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## Bloody Spectacle or Religious Commentary?: Divination by Entrails in Seneca's *Oedipus*

Written by  
Scott Magelssen

"If Seneca's plays survived the sack of Rome, the burning of libraries, the leaky roofs of monasteries, the appetites of beetle larvae and the slow erosions of rot and mildew, they have not had a conspicuously easier time among modern critics, who dismiss them both for too closely resembling Greek models and for too freely departing from them."

Dana Gioia

Introduction, *Seneca: The Tragedies in Two Volumes*<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that two separate discursive fields which place Senecan tragedy within a continuum of dramatic history have been articulated in the late twentieth century. One locates the work of Seneca in the evolution of drama as a degeneration from that of the ancient Greeks, and the other into the category of works that "influenced" the writing of Elizabethan tragedies, especially those of Shakespeare. A number of scholars intersect over the same textual territory: namely, the divination scene in Act II of Seneca's *Oedipus*. Each offers a careful and rigorous interpretation of the text, within a framework of either "kernel of potential" or "retrograde evolution," in order to legitimize their position. The scene in question depicts Tiresias, the blind prophet, and his daughter, Manto, sacrificing a bull and heifer for Oedipus and his court. In an effort to divine the identity of the former king's murderer, the characters proceed to examine the entrails of the beasts, which they find to be in putrid and oozing disarray. Those scholars who critique Seneca for appropriating Sophocles' poetic and well-structured tragedy and offering a transliteration of a lower order use as evidence the bloody spectacle and bombastic language (at the same time condemning Roman tragedy for resorting to obscene methods to entertain their audiences). In contrast, the scholars who laud Seneca are quick to point out that such instances as this particular scene and the conjuring of the ghost of Laius, the murdered

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<sup>1</sup> *Seneca: The Tragedies in Two Volumes*, ed. David R. Slavitt, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1995).

king and Oedipus' father, in a later scene, are direct ancestors to some of the richest moments from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. I propose in this essay, however, that in order to better understand the divination scene, it must be separated from the confines of such sentimental categorizing of both Sophocles' and Shakespeare's work, and realigned within the context of Roman religion and the language of intelligibility in Seneca's time. By so doing, I would like to suggest that Tiresias and Manto are neither mere vehicles for horror and spectacle, nor proto-Elizabethan figures. Rather, these characters voice a specific enunciation of that which was possible to think in first century Rome, specifically concerning the constant struggle to maintain order in the cosmos. Essential to recognize is that the divination scene may only be perceived as Seneca's fascination with the macabre if the text is analyzed within a template of twentieth-century sensibilities. Once realigned within a first-century discourse, the so-called macabre elements emerge not as ends, but as a network of signs intended to transfer specific ideas about the relationship between nature, the heavens, and the order of kings and queens. These ideas will be the focus of my essay.

In order to offer a different interpretation of Seneca's divination scene, it is necessary to briefly examine the discursive landscape of Seneca studies emergent in the twentieth century. Perhaps T.S. Eliot's description of Seneca as an "existentialist extraordinaire" in 1927<sup>2</sup> may act as a signpost which marks a threshold in the last century's trajectories of Seneca studies, which shifted his work into a compelling object of inquiry by charging it with relevant historicity. The following decades saw *Oedipus* and Seneca's other tragedies imbued with new systems of meaning which allowed them to function as a chapter in a linear development of western culture and dramatic literature. Clarence Mendell, in *Our Seneca*, argues that without the Roman poet, the Shakespeare phenomenon may never have occurred. He credits E.K. Chambers with referring to Senecan tragedy as Shakespearean drama in "swaddling clothes." Though the Elizabethans had no access to the far superior Greek models, writes Mendell, Sophocles' tragedy would not have been as accessible to Shakespeare and his contemporaries as the work of Seneca:

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<sup>2</sup> See T.S. Eliot, "Introduction," *Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies Translated into English*, ed. Thomas Newton (Constable, 1927).

The vitality of Greek tragedy was not lost even in the process of evaporation which was necessary to preserve it for two thousand years. Sophocles, presented directly to sixteenth century England, would have in all probability been passed by. But the evaporated product was acceptable and Seneca by means of his own mediocrity, which was understandably human, gave to the predecessors of Shakespeare as much as they could absorb of a far greater drama than either he or they could comprehend.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar manner, Moses Hadas evokes *in vitro* images to style Seneca as an influence on Shakespeare: "derogatory criticism of Seneca is posited on the assumption that Seneca is a corrupted Greek; it is fairer to look upon him as an embryonic Elizabethan."<sup>4</sup> In both Mendell and Hadas, the attribution of Shakespeare's success to the rediscovery of Seneca is tempered with a regard for Seneca's tragedies as mediocre in comparison to the Greeks. In this kind of comparative analysis, it is often posited that Seneca used Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* as a model. Mendell writes, for example, "Seneca had before him the Oedipus of Sophocles when he wrote his play of the same name."<sup>5</sup> By maintaining this assertion, Seneca interpretation opens itself to a synoptic textual analysis, comparing the Greek and Roman tragedies, and subsequent conclusions measure the poetic and dramatic virtues of the former as touchstones by which to measure the latter. These arguments have become somewhat institutionalized. Witness a passage in an undergraduate theatre history textbook: "unlike the Greek dramatists, [Seneca] emphasizes violent spectacle. Scenes which the Greeks would have banished from the stage—stabblings, murders, suicides—were often the climactic on-stage moments in Seneca's works."<sup>6</sup> David Slavitt, while not a proponent of this view, puts words to what he perceives as an anti-Seneca bias:

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<sup>3</sup> Clarence Mendell, *Our Seneca* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941) 200. See also J.W. Cunliffe, *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1893).

<sup>4</sup> Moses Hadas, *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958) 5. See also Lorraine Helms, "The High Roman Fashion: Sacrifice, Suicide and the Shakespearean Stage," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 107.3 (May, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Mendell 4.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb, *Living Theatre: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) 68.

"We can all agree, perhaps too easily, that bombast is bad. Sanity and proportion are better than madness and exorbitance, and therefore Seneca, being bombastic, exorbitant, and extravagant, if not actually crazy, may be dismissed [...]. The plays are shapeless displays of rhetoric and horror."<sup>7</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that the archive of classical works is fragmentary, and there is no certainty that the Sophocles *Oedipus* was the only model for Seneca. Sophocles may have written several versions of the Oedipus myth, but only one is extant. Furthermore, the Oedipus myth was popular enough to yield many dramatic narrativizations by Roman poets, including a closet drama by Julius Caesar.<sup>8</sup> Trapped in a limbo of categorizations between the genres of Golden Age Greek tragedy and Shakespearean Drama, then, Seneca has often been denied contextualization within specific Roman society and religion. An understanding Seneca's *Oedipus* and its divination scene would benefit from a reexamination in light of religious discourses in first century Rome.

A summary of the scene itself is in order at this point: at the opening of the second act, Creon has returned from the oracle at Delphi with news that the pestilence, drought, and ill omens in Thebes are the result of the presence of Laius' killer. Until that individual is named and banished from Thebes, there will be no end to the suffering of its citizens. Immediately, Tiresias and Manto enter to offer their services, and Oedipus calls upon the blind prophet to augur the identity of the villain. Tiresias apologizes for his blindness and slowness of speech, and introduces Manto, who will help in the ritual.<sup>9</sup> The prophet calls for a snow-white bull and a "heifer not yet broken to the yoke" to be brought to the altar. He calls for Manto to invoke the gods by the burning of oriental incense. After noting the peculiar fire and smoke from the burning incense (signs pointing to the anger of the gods) Tiresias calls for the animals to be

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<sup>7</sup> David R. Slavitt, preface, *Seneca: The Tragedies in two volumes*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1995). ix. See also Anna Lydia Motto, and John R. Clark, "Grotesquerie Ancient and Modern: Seneca and Ted Hughes," *Classical and Modern Literature* 5.1 (Fall 1984).

<sup>8</sup> F.B. Watling, Introduction, *Four Tragedies and Octavia* (London: Penguin, 1966) 19.

<sup>9</sup> In the Greek myth, Tiresias' lack of sight is punishment for viewing Athena while she bathed, but as a dramatic function, Tiresias' blindness allows for Manto to describe in great detail the sacrifice not only for the prophet, but for the spectators. Many scholars maintain that Senecan tragedy was never staged for an audience, due to difficulty of staging scenes such as this one, and the danger of voicing certain political views therein (Watling 17). If the plays were meant for reading or for recital at smaller gatherings, Manto's detailed descriptions aid in visualizing the ritual.

brought to the altar for slaughter, asking Manto for a description of the ritual at every step—the touch of the hands of the priests on the animals' bodies, the reaction to the salted meal sprinkled on their necks, which direction they face, how they stagger when struck with the sacrificial blows, *et cetera*. The remainder of the scene is an account of the slaughter and the state of the victims' organs and viscera.

Tiresias asks how the blood flows from the wounds. Manto responds by describing the flow of blood not only from where the blades struck, but from the eyes and mouth as well; evil portents according to Tiresias. As the entrails are removed for examination, Manto offers running commentary. The bulls' entrails do not mildly quiver, but make Manto's hands violently shake. The heart is withered, and part of the lungs is missing. The liver is monstrous: it oozes with black gall, and masses of flesh covered with membrane rise up out of it, "as if refusing to reveal its secret."<sup>10</sup> This side of the liver with the projections is marked with seven veins, the "backward course" of which is obstructed.

The results of the examination of the heifer are even more ominous. The organs are completely out of place: on the right side, a lung is missing; on the left, a heart. The womb and genitals are deformed, and most "monstrous," a living fetus with blackened flesh is found in the virgin womb, twitching in the gore. As this is observed, the bodies of the dead animals begin to rise up. With awful bellows, the gutted carcasses try to attack the priests with their horns.

When asked by Oedipus to interpret these signs, and to name the identity of the villain, Tiresias is unable to give an answer other than that the ominous results of the ritual indicate ill fate and disastrous consequences for prior actions. The prophet is forced to resort to another method of augury: that of evoking the Ghost of the former king himself. With this admission, the chorus enters and sings its ode, and the act ends.

Most obvious to those familiar with both Senecan and Sophoclean versions of *Oedipus* is the fact that Sophocles' tragedy lacks a divination scene.<sup>11</sup> The Senecan version, then, adds completely new material, *versus* the mere adaptation and transliteration of the Greek original,

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<sup>10</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Oedipus*, trans. E.F. Watling, *Seneca: Four Tragedies and Seneca* (London: Penguin, 1966) 223.

<sup>11</sup> See Sophocles, "Oedipus the King," *Sophocles I*, trans. David Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1991.

which allows an analysis of Seneca's scene on its own terms. Because of the absence of a corresponding scene in Sophocles' text, a mode of inquiry is relieved from the onus of a comparative analysis that similar Senecan scenes (such as Hippolytus' death the end of *Phaedra* [cf Euripides' *Hippolytus*], and descriptions in *Oedipus* like the king's blinding and Jocasta's suicide). Because a description of animal sacrifice and dissection is a site of emergence, it would suggest that Seneca had other motives than simply rewording Greek models in a bloodier manner.

The reasons for its inclusion are indeed difficult to ascertain at first. Since the ritual does not offer a satisfactory result (the identity of Laius' killer is not determined), it would appear the scene is merely included for the sake of spectacle. Horace argues in his *Ars Poetica* that such an inclusion of a scene with no real purpose indicates sloppiness, as it was not conducive to a well structured tragedy.<sup>12</sup> All parts of a tragedy, in Horace's view, should work toward one unified end. A more generous interpretation is that, as an "oracle," the divination scene functions not to develop the plot, but to redefine the tragic hero. Rebecca Bushnell cites Walter Benjamin's argument that "[t]he oracle in tragedy..[entails] neither a causal nor a magical necessity." Instead, according to Benjamin, it "evokes the unarticulated necessity of defiance, in which the self brings forth its utterances"<sup>13</sup>:

...the hero's voice, the expression of his self, eclipses the oracle, even as the oracle predicts and precipitates his disaster. The supernatural voice does not compel the hero; rather it tempts, and it frustrates him, for when the important questions are asked, the supernatural voice is always silent. It is as much what the voice does not say, as what it says, that defines the hero's career; the hero is forced to find his own voice to express his identity and destiny.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the relative silence on Laius' killer, however, (and the question of its impact on the construction of Oedipus as tragic hero aside), the divination does point to a disordered cosmos which suggests that a more vile event than the mere killing of a king has occurred, and that

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<sup>12</sup> See Horace, *Ars Poetica* in *Roman Drama*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Dell, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Weld Bushnell (quoting Walter Benjamin), "Oracular Silence in *Oedipus the King* and *Macbeth*," *Classical and Modern Literature* 2.4 (Summer, 1982) 195.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* 195.

Seneca saw the cultic practices of Tiresias as a template for measuring cosmic order and a legitimate means of knowledge production.

If *Oedipus'* poet is the same Seneca we know from philosophical treatises and letters, his positions on religion and particular divination practices, as well as his opinions on spectacle, may be gleaned from his other writings. Seneca was a Stoic philosopher, and thus advocated a "middle ground" position in matters of consumption and lifestyle. According to E.F. Watling, Seneca opposed the bloody spectacle in the amphitheatres.<sup>15</sup> He also wrote as a critic and commentator on moral issues, attacking religious views he did not agree with, such as the deification of emperors he ridicules in *The Pumpkinification of Claudius*. A perception of the divination scene as gruesome spectacle for its own sake, then, is difficult to reconcile with Seneca's writings on moderation and religious conscientiousness. Given Seneca's statements in other writings within the discursive field of Stoicism and Roman religion, however, the scene becomes an important articulation of religious practice within a limited archive. In the remainder of my essay, I attempt to realign an understanding of the scene within this discursive field.

While there are no extant eyewitness accounts of either Greek or Roman divination practices, there are commentaries or statements available from the period which indicate the extent of their circulation within respective cultures. Legal practitioners of the art of divination were the *haruspices*, mostly experts from Etruria. But there were illegitimate practices of divination as well. Robin Lane Fox describes accounts of rogue diviners and augurs swindling gullible believers in the first and second centuries. The prefect of Egypt, for example, issued an edict banning oracles and divination in 198/9,<sup>16</sup> and R.M. Ogilvie points to the authorities' need to maintain and police the practice in the face of its growing popularity:

People continued to consult the *haruspices* so widely that the Emperor Tiberius was forced to regulate the profession and insist that all consultations should be held in public before witnesses in order to minimise the possibility of fraud.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Watling 17.

<sup>16</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986) 213.

<sup>17</sup> R.M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus* (New York: Norton, 1969) 67.



According to Arthur Stanley Pease, current knowledge of divination ritual in the Roman Republic and Empire comes from "(1) literary sources; (2) comparison with similar customs among other peoples, especially the Babylonians; and (3) from inferences from certain models of livers."<sup>18</sup> These rituals, apparently, were appealing for their efficiency. The practice of divination by examination of entrails, especially of the liver, writes Ogilvie, was more expedient than the "hit and miss" method of prayer in determining whether sacrifices and entreaties were acceptable to the gods.<sup>19</sup>

In Stoic philosophy at the time of Augustus, the meanings of human events were believed to be discernible through knowledge of the rules that governed nature and the cosmos. "Because [the rational spirit] was present in all creatures," Ogilvie writes "there was a common understanding between the different parts of the universe which caused one event to be reflected in another. Hence there was nothing implausible about supposing 'that the divine providence could be reproduced in a sheep's liver or the flight of birds.'"<sup>20</sup> Entrails, in particular, were an important resource to *haruspices* who sought to divine the state of the cosmos.

"The liver was such a vital organ and was, in stoic theory, a microcosm of the working of the universe, it was believed that detailed examination could see in it a more intricate pattern of what the gods intended [...]. The practice of divination from the liver was patently defended by the philosopher Epictetus. It remained one of the principal forms of augury."<sup>21</sup>

Divisions of the liver corresponded to divisions of the heavens, and all related to cosmic and terrestrial order.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur Stanley Pease, "M. Tulli Ciceronis de Divinatione," *Illinois Studies in Language and Literature* 6.2 (May 1920) and 8.2 (May 1923) 95. The "models of livers" refer to various Etruscan bronzes with arranged inscriptions running over them.

<sup>19</sup> Ogilvie 54. See also Polymnia Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus," *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid* 54.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* 65-66, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Pease notes that the examination of entrails originally determined the fitness of the animal for ritual sacrifice, and developed into a form of divination thereafter. Pease offers four possible beliefs as reasons for the shift: "(1) That the animal sacrificed was itself regarded as a deity, and therefore, in its seat of

A navigation through philosophical accounts of other writers at the time of Seneca also yields a network of statements that indicate the presence and legitimacy of divination practices in the Roman Republic and Empire. Marcus Tullius Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods* (which predates Seneca's work by a half-century) contains a dialogue between Cotta, Velleius, Lucilius, and Balbus on matters concerning religion and the deities.<sup>23</sup> While it should not be treated as an unproblematic window into Seneca's thought, Cicero's text does include Stoic discourse in the voice of Balbus. This is particularly the case in the four characters' discussion of divination, which Cotta designates as one of the two categories of religion.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Velleius maintains that Epicurus has rid Romans of such superstition,<sup>25</sup> Balbus, argues that the gods created and gave birds and other animals to humans for the purpose of omens and signs of things to come. They are meant for man and only man can unlock the significance of the signs. The gift of prophecy is the best example of "proof that divine providence concerns itself with the welfare of man."<sup>26</sup> Cotta, held to be the closest in sentiment to Cicero himself, answers Balbus directly:

And what was the origin of your art of divination? Who discovered the significance of a cleft in an animal's liver or interpreted the raven's cry? Or the way the lots fall? Not that I do not believe in these things [...]. But how omens came to be understood is something I must learn from the philosophers [...]. But, you argue, doctors too are often wrong. There is however to my mind no

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intelligence, possessed of a knowledge of the future [...]. (2) that the god entered into the perfect sacrificial *exta* where, since he was voiceless, his will and foreknowledge had to be sought by extispicine [...]. (3) that the god in accepting the sacrifice assimilates the victim into his own being, as one assimilates food in eating it, so that the victim's liver is brought into accord with the liver (and hence with the foreknowledge) of the god himself [...]. (4) that just before the moment of death the animal, like a human being becomes most prophetic in power, so that changes take place at the moment immediately before death" (Pease 97).

<sup>23</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. Horace C.P. McGregor (London: Penguin, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> The other category is worship (Cicero 194).

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* 92.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* 188. Lucilius likewise argues that divination is proof of divine power in the universe. Even if the stories told by the diviners are fictions, he maintains, there is enough evidence to show that the leaders of the people have benefited from their advice on important decisions. "The state," he says, "prosper only under the guidance of men of religious faith" (128). Lucilius mourns the lost art of augury in the present, and pines for the faith of their ancestors.

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comparison between medicine, which applies reasoning which I can understand and the power of divination, the origin of which is a mystery to me.<sup>27</sup>

Though Cotta will not directly reject divination as a sign of the existence of the gods, he will not subscribe to it until he determines its origins.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Cicero argues that human error will always remain a factor in divination, so the practice may only be as reliable as medical diagnoses, or (elsewhere) nautical predictions.

The stoic position as put forth by Balbus in Cicero's dialogue, then, is that divination is the means by which humans may interpret the signs given to them by the gods. This is then undercut by Cotta's emphasis on human error and ultimate unreliability of the interpretation of signs from the gods. Cicero cites a somewhat different Stoic viewpoint on divination by entrails, however, in book I, chapter *lii*, of his *de divinatione*: "The Stoics will not allow that the Deity can be interested in each cleft in entrails, or in the chirping of birds. They affirm that such interference is altogether indecorous, unworthy of the majesty of the gods and an incredible impossibility."<sup>29</sup> Here Cicero's text conflicts with both Balbus' words, and Ogilvie's assertion that Stoics held divination of entrails in high regard. Whereas Ogilvie states that the Stoics believed the liver could be examined as a microcosm of the universe, the statement in Cicero denies that entrails merit the notice of the gods.

Despite disparate accounts on the Stoic's regard for animal entrails and their relative adequacy as receptacles for divine messages, the presence of statements on this facet of divination in the writings of Cicero and others indicates that the practice was a prominent part of Roman religion. Furthermore, there is a suggestion in the opening of Cicero's *de divinatione* that the author holds Roman divination practices to be more rational and advanced than that of

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid* 198.

<sup>28</sup> This view is echoed in Cicero's *de divinatione*, as Cicero tackles the question of divination, this time mediated by himself and his brother, Quintus, as the interlocutory characters. In a discussion of the practice of divination by entrails, Cicero asks, "... I know what is indicated by a fissure in the entrails of a victim, or by the appearance of the fibers; but what the cause is that these appearances have meaning I know not" (Cicero, "On Divination," *On the Nature of the Gods*, trans. C.D. Yonge [London: Bell and Sons, 1902] 148-9) Pease interprets the original Latin *fissum in extis, quid fibra valeat* as pertaining to certain vital organs (spleen, stomach, reins, heart lungs, liver). *Fissa* are stripes on the surface of the liver, a site of "mantic" power, which in the case of sheep's livers were considered very significant (Pease 95,96). Cf. the seven "veins" as described by Manto on the liver of the bull.

<sup>29</sup> Cicero, "On Divination," *On the Nature of the Gods*, trans. C.D. Yonge [London: Bell and Sons, 1902] 193.

the Greeks. Cicero contrasts the etymology of the Roman word for the practice, stemming from *Divis*, having to do with gods, while the Greek word comes from the word for madness. He separates divination as ritualistic art and divination by mere observation of nature or visions. The former, he writes, is more reliable, as it is based on observation and reason. The latter is more concerned with frenzy and dreams. Perceived in this light, it is possible to suggest that Seneca's selection of divination practices for dramatic treatment in *Oedipus* exemplified the Roman improvement of Greek practices. In other words, Seneca was one-upping the Greeks by making Tiresias a rational, observant augur, rather than a frenzied prophet who gets his answers from birds.

However, as far as Seneca's own views on the matter of divination by entrails, the author is reticent in all writings but his tragedies. As a Stoic philosopher, Seneca may have located the order of animals' livers and entrails within the correspondent levels of the cosmos as outlined in a general Stoic cosmology. Such a general cosmology, though, cannot be taken for granted, given the range of interpretations of the Stoic position, even within the writings of a single author like Cicero.

While Seneca's views on divination specifically by the examination of animal entrails are not to be found, the author does consider divination by natural phenomenon in his *Naturales quaestiones*:

We differ from the Etruscans [...] in that we believe that only certain things that happen regularly, *ratione*, allow us to make the predictions of the future that come under the head of divination [...]. [However] we just do not know enough about the incidence of lightning and about birds' calls to make truly verifiable inferences from them. With greater knowledge, more links in the chain can be discoverable.<sup>30</sup>

According to Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, Stoics in first century Rome believed errors in divination were due to the misinterpretation of signs, rather than their unreliability. Seneca's reluctance to place total trust in divination suggests a suspicion of humanity's ability to read the future by

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<sup>30</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Naturales quaestiones* (3.32 ff), quoted in Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1989) 79.

examination of natural phenomena.<sup>31</sup> If the account of the divination ritual in *Oedipus* was informed by the notion of human fallibility, perhaps Seneca was foregrounding error or unreliability in the scene. Tiresias' blindness and necessary intervention by Manto add further degrees of separation from a divine message in its unmediated form. Thus, Tiresias is denied access to the identity of Laius' killer not because the signs are inadequate, but because the prophet lacks the necessary facilities to interpret them. Therefore, the scene functions structurally within a narrative of the unraveling of a mystery—giving clues, but not revealing the solution. As philosophical or religious commentary, Seneca may have been registering his own sentiments concerning divination by entrails, possibly *vis-à-vis* those of Cicero. The practice is legitimate in discerning information or the will of the gods, but may only be trusted as far as human ability.

One may argue that the description of the disordered entrails of the bull and heifer in Act II is only one of many gruesome scenes in *Oedipus*, which similarly seem at first glance to exist solely for shock value. For example, there is Creon's account of the oracle in the grove scene in which a ghastly Laius, still bleeding from his wounds rises to condemn his son. Jocasta commits suicide on stage by stabbing herself in the womb in revulsion for giving birth to her own "grandchildren." Oedipus, after blinding himself, continues to claw at the empty sockets, tearing away "the last remaining shreds/Left of the raggedly uprooted eyes."<sup>32</sup> Why, then, does the divination scene merit separate analysis from the other the bloody sequences? My argument does not concern whether Seneca had a "fascination" with the macabre or the grotesque. What I hope to have shown is that dismissal of such scenes as mere horror, or naïve treatment of what was later to receive fullest enunciation in Shakespeare, is not a responsible scholarly act. Neither the trajectory of evolution toward Shakespeare nor degeneration of the Greeks do Seneca's work justice. Each makes the Roman text speak with a twentieth century sensitivity and nostalgia—either for the more perfect Greek model, or for the catalyst that prompted Shakespeare's emergence after a dry spell in the history of dramatic literature. By relegating *Oedipus* and the other Senecan tragedies to these categories, they are left to function only as a link in a chain of degeneration or primitive origin. I propose, instead, a reexamination of these

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1989) 79. Here, Seneca's ambivalence echoes Cicero's statement the *de divinatione* that, in the end, faulty human intervention will always guarantee the true and complete messages of the gods will be deferred.

scenes, through continual resituation within the context of Seneca's world and society, which was inseparably wrapped up in the religion of the time.

The divination scene in Act II of *Oedipus* is a moment that voices the language of intelligibility of first-century Rome. By appropriating the Greek myth and inserting a scene concerning Roman divination practices, Seneca engaged in a strategy to stabilize a belief system. The scene indicates to what extent divination was a very real way to show that the order in the cosmos was in flux and could be measured by practitioners like Tiresias and Manto in order to maintain stability. Furthermore, as philosopher, Seneca turns a critical eye upon the particular divination practices in circulation at the time of his dramatic activity. In *Oedipus*, he examines the role of Tiresias as *haruspex*, and tempers the position that divination was a legitimate means for understanding the cosmos with a cautionary element of human fallibility and weakness. The inability of Tiresias and Manto to discern the identity of Laius' killer is not evidence for the scene's lack of contribution to the development of the plot. Rather, the scene's inclusion posits that the disorder of nature was directly proportionate to the disorder in the moral laws and stability of the people, especially kings. In the face of such profound disarray, the characters determine that the cosmic order had been upset by something far worse than the killing of the king. It would appear, then, that the divination scene is about more than mere spectacle. It therefore merits more historiographically responsible treatment than relegation to comparative analysis with Greek or Elizabethan tragedy. *Oedipus* and Seneca, both, deserve another look.

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<sup>32</sup> Seneca, *Oedipus*, 248.