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DIDASKALIA
Volume 8 (2011)

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Performing the "Unperformable" Extispicy Scene in Seneca's *Oedipus Rex*

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Several challenges would hinder any performance true to the text of the spectacular sacrifice and extispicy scene of Lucius Annaeus Seneca's *Oedipus*: bovine acrobatics, prodigious gore, the aesthetic and physical dangers of bringing livestock to the tragic stage. Consider the following excerpt (334-44):

Tiresias:
> . . . Huc propere admove
> et sparge salsa colla taurorum mola.
> placidone vultu sacra et admotas manus
> patiuntur?

Manto:
> Altum taurus attollens caput
> primos ad ortus positus expavit diem
> trepidusque vultum obliquat et radios fugit.

Tiresias:
> Unone terram vulnere afflicti petunt?

Manto:
> Iuvenca ferro semet opposito induit
> et vulnere uno cecidit; at taurus duos
> perpessus ictus huc et huc dubius ruit
> animamque fessus vix reluctantem exprimit.

Tiresias:
> Bring the cattle and strew their necks with salted grain.
> Are their faces calm? Do they bear
> The rites and the touch of your hands?

Manto:
> The bull reared his head high,
> Facing East, and cringed from the first rays of dawn.
> He turned his face, frightened, and shunned the light.

Tiresias:
> Did one wound suffice to fell each to earth?

Manto:
> The heifer broached herself on the exposed blade
> And dropped. But the bull suffered two blows—
> He rushes erratically here and there,
> Staggering, and struggles to force out his heavy breath.[1]

Although it is easy to argue against any staging of this scene in antiquity that would have called for virtuosic performance by live cattle, there are less literal possibilities for presenting the episode that would not have required animal actors. The question remains, then, of how the scene might have been performed in the first century C.E. In the following brief essay, I first discuss the controversy surrounding the performance of Senecan drama in general, with particular attention to what other scholars have said about the sacrifice scene in the *Oedipus*. I then highlight some of the challenges involved in the scene's

performance, and finally, I propose a solution: taking a cue from recent work that argues compellingly for a relation between the forms of Senecan tragedy and those of the pantomime, or *fabula saltata*,[2] I propose a stunning enactment of the extispicy scene that involves dance. My proposal is compatible both with the text of the *Oedipus* and with our current knowledge of ancient drama. My proposal calls for three speaking actors (Oedipus, Manto, and Tiresias), two non-speaking priests, and one dancer. The dancer first plays the role of the sacrificial heifer, and then of the sacrificial bull. I base my hypothetical staging on a close reading of the text of the tragedy and on recent scholarship pertaining to the pantomime. My proposal facilitates a staging of the scene that is more dynamic than previous suggestions, yet avoids the pitfalls of bringing cattle to the stage.

The plays attributed to Seneca, including the *Oedipus*, were the model for Renaissance tragedy, and Senecan drama has of course been performed many times, both in Latin and in vernacular translations, since the beginning of the early modern period.[3] More recent performances of Seneca's *Oedipus* in translation include those of Peter Brook in 1968 and the Theater by the Blind production in New York in 2005. German philologists of the Romantic Era, however, citing the rhetorical and episodic nature of the plays, concluded that Senecan tragedies were originally *Rezitationsdramen* intended exclusively for recitation rather than theatrical performance. This view seems to originate in 1809, when August Wilhelm Schlegel made the claim, based on aesthetic considerations, that Seneca's plays were never intended "*aus den Schulen der Rhetoren auf die Bühne hervorzutreten*"[4] ["to emerge from the rhetorical schools onto the stage"]. Philologists such as Friedrich Leo developed this bias into several arguments, which came to be generally accepted, against the performance of the Senecan plays.[4] Twentieth-century scholars reexamined the question and took opposing sides. Otto Zwierlein argued that some scenes, such as the extispicy of the *Oedipus*, are "*bühnenfremde*,"[6] or foreign to the theatre, to the extent that they are "*nicht darstelbar*,"[7] or unperformable on stage: a controversial argument.[8]

Many scholars have made nuanced arguments about the possibilities of performing the plays. Leon Herrman, William M. Calder, L. Braun, Albrecht Dihle, Pierre Grimal, D. F. Sutton, John G. Fitch, P. J. Davis, and Frederick Ahl all argue for performance of some sort.[9] Calder and Ahl subscribe to the view that the plays were closet drama, while Sutton and Davis argue that they were performed in large theatres.

However, the playability of the sacrifice/extispicy scene of Seneca's *Oedipus* has been considered dubious, even by those who favor performance. Scholars such as Zwierlein argue that such a scene would have been impossible to stage. G. O. Hutchinson cites it as an example of the "wildly unreal"[10] and unplayable scenes in Seneca's plays. Even Fitch, who contends that *many* of the Senecan plays were written for the stage, balks at extending this claim to the *Oedipus* because the sacrifice scene presents so many practical challenges to performance. Fitch writes, "there is, however, one scene which is clearly not written in such a way as to lend itself to stage performance: it is the scene of animal sacrifice in the *Oedipus*."[11] Yet, others have suggested various possibilities for how the scene might have been performed. A few of these bear mention at this point, if only to demonstrate how wonderfully creative and bizarre some of the proposed and published solutions to this problem are.

Thomas G. Rosenmeyer argues that the scene could have been performed by having the sacrifice and the extispicy take place offstage,[12] an argument that has found favor with Anthony Hollingsworth.[13] This seems reasonable and is, in fact, the easiest solution to some of the problems performance would present. In Rosenmeyer's proposed performance, Manto narrates to the audience and to Tiresias a vivid description of an action that must be imagined to be taking place offstage. Fitch points to flaws in this scenario, however, the most serious being that Manto actually handles the entrails onstage.[14] Fitch rejects Rosenmeyer's conception of the scene's performance in favor of recitation.[15] There have been other more adventurous proposals. Sutton posits that trained animals might have taken to the stage, or, alternately,

that "drugged calves" might have acted the roles of the sacrificial beasts.[16] For obvious reasons, this is a potentially messy solution, at the very least precluding performance at a residence, unless it were held in a barn. Further, it is doubtful that either drugs or any amount of training could convince a bull to run amok while skillfully avoiding actors and audience, and then to lie down on cue. And then how would the animals make their exit? They would either have to be coaxed up and walked offstage, or dragged.

Rosenmeyer and Sutton both make important contributions toward understanding the sacrifice scene, regardless of whether or not it was actually performed according to their specifications in antiquity. Rosenmeyer emphasizes the importance of the verbal texture of Manto's narration. Sutton, on the other hand, reconstructs the performance by considering the ways that another genre, the animal spectacle, might have contributed to the staging. If we consider performance genres popular during the first century C.E., the first to come to mind is the *fabula saltata*, or pantomime, which was all the rage at the time and much more popular than tragedy.[17] The *fabula saltata* was performed onstage by a sole, nonspeaking dancer who portrayed a series of roles while a singer or chorus narrated. Broadly speaking, there are good reasons to give careful consideration to pantomime when it comes to the staging of the sacrifice and extispicy. John Jory and Bernhard Zimmerman have demonstrated that tragedy was the overwhelming subject of choice for pantomime performances,[18] and that entire plays were performed in pantomime.[19] Recent studies by Zimmerman and by Alessandra Zanobi have revealed formal resemblances between Seneca's plays and the pantomime. We also know that pantomime dancers performed the roles of animals as well as those of human characters.[20] Therefore I would like to suggest a pantomime performance as a solution to the seemingly intractable difficulties of the sacrifice/extispicy scene.

As a thought experiment, let us imagine how recourse to the pantomime might resolve the most daunting of the problems that have troubled scholars about the scene. We might imagine a provincial official of the first century C.E. planning a production of the *Oedipus* for the public stage, or perhaps a wealthy freedman putting on the play for his guests: dinner theatre at Trimalchio's. The producer would need three speaking actors (Oedipus, Manto, and Tiresias), two nonspeaking priests, one dancer, and, at the end of the act, the chorus.[21]

The first difficulty encountered in staging the scene is the entrance. This is how I imagine the stage to be set: Oedipus stands beside the altar, stage right. Manto stands beside the altar, stage left. Tiresias stands toward the very front edge of the performance space, stage left. At lines 299 to 300, Tiresias tells the priests (the command is plural) to drive the bull and heifer to the altar. Manto then tells Tiresias at 303, "*opima sanctas victima ante aras stetit*" ["a choice victim stands before the sacred altar"]. Yet, at 334-35, Teiresias tells Manto, "*Huc propere admove / et sparge salsa colla taurorum mola*" ["Quickly, drive the cattle here and strew their necks with the salted grain"]. I take Tiresias's first command as the entrance of the two priests. They enter from the center door of the *scaenae frons*, or from the rear center of the performance space. They hold a large, square piece of fabric stretched between them at about waist height. The dancer crouches behind the fabric, concealed from the audience. They approach the altar and stop a few steps behind it. Manto then announces, "*opima sanctas victima ante aras stetit*" ["a choice victim stands before the sacred altar"].[22] When Manto describes the evil omens of the fire, I would modify Rosenmeyer's suggestion that Manto is describing a scene that occurs offstage. While Rosenmeyer is right to emphasize that Manto's verbal description is essential to the audience's understanding here, I disagree that all of the action Manto describes takes place offstage. Instead, I would argue that she stands beside the altar, which is of course in plain view of the audience, and that she describes a flame the audience must imagine. At lines 334-35, the priests take a step forward toward the altar, and the dancer follows, still crouching behind the cloth. Manto then makes a gesture of strewing salted grain on the 'cattle' behind the sheet. The dancer, wearing the mask of a bull, rears up from behind the cloth. Manto starts back, and the dancer turns and cringes behind the cloth again. Tiresias then asks, "*placidone vultu sacra et*

admotas manus / patiuntur?"[23] ["Are their faces calm? Do they bear / The rites and the touch of your hands?"] and Manto describes the bull's movements.

The priest standing stage right of the altar holds out a stylized sacrificial knife with one hand, and the dancer, now wearing the mask of a heifer, stands slowly and turns to face the outstretched knife. The dancer gracefully opens both arms. With a decisive and majestic motion, the dancer steps toward the knife, closes both arms around it, and sinks down behind the cloth.

The dancer rises, now wearing the mask of the bull. The priest standing stage right of the altar strikes at the bull with the knife, and the bull staggers toward the other priest, who also strikes. The dancer clutches at the wounds and moves erratically back toward stage right, and Teiresias asks, "*Unone terram vulnere afflicti petunt?*"[24] ["Did one wound suffice to fell each to earth?"]. As Manto describes the scene, the dancer staggers back toward the priests, who lift the cloth overhead. The dancer sinks to the ground and the priests bring the cloth down to cover the body. They then raise the sheet again to hold it stretched between them, as before, in front of the dancer.

There are several advantages to the hypothetical staging of the scene proposed in this paper, not the least being that it can be performed without bringing livestock onstage. The pantomime dancer's actions bring the scene to life in a stylized yet dynamic way that avoids the spectacle of actual animal slaughter: a distinct advantage over a static staging that relies exclusively on verbal description of events. Further, this experimental dynamic staging helps us to imagine how the tragedy might have been performed in antiquity through recourse to another ancient performance genre. The experiment, in turn, leads to further problems and questions: would Seneca have turned his nose up at contaminating tragedy with pantomime? Or was the scene written for this express purpose? How common would such a hybrid performance have been? And what sort of gestures would an ancient dancer, cast in the roles of the sacrificial animals, have used? If nothing else, this experiment illustrates a vibrant possibility for staging future productions of Seneca's *Oedipus*, and demonstrates a new way in which the tragedy is indeed suited to both ancient and contemporary theatrical performance.

notes

[1] All translations mine unless noted otherwise.

[2] Zimmerman (2008); Zanobi (2008).

[3] See, for example, Ronan (1994) 180–85; Smith (1988); Boyle (1997) 10–12; 219n12.

[4] Schlegel (1966 [1809]) 234.

[5] Leo (1878).

[6] Zwierlein (1966) 24.

[7] Zwierlein (1966) 25.

[8] Other scholars who argue against the performance of Senecan tragedy include Marti (1945), Beare (1964), and Pratt (1983).

[9] Herrman (1924); Calder (1975); Braun (1982); Dihle (1983); Grimal (1983); Sutton (1986); Fitch (2000); Davis (2003); Ahl (2008). Hadas (1939), and Bieber (1953/1954) also argue for performance.

[10] Hutchinson (1993) 63.

[11] Fitch (2000) 9.

[12] Rosenmeyer (1993).

[13] Hollingsworth (2000/2001).

[14] Fitch (2000) 10–11.

[15] Fitch (2000) 11.

[16] Sutton (1986) 23.

[17] Jory (2008) 157.

[18] Jory (2008) 160; Zimmerman (2008) 220.

[19] Jory (2008) 167.

[20] Wyles (2008) 76–77.

[21] Because pantomime dancers performed several roles in succession, only one dancer is needed to play both the sacrificial heifer and the sacrificial bull.

[22] 303.

[23] 336–37.

[24] 340.

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