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Genitor, Quid hoc est? Interpreting the extispicium in Seneca's Oedipus

Scholarly discussion of the *extispicium* in Seneca's *Oedipus* (lines 299-400) has generally been limited to debate concerning the episode's performability. But this debate has largely ignored the content of the scene. This paper seeks to address this deficiency and to answer the question which Manto poses to her father (*Genitor, quid hoc est?*) at *Oedipus* 353, and which Tiresias leaves unanswered. In the process, it becomes clear that in the *extispicium* episode, Seneca took advantage of a knowledge of ritual sacrifice and examination of entrails to reveal Oedipus' guilt and to foreshadow upcoming mythological events.

Seneca includes two details not normal to extispicia: the sacrifice of a bull instead of a sheep, and the lack of a specific "yes or no" question to be answered. On the other hand, he accurately describes the physiology of the liver and intestines, and uses appropriate terminology. A Roman audience watching the play would have been familiar with this sort of religious rite and appreciative of Seneca's accuracy. For the characters on stage, the signs, while clearly unfavorable, are too unusual to understand.

The signs Manto describes (e.g., a thin membrane surrounding the liver), however, are not merely unfavorable, but rife with symbolism for one willing to look at them properly. At the beginning, smoke from the sacrificial fire divides itself into two parts, reflecting Oedipus' dual nature. One part of the smoke covers the king's head, indicating that he is guilty of Laius' death and that he will soon be deprived of sight. Both a cow and a bull are sacrificed; the death of each is described in some detail, and reflect the ultimate fate of Jocasta and Oedipus respectively. The cow dies easily, predicting Jocasta's suicide, while the bull needs two blows (again reflecting Oedipus' dual nature, among other things) and even tries to escape before finally perishing, indicating the king's previous attempts to flee from his fate. Once dead, the entrails of the bull continue to move, making it difficult for Manto to read them, thus reflecting the gods' reluctance to reveal their secrets. The heart is diseased, just as the royal family (i.e., the "heart" of the kingdom) is corrupt. The presence of two *capita* in the liver could indicate a number of things, including the dispute between Oedipus and Creon, the troubles between Oedipus and Laius, or even the upcoming feud between Eteocles and Polynices. The *hostile latus* of the liver has seven veins running through it, clearly representing the seven armies Polynices will lead against Thebes; the veins are prevented from turning back by a fissure, representing the walls of Thebes, which will stop the invasion the return of the *Septem Contra Thebes*. Finally, Manto discovers an unborn fetus in the cow, not in its womb, but filling up another place. Nature has been overturned and horrifying offspring have been produced. And thus the cow mirrors the reality of the children of Oedipus and Jocasta. Once more, the sacrificial animals attempt to get up and escape, reflecting that Oedipus continues to try to escape the truth.

The *extispicium* episode in Seneca's *Oedipus* contains details and terminology accurate to Roman sacrifice. It also includes details that clearly reveal what is happening and what will happen. None of the characters on stage appreciate the significance, any more than previous scholars have. Both groups have focused their attention on the unusual nature of

the signs, without being able to determine what they stand for, with the result that Manto's query of *Genitor, quid hoc est?* has remained unanswered until now.