, suggesting that if his dating of the supposed Sostratus is correct, then it might open up new vantages of understanding Catullus' treatment of Attis.⁵² If we accept that link, it might weakly suggest that there is a connection between forests and gender transformation, given the setting of Catullus 63 in a Phrygian wood, though it is a very tenuous connection. Brisson, after recounting the role of snakes and mice in Greek myth, says that Sostratus returns to the "A" version, but "displaces the center of attention, in interesting itself not in the animal attacked, which is to say the snake, but the attacking animal, which is to say the mouse."⁵³ Beyond these possible uses of the Sostratus version, however, we see in it a lengthy exploration of Tiresias' role as one who, as

⁴⁸ O'Hara, 1996, p. 195

⁴⁹ Brisson, 1976, p. 91

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94

⁵¹ O'Hara, 1996, pp. 197-8

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 212-4

⁵³ Brisson, 1976, pp. 110-1

Brisson points out, is placed in a position to mediate between gods and men, living and dead and, as such, transcends those oppositions—and in doing so, violates them.

This transcendence and transgression of boundaries will prove to be a hallmark of the character: by having transgressed, Tiresias is positioned as someone who can inform others—usually Theban nobility—not to transgress themselves, suggesting that this transgressive figure has been recuperated in the Debordian sense—as he writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “Spectacular power, which is absolute within the unchallengeable internal logic of the spectacle’s language, corrupts its specialists absolutely.”⁵⁴ While Debord is there talking about writers and artists under conditions of capitalism, the allegation that the needs of an overarching power contaminate the people working under them, recuperating them or their work to its own ends, nonetheless applies to our reading of Tiresias, especially if we follow Giusti’s reading of Tiresias-as-poet. But in those same appearances, Tiresias is presented, in one way or another, as abject to a greater or less degree: his masculinity is in question; his traditional attributes are upended; his position of authority is undermined by his position as a person in society, aligned as he often is in Roman texts with illicit magical practices. The next section will explore Tiresias’ activities in Thebes, specifically in the hands of Seneca, in his *Oedipus*, and Statius, in *Thebaid* IV.

2.b. Actions

Here we begin to move beyond what Brisson outlines: while his concern is primarily with the myth of Tiresias, in the sense of what mythological qualities are attributed to the figure, it now behooves us to examine settings in which Tiresias appears as the seer whose abilities have been vaunted since his first appearance in literature. The two texts under primary consideration here are Seneca the Younger’s *Oedipus Rex*, and Tiresias’ appearances in Statius’ *Thebaid*, specifically in book IV; I have not spent as much time on his appearance in book X due to its brevity and relative similarity to his earlier appearance on the page. These uses of the character obviously draw on Greek antecedents: Seneca relied, understandably, on Greek versions of the story he is telling; Statius not only drew heavily from Seneca’s representation of Tiresias’ necromantic practice but also from earlier epic portrayals, specifically in *Odyssey* XI. Both,

⁵⁴ Debord, 1994, p. 138

however, differ notably from their sources, not least in their depiction and leveraging of Manto, Tiresias' daughter, as well as the extravagantly visceral quality of the sacrificial rites they depict.

Seneca trots out a figure very recognizable as the blind seer who we, as well as devotees of the various tragic tales that accreted around the increasingly spectacular ruin of the royal house of Thebes, would easily recognize. As in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the title character seeks out advice from the seer to figure out why a plague has ravaged Thebes and its environs. Seneca presents us with an enfeebled Tiresias: as Creon introduces him, he is, "... the Phoebean seer, Tiresias, [who] limpingly hurries on shaking knees / and his companion Manto leading him, bereft of light as he is" (... *sorte Phoebæ... / Tiresia tremulo tardus accelerat genu / comesque Manto luce viduatam trahens*, 288-90⁵⁵). But if Creon takes time to note Tiresias' physical disability, Oedipus is at pains to emphasize his proximity to Apollo, calling him *proximum Phoebæ caput* ("the one closest to Phoebus," 291) in the very next line, which is entirely devoted to respectful greeting before the command to provide the answer to their mystery.

Tiresias' initial self-presentation, however, falls closer to Creon's introduction. As he says pointedly at 295, "The greater part of truth lies hidden from those deprived of sight" (*visu carenti magna pars veri latet*), but goes on to say that where fatherland or Phoebus calls, he goes (*sed quo vocat me patria, quo Phoebus, sequar*, 296). It is in this tone of seeming resignation that he continues—"oracles must be elicited," *fata eruantur*, 297, he says, though it is worth noting that *eruo* is a word used both for the unearthing of truths and for the demolition of cities, which implies that he knows more than he is letting on about the source of Oedipus' troubles.⁵⁶ As he readies himself for the ritual through which he will direct his daughter, he asks her at several points about the signs she sees so that he can interpret them, though given the nature of the signs, it rapidly becomes clear that things are not going well.

When Manto reports that she has thrown frankincense onto the altar, Tiresias asks how the flame behaves; she tells him that it flared once and then quickly went out (*subito refulsit lumine et subito occidit*, 303). The very flames of the altar behave strangely: although Tiresias asks if they burn upright or braid like hair (*utrumne... comam?*, 309-11), questions which seem straightforward, Manto describes the behavior of the flame as looking almost like a rainbow with many shifting colors, the syntax mirroring their movement (*imbrifera qualis implicat varios sibi /*

⁵⁵ Text from Boyle, ed., 2012, pp. 24-31

⁵⁶ Smith and Lockwood, 2005, p. 236

Iris colores, 314-15). Finally, it burns down into shadow (*ultima in tenebras abit*, 320), but suddenly, the flame splits in two: “The warring ember of a single rite rends itself,” as Manto describes it, before admitting, “Father, I’m frightened looking at it” (... *se scindit unius sacri / discors favilla. Genitor, horresco intuens*, 322-3).

She continues, as the portents continue ill: the wine turns into blood (*libata... permutet cruor*, 324); the smoke from the split flame settles thickly across the king’s face, eventually hiding his eyes entirely in a coil of bubbling sibilance (*spissior vultus sedet / et nube densa sordidam lucem abdidit*, 326-7); she turns to her father with a rather helpless subjunctive: “What, father, would that mean?” (*quid sit, parens, effare?*, 327).

Tiresias performs dismay and confusion at these signs: “What can I say / amidst the wandering tumult of a thunder-struck mind?” (*quid fari queam / inter tumultus mentis attonitae vagus*, 328-9) he asks, though his careful chiasmus suggests that his mind might not be as tumultuous or thunder-struck as he maintains. We see in this cleverly-deployed construction part of what Boyle describes as the “[elevation of] Tiresias into a figure of some authority.”⁵⁷ Nonetheless, he goes on to affirm that the signs are, indeed, very bad (*sunt dira*, 330), though he affects to be unsure as to what they would reveal (*Quid istud... tegunt?*, 332-3).

He elects to continue the ritual, telling Manto to proceed with the sacrifice on his behalf, but it too goes poorly: the bull flinches from the rising sun; the sacrifices bleed too much and too little, the heifer felled easily while the bull attempts to buck the weapon, showing his reluctant spirit (*animam... reluctantem exprimit*, 344). Tiresias acknowledges these, too, as ill omens (*Infausta... sacra... cient*, 351), but still presses Manto to read the entrails, his words clipped and balanced delicately around the entrails themselves (*sed ede certas viscerum nobis notas*, 352).

What Manto finds in the body cavities of the sacrificial animals is a horror show, a full thirty lines (353-83) of lovingly-rendered nightmare gore, opening with another invocation of Tiresias as her father: *Genitor, quid hoc est?* (353). The rite closes in flames as it opened in smoke: the fire bellows on the altar, and the flames themselves are afraid (*immugit aris ignis et trepidant foci*, 383). Oedipus, characteristically, tries to brazen his way through his misfortune, claiming that great evils often make men strong (*solent suprema facere secures mala*, 386), to which Tiresias responds, in a beautifully damning line, “You will come to envy these evils with

⁵⁷ Boyle, 2012, p. 189

you now ask help” (*his invidēbis quibus opem quaeris malis*, 387). Having been privy to a number of *mala*, both in the origin of his mantic abilities and in services already rendered to Theban nobility, Tiresias is well positioned to call Oedipus’ bluff.

Oedipus may be evincing fear, frustration, or both when he tells Tiresias to reveal the name of the one who killed Laius (*memora... manus*, 388-9), but Tiresias insists that nothing can reveal the name of the killer but raising the dead. However, he says, since Oedipus is the king, it would be *nefas*—as Tiresias positions it, quite as much an abomination in the face of divine law as Oedipus’s actual deeds—for him to witness such an act (*nam... umbras*, 388-9). Oedipus dutifully turns the task over to Creon as Tiresias enjoins the chorus to praise Bacchus, since he apparently intends to assist Creon in summoning the departed spirit of the king: “While we open the deepest gates of Styx / let the people sing in praise of Bacchus,” *Dum nos profundae claustra laxamus Stygis, / populare Bacchi laudibus carmen sonet* (401-2).

We have, in Seneca’s version of events, a couple of clear departures from the Sophoclean model. First and most obviously, Sophocles has Tiresias attended only by a παῖς, a child or a slave, addressed only at line 444⁵⁸ and who, as Beek notes, “...does not speak, is not described, and is addressed only once.”⁵⁹ Although Beek posits this as a “possible appearance” on Manto’s part, her presence marks a specific intervention by Seneca into the story, inserting a figure better known in other contexts into his version of the myth.

In addition to this wholesale insertion, Seneca also radically reimagines the tenor of the interaction between Oedipus and Tiresias: Sophocles’ Oedipus addresses Tiresias in honorific terms, introducing him to the audience with 15 lines of laudatory language—not nothing in a play that only runs to 1500 and change. For Sophocles’ Oedipus, Tiresias knows things “which can be known / and those which are unspeakable, in heaven and on earth, / though [he] cannot see them” (... διδακτά τε / ἄρρητά τ’, οὐράνιά τε καὶ χθονοστιβῆ, / πόλιν μὲν, εἰ καὶ μὴ βλέπεις [...], 300-3); he is the “sole guide and deliverer” (... προστάτην / σωτῆρά [...] μόνον, 304-5) against the plague which has afflicted Thebes since Laius’ death. Further, it is worth noting, he asks Tiresias that, “You not begrudge the message of the birds / or other ways of prophecy that you have” (σύ νυν φθονήσας μήτ’ ἀπ’ οἰωνῶν φάτιν / μήτ’ εἴ τιν’ ἄλλην μαντικῆς ἔχεις ὁδόν, 310-1). Tiresias, too, offers an affect very different from Seneca’s reluctant, disabled seer who

⁵⁸ Text from Steadman, 2015, pp. 20-31

⁵⁹ Beek, 2022, p. 414

claims not to know the name of Laius' killer; in Sophocles' version of events, Tiresias seems already to know that he is speaking to the murderer. "Alas, alas, knowledge is terrible when the end / benefits not the knower; well did I know / that, but I forgot—I would not have come here" (φεῦ φεῦ, φρονεῖν ὡς δεινὸν ἔνθα μὴ τέλη / λύη φρονοῦντι: ταῦτα γὰρ καλῶς ἐγὼ / εἰδὼς διώλεσ': οὐ γὰρ ἂν δεῦρ' ἰκόμην, 316-8). Already, for Sophocles, Tiresias knows what he is being asked to tell; given the reference to his blindness, it can be inferred that he forgot what he learned in his experience adjudicating between Zeus and Hera: to say things to powerful people that they do not wish to hear will be to suffer. He is, understandably, loth to do so—but the fact remains that he does know the truth of the matter.

In contrast, Seneca's Tiresias is either lying or less competent than his reputation would suggest. His last line in the play, however, points towards another of his notable appearances and attempted interventions against the catastrophically unwise behavior of the Theban nobility: when he enjoins the gathered chorus to sing in praise of Bacchus, it is difficult not to think of Tiresias' behavior in Euripides' *Bacchae*; when the chorus, in lines 441-4, invokes the fate of Pentheus, whose grisly death as a result of his failure to adequately praise Dionysus forms the meat of the play, the parallel is confirmed. Indeed, despite the differences in their initial comportment—the Tiresias of *Bacchae* is not at his most dignified, appearing as he initially does in women's clothing to go with Cadmus to the women-only Bacchic rite—the Tiresias of Seneca's *Oedipus* has more than a little in common with the character as portrayed by Euripides.

There is an early mention of Tiresias' physical infirmity: his blindness is invoked in his very first line, when he calls out, "Who is at the gate?" (τίς ἐν πύλαισι;, 170)⁶⁰, and in calling for Cadmus, notes their shared agedness (ἄ τε ξυνεθέμην πρέσβυς ὦν γεραιτέρω, "... what I, being an old man, put together with an older one," 175); shortly thereafter, Cadmus echoes the sentiment (κρᾶτα σεῖσαι πολίον... / γέρων γέροντι..., "our gray heads... / one old man to another...", 185-6). Tiresias' inability to go alone, through a combination of age and blindness, to the Bacchic rite is touched on again at the end of the scene, when Tiresias himself draws attention to it: "... But guide me with my ivy staff, / try to steady my body, as I will yours: / it would be shameful for two old men to fall; let's go regardless" (ἀλλ' ἔπου μοι κισσίνου βάκτρον μέτα, / πειρῶ δ' ἀνορθοῦν σῶμ' ἐμόν, κἀγὼ τὸ σόν: / γέροντε δ' αἰσχρὸν δύο πεσεῖν: ἴτω δ'

⁶⁰ Text is Seaford, 2015, pp. 76-87

ὅμως, 363-5). These repeated references to Tiresias' need for assistance with tasks while carrying out a ritual he feels obliged to do offer a distant echo of Manto's narration of ill omen after ill omen in Seneca's version of events.

Further, both Seneca and Euripides portray a Tiresias sensitive to his duties and ready to perform them in spite of misgivings, in contrast to Sophocles' portrayal, in which Tiresias is asking to leave only a few lines after his arrival. Euripides' Tiresias extends this sense of duty even further, offering Pentheus a patient disquisition on Dionysus' nature and genesis in apparent hopes that it will calm the young man's wrath (266-327). Although, as Seaford points out,⁶¹ this speech seems somewhat at odds with the flat declaration at 200 that, "We don't get clever with the gods" (οὐδὲν σοφίζομεσθα τοῖσι δαίμοσιν), since it does employ some sophistic arguments about the ostensibly mistaken nature of Dionysus' birth, it nonetheless displays both an awareness of audience—Tiresias speaks differently to Pentheus than he does to Cadmus—and serves ultimately to reinforce his earlier statement. Tiresias seems to perceive his duty to Thebes, and to Dionysus, as requiring that he show patience and attempt to reason with the tragically unreasonable Pentheus.

It is only once the young king has made his determination to blaspheme clear that Tiresias permits himself the kind of dire and direct prediction that Seneca gives him at 387. When Tiresias informs Oedipus in no uncertain terms that, "These ills for which you now seek help, you will come to envy" (*his invidetis quibus opem quaeris malis*), it rings with the same defeated meanness as, after a few scathing words to Pentheus, Tiresias says, "This is how Pentheus will bring ruin to your / house, Cadmus: I speak not as a seer / but based on the facts: a stupid man says stupid things" (Πενθεὺς δ' ὅπως μὴ πένθος εἰσοίσει δόμοις / τοῖς σοῖσι, Κάδμει: μαντικῇ μὲν οὐ λέγω, / τοῖς πράγμασιν δέ: μῶρα γὰρ μῶρος λέγει, 367-9). Although Seaford suggests that the play with Πενθεὺς and πένθος is "not a pun but anxiety,"⁶² it nonetheless provides another bridge into Seneca's version of events.

A further connection arises from both visions of Tiresias being positioned as, to a greater or lesser degree, abject in the Kristevan sense. The quality of abjection is, as we shall see, associated often with witches and necromantic seers like Lucan's Erichtho but, as Phillips writes, "this term can be used to think of the instability of gendered and/or sexed bodies—especially

⁶¹ Seaford, 2015, p. 169

⁶² Ibid., p. 181

those occupied by transgender individuals.”⁶³ While the use of contemporary terminology is not necessarily useful here, it is worth considering that Tiresias is presented in both of these iterations as other than conventionally masculine: Euripides has him in drag; Seneca has him carry out a rite that he is physically incapable of actually carrying out, leaving his daughter to do the heavy lifting while he interprets the outcome. The abject qualities of Tiresias’ presentation will be discussed in more detail in the “analysis” section.

Of course, Ovid too recounts this particular story, in something of a bridge between Euripides’ and Seneca’s version. As Janan, citing W. S. Anderson, points out, the Ovidian version has intertexts with *Aeneid*,⁶⁴ though these do not quite extend to Tiresias’ prophecy. For our purposes, however, it is interesting that Ovid renders many of Tiresias’ utterances in Book III as brisk and relatively direct, and his forecast for Pentheus is no exception. When Pentheus mocks Tiresias for his blindness (*obicit*, *O. Met.* III.516), the seer rather frankly tells him that he would be better off blind (*quam felix... orbus*, 517-8), and foretells the dire end that awaits Pentheus a mere two hundred lines later (*namque dies aderit... vidisse quereris*, 519-25). The blunt future *eveniet* (“it will happen,” 524) of Ovid’s Tiresias here seem to point to the equally-blunt *invidetis* (“you will come to envy”) offered by Seneca’s Tiresias, on which I have touched recently. His brusqueness and the emphasis on his achievements (*cognita res... ingens*, 511-2), on the other hand, look ahead to Tiresias’ speech in the hands of Statius, to which we will come shortly. That said, Tiresias’ fundamental point, in Ovid’s hands, that the gods must be respected, is an example of recuperation: here again we have Tiresias, as one who has transgressed and is positioned as abject by virtue of his blindness, telling someone else to follow the status quo, much as Ovid himself may have been said to be doing by writing *Metamorphoses*.

It is to Euripides’ *Phoenissae* that we must turn, however, to account for Seneca’s—and, later, Statius’, about whose version of events more is to follow—inclusion of Manto, Tiresias’ daughter. She more or less explicitly accompanies him in *Phoenissae*, addressed in Tiresias’ first line in the play as “daughter” (θύγατερ, 835).⁶⁵ As Boyle notes, Seneca opens his iteration of the Oedipus story with “an adaptation of the opening of... *Phoenissae*,”⁶⁶ establishing a clear link between the two plays. While Boyle later suggests that Tiresias’ presentation in Seneca’s

⁶³ Phillips, 2014, p. 19

⁶⁴ Janan, 2009, pp. 187-90

⁶⁵ Text is from Mastronarde, 1988, p. 70-7

⁶⁶ Boyle, 2012, p. 103

Oedipus is “essentially Seneca’s creation,”⁶⁷ both the presence of Manto and Tiresias’ comportment are redolent of his characterization in Euripides’ *Phoenissae*.

In *Phoenissae*, Tiresias essentially precludes the remarks about him that Seneca’s *Oedipus* makes on announcing his arrival: he asks his daughter to guide his steps, since he is blind, because he does not wish to fall (ὥς τυφλῷ ποδὶ... μὴ σφαλῶμεν, 834-7); he characterizes himself as “without strength” (ἀσθενής, 837), necessitating his daughter’s assistance. Here, too, as he begins to explain the nature of Thebes’ ongoing problems to Creon, Tiresias couches his assistance in terms of duty, in this case to Creon himself, saying, “To you, though, since you need to know it / I will speak” (σοὶ δ’, ἐπεὶ χρήζεις μαθεῖν, / λέξω..., 866-7).

Perhaps most notable as a link between Euripides’ *Phoenissae* and Seneca’s *Oedipus* for our purposes, however, is the near-quotation of *Phoenissae* 899 that occurs at *Oedipus* 387. As Creon continues to press Tiresias to reveal what he foretells of Thebes’ fate in the unholy war between Polynieces and Eteocles, even as Tiresias attempts to escape—which he does a little over 50 lines later, again requiring assistance from his daughter, there addressed as τέκνον (955)—Tiresias utters a line that will be elegantly paraphrased in Seneca’s Latin: βούλη σὺ μέντοι κούχῃ βουλήσῃ τάχα, “What you so want now, very soon, you will not” (899). This utterance, which has an almost proverbial ring, finds its echo in *His invidiebis quibus opem quaeris malis*, “You will come to envy the evils for which you seek aid” (387). While Seneca elaborates on the sense of the line, expanding Creon’s desire to know how to save Thebes (by killing his son, it transpires) into *Oedipus*’ entire situation, the sonic resemblance, with both lines relying on repeated sibilants and voiced bilabial stops, as well as the syntactical resonance, Seneca balancing the line at either end with *Oedipus*’ maladies (*his... malis*) much as Euripides hangs his on the repeated forms of βούλομαι followed by or containing a sigma (βούλη σὺ... βουλήσῃ...), both writers contrasting a strong future-tense verb with the present-tense state of their addressees, combine in striking similarity. Seneca, it seems, offers a Euripidean, rather than a Sophoclean, Tiresias.

But if Seneca’s Tiresias is Euripidean, more than Sophoclean, in character, how does that impact our reading of Statius’ reiteration of Seneca’s gruesome scene of necromancy? That Statius’ interpretation of the raising of the dead owes a great deal to Seneca’s is something of a

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 187

given: LeGras lays out eight points of similarity, though he also notes that Statius' version expands on Seneca's (and, subsequently, passes over the divination sequence in Book X with a nod to *Phoenissae*).⁶⁸ Vessey affirms that similarity, while also noting that, "The popularity of the motif [of necromancy] in the Flavian era is demonstrated by the fact that Valerius, Statius and Silius all included episodes of necromancy in their epics,"⁶⁹ and while he characterizes Seneca's *nekyomanteia* as "exotic mannerism,"⁷⁰ he goes on to reiterate that Statius is working in the same tradition as Seneca.⁷¹ In his discussion of the relationship between Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* and another part of *Thebaid*, van der Schuur states explicitly that, "Statius's *Thebaid* shows its debt to Senecan tragedy right from the moment the figure of Oedipus enters the stage... This Oedipus is a Senecan Oedipus."⁷² If the action of Statius' Oedipus is Senecan, it is scarcely surprising that his Tiresias, too, is Euripidean. After all, the Tiresias of *Phoenissae* who sweeps out on his daughter's arm, muttering darkly about the foolishness of prophecy, is not dissimilar to Statius' unpleasant old man, ordering his daughter and the risen dead about with equal imperiousness.

In Statius' repurposing of this Euripidean disruption into an otherwise Sophoclean iteration of Oedipus, his sons, and their many sins, however, we also find a distorted echo of Tiresias' first-ever appearance: his interview with Odysseus in *Odyssey* XI. That Statius should be writing in conversation with *Odyssey* and with Homeric epic in general is scarcely surprising, given his level of education and the extent to which Homeric epic pervades subsequent classical literature, much as Shakespeare pervades our own. What he chooses to do with it, on the other hand, and how he goes about it, are remarkable for our discussion.

When Tiresias appears in *Odyssey*, he arrives as the herald of the other dead. Brisson notes that one of Tiresias' qualities is that he retains a livelier mien after death,⁷³ and while Brisson points to his "B" variant as a source for this, citing specifically Callimachus' *Bath of Pallas*, which we have examined previously, and a passage from Apollodorus' *Library* which recounts the same story,⁷⁴ since both of these versions postdate *Odyssey* by many years, it seems

⁶⁸ Legras, 1905, pp. 174-6

⁶⁹ Vessey, 1973, p. 237

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 245

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 257

⁷² van der Schuur, 2018, p. 123

⁷³ Brisson, 1976, p. 26

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 21-3

reasonable to surmise that they seek to partially explain how Tiresias can appear as relatively lively and aware as he remains when he appears to Odysseus, even before he drinks from the offering of blood (διογενὲς Λαερτιάδῃ... νημερτέα εἶπω, *Od.* XI, 92-96).⁷⁵ Indeed, Vessey writes that, “the origin of all later *nekuiae* is to be found in Homer,”⁷⁶ subsequently explaining that, “a pattern is established in Homeric necromancy which was both complicated and modified by later writers.”⁷⁷ Odysseus is greeted courteously by the seer, who refers to him not only as the grandson of Zeus, as cited above, but subsequently also as “Glorious Odysseus” (φαίδιμ’ Ὀδυσσεῦ, 100). Tiresias carries his characteristic golden staff (χρύσεον σκηπτρον ἔχων, 91); he is explicitly named as Theban (Θηβαίου Τειρεσίαο, 90) in this sequence, while Circe noted his blindness when she gave her instructions to Odysseus (μάντηος ἀλαοῦ, *Od.* X, 493).

He also explicitly requires propitiation in the form of black animals. Circe instructs Odysseus in how to go about this, and Odysseus later carries out her instructions, repeating them more or less word for word: the blood that will fill the pit to summon him must come from a black ram, as the reader is informed by the repeated phrasing used in Circe’s instructions (*Od.* X, 524-30) and Odysseus’ report of the sacrifice (*Od.* XI, 30-3). Tiresias’ need for the sacrifice of a black ram specifically is cemented when Circe informs Odysseus that he must sacrifice, specifically, a black ram as thanks for his guidance in returning to Ithaca and foreknowledge of what he will find there (*Od.* X.524-5).

So: the *Odyssey* presents us with a Tiresias who is courteous, carries a staff, and demands sacrifice of black animals. Let us turn now to Statius’ imagining of the character in his epic of fraternal war, and see how these attributes are changed to suit his purposes.

Here again Tiresias is summoned, but not by a man doomed to wander—rather, by Eteocles, explicitly characterized as the king of Thebes in the relevant passage (*Stat. Theb.* IV.407).⁷⁸ Upon being summoned, as in Seneca, Tiresias immediately discards as useless all other forms of divination in favor of calling up the dead (*illi deos... patuisse refert*, 409-14). As soon as he makes this assertion, Tiresias sacrifices his own sheep, rather than demanding one be sacrificed, in order to prepare the place where the necromancy will take place (*bidentum*, 416); the necromantic locus being decided, he orders the sacrifice of specifically black sheep and cows

⁷⁵ Text from Stanford, 2003, pp. 171-2

⁷⁶ Vessey, 1973, p. 238

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239

⁷⁸ Text from Parkes, 2012, pp. 22-35

(*velleris... monet*, 445-6). Here we see Tiresias making sacrifice of the animals he had requested be offered to him in his earliest appearance, as noted above—an inversion of the first-ever appearance of the character. As Parkes notes,⁷⁹ black animals are associated with underworld sacrifice, and taken in combination with the other elements Statius summons and inverts, it is worth considering as part of this pattern. Further, instead of supping on blood, he has Manto offer it (*innuba Manto... praelibet sanguine*, 463-4).

Although Tiresias' initial address to the chthonic gods is polite, calling upon the "realm of Tartarus and the terrifying, ever-hungering kingdom of death" (*Tartareae... inexpletae*, 473-4), a mere thirty lines later he seems to be losing patience, calling upon them again and testily asking whether the gods would appear to any rabidly-chanting Thessalian or poison-wielding Colchian (*rabido... motu*, 504-6), making reference to Erichtho as she appears in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and Medea respectively—a telling comparison, in which Tiresias implies that he is reasonable comparable to two more or less canonically abject figures. The polite formalities trotted out by the Homeric Tiresias are rapidly disappearing, and they seem to have fallen by the wayside entirely as this second address progresses, devolving into threats: *et nobis saevire facultas* (513)—"I too have the means to rage." And even if Manto is "the guide and strength of [his] old age," as Parkes has it⁸⁰ (*nostrae regimen viresque senectae*, 536), he immediately follows that address with the dismissive, *ne vulgata mihi*, "Don't tell me what's well known" (537).

As the necromantic ritual reaches its peak, we see another instance of Statius discarding Tiresias' most long-standing qualities: he stops leaning on his staff (*nec iam firmanti baculo... / nititur*, 582-3) and his sight is restored. Although deliberating briefly on the source of his newly and temporarily restored vision (*umbris... spiritus*, 586-7), he positively declares that he can see all that Manto described to him (*en video quaecumque audita*, 587). The last thing the reader sees Tiresias do before his reappearance in book X is pointing the gathered dead towards the blood he and Manto have set out as sacrifice: who once was the honored first to drink from the offering of blood now leaves it to a crowd of more or less unremarkable dead.

⁷⁹ Parkes, 2012, p. 228

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 29

2.c. *Throughlines*

In our examination of these texts, a few notable throughlines emerge, uniting in the figure of Tiresias as he appears in these different iterations. The figure is frequently shown to transcend binaries and boundaries, most obviously those between the binary genders, but also between the forbidden and allowable and, indeed, the living and the dead, to say nothing of his very presence acting as an agent of the “cross-contamination” between tragedy and epic as literary genres, to which Parkes has referred.⁸¹ This ability to transcend, however, easily passes into the realm of transgression which must be punished. That punishment is often in the form of divine intervention, as we saw in our examination of Brisson’s “A” and “B” versions of Tiresias’ origins, but his presence in the Theban cycle, tasked with either uncovering or trying to convince of unsavory truths, could certainly be seen as punishment in itself.

Roman iterations of Tiresias’ story make frequent use of and reference to qualities attributed to the character in much earlier versions, from material qualities like his blindness, age, or reliance on a staff, to attitudes towards whatever task he is summoned to. In some cases these attributes are amplified, as in the greater role of Manto in the Roman texts examined here, allowing us the opportunity of examining the nature of their relationship, which does not seem to resemble other father-daughter relationships in the literary contexts in which these two characters appear together. Similarly, the theme of transgression that surrounds the character is emphasized to a greater degree in Roman texts: rather than transcending disagreement or binary disjunction, Tiresias’ acts and experiences are positioned as more explicitly transgressive in the Roman mind. This transgressive positioning is accomplished, in part, by the figure’s alignment with abjection in the Kristevan sense: Tiresias engages in necromantic activities that would be considered disgusting, yet were a point of fascination by the time of the Flavian emperors if not before. These activities are described and assigned to this ostensibly unimpeachably correct seer with knowledge of the increasing restrictions on divination and the use of magic in imperial Rome; indeed, his ability to accurately predict the future or divine the past is placed in question in both Seneca and Statius as part of their larger examinations of transgression on a societal level.

In Roman hands, Tiresias is less the respectable and respectful seer of Homer, and comes much closer to constituting an outright warning against trespassing the boundaries of gender,

⁸¹ Parkes, 2021, p. 108

death, and, most critically of all, social convention. These themes of transgression against morality and gender will be explored in the next section.

3. Analysis

3.a. Gender

One of the more salient qualities of the Tiresias story, at least to a contemporary reader, is the character's adventures across cultural boundaries of gender. Most clearly marked in Brisson's "A" and "C" versions, we see Tiresias, in some way, transgress or transcend the borders of binary genders. In the "A" version, as examined here⁸² in its representations in Pseudo-Apollodorus' transmission of Hesiod in his *Bibliothèque* and Ovid's retelling in *Metamorphoses*, Tiresias turns from man to woman and back by intervening in two snakes' copulation; in the version brought down to us by Eusthatius, Tiresias begins life as a girl and spends the rest of his life disagreeing with and disrespecting gods, which leads to his many changes of sex and gender (and species, but that was only once).

But to what extent do these changes position Tiresias as an unstably-gendered subject for the Romans? As Giusti argues, Tiresias' time spent as a woman seems not to have impacted his ability to be cast as a male subject and, as such, to continue to participate in misogyny.⁸³ Indeed, his eventual ruling in the case of sexual pleasure brought to him by Juno and Jupiter seems to keep him in the classically misogynist belief that women are the randier sex, because of their greater pleasure, Tiresias says.

Tiresias' masculinity seems assured in Ovid's depiction of events. Syntactically, in *Metamorphoses*, it is this masculinity that both brings about his transformation into a woman and his subsequent reassertion of it that turns him back. After all, he "violated [them] with a strike from his staff" (*baculi violaverat ictu*, IV.325)—note the central position of the staff itself in the line. This insertion of the *baculus*, one of Tiresias' traditional attributes, into the line in this way, especially from this author, feels suggestive; as far as why the line might be construed as cementing Tiresias' masculinity, it is worth considering Craig Williams' construction of Roman masculinity as being, above all, the penetrating party in a sex act.⁸⁴ Tiresias' subsequent return to form is not without a hint of the salacious, as well: once again, the violence of the strike (*percussis*, 330), is placed in the center of the line, syntactically dividing Tiresias' gendered

⁸² See pp. 3-8

⁸³ Giusti, 2018, p. 13

⁸⁴ Williams, 2010, p. 18

experience, and *feriam*, the verb with which the transformed Tiresias resolves to try striking a pair of copulating snakes apart again, is not without sexual connotations.⁸⁵

But if Ovid offers a rather salaciously rendered version of events, especially in contrast to the sterile recap offered by Pseudo-Apollodorus of Hesiod, it still begs the question: why would interfering with snakes specifically have such an effect? If we followed Eusthatius' report of Sostratus, their relevance would seem straightforward: this is another offence against Apollo, after the girl who is not yet Tiresias strikes them apart—but the snakes do not appear in that version. The connection with Apollo isn't wholly groundless: as Ogden writes, "Amongst the gods Apollo has the strongest claim to be regarded as a *drakon*-master. He is of course the destroyer of the Delphic serpent. But he also sponsors and presides over serpents in his shrine on the plain Troy, in his Thymbraean aspect, and in his shrine at Epirus."⁸⁶ Given Apollo's association with prophecy, this seems like an obvious link. It is worth noting, however, that a Roman encountering this story might have their own ideas about snakes and, perhaps, why one ought not bother them. As Flower tells us, snakes seem to appear as *genius loci* on a regular basis (at least in Campania),⁸⁷ and are often seen in pairs in *lararia*. Beyond this, however, lies the association of serpents with the realm of the dead, which Ogden notes: "Snakes and *drakontes* were often regarded as emanating from the earth and retaining a special bond with it. [...] It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the great *drakontes* of myth were often projected as children of the earth,"⁸⁸ he writes, before going on to argue that, "It follows that the underworld should have been well populated with serpents."⁸⁹ If we accept, as I do, that this association of snakes with the dead is present to Roman interpretations of Tiresias, it serves to hint at his subsequent position as a sort of recuperated transgressor—and, of course, his association with necromancy in two of the three texts upon which my work here draws.

Even without the association with the dead, however, we nonetheless can see "A"-version Tiresias' interference with the snakes as a trespass against divine will, distinct from but relevant to the gender-transgressing sighting of Athena in Brisson's "B" version. (Ogden notes that Athena, too, is associated with the serpent, from her *aegis* to her work with Cecrops in the

⁸⁵ Adams, 1982, p. 148

⁸⁶ Ogden, 2013, p. 192

⁸⁷ Flower, 2017, pp. 67-70

⁸⁸ Ogden, 2013, p. 247

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 248

foundation of the city that bears her name.⁹⁰) And that transgression against the divine appears even in the convolutions of the “C” version, with its many transformations: as O’Hara notes, an overriding theme of that version seems to be Tiresias being transformed in response to some kind of mockery or denial on Tiresias’ part of divine will.⁹¹

But if this assertiveness is both the source of Tiresias’ punishment and, arguably, a way to cement his masculinity, where does that leave Manto? She is his daughter, and while there are other daughters of men with no obvious wives it seems reasonable to consider Manto as in fact *his* daughter, the product of his time as a woman. It is worth considering, then, what kind of parent Tiresias is to her, and how this might impact the perception of his gender by readers and viewers in Rome.

For Manto is shown, in Ovid, Seneca, and Statius’ hands, as “fully capable of displaying [her] father’s... unique nature and talents,” a quality Hallett notes was assigned to father’s daughters in Rome.⁹² This is, as she shows, a distinctly Roman conception of the role and value of the daughter, not shared by other ancient cultures, including the ancient Greeks.⁹³ To see those qualities written so clearly in and into Manto’s character, especially when she is positioned in general as a force for good—Beek writes that she is “a helpful and community-oriented character, working for public good and not involved in any harmful or disreputable behavior”⁹⁴ as a general principle—suggests that for these Roman writers, she is an archetypally good daughter. While Beek does clarify that, in Statius’ hands, Manto is rendered complicit in an unsanctioned form of magic,⁹⁵ she nonetheless does so in the interests of assisting her father. This is the behavior of a dutiful daughter.

In these portrayals, however, Tiresias does not embody the qualities Hallett notes in elite Roman father’s discussions of, and reported interactions with, their daughters. Although in these authors’ hands he stops short of speaking disrespectfully to Manto, he scarcely evinces the “fond fatherly feeling for [an] individual daughter”⁹⁶ that Hallett suggests is characteristic for elite Roman fathers. Something else is happening here.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 195-8

⁹¹ O’Hara, 1996, p. 184-5

⁹² Hallett, 1984, p. 338

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 341-2

⁹⁴ Beek, 2022, pp. 409-10

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 410

⁹⁶ Hallett, 1984, p. 63

In her study of motherhood and maternity in Roman literature, McAuley writes that Statius presses the themes of maternal representation—themes of “horror and idealization, and the association of maternal bodies with virtuous rhetoric (or, more generally, language)”⁹⁷—to their greatest extent. Her note that, as Tiresias orders his daughter through the necromantic ritual in *Thebaid* IV, and the cavalcade of Theban iniquity she narrates, the ritual becomes “a kind of inverted birth,”⁹⁸ points us towards the positioning of Tiresias as a parent in these texts. Indeed, by McAuley’s own argument, the necromancy scene in *Thebaid* book IV need not even be read as inverted: “The first Theban mother,” she writes, “is the earth,” citing the “autochthonous origins” of the Theban people.⁹⁹ She subsequently writes that, “real human mothers become associated with the chthonic forces of the underworld,”¹⁰⁰ exploring the roles played by Jocasta, Ide, and Eurydice in the epic. In her exploration of these more conventionally maternal figures, McAuley also examines “strange ‘motherings,’”¹⁰¹ as of Jupiter bearing Bacchus. And although she does not include Tiresias in her consideration of maternal figures, she does note in the introduction that today, “even men have *become* biological mothers,”¹⁰² referring to trans men who have borne children even after beginning medical transition. It is in this way, then, that Tiresias is a parent: he does not act as a father to Manto, because he is not her father; he is her mother.

Many of these qualities are also present to, because they are borrowed from, Seneca’s imagining of Tiresias in *Oedipus*. There, too, we find something other than the gold-scepter’d Homeric seer: Seneca presents a figure who is recognizably abject. Manto’s presence alone may suggest this, if my interpretation is correct, reminding the audience that Tiresias has been pregnant, a condition Kimball notes¹⁰³ that Kristeva associates with abjection. As we are reminded at his introduction from Creon (Sen. *Oed.* 288-90), Tiresias’ knees are weak, and Manto is “dragging” him along (*trahens*) due to his blindness. As Laes bluntly puts it, “Both Greek and Latin authors considered blindness a fate worse than death,”¹⁰⁴ going on to remark on

⁹⁷ McAuley, 2016, p. 300

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 315

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 303

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 306

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 302

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 3

¹⁰³ Kimball, 2022, p. 266

¹⁰⁴ Laes, 2018, p. 80

the relatively common practice of a blind person being guided by a child or a slave.¹⁰⁵ He later points out that both blindness and lameness were common ill-wishes on curse tablets¹⁰⁶—and our subject suffers one or both of those conditions in all Roman versions of his story under consideration.

These elements of disability, of physical infirmity, as well as Manto's identification as Tiresias' daughter, are as present in Ovid as elsewhere: Ovid's Pentheus explicitly mocks Tiresias for his blindness; while Manto does not appear until book VI, she is characterized as “daughter of Tiresias, Manto the prophetess,” (*sata Tiresias... praescia Manto*, VI.157)—their relationship is in no doubt. The choice of *sata* in particular to describe their relationship, with its connotations of sowing, planting, and begetting,¹⁰⁷ seems especially to suggest that she is born of Tiresias, and not his child with an unknown mother.

Further, these presentations of abnormal parenting, and specifically abnormal mothering, occur in the shadow of the *Lex Juliae*. As Hines writes, in her discussion of Ovid, “Just as Augustus was concerned with reassuring the Roman populace that a lasting resolution to civic strife has been achieved, his administration's enthusiastic promotion of marriage and child-bearing was built upon an understanding of population growth as a certain path towards community stability,” going on to write that, “A preoccupation with fertility was formalized in a legislative program keyed toward conservative family values among the upper class: female chastity, legitimate marriage, and plentiful children.”¹⁰⁸

Although Tiresias is treated with a respect that seems masculine, he is nonetheless placed in a position that is, in various ways, demonstrated to be less than wholly manly. His association with qualities of abjection both obviously, through emphases on his physical disabilities, and implicitly, through the presence of his daughter and the potential spectre of his past pregnancy, he is shown to sit on a fragile boundary: treated in these scenes as a masculine figure; presented to the onlooker as an uncanny other. And as we shall see, his use of necromancy only serves to further destabilize his masculinity, while increasing the extent to which a Roman audience might read him as a transgressor.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 99-100

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 184

¹⁰⁷ Smith and Lockwood, 2005, p. 663

¹⁰⁸ Hines, 2026, p. 114

3.b. *Necromancy*

In her book-length examination of the symbolic weight of viscera in Roman literature, Hines writes that Seneca (and Lucan) extrapolate on Ovid's alignment of viscera with reproduction and reproductive organs, while also aligning the term with polluted sacrifice.¹⁰⁹ She says that Seneca in particular, "does not merely replicate Ovid's integration of reproductive concerns with violence, but magnifies it, presenting them in overdetermined contexts of domestic strife," and that he links "the ominous reproductive connotations of the Ovidian figure to the word's formerly unmarked affiliation with sacrificial meat."¹¹⁰ Not even a seer like Tiresias is safe: "the word viscera appears thrice in the space of thirty lines," she says, going on to characterize both Tiresias and Manto as being "invested with true religious authority."¹¹¹ Vessey, too, notes that in Statius' iteration of Tiresias, both he and Manto are "more stately creations" than other notable necromancers, due to their "considerable background in literature extending from early Greek epic to Seneca," making Statius, "heir to a respectful portrait of Tiresias from which he could not deviate."¹¹² However respectful that portrait may be—and as discussed previously,¹¹³ it inverts, rather than reiterates, several critical elements of Tiresias' character and practice from their Homeric origins—it still does not ensure their success.

That supposed investment with authority, however, may itself be questionable: as we have seen, magic is often carried out by abject figures; necromancy in particular was, for the Romans, unsettled and unsettling territory. As Ogden notes, "the Romans generally took a dimmer view of the practitioners of necromancy than the Greeks did," adding that accusations of necromancy were not only a slight to be cast against one's enemies, but could amount to actual crimes.¹¹⁴ He goes on to say that, despite the frequent levelling of accusations of necromancy against Roman emperors, they were at pains to outlaw specific types of divination, especially with respect to predictions of death: "Augustus... banned the use of magic and divination to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 121

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 122

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 137

¹¹² Vessey, 1973, p. 251

¹¹³ See pp. 20-3

¹¹⁴ Ogden, 2001, p. 149

predict death. Tiberius... made it a capital offense to consult a prophet about the death of the emperor,” going on to note that Nero expelled at least one soothsayer.¹¹⁵

Beek, citing Ogden and Graf, writes that necromancy in Roman literature is carried out by “uncanny priests, intimidating sorcerers, and, most often, gruesome witches,” in scenes “in which mortals approach the unnerving realm of the dead and risk not being able to return to life. Divination from a parade of unnaturally reanimated dead is more inherently repulsive than the harmless and noninvasive practice of reading bird signs,” concluding that “in literature (especially silver Latin) necromancy is much more strongly associated with evil.”¹¹⁶

Further, the conditions of the divinatory necromancy in which Tiresias engages works in alignment with notable intertexts. In her discussion of Erichtho’s necromantic activities in *Pharsalia*, Hines writes that, “the pervasive association of the word viscera with peculiarly corrupt divination, whether that corruption manifests in the preparation, execution, or outcome of the ritual, seems not to arise within Latin literature until the late Julio-Claudian period,” but it is certainly in full effect in Seneca and Statius’ treatments of the attempt to elicit knowledge from the dead; in that treatment of the necromancy scene in *Pharsalia*, Hines allows that “the inclusion of viscera in scenes of unholy sacrifice... may feel like a foregone conclusion for Roman articulations of religious pollution.”¹¹⁷ Certainly in Statius, the connection between copious, visceral gore and the *nefas* quality of the war that forms the matter of *Thebaid* is clear; we have already noted Hines’ reading of the presence of corrupted viscera in Seneca.

Stratton explores the link between Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection and the Roman literary imagination of witches and magic. Although she is explicitly exploring women’s magic and women doing magic in Roman literature,¹¹⁸ this lens is useful for our purposes as well: as we have discussed, Tiresias is only imperfectly aligned with masculinity, and this position allows us to make use of Stratton’s approach to what she terms the corporal ideology of the Greco-Roman world. “Nobility resided in the body,” she writes, adding that, “concern for ensuring that noble characteristics properly develop also occurs in ancient medical writings and philosophic literature,” before noting that the body for the ancient Greeks and Romans was, “a delicate hydraulic machine, controlled by humors and temperatures,... [requiring] vigilant care to

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 156

¹¹⁶ Beek, 2022, pp. 440-1

¹¹⁷ Hines, 2026, p. 163

¹¹⁸ Stratton, 2014, p. 153

maintain its proper operation and peak performance. This mutability constituted the source of a body's vulnerability."¹¹⁹

As Stratton explores the activities of female witches, notably Lucan's Erichtho and Horace's Canidia, we nonetheless see shades of the perverse necromancy over which Tiresias presides in Seneca and Statius, and intimations of the abject corporality we have discussed. As she notes in her discussion of literary visions of magic that involves corpse desecration, "abjection... signals the transgressive nature of magic rites and the female characters who perform them"; as she expands her focus into animal transformations, she writes that such magic demonstrates, "the ease with which individuals slip from one category to the other," and that these tales, including Circe's transformation of Odysseus' men, "casts the reader face-to-face with the poverty of human pretenses to order and civilization, in other words, with the abject."¹²⁰

Kristeva herself makes the link between abjection and the dead quite clear, as well as pointing to the visceral reaction it arouses in us. She cites early encounters with alimentary disgust as a primary encounter with abjection, recalling for the reader that, "a spasm of... all of the viscera [*viscères*]... seizes the body."¹²¹ Later, she writes that the abject is "what upsets an identity, a system, an order. That which does not respect limits, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguity, the mixed."¹²² Certainly, such terms would seem to describe our subject admirably, to say nothing of the inherently boundary-crossing nature of summoning the dead or carrying out obviously doomed ritual sacrifices. But we must ask, finally: to what end? What are we to make of this figure who is simultaneously abject in his blindness and his proximity to maternity, the spirits of the dead, and a form of dark magic which, as we have seen, is typically carried out by women in literature—yet who is greeted at almost every appearance with reverence?

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 155-6

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 160-1

¹²¹ Kristeva, 1980, p. 10

¹²² Ibid., p. 12

4. Conclusion

In Roman hands, Tiresias has been placed in many of the same roles we recognize from Greek sources: trying to curb the downfall of one or another Theban king; subjected to gendered transformations whose unsettling properties ripple into his future; stricken blind but simultaneously granted second sight. We have explored the ways in which Tiresias' being and activities are positioned as transgressive or even abject: his proximity to pregnancy and childbearing by virtue of Manto's presence; the emphasis on his physical infirmity; his use, in both Seneca and Statius, of a kind of extravagantly disgusting magic to summon the spirits of the dead. Yet these appearances are in texts that, while they may push against a particular ruler or historical moment in Rome, are nonetheless deeply embedded in the *mores* of elite Roman men.

I have used the term "recuperation" previously to describe how Tiresias' transgressive qualities are deployed in these texts, and here we return to it. The term as I use it arises from the work of the Situationists, and specifically Guy Debord—and it seems *à propos* to invoke the concept of "the spectacle," albeit on a smaller scale than the Situationists perhaps intended, to discuss works that, in one way or another, would presumably have been performed. In his discussion of the role of art in Capitalist society, he notes that art can be "purely and simply recuperated by capitalism as a means of conditioning the population," but goes on to add that "the sphere reserved for 'free creative activity' is the only one where there is posed practically, and with all its amplitude, the questions of the deep use of life, of communication....The nonsense and established separation corresponds to the general crisis of traditional arts, a crisis linked to the experience of or the demand for experimenting with other ways of living."¹²³

That Tiresias is a recuperated figure is essentially Giusti's argument, discussed elsewhere. She cites Liveley's Lacanian—or perhaps more properly Irigarayan—argument that Tiresias is basically a man talking about women's experiences¹²⁴ in the interests of drawing a parallel between Tiresias as *vates* and Ovid as poet, building her argument on Tiresias' appearance as "the first non-divine *vates* of the *Metamorphoses*" as reason to "interpret this character as a double for the poet."¹²⁵ This is scarcely an inappropriate conclusion to reach: as Sperduti notes, it was only around the Augustan period that it became common to use *vates* for both poets and

¹²³ Debord, 1960, np.

¹²⁴ Giusti, 2018, p. 13

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 19

seers¹²⁶—but after that point, it certainly became much more common. Indeed, by suggesting that the Tiresias episode was edited after Ovid’s exile, we are offered a figure recuperated both in the Situationist sense and in the sense of rehabilitated to meet the standards of Augustan morality.¹²⁷

Giusti’s reading of Tiresias as Ovid inserting himself into the poem is not, indeed, limited to this appearance of Tiresias in epic Latin literature: Lovatt makes a similar argument in her exploration of madness in *Thebaid*. She notes that, “prophecy and poetry are inextricably entangled in the Roman concept of the *vates*,” adding that Statius frequently characterizes himself and other poets as *vates* in *Silvae*, while pointing out that Tiresias is positioned as mad in *Thebaid*, specifically in the description of his prophecy of the death of Menoeceus in book X of *Thebaid*.¹²⁸ Although I have not meaningfully discussed that section of *Thebaid* here, foregoing Tiresias’ briefer appearance there to focus on the longer episode in book IV, Lovatt’s argument is germane to my reading of Tiresias’ abject positioning in Seneca and Statius.

Indeed, Liveley’s reading of Tiresias’ judgement in *Metamorphoses* also lends support to the Kristevan-abject view I present here: she allows that, “The most obvious reason for Tiresias’s partiality in his arbitration for the gods is his status as a ‘*man-made-woman*,’ a figure who is, despite his physical transformation of sex, first and foremost a man,” but goes on to note that, “the easy transformation of Tiresias from man to woman (and back to man again) destabilizes notions of fixed gender identity.”¹²⁹ Ultimately, she concludes that, “For Ovid, it seems that the markers of sex and gender are not fixed and immutable, but may be appropriated by either of ‘neighbouring’ sexes”—“Masculine and feminine, male and female, are shown to be open positions that either sex may occupy, rather than mutually exclusive poles.”¹³⁰

Tiresias as a character, then, is deployed by Roman writers in a recuperated position, urging piety towards the gods and one’s ancestors. This is understandable, especially in light of the illegality of his actions, in the case of necromancy, and his unusual parental status in a time when additional legal scrutiny was placed on intimate relationships. He is tasked with enforcing the status quo by means of his prophecy, and indeed, offers a surface-level reinforcement of the

¹²⁶ Sperduti, 1950, pp. 218-9

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 18

¹²⁸ Lovatt, 2001, pp. 115-7

¹²⁹ Liveley, 2003, p. 157

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 161

status quo both in his judgement in the matter of Jupiter and Juno's quarrel and in his return to manhood in the version of the origin of his knowledge of love "from both sides" that we see in Ovid.

But as we have seen, in Roman hands, although his words often reinforce conventional *mores*, his behavior and his being do not. Whether by maintaining that blindness is preferable to whatever the ill-fated Pentheus has planned, as Ovid has him do; by jumping straight past the sure knowledge espoused by the character in Sophocles' hands to the hideous sacrifice we see in Seneca; or by having his daughter assist him in reaching necromantic transport as we see in book IV of *Thebaid*, the fact remains: Tiresias does not behave like a normal man. His blindness, physical infirmity, embrace of magical practices more often attributed to women in Roman literature, and the presence of his daughter, who assists him in various ways with all of these attributes and activities, position him as other than the norm.

I have argued in the past that these experiences with different types of transgression, of subversion, enable the character to speak with unique experience: "Tiresias has, after all, broken a lot of rules, and is in a position to know which rules bend, which rules break, and which will break you in return."¹³¹ We see this quality—speaking from experience about how far to push a given socially-constructed boundary—in the Roman imaginings of Tiresias I have examined here, but the seer's position is unclear. Is he the respected seer conjured by Odysseus or an abject hag, dragged along by the daughter he shouldn't have been able to have?

The three appearances of Tiresias that I have focused on here—in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* book III, in Seneca's *Oedipus*, and in Statius' *Thebaid* book IV—are disparate but, as we have seen, linked to one another both directly through chains of reference to one another, and indirectly via shared reference to Greek antecedents. And even if some of the messages Tiresias is tasked with delivering are conventional, reinforcing "normal" *mores*, his mode of delivery is anything but. Whether we see him casting off his Homeric attributes, approaching his gendered experiences with unusual equanimity, or refusing to offer comfort to a king not yet aware of the extent of his own transgressions, Tiresias cuts a transgressive figure in the works under consideration here. But Tiresias does not merely transgress, dancing from one side of respectability and abjection, blindness and second sight, masculinity and femininity to the

¹³¹ Boyles, 2020, np.

other—rather, these disparate qualities are synthesized in his singular figure. The “cross-contamination” of tragic and epic genres that Parkes identified¹³² runs through Tiresias, who embodies a variety of cross-contaminations of his own. In nascent form in Ovid and coming to full flower in Seneca and Statius, we see a figure who both contains and overflows with the contradictions of imperial Rome: subject to morality laws but ruled by emperors to whom all manner of iniquities were attributed, Tiresias is positioned to show a way forward, or a way out—but not even the great seer can offer a vision of a future untroubled by imperial contradictions.

¹³² Parkes, 2021, p. 108

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