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The Vates in Senecan Drama: Prophecy, Poetry, Problems, and Possibilities

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Abstract
This dissertation analyzes Senecan drama through the malleable figure of the vates, which has the dual resonance of poet and prophet. Both types of vates transmit fatum, but in Seneca, where prophets prove unsuccessful, poets have greater interpretive capacity and greater autonomy. The dissertation is structured along three ‘vertical’ levels of prophetic activity: Olympian, infernal, terrestrial. Chapter 1 articulates the ways in which traditional prophets (Calchas, Tiresias, Manto, and Cassandra) are flawed in Senecan tragedy. Where these Olympian prophets fall short, the various ‘non-prophet’ figures who assume the vatic role prove more successful. Chapter 2 argues that Seneca's infernal figures (ghosts and furies) usurp the functions of the vates by communicating the knowledge of the underworld to those on earth. Yet they can only appear for brief periods of time and are powerless to intervene directly in human affairs, as is the case with the Furia and with the ghosts of Laius, Thyestes, Hector, and Achilles. Chapter 3 focuses on three species of human non-prophet figures: (1) the ‘avenger’ vates Atreus and Medea, who elide the role of prophecy altogether, since they style themselves as deities and as authors; (2) the ‘accidental’ prophet (for example, Andromache), who utters statements that he or she does not realize will prove true; (3) the vatic destabilizers Astyanax and Polyxena. These vatic analogues, along with the Juno-Hercules pair (Chapter 4) subvert and create fatum in ways that reveal their poetic links, specifically, the unpredictable (and so, powerful) qualities of authorial innovation. A case study of the vates, Oedipus, is the focus of Chapter 5. Seneca uses Oedipus' problematic relationship with oracles to explore issues of the self and of causality. Prophecy's goal is to isolate a single answer. Prophecy in Senecan tragedy fails, I propose, due to multiplicity in the areas of timescale, sites of knowledge, and cause. Neither poets nor prophets ultimately have full control over the future. But Seneca's limited prophets, when counterposed with his more successful poet characters, dramatize how the poet, who has access to more flexible forms of meaning, also has greater autonomy at understanding and creating fatum.

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THE VATES IN SENECAN DRAMA: PROPHECY, POETRY, PROBLEMS, AND POSSIBILITIES

Carrie Mowbray

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Classical Studies

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The Vates in Senecan Drama: Prophecy, Poetry, Problems, and Possibilities

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For my grandmother,

Jo Anne Williams,

who was there for me from the beginning, and before
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ABSTRACT

THE VATES IN SENECAN DRAMA: PROPHECY, POETRY, PROBLEMS, AND POSSIBILITIES

Carrie Mowbray

Supervisor: Dr. Emily Wilson

This dissertation analyzes Senecan drama through the malleable figure of the vates, which has the dual resonance of poet and prophet. Both types of vates transmit fatum, but in Seneca, where prophets prove unsuccessful, poets have greater interpretive capacity and greater autonomy. The dissertation is structured along three ‘vertical’ levels of prophetic activity: Olympian, infernal, terrestrial. Chapter 1 articulates the ways in which traditional prophets (Calchas, Tiresias, Manto, and Cassandra) are flawed in Senecan tragedy. Where these Olympian prophets fall short, the various ‘non-prophet’ figures who assume the vatic role prove more successful. Chapter 2 argues that Seneca’s infernal figures (ghosts and furies) usurp the functions of the vates by communicating the knowledge of the underworld to those on earth. Yet they can only appear for brief periods of time and are powerless to intervene directly in human affairs, as is the case with the Furia and with the ghosts of Laius, Thyestes, Hector, and Achilles. Chapter 3 focuses on three species of human non-prophet figures: (1) the ‘avenger’-vates Atreus and Medea, who elide the role of prophecy altogether, since they style themselves as deities and as authors; (2) the ‘accidental’ prophet (Andromache, inter alios), who utters statements that he or she does not realize will prove true;
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... iv  
Abstract .......................................................................................................................... vi  
Introduction .....................................................................................................................1  
  Latin vates ..................................................................................................................... 4  
  Knowing in time ........................................................................................................... 10  
CHAPTER 1: Seneca’s Prophets: A Model of Failure ..................................................... 23  
  Calchas: interpres deum? ......................................................................................... 25  
  Tiresias and Manto: certa signa? ............................................................................. 36  
  Cassandra, Seneca’s falsa vates ............................................................................. 49  
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 65  
CHAPTER 2: Seneca’s Infernal vates ............................................................................. 68  
  Necro-knowledge: Achilles and Hector ................................................................. 71  
  Laius the anti-oracle .................................................................................................. 79  
  Infernal prologuists: the ghost ................................................................................ 86  
  Furies in play ............................................................................................................. 97  
  Thyestes: the ghost and the fury ........................................................................... 101  
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 110  
CHAPTER 3: Vatic Avengers and Accidental Prophets ................................................. 112  
  Avenger-vates .......................................................................................................... 113  
  maius nefas: crimes of poetry ............................................................................... 117  
  Medea machinatrix .................................................................................................. 120  
  Atreus, Medea, and (more) crimes of poetry ...................................................... 124
Challenging fate beyond revenge: *Troades* ................................................................. 131
Andromache: accidental prophet .............................................................................. 135
Autonomy and subversion: Polyxena and Astyanax ............................................... 140
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 144

**Chapter 4: Juno and Hercules: *vates*, Creators and Destroyers** .................. 147

Setting the stage: Juno’s models .............................................................................. 148
Juno: a furial inception .............................................................................................. 152
Time for Juno ............................................................................................................ 157
Hercules vivax ........................................................................................................... 161
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 169

**Chapter 5: Oedipus: the *vates*, the Self, and the Limits of *interpretatio*** .......... 172

* A maius monstrum .................................................................................................. 174
* Naming names ........................................................................................................ 175
* Oedipus: *interpref ati sui*? ................................................................................ 184
* Oracles ‘overfulfilled’ and *confatalia* ............................................................... 188
* A poetics of multiple *causae* ............................................................................... 196

Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 204

**Conclusion** ........................................................................................................ 207

* Senecan prophets, non-prophets, and poets ....................................................... 207
* Seneca *futurus*: prophecy in the *Octavia* ........................................................... 219

**Bibliography** ...................................................................................................... 217
Introduction

Characters in tragedies, like their real-life counterparts, desire to know what will occur in the future so that they can avoid or minimize adverse events and experience positive ones. Prophets and oracles claim to offer insight into the future that is ratified by a deity, yet that is not immediately available to the casual inquirer. Tragedy, in fact, is well-suited to illustrate changes in knowledge over time—precisely the dynamic that characterizes prophecy. The progression from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge in a prophetic or oracular scenario entails the chief components of classic Aristotelian tragedy: reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnórisis).\(^1\) Prophetic figures, oracles, and divinatory scenes occur in nearly every Senecan play, and yet prophecy deviates from what one would expect based on earlier poetry, tragic and otherwise. Prophets such as Cassandra, Tiresias, Calchas, who were unfailing (though often disbelieved) guides to the future in previous literature, are flawed prophets in Seneca. As prophets, they cannot correctly divine the future or offer useful information, as their botched attempts at divination and self-conscious commentary on their limitations attest.\(^2\) Their failures, and the comparatively greater successes of other ‘non-prophets’, especially poet figures, can tell us a great deal about broader issues of poetics and hermeneutics.

The Latin term vates encompasses both prophet and poet, and Seneca capitalizes on both the continuities and the disjunctions between prophets and poets in order to dramatize issues relating to fate and foreknowledge. Specifically, I see the failures of Seneca’s prophet-vates, but the more successful abilities of his poet-vates, as gesturing toward the limitations of humans’ ability to know the future, but their ability to compensate for this lack of actual foreknowledge by substitutive operations, such as

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\(^1\) Aristotle, Poet. 1452a23 (anagnórisis); 1452a30-32 (peripeteia). See Bushnell (1988) and Roberts (1984) on prophecy in Greek tragedy.

\(^2\) The terms ‘divination’ and ‘prophecy’ are often used interchangeably. A prophētēs (προφήτης) is an individual who ‘utters forth’ or ‘interprets’ the will of the gods; it is a nominalization from the verb προφημι. The noun form for the activity of prophecy is unattested in classical Greek; in post-classical Greek, προφητεία and προφητεύμα refer to the gift of prophecy and the prophetic utterance itself, respectively (LSJ, s.v.). μαντική is the overarching Greek term for prophecy and divination (Struck and Johnston, eds., 2005). Latin divinatio, correspondingly, encompasses prophetic and divinatory activity. I use ‘prophecy’ and ‘divination’ relatively interchangeably but prioritize ‘prophecy’ as the superordinate term. Technical divination was the more normative vatic activity in Roman practice, while both second-sight ‘inspired’ prophecy and technical divination (along with oracular consultation) were prevalent in Latin literature, including in Senecan tragedy.
writing, which will be able to exercise influence on the future. Given the centrality of the prophetic element to Senecan tragedy, it is surprising that the topic has, until now, received scant attention. In the dissertation that follows, I elucidate the ‘problems’ with prophecy in Seneca: the failure of normal prophets to accurately and fully predict the future; the usurpation of the prophetic role by non-prophets; statements that become prophetic unintentionally; the ‘overfulfillment’ of oracles in ways that were not foreseeable. A short-circuiting of the prophetic, and an inability to arrive at a single answer, characterize Senecan tragedy. This dissertation will show how multiplicity is destabilizing of prophetic success, which necessitates a right/wrong binary. Despite multiple divinatory channels, the search for a single definitive meaning (what will come true) proves elusive to Senecan characters, and is complicated by the ever-present layers of causal factors that are at play. For the prophet, the issue of too many meanings is a stumbling block to vatic success; for the poet, on the other hand, this multiplicity leads to greater and more nuanced interpretive possibilities. The model of multiple causality, or co-fated events (confatalia) underpins Seneca’s poetic decisions, and will inform my reading of the tragedies. After establishing the idea that Senecan poetics is one of multiplicity, the dissertation argues that the limitations as well as the successes of Seneca’s vates (prophets as well as poets) have a great deal to tell us about Seneca himself qua poet.

Summaries of each of the chapters can be found at the end of the introduction. To orient the immediate discussion, I give a sketch of the dissertation’s structure: in the first chapter, I detail how normal prophecy fails in Senecan tragedy, as the prophets Calchas (in the Troades), Tiresias (along with Manto, in the Oedipus), and Cassandra (in the Agamemnon) all demonstrate. Where traditional prophecy proves unsuccessful, certain non-prophets usurp the role of prophet, either deliberately or incidentally. The individuals I typologize in chapters 2 through 5 show how Seneca’s non-prophets have greater access to knowledge, and greater efficacy in communicating it to others, than prophets do. Chapter 2 presents the infernal vates, ghosts and furies, whose their underworldly knowledge make them poet as well as prophet stand-ins. Chapter 3 details two types of humans who supplant the role of prophet: avengers (who also play the role of poet), as

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3 That incidental prophecy shows a marked parallel with dramatic irony is an issue to which I will return.
well as other individuals whose autonomous actions render traditional prophecy ineffective; and a third subspecies, the ‘incidental’ prophet, whose words prove to foretell the future outside of an overtly prophetic context. Chapter 4 deals with one case study of the workings of multiple causes, in both actuality and on the level of poetics: Seneca’s Hercules, in which Juno is the vatic figure. Chapter 5 presents Oedipus as a case study of the interpres, and as the culmination of various vatic modes that characterize the rest of the Senecan corpus.

Before we turn to Seneca, some key concepts will orient the discussion. The Latin word vates has the dual meaning of ‘poet’ and ‘prophet’—an idea that stemmed from both figures as inspired transmitters of divine messages. As I will argue, the meaning of vates underwent significant redefinition in the early empire. But even before Plato, the idea that poet and prophet share certain salient qualities was at play, and led to continued philosophical and aesthetic debates about poetic inspiration and craftsmanship.\(^4\) Closer to Seneca’s own day, ps.-Longinus makes this connection in On the Sublime.\(^5\) The above-mentioned authors all liken poetic inspiration to divine prophetic possession. Enthusiasm, or furor, can prove a source of both creative and destructive energies and is a key attribute of Senecan poet and prophet figures.\(^6\) Yet the poet has greater control over what he or she says than an inspired prophet, who is often compelled just to transmit divine messages. With respect to utterance, as Bettini has discussed, Latin fatum carries the meaning not just of ‘fate’ but also ‘that which has been spoken’, often in the narrower sense of religious or poetic speech.\(^7\) Taking the vates as a point of departure, I propose that Seneca is concerned to show how both poets and prophets interpret fatum. While prophets fail at the endeavor, it is the other vatic species, the poet, who has greater insight into hidden matters, and greater efficacy in communicating them. We should note that prophet and

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\(^4\) Mentioned in Hor. A.P. 295-8; Cic. Div. 1.38.80; De Or. 2.46.194. Cicero mentions the comments of both Plato (see Ion 534a) and Democritus on the mad poet.

\(^5\) On the affinities between poet and prophet, see Flacelière (1965, pp. 75ff). Among more recent studies, Struck (2005, pp. 147-165; 2004) has drawn much-needed attention to the relationship between the interpretation of poetry and the parallel processes of technical divination in Greek and Roman thought.

\(^6\) See Schiesaro (1997 and 2003) for models of madness within Senecan tragedy as characterizing poietological figures (Atreus, Medea, Juno, and, to varying degrees, Oedipus and Cassandra); cf. Littlewood (2004). For Seneca’s conception of poetic furor as deriving from Vergil, see Putnam (1995), and, more recently, Staley (2009). Schiesaro, especially, sees these figures as embodying the repressed psychological drives of the tragic poet.

\(^7\) Fatum is both a fixed form and a nominalization from the verb fari. See Bettini’s (2008) rich study on the semiotics of fari/fatum terms in Roman ritual, poetic, and legal speech.
poet do not have to be mutually exclusive, and indeed, several of Seneca’s prophet figures also display poetological attributes. Cassandra and Juno, for example, can claim ‘super-role’ status, since they share in aspects of both prophet and poet.

It is the prophet’s job to interpret, or else simply to transmit, divine messages against the backdrop of ordinary experience. Senecan tragedy contains several references to interpreter figures. Calchas is called interpres deum, Oedipus attempts to be interpres fati mei, and the verb intersum, which Cassandra applies to herself, also hints at her status as go-between.8 A prophet is a mediator, or interpres, between a god and humans, yet poets and audiences of poetry are also interpretantes. Poetry, like prophecy, is a second-order type of language in which the surface layer gives but one piece of the fuller meaning.9 For this reason, exegesis is a necessary hermeneutic activity. Poets and receivers must negotiate the gap between linguistic signs and their referents; in other words, their task as well as their tool is interpretatio. While both prophets and poets transmit fatum, the major differences reside in what form interpretation takes, from where the authority is thought to derive, and the relative degrees of autonomy possessed by each. With this in mind, we will examine how Seneca capitalizes on these intersecting, and overlapping, resonances of vates in order to comment on human–divine relations, causality, interpretation, and poetics.10

**Latin vates**

A brief sketch of the resonances of vates in Latin poetry will be helpful to situate Seneca within the larger tradition under which he was operating. In addition to characterizing actual prophetic figures (the Sibyl of Cumae; Helenus; the Pythia), the term also came to be applied to poets by poets. As Newman has demonstrated in his seminal treatment of

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8 *Tro*. 351 (Calchas); *Phoe*. 139 (Oedipus); *Aga*. 873 (Cassandra). The constellation of *interpres* and *interpretatio* words in fact already presents an meta-interpretive etymological enigma, as the simplex form *pres* is not attested. Etymologies that have been proposed for its base form include *prex* and *pars*, where the latter would denote mediation *inter duas partes*, Maltby (1991), ad loc.; cf. *TLL* VII.1, p. 2250, and *OLD*, s.v. Like in English, *pars* contains the metadramatic resonance of a ‘part’ in a play.

9 *OLD* s.v. Both the poet and the prophet were originally considered to be divinely inspired, yet there is also a technical side of each, which relies on careful study and exegesis—the trained divinatory specialist, on the one hand, and the poetic craftsman, on the other. Note the analogical similarity with the models of inspired and technical divination mentioned above; this tension obtains in both resonances of Latin *vates*: poet and prophet. My comments on the relationship between divination and poetic exegesis are greatly indebted to Struck’s volume (2004).

10 A recurring question of the dissertation is the proper relationship with *fatum*. 
the *vates* in Augustan poetry, "vates underwent significant reshaping by Vergil and Horace (and, in different ways, by Ovid). Vergil redefined the *vates* as a poet-prophet visionary, counterposing this individual against the ‘mere’ craftsman *poeta*. The Augustan poets were not, of course, the first to conceive of poetry’s links with prophecy, nor to articulate this past–present–future dynamic. But the degree to which they self-consciously presented themselves as *vates* means that their motivations (at least, their purported ones) are more distinctly visible in the text.

Vergil, as *vates*, interprets the present by writing backwards, into Rome’s past, a prophecy-filled narrative that looks forward (to Augustan Rome). Based on his new conception of what an authoritative poet should do, Roman *vates* appeared to take inspiration not from a god or muse so much as from Romanitas, and especially from the literary tradition past and present. The *vates*-poet, then, reinterpreted as a visionary ‘poet’s poet,’ links the present with the past (by transmitting the literary tradition) and future (by commemorating the present for subsequent audiences). Under Vergil’s influence, the *vates* was now charged with transmitting ideas that were contemporary and timeless, and that (crucially) were charged with presenting Rome as a locus for political, social, and intellectual activity.

Vergilian poetics, and especially his perception of the poet’s role, shaped how subsequent poets (including Seneca) conceived of the poet-prophet connection. Other Augustan and early imperial poets (for example, Horace, Ovid, Propertius) interpreted the role of a *vates* in accordance with their own poetic goals, but Vergil’s influence remained the greatest factor on these other poets’ conception of the vatic element. Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* offers an important contemporary site of cross-fertilization with Senecan poetics. In keeping with the Augustans’ self-styling as *vates* (Horace, Ovid, Propertius), Lucan calls

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1. For a useful survey of the uses and resonances of *vates* in Augustan poetry, see Newman (1967). O’Higgins (1998) and Dick (1965) both offer detailed studies of *vates* in Lucan; however, to date there has been no similar study on the Senecan *vates*.
2. This forms the basic thesis of O’Hara’s (1990) influential study of prophecy in the *Aeneid*, which demonstrates how prophetic speech in the *Aeneid* is generally long-ranging and Rome-looking. Overly ‘optimistic’ prophecies encourage Aeneas, while holding in reserve a ‘pessimistic’ element, normally concerning death.
3. See Putnam (1995) on the significant influence of the *Aeneid* (especially the second half) on the Senecan tragic worldview. In addition, Vergil is the poet whom Seneca quotes most frequently in his prose works; cf. Hine (2004).
himself a \textit{vates} who sings of the 'New Apollo'—that is, Nero.\textsuperscript{14} In Lucan, like in Seneca, prophecy is both prominent and a flawed enterprise. Characters receive partial or misleading information through vatic channels, engage in alternative activities such as necromancy, or deny the importance of oracles altogether. Within the limitations of the genre of tragedy, of course, Seneca did not have the option to talk about himself. At the same time, as several recent studies have proposed,\textsuperscript{15} it is suggestive to view elements of Senecan poetics through his poetological characters: Atreus, Medea, and Juno, as well as (to differing degrees) Oedipus and Cassandra. As the dissertation will show, these individuals comment on both vatic-poetic and vatic-prophetic concerns.

Prophecy is not only a literary phenomenon in Seneca’s day; it also looms large in the political climate and philosophical debates. As Potter succinctly puts it, ‘Prophecy is implicitly connected with power.’\textsuperscript{16} The matter of human–divine relations had grown increasingly complicated in the early empire: Julio-Claudian emperors claimed divine descent, and some members of the imperial household were even divinized and received cult after death. The historical and biographical records are peppered with accounts of the emperors’ interaction with prophecy. For example, Augustus burned two thousand books of prophecy in the Forum and removed prophetic books from the Capitoline to the temple of Apollo Palatinus; other sources cite his interdiction against certain forms of astrology when he became ill during the final years of his life.\textsuperscript{17} The early emperors were well aware of the potential of prophetic channels (like poetic channels) to broadcast a message that was favorable to their ideological program.\textsuperscript{18} Claudius was the first to raise the status of Etruscan haruspicy, traditionally considered inferior to Roman divinatory practices, to an officially sanctioned Roman \textit{collegium}.\textsuperscript{19} Nero’s complex (and often antagonistic)\textsuperscript{20}
relationship with prophecy did not end when he died. The Fourth Sibylline oracle predicted a return of Nero, at which point the world would end, and in fact, rumors of a Nero redivivus continued to resurface long after his death. These acts were not only (or not even) attempts to access recondite knowledge but were ideological articulations of power. The dating of Seneca’s tragedies is uncertain, and roman à clef readings of the tragedies ultimately prove unsatisfactory; nevertheless, Seneca’s closeness to the imperial center under Gaius, Claudius, and Nero suggests that we not discount contemporary social, political, and intellectual contexts when we read his poetry. Indeed, Seneca’s Menippean satire *Apocolocyntosis* features a poetic passage in which prophecy is made to transmit ideological material: Apollo himself delivers a prophecy-poem that foretells a golden age and Nero’s longevity while flattering him as Apollo’s own equal. Julio-Claudians emperors’ preoccupation with prophecy can also be seen in the *Octavia*, the praetexta drama that is also an early reception of Senecan tragedy. As I will discuss, this play recasts many of the prophetic modes (and problems) of Senecan tragedy while functioning as an *ex post eventum* prophecy, in that the events which the drama ‘foretells’ had already occurred in actuality.

The philosophical writings of Seneca, a self-identified Stoic (though he had training in other philosophical schools), are also engaged with questions of prophecy and foreknowledge. With this in mind, some brief words about Stoic views on divination are in order. Divination is integral to Stoic thought. Chrysippus wrote two books on divination, and on the Roman side, one of the most adamant pro-divination voices that we have is that of the Stoic Balbus in Cicero’s *De Divinatione*. The classic Stoic ontological proof for

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20 For example, he expelled magicians and astrologers in 68 C.E. and reportedly looted the oracle of Delphi, carrying off the Pythia’s tripod (Paus. 10.7.1).
22 *ibid.*, p. 89. See also Champin (2003, pp. 183-185). ‘Nero redivivus’ is an especially fascinating prospect in light of the *Octavia*, which starred Nero, since the historical Nero acted on the stage.
24 One does not have to believe that Seneca’s tragedies explicitly transmit Stoic teachings to allow that philosophical elements at work (explicitly or in the backdrop). Among those who see Stoic thought reflected in the tragedies, Rosenmeyer’s (1986) seminal study of Stoic elements in Senecan drama remains the fullest treatment of issues such as *sympatheia* in the dramatic corpus. More recently, work on the ‘self’ and Seneca intersects with Stoic notions of *autarkeia*, or self-determination: Volk and Williams (eds., 2009); Bartsch (2006) and Gill (2006). *On interpretatio stoica* more generally, see Hine (2004) and Mayer (1994).
25 According to Bouché-Leclercq (1879-82), quoted in Flacelière (1965, p. 78); ‘No one wrote so much on [divination] as the Stoics, and no other school of thought did more to strengthen belief in divination.’
the existence of god is based on divination. If divination exists, it necessarily proves the immanence of a divine force. The converse: if gods exist, then divination is a valid means by which the divine will is transmitted to humans. Stoicism’s conceptualization of the universe in materialist terms also underwrites divination. For Stoics, divination is not irrational but is guaranteed by ratio itself. Words, bodies, and natural phenomena are all held to be viable carriers of signs. The thread is pneuma, or logos, which is the material coefficient of (or is coterminous with) the divine. The universe is held in constant tension (tonos), and the threat of imbalance is crucial. Under Posidonius’ notion of sympatheia tōn hōlōn, all elements in the universe are mutually connected and respond to each other.

So, signs that are manifested in one sphere reveal what has happened, is now happening, or will happen in a different sphere. Natural phenomena and forces act as barometers of divine will, indicating the ‘temperature’ and ‘pressure’ of the universe as humans imprint it with their moral choices. Rosenmeyer’s extensive treatment of cosmological and natural elements in Senecan drama offers a thorough account, bolstered by many examples, of how phenomena such as sympatheia are manifested in the plays.

To return to prophecy: in a worldview in which absolutely everything was thought to be inscribed (on the surface level and encoded in signs), it was up to humans to cut through these layers of meaning in order to extract and interpret relevant information. Apparent failure of prophecy to come to pass was not due to some flaw in the system of divination, nor did it stem from malicious gods. Rather, human error should be blamed when the outcome did not accord with what the prophecy foretold. Yet the picture in Seneca is still more complex. In book 2 of the Naturales Quaestiones, Seneca examines lightning portents as well as Etruscan haruspicy. Here, some of the familiar sentiments from orthodox Stoicism are at play: divination is a valid, and potentially efficacious, enterprise. But Seneca also anticipates questions about the futility of knowing the future if

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26 For ancient sources, see Cicero de Div. and Seneca NQ 2.
27 On pneuma as a binding force, see especially Sambursky (1959, p. 1ff).
29 This is dramatized in the elaborate extispicium scene in the Oedipus, where the entrails of the heifer gesture toward the state of affairs at Thebes past, present, and future. For the Stoics, as Flacelière points out, sympatheia was thought to extend in time and distance: because of ‘universal, cosmic sympathy, [...] there could be no fact that was not inevitably connected with the totality of facts, past present and future.’ (1965, p. 79).
30 Assuming the prophecy was made in good faith, that is, and not by one who was trying to exploit the vatic role.
one is powerless to intervene. He says that prayer and expiation are ineffectual as anything except psychic palliatives, yet he acknowledges a place for divination by stating that the gods leave some aspects hanging in the balance (suspensa) and that these are able to be altered by human agency.

Prophetic speech in the form of an eschatological vision functions as a consolatory trope in the Ad Marciam De Consolatione. The picture of cosmic destruction that Seneca predicts, which is in line with orthodox Stoic thought, actually offers a reassurance that one is not alone. After inevitable periodic cycles of cosmic dissolution, the universe and all its elements will be created anew. Elsewhere, Seneca cautions against relying on divination, either because it is untenable as a means of revealing the future or because it is potentially harmful. In the latter we can glimpse a line of Stoic thought that links the inadvisability of attempting to see into the future with the dangers of so-called prospective emotions (hope, fear, anxiety), which for Stoics compromised autarkeia. Instead of attempting to glean knowledge about the future, so went the thought, one should instead focus on one’s behavior and moral development in the hic et nunc. As long as one is living in accordance with nature (secundum naturam), no actual evil can befall an individual, because he or she will be able to withstand adversity. The picture is complex, and this tension between concern and lack of concern with the future is at play in the Stoic mental exercise of the praemeditatio futurorum malorum, which aims at preparing oneself for various types of misfortunes that could happen. One who practices this type of spiritual exercise has already grasped the worst things that could befall a human, and so is armed against them when and if they do arise. The imaginative element of ‘scripting’ that characterizes the praemeditatio offers a suggestive link with the writer’s immunity from catastrophe. And while the certainty of death is a kind of self-fulfilling and universal prophecy, an individual’s attitudes and actions can allow him or her some measure of control over the unseen future, based on how he or she is remembered in living life and in

31 The fifth choral ode of Seneca’s Oedipus also expresses this sentiment (Oed. 987-90).
33 In this consolatory endeavor, Seneca draws from the store of Stoic cosmology, especially the notions of palingenesis and ekpyrosis; see the commentary of Manning (1981), ad loc. (Ad Marc. 26.5-6), with p. 133 for analysis.
34 See Armisen-Martelli (1986) on the praemeditatio in Seneca. I see in this exercise an interesting alternative to actual prophecy.
35 The term Hadot (1981) uses for individual exercises practiced for psychic health and moral improvement is ‘exercice spirituel’.
encountering death. Seneca himself recognized this potential, as his theatricalized death scene bears out: by staging his own exemplary death, Seneca interprets past models (for example, Cato and Socrates) in a way that (he intends) will allow him to exercise influence on future receptions of his life and work.\textsuperscript{36} Finally, recurring throughout Seneca’s prose writings is the notion that specific foreknowledge is less important than acceptance that things will fall out \textit{ex decreto dei}—a prospect his tragic characters are ignorant of, or refuse to entertain.\textsuperscript{37} Both his prose and poetry present the paradox that accurate foreknowledge is \textit{possible}, but that it is also potentially detrimental to one’s psychic well-being. The ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ arguments for prophecy that recur in Seneca’s prose are recast in the words and actions of individual characters and choruses, both explicitly vatic and otherwise, or they lurk under the surface of what we know (and the characters do not) will occur.

\section*{Knowing in time}

Based on the picture in previous tragedy, along with Stoic acceptance of divination, one might think that prophecy would be a viable means of foreknowledge in Seneca’s tragedies. So why does it fail? That Senecan prophets fail, when it has been noticed at all in passing, has generally been attributed to a morally ‘inverted’ world, to the absence of gods in the Senecan worldview, or to a contrarian urge on Seneca’s part. But there \textit{are} gods in the tragedies; they lurk behind the scenes as objects of prayer and sacrifice, and, most blatantly, in the in-person nature of Juno’s appearance as prologuist of the \textit{Hercules}. What is more, moral perversion has no definitive link with whether or not divination is successful in any other philosophical or poetic texts. And I believe that there is more at stake than rhetorical one-upsman. The activity of prophecy, at its most basic, has three main strands: knowledge, time, and cause. In Seneca, none of these factors works in straightforward ways. Their complex interactions destabilize prophecy, on the one hand, and simultaneously gesture toward other means of sourcing hidden knowledge—including the deliberate refusal to engage with foreknowledge at all. All of these sites are

\textsuperscript{36} For an extended treatment of Seneca’s attitudes toward death, and the receptions of his death scene, see Ker (2009).

\textsuperscript{37} For the notion of \textit{ex decreto dei}, see \textit{NQ} 3.10.12.
plural in Seneca, a contention to which I will return, and this serves to make prophecy not more but less efficacious.

First, Seneca’s tragedies dramatize the disparate levels of knowledge that are at play between levels of characters, audiences, and authors. Prophecy as well as phenomena such as dramatic irony operate by means of a knowledge gap. And the notion of critical distance, where audiences and the players-on-stage have different access to information, is an integral component of dramatic performance. Whether or not Seneca’s dramas were performed, and if so, via what medium or media (e.g. full-scale theatrical performance; performance of individual scenes; recitationes), the idea that Senecan drama contains many metadramatic elements has become a commonplace. Several of Seneca’s plays, like Thyestes, Medea, Agamemnon, and Troades, contain ‘plays-within-plays’ in the 4th or 5th acts. Elsewhere, more subtle forms of theatricality combine to form mise-en-abyme assemblages of performers and receivers. The author-audience-actor dynamic can be conceptualized as a set of concentric circles, where access to knowledge is more constrained the closer a character is to the epicenter, and more expansive the further removed one is from the center of the dramatic action. This has bearing on prophetic success or failure. The protagonists, constrained as they are to the viewpoint of their own particular situation, have the least insight into causes and effects. Those who occupy an intermediary position—actual prophets as well as others who approximate the prophetic role in some way, such as ghosts and furies, as well as prologists and poet- and messenger-figures—possess a greater degree of knowledge, and can funnel information between layers from a position of safe remove. Occupying superordinate positions are those who inhabit the world outside the tragedy, and who thus have the greatest potential for understanding; these include external audiences, authors, and divinities. This structuring also interacts with specialized knowledge in a vertical archaeology, where the superal, terrestrial, and infernal levels each offer a different source, and degree, of

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38 I will discuss irony in greater detail below.
39 See, for example, Boyle (1997); Erasmo (2004); Schiesaro (2003); Littlewood (2004).
40 Cf. Schiesaro’s notion of ‘frames’ in Seneca’s dramatic structure (2003, pp. 14; 45-64).
41 One key way in which Seneca engineers this is through ‘intracorporal’ previews of what are thought to be later tragedies; however, the uncertainty of dating the tragedies problematizes an attempt to see this phenomenon as a linear progression.
42 An approximation of this panoptic perspective can be glimpsed in the divine–authorial correlative figure conscient Sol, whose behavior responds to extreme human actions (normally those of criminal nefas) while standing at a level of remove, and who knows and sees all.
knowledge. In Senecan tragedy, figures with access to more than one vertical level, or who are on a middle or outer layer (or both) possess the greatest access to meaning. Audiences inscribed within the dramatic action present an interesting case study: experiencing time and knowledge differently from those who are removed from the play's action, they provide a mirror for Seneca's own audiences to reflect on their own place in the complex chains of knowledge and agency. In these conjunctions and disjunctions, it becomes clear that knowledge is not equivalent to power. Seneca's vatic figures are often powerless to intervene in the dramatic action, whether for their own purposes or as adjutants (or saboteurs) of others' goals.

Problems with time also contribute to prophetic failure in the tragedies. The question of who knows what and when he or she knows it is not a simple matter in Seneca. Drama is generally thought of as progressing according to a particular storyline of causes and effects. But Senecan time is emphatically nonlinear, and this, understandably, complicates foreknowledge. Multiple models of time are at play in any given tragedy. Time can expand or contract, can repeat itself (often with variations on a theme); as in film, it can include analeptic flashback and proleptic flash forward, or it can freeze for extended scenes of static description. Events can be presented as occurring simultaneously, or on a parallel timescale with events outside the bounds of a particular tragedy. And due to the element of 'metaliterary time,' previously told versions add ever-present layers of complication. Some of Seneca's characters are blind to, or refuse to engage with, the past or the future—and this naturally has a bearing on the degree of prophetic viability. Medea and Atreus are focused entirely on their revenge, and in their obsessively presentist mindset, they ignore (or, in their authorial guises, 'write out') any future. Others, like the Trojan survivor-victims, live in the past as a way to escape their present state of oppression and an equally hopeless future. In the case of Oedipus, he believes that he can still avoid his future, not understanding that he has already fulfilled the Delphic oracle's prophecy. One very Senecan modality is the representation of the

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43 On time in Senecan tragedy, see especially Owen (1970) and Shelton (1975). Schiesaro also adduces iteration; seriality; recursion; retrogression (2003).
44 On analepsis and prolepsis in the tragedies, see Schiesaro (2003, pp. 187).
45 On static scenes of description, see Aygon (2004). Seneca's descriptions are not always static, however; Tietze Larson (1994) offers a valuable analysis of the 'running commentary' in Senecan tragedy.
same event more than once, from more than one viewpoint.\footnote{46} This ‘parataxis’ is revelatory of tragedy’s multi-layered causal and temporal dynamics, and destabilizes future-orientated prophecy. An attempt to control time and knowledge (frequent obsessions of Senecan characters) is emblematic of the larger desire to shape one’s experience in the face of an unseen future, or fate. One would think that access to the mytho-literary past would make prophecy more accurate, but it makes it less so, since possible meanings have now multiplied. In the time–knowledge intersections that complicate a linear teleology, the tragedies suggest again and again, prophecy may not be a satisfactory tool to bring hidden meaning to light.

Dramatic irony is a central component of Seneca’s tragedies. It also shares a great deal of overlap with prophecy: with both, there is a change of knowledge over time.\footnote{47} Irony, like prophecy, is predicated on the gap between surface meaning and another meaning\footnote{48} that eludes the grasp of (certain) individuals at first, but that will later be revealed.\footnote{49} But while prophecy entails a deliberate effort to divine the future, the ironic event is only interpretable as such in hindsight—at least, by those whom it directly affects. The interpretability only post eventum to some, in contrast to others’ clear understanding of what will transpire, points to the fact that interpretation is inextricable from one’s perspective. Those who experience irony do not realize that certain utterances or actions will take on meaning beyond what they intended until they themselves are experiencing the event, at which time it is too late to change the course of events. Prophecy, on the other hand, offers the tantalizing possibility of being able to predict, and so control, some portion of the future.\footnote{50} I would like to extend Holland’s thesis that the ironist has a ‘privileged’ and ‘divine’ epistemic viewpoint\footnote{51} in order to elucidate how irony works in Seneca. The authorial perspective approximates the divine one, and Seneca’s ironists are poet figures as well as deities (or quasi-deities). Ironists, poet figures, and gods occupy

\footnote{46} This parataxis occurs, for example, in the side-by-side presentations of Agamemnon’s death, both seen through Cassandra’s eyes, but once in prophetic, once in poetic mode. And the views on the afterlife put forth by two successive choral odes in the Troades stand in direct contrast to each other, as I will further discuss in Chapter 3.

\footnote{47} Dramatic irony is integral to Senecan poetics; in fact, its frequency in his plays is often seen as a flaw.

\footnote{48} In this gap between surface and under-meaning or other-meaning, it also resembles allegory (see Struck 2004). Both prophecy and irony are unlike allegory, however, in that time is a crucial factor.

\footnote{49} With prophecy, the withheld or incomplete knowledge highlights the gap between human and divine spheres.

\footnote{50} See Wood (2003); cf. Holland (2000).

\footnote{51} Holland 2000.
superordinate levels with respect to the dramatic action, and thus possess critical
distance.\footnote{Critical distance is part of the theatergoing experience as well; it is replicated physically by the gap
between players-on-stage (who are limited to their own particular on-stage ‘lives’) and an audience that
has superior knowledge.} Irony-deployers such as Atreus and Medea present themselves as omniscient
divinities and as authors; they also ignore or discount the traditional prophetic means.
Only one actual deity appears in Senecan tragedy: Juno of the Hercules, who is both poet
figure and ‘divine ironist’.

The phenomenology of prophecy is generally thought to be one of effects. While
results are often hidden from ordinary human cognition until after the fact, the causes
behind events can be even more elusive. Causality is an integral component to how drama
works, and as Rogers asserts: ‘To interpret a work as dramatic is to interpret the relation
[sc. between mind and world in the work] in terms of causality.’\footnote{Quoted in Rosenmeyer (1986, p. 63). As Rosenmeyer points out, there is no causeless change, though the
causal factors are not necessarily visible.} In the classic
Aristotelian view of tragedy, one cause is said to lead to one effect.\footnote{Poet. 1452a18ff.} This single-stream
model does not, however, suffice for Senecan tragedy; in place of a two-dimensional chain
is a matrix of causal factors.\footnote{\textit{NO} 2.32.4 \textit{fatum} series; cf. \textit{Oed.} 990 \textit{qua exa} \textit{suis currunt causis}.} Stoics articulate this model of multiple causality as
\textit{confatalia}, or cofated events, under which everything that happens in the universe is due
not just to what is already predetermined by god or fate, nor is it entirely the prerogative
of free, spontaneous human actions. Certain elements are fixed, but others hang in the
balance of potentiality (\textit{suspended}), and are able to be steered one way or another by
human agency. This other factor Epictetus calls the ‘\textit{eph’hemin},’ or ‘up to us’\footnote{Gcero glosses it as \textit{in nostra potestate}. See Bolzien (1998) for a extended presentation of \textit{confatalia} in
Stoic thought; see also Rosenmeyer (1986, pp. 86-7) for a good encapsulation of the \textit{eph’hemin} element.} The
interactions of these countless decisions of human choice against the backdrop of what-
has-been-decided (\textit{fatum}) make up the model of co-fated occurrents. Due to the multiple
sites of causality (as also of time, and knowledge) in Senecan tragedy, the efficacy of
prophecy becomes compromised. Multiple causation is reinforced on the structural level
of poetics: in addition to his nonlinear handling of time, that Seneca arranges scenes in a
paratactic (or ‘proto-cubist’) way from various perspectives reflects multiple causality. The
frequent repetitions and intracorporal echoes in Seneca contribute to the effect of a
kaleidoscope of causes. It is a salient feature of Senecan drama that philosophical concepts and poetics are mutually reinforcing.\textsuperscript{57}

In addition to being a particular conceptualization of how the universe works, the processes of poetic creation and reception are underwritten in Senecan drama by what I label ‘poetic confatalia.’ It is this dynamic, I believe, that prophecy’s failure, and poetry’s greater success, serves to illustrate in Senecan tragedy. In this schema, what has come before in the poetic tradition, coupled with the broad strokes of what must occur due to the familiar plotline from myth, represent the backdrop of \textit{fatum}—the already-determined workings of fate/divine will. Those elements of individual authorial choice that are not pre-determined have an analogue in the \textit{eph’hēmin} component. As the dissertation will argue throughout, in Senecan drama prophecy’s failures both derive from and dramatize cofatededness. Under this causal model, I argue, prophecy can only ever succeed in a limited way, since multiple unforeseeable factors are always at play: any single human action or utterance influences a given situation and immediately becomes part of \textit{fatum}, where it then goes on to participate in the ‘swarm of causes’\textsuperscript{58} as it forms the backdrop for subsequent outcomes.

Intersections of temporal modalities with the various levels of knowledge and multiple causation contribute to a sense of the already-known (déjà vu is frequent in Senecan tragedy), the can’t-be-known (opacity that is manifested in failed prophecy), and the known-too-late (irony and oracles). Recurring throughout this study is the idea that poetic creation and interpretation can substitute for what the vatic activity prophecy purports to offer, that is, knowing in advance. Prophecy aims at isolating a single correct meaning, which is never guaranteed until after the fact, while poetry lacks closure in the form of a single meaning and is not time-bound in the same kind of teleological way. But poetry also offers open-ended expansiveness: meaning that is not time- or context-bound, and that takes on new resonances with each engagement. It is with these limitations as well as possibilities in mind that this study analyzes Senecan tragedy through the malleable figure of the \textit{vates}.

\textsuperscript{57} Schiesaro labels this the ‘\textit{maius} motif’ (2003, pp. 31; 34-5). As chapter 1 discusses, this motif is at play on the intertextual level, in an author’s instinct to outdo literary precedents; it also characterizes the logic of revenge, which is based not on paying back in kind but in surpassing the original injury.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{smēnos aitiōn}, Chrysippus’ term (\textit{SVF} 2.945).
What kind of *vates*, then, is Seneca? The question is not a simple one. Senecan poetics has historically been a neglected or misunderstood subject. From the time of Quintilian until quite recently, critics tended to dismiss Seneca as unworthy of being taken seriously *qua* poet. His style was said to be rhetorically heavy-handed and derivative, and the content of his plays was gruesome and morally problematic. Only relatively recently, in the last quarter of the 20th century, has a more nuanced picture emerged, as scholars have begun to study Seneca within his literary, historical, and intellectual milieux, and (more rarely) holistically, in relation to his prose output.59 The relationship between the Stoic philosopher, the political player, and the tragic poet is complex; in fact, at various points it has been thought that some or all of these figures must be distinct Senecas. Yet poetry is never far from Seneca’s mind. In his prose works, he frequently quotes from, *inter alios*, Homer, Euripides, Vergil, and Ovid in order to illustrate and bolster the effectiveness of philosophical points (moral philosophy but also other branches, such as natural science). Seneca’s ‘philosophy’ of his own poetics is more elusive. Nowhere does Seneca explicitly articulate his guiding principles, and he gives only occasional glimpses of his poetic theory.

A relevant quote (or paraphrase) from Cleanthes seems to underpin Seneca’s poetic motivations.60

‘Nam,’ ut dicebat Cleanthes, ‘quemadmodum spiritus noster clariorem sonum reddit, cum illum tuba per longi canalis angustias tractum patentiore novissime exitu effudit, sic sensus nostros clariores carminis ars necessitas efficit.’

‘For,’ as Cleanthes used to say, ‘just as our breath returns a clearer sound when a trumpet channels it through a narrow passage which grows wider at the end, in the same way, the strictures of poetry’s demands render our thoughts clearer.’ (*Ep. 108.10*)

Some ideas are only expressible via poetry, but in one of many (unofficial) Stoic paradoxes, poetry is *both* clearer and more inherently ambiguous than prose.61 A few other references

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59 For recent forays into the interactions between Seneca’s various literary—philosophical pursuits, see Volk and Williams (eds., 2006), esp. Ker’s contribution on Seneca’s ‘many genres’, both prose and poetic; and Bartsch and Wray (2009).
60 On the passage see De Lacy, who does not in any case apply the notion to Senecan poetry (1948, p. 271).
61 To what extent, and in what ways, the prose works and poetry should be seen as in dialogue with each other are hotly debated questions among Senecan scholars.
reveal Seneca’s sense of his relationship to poetic predecessors. Seneca deploys a vivid metaphor, along with a Vergilian quotation, to argue for selective pluralism:

Apes, ut aiunt, debemus imitari, quae vagantur et flores ad mel faciendum idoneos carpunt, deinde quidquid attulere disponunt ac per favos digerunt 'liquentia mella / stipant et dulci distendunt nectare cellas.'

We should imitate the bees, who flit around and select those flowers most suitable for making honey, then arrange and distribute through the combs whatever they’ve brought back; as our poet Vergil says, [these bees] 'pack full the flowing honey, and swell the cells to bursting with sweet nectar.' (Ep. 84.2)

Like bees gather nectar from different types of flowers, then convert this raw material into the finished product of honey by a biochemical process of digestion, the poet must look to various models rather than be slavishly devoted to a single exemplar—even one that is considered most worthy of imitation—in order to create an original work. This partially unconscious process of culling will ideally, through additional synthesis, produce a finished product that surpasses its predecessors. Recent studies have isolated Seneca’s dexterous handling of poetic models—Attic tragedy, but also Latin poetry, both drama and (especially) the works of Vergil, Ovid, and Horace. In the same letter, an analogy of the multi-voiced chorus that combines to sound like one entity illustrates this pluralism in a different way. Here, Seneca uses a theatrical paradigm to refer to the experience of ancient philosophers—a striking detail given Seneca’s own dual status as philosopher and tragic poet. The choral metaphor draws pointed attention to the dynamics of accretion over time: now there are even more voices, because of the gathered force of all of the past models. Seneca is explicit that he himself strives to follow this example of blending disparate elements into a harmonious whole, and emphasizes that it is only with constant practice (adsidua intentione) and with ratio that one might achieve this goal.

Apart from these few scattered references, however, one must go to Senecan poetry itself in order to piece together his views on the intricacies of poetics. As the dissertation will discuss, Seneca engineers his plays in such a way that stylistic and

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62 Ep. 84.2-3. See Perry (2002) as well as Fantham (1978). The fact that Seneca is quoting from Vergil’s Aeneid (1.432-3), which compares the building of Carthage’s theater to the work of bees, to illustrate his point about a poet’s models adds a layer of subtle poetic (and specifically, dramatic) nuance to Seneca’s poetic prescriptions.

63 See especially Tarrant’s seminal study (1976). On Seneca’s relationship with Augustan poetry, see Trinacty (forthcoming).

64 Non vides, quam multorum vocibus chorus constet?, Ep. 84.9-10.

65 Ep. 84.11.
thematic elements are mutually informing. We have already noted that Seneca often presents a scene more than once, from more than one perspective. Through this multi-voiced dialogism, Seneca effectively stages internal debates on various themes (including on poetics) without definitively privileging one over another. In Seneca, things do not only happen often; they also happen to extremes. Various characters are shown as self-consciously striving to outdo their precedents, normally by being more nefarious. The phenomenon of *escalatio*, which Schiesaro labels the 'maius-motif', parallels the *aemulatio* in which poets must engage in order to distinguish their work from previous iterations. Seneca was not content with, nor is Senecan poetry fully explainable by, the Stoic exegetical tools of *allegoresis* and etymology—tools which, like divination, aim at isolating a single definitive meaning.

As was mentioned above, the Augustan *vates* interprets contemporary political and social events through the past in an attempt to shape future interpretation. To be sure, ideological material forms an undercurrent of Seneca’s tragedies, even though it is encoded through the mediating ‘escape valve’ of Greek myth. Seneca redefines the notion of the *vates* to encompass not only themes of contemporary topical relevance (for example, the uses and abuses of power) but also to elucidate philosophical ideas that are not time- or context-bound. The idea that Seneca’s poetry can reflect (or refract) Stoic thought is not new: studies on Stoic moral philosophy as an informing presence on the tragedies have been predominant, while Rosenmeyer’s contribution on the interactions between Senecan tragedy and Stoic cosmology has added another useful dimension to the interpretive picture. But the idea that Seneca’s plays dramatize how a play can serve as a philosophical vehicle that can succeed in ways that a prose treatise cannot has not to date been thoroughly explored. One aim of this dissertation is to make an foray into this line of thought via the malleable figure of the *vates* whom, I argue, Seneca deploys to engage in productive ways with various branches of philosophy: moral, natural–scientific,

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67 De Lacy (1948) notes Seneca’s dissatisfaction with allegoresis and etymology; this attitude separates Seneca from near-contemporary Stoic poets such as Cornutus, for whom these interpretive tools are key. On Cornutus and literary criticism, see Struck (2004).
68 For the sentiment that poetry can communicate certain ideas that prose is not able to communicate, see *Ep.* 108.10 (quoted above). On my view, drama presents an especially effective way to stage philosophical debates, since its various characters and choruses speak *viva voce* and can be heard ‘speaking to’ each other even across scenes (at least, from the perspective of the author and audience, with their more panoptic viewpoint).
cosmology, as well as aesthetics and poetics. Within these rubrics, Seneca’s characters are cast in multi-voiced debates on issues of fate, foreknowledge, human–divine relations, hermeneutics, and the self—all issues that loom large in Seneca’s explicitly philosophical works. While Stoicism forms the backdrop for many of these ideas, the Stoa is far from the only influence; indeed, many characters and choruses challenge the prevailing Stoic views and echo the tenets of other philosophical schools. Through these figures, Seneca is able to comment on the play of interpretation (its possibilities and its limits)—specifically, the human ability to shape the unseen future via writing and interpreting *fatum*.

In Senecan tragedy, prophetic activity operates on three levels (heavenly; infernal; terrestrial), each with its own representatives. These vatic agents do not, however, stay within the bounds of their respective realms but often travel fluidly between the realms—a phenomenon I refer to as ‘vertical displacement’. Along these lines, the structure of my dissertation moves from the traditional Apolline prophet (Chapter 1) to the infernal *vates* (Chapter 2) to human figures who appropriate vatic functions but who are not, *stricto sensu*, prophets since they do not claim that divine authority underlies their utterances (Chapters 3, 4, and 5). The first chapter analyzes how Seneca’s traditional prophets display flawed or limited foreknowledge. Calchas, the Argive seer par excellence, is an ineffectual prophet in Seneca’s *Troades*. His role as *interpres deum* is largely redundant; it usurped by several characters before two Trojan youths subvert the entire apparatus of *fatum* in the dramatic final act. Seneca’s *Oedipus* stages a set of failed divinatory attempts. The father-daughter prophetic pair Tiresias and Manto are unable to bring to light the identity of Laius’ murderer using traditional prophetic means. Both figures’ powers of perception and interpretation fall short; the chain of ever-more-invasive divinatory tactics that ensues includes an elaborate (and frustrated) *extispicium* which comprises one-fifth of the play and culminates in a necromancy. But where prophets cannot succeed, poets can prove more successful—a sentiment that is dramatized effectively in Cassandra, whom Seneca deploys as a dual prophet–poet figure. This self-professed *falsa vates* describes the death of Agamemnon in two successive visions. In the first, she is an unwilling prophet, and the details of her vision are murky. In the second, far clearer version, she narrates the murder simultaneously as it occurs, interprets it with rhetorical and poetic sophistication, and plans to re-tell it to her fellow Trojans after her death. Cassandra’s shortcomings as
prophet and comparatively greater autonomy as poet gesture toward the heightened degrees of insight and freedom that poetry can offer versus prophecy.

Where traditional prophets fail (at least in their prophetic guises), other ‘non-prophet’ figures take on vatic roles, and the remainder of the dissertation analyzes these analogues. Taking the typology of the infernal vates as a starting point, chapter 2 argues that Senecan ghosts and furies can be seen as vatic stand-ins. The underworld of Senecan tragedy offers a repository for nonlinear models of time, where infernal figures have fluid access to the past and future, including to the vast stores of mytho-poetic knowledge. Infernal vates inhabit a superordinate status with respect to the events of the play. In his choice to have ghosts and furies deliver prologues which seem to offer prolepseis of the coming play, Seneca’s infernal figures act as prophet-substitutes as well as poets. In the Thyestes, for example, the dual prologists Tantalus (in ghost form) and Furia give a foretaste of the tragedy’s climactic scene. Yet in Seneca, the content of these prologues does not ever come to pass in a straightforward way; other factors interrupt what appears to be fixed fatum. As Seneca’s tragedies suggest, the knowledge of the underworld is abstruse and dangerous—and necessary.

So far, the vatic figures in Senecan tragedy have fallen under the rubrics of Apolline prophet and infernal substitute. To complete the progression Olympian—underworldly—terrestrial, the three remaining chapters treat vatic stand-ins who operate on the human plane, and who strive to attain primarily prophetic knowledge but rather self-knowledge. These characters’ motivations range from vengefulness (Atreus and Medea) to the desire for autonomy (Hercules, Oedipus, Ulysses) to self-possession in the face of danger (Astyanax and Polyxena). Each offers an alternative to traditional prophecy that calls into question the power of fatum. Most do so via deliberate strategizing, though some (like Andromache) utter ‘incidental’ prophecies that, although unbeknownst to the speaker at the time, will foretell a later event. Medea and Atreus, (anti)heroes of Seneca’s revenge tragedies, claim not to need prophecy at all, since they style themselves as above the control of any natural or supernatural force. Atreus and Medea also present their actions in explicitly poetic terms, acting as dramaturge in the inset ‘plays-within’ which

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70 I also include the problematic goddess Juno, a hybride character who shares in Olympian and infernal elements, as well as in human fallibility. I treat the Juno–Hercules pair under the vatic-self rubric.
they engineer. Through the substitutive logic of vatic activity, the avengers comment on poetry’s ability to offer insight where prophecy fails. The avengers appear to be successful, since their revenge is exacted by the end of the play. But their confidence ultimately proves misguided: they cannot understand the larger patterns of talionic tragedy, which guarantee that too will eventually be at the mercy of causal forces beyond their grasp. The Trojan youths Polyxena and Astyanax also challenge *fatum*, but in an inadvertent way rather than due to vengeful desires. In the final act of Seneca’s *Troades*, the young Trojans’ exemplary actions as they anticipate their executioners subverts the entire prophetic-proleptic apparatus which has been set in motion from the play’s beginning. What is more, the prophecy that the Greeks will return home safely is undermined, which accords with the post-Trojan accounts of epic and tragic poetry. Trojan vengeance, then, is exacted on the Greeks inadvertently, in a kind of talio-by-proxy. In addition to undoing what had appeared to be fixed *fatum*, Polyxena and Astyanax also dramatize a way of writing into the future: as exempla who change the course of events, their actions will continue to resonate with subsequent audiences.

Juno and Hercules, the two main characters of Seneca’s *Hercules*, offer interesting perspectives on vatic success and failure. As displaced Olympian goddess of limited power, Juno must appeal to the underworld in order to take revenge on her stepson Hercules. Like Cassandra’s, Juno’s is a kind of vatic ‘super-role,’ where she is actor, dramaturge, prologuist, and furial figure. Rather than give a proleptic sketch, she articulates in minute detail her *plan* for the coming play which she presents as her own creation. Hercules, on the other hand, is oblivious to Juno’s machinations but ends up overthrowing her plot anyway. While Juno’s authorial role has been the focus of several recent discussions, that her intended plot is unsuccessful has been a surprisingly elided (though crucial) detail. I argue that the interplay between Juno and Hercules can productively be seen through the lens of *confatalia*. Both are constrained by *fatum*, and both struggle for self-determination against each other, and against their previous literary ‘selves’, in an illustration of the *eph’hēmin* component. If Hercules had followed through with his intended suicide, he would have fulfilled Juno’s prophecy-plot. Instead, in his decision to live on he thwarts her plan, thus pointing up the unforeseeable elements inherent in human choice. The play’s climax, moreover, reveals an element of choice, or *inventio*, in the autobiographical detail
which Seneca injects into his treatment of the Hercules myth. Hercules and Juno, in an unintentioned collaboration, each dramatize the inescapability of fatum in its mytho-literary guise, as well as the possibilities that inhere in a poet’s own creativity.

Seneca’s two Theban plays can be seen as the culmination of the many vatic strands that subtend his dramatic corpus, and the final chapter presents Seneca’s Oedipus as a case study in failed self-knowledge. Oedipus is a self-consciously vatic figure: having trumped the Sphinx as her interpres, he attempts to become a greater monstrum but is unsuccessful at being interpres fati sui. In setting his own enigma in which he is the riddle’s setter, its answer, and its decoder, Oedipus’ ‘hermeneutically incestuous’ role mirrors his actual incestuous identity. Oedipus is at pains to avoid his fate, but despite his cleverness and his access to several modes of recondite knowledge, true understanding is denied him. Seneca’s Oedipus dramatizes how gnōthi seautōn, the well-known inscription that stands at the entrance of the oracle at Delphi, is both the simplest and the most elusive of Delphic pronouncements. The second half of Chapter 5 presents a final problem with prophecy. Oedipus claims to have ‘overfulfilled’ what the Delphic oracle foretold by killing his mother (in addition to killing his father, and mating with his mother). I propose that we can think of Seneca’s treatment of the Oedipus legend twice as an analogous example of ‘overfulfilling’ his authorial project. The Phoenissae can be seen as an intracorporal reception piece that allows Seneca to rewrite Seneca. Moreover, the interrelationships between the two Theban plays and their models compel us to reflect on some overarching questions of a poet’s relationship with fatum. The layered prophetic scenes that are embedded within a poetic text or dramatic performance in turn point to the challenges, and rewards, of an activity that can substitute for foreknowledge: interpretation.
CHAPTER 1

Seneca’s Prophets: A Model of Failure

Prophets serve as intermediaries between gods and humans and have the task of communicating the divine will or fate. They often provide warnings or convey other information to humans—although, of course, the messages they convey are often misunderstood. Oracles and prophets in Greek tragedy and in epic tend to be ‘successful’ (that is, their prophecies come true, whether or not they are initially believed). Yet, as I argue in this chapter, the presentation of prophecy is markedly different in Senecan drama. Seneca’s tragedies feature three (or four) prophets: Calchas in the Troades; Tiresias and Manto (who function as one mantic unit) in the Oedipus; and Cassandra in the Agamemnon. Treating these prophets under a single rubric, that of the traditional prophet, I elucidate how Senecan prophets fail to deliver complete, unerring prophecies and examine what implications this has for larger issues of Senecan poetics. Self-doubt about their own prophetic abilities further contributes to this atmosphere of vatic failure. These figures serve structuring as well as thematic roles. On the structural level, they join the dramatic action at times, or they point to their own redundancy as prophets as they are usurped by other figures. On the level of thematics, they dramatize the always-limited quality of human foreknowledge, and (by virtue of their failures) set up the alternatives to such knowledge. Seneca uses his prophets to engage with the larger mytho-literary tradition by pointing up the consistencies with and deviations from previous Cassandra, Tiresias, and Calchas figures. And through the overlapping and mutually distinct resonances of vates as poet and prophet, Seneca comments on issues of poetic creation and reception.

Although all of the Senecan prophets ultimately fail to deliver clear, unambiguous accounts of future occurrences, their failures allow for substitute vatic figures, and actions, to assume the traditional prophetic roles and operations. But in Seneca, prophets and poets are not always mutually exclusive. One such crossover figure is Cassandra, who actually plays the role of both prophet and poet in two successive visions. Her failures as
prophet, but greater degree of autonomy as poet figure, indicate that Seneca’s ‘problematic’ prophets do not lead to dead ends—far from it. Rather, their failures both engender and comment on the creation of more (and more innovative) poetry, and the gaps between what is expected and what actually proves true force the audience to contend with human knowledge and power as always-limited enterprises. Recurring throughout this chapter, as throughout the dissertation, is the idea that vatic failure draws attention to what I see as the larger matrix of causality at play in Senecan tragedy: there is no single cause attributable to a given event, but rather, events are co-motivated. Prophecy’s flaws in Senecan tragedy, I argue, rest on a model of confatalia, in which agency is shared between human agents and supra-human forces of nature, god, and/or fate. This model of shared causality on the level of dramatic action points to a corresponding ‘poetic confatalia’, where the constraints placed on a given iteration of poetry by generic considerations and the basic plotline of the myth are in constant tension with the unpredictable elements of authorial creation.

The order in which I treat the prophets of this chapter is ascending in terms of the level of involvement in the dramatic action and corresponding degree of agency. We begin with Calchas, who in the Troades delivers a brief monologue demanding the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena, but without engaging in actual prophecy. His role is largely redundant, though the scene does function as a juncture point of the play, and his failures pave the way for others to usurp the prophetic role. Next, I turn to the extended trifold divination scene of the Oedipus, where the prophets Tiresias and Manto are unsuccessful at ascertaining the name of Laius’ murderer. The third prophet in this progression is Cassandra. In her first account of Agamemnon’s murder, an inspired prophetic vision, she is far less successful or autonomous than in the reprise, which is a running commentary narration of what she is actually seeing. As I will argue, in her complex role as both prophet and poet, Cassandra can be seen as a kind of vatic ‘super-role’ figure. In the problems that these other prophets experience resides the suggestion that attempted foreknowledge is not always an advisable enterprise after all, and that other avenues may be better candidates for accessing hidden information.
Calchas: *interpres deum?*

Calchas, the Argive seer *par excellence* familiar from epic and tragedy, appears only briefly in Senecan drama. In his eleven-line speech in the *Troades*, he announces that the fates demand the sacrifice of two Trojan youths in order for the Greek fleet to set sail. Calchas’ role as prophet in Seneca’s *Troades* is largely redundant, since other non-prophet figures and forces guarantee (either before Calchas’ appearance or after) what he utters: the requisite deaths of two young Trojans. At the same time, Calchas’ appearance provides an important structural link, or ‘seam,’ on both the level of dramatic action and the meta-levels of poetics, where it lays bare salient aspects of the poetic composition. And there is more to the prophet’s words than first meets the eye. While readers of the *Troades* generally assumed that the demands of fate have been fulfilled by the end of the play, the events of the final act call into question whether these requirements have in fact been met. Calchas’ role as traditionally authoritative prophet serves to underscore that the two sacrifices are necessary and sufficient conditions for the Greek fleet to be able to return home in safety. But what actually happens tells a different story, and, I believe, dramatizes that even what is apparently fated can be changed due to a variety of factors. Seneca puts prophecy in the service of poetic and philosophical goals; the fact that his Calchas fails where his prototypes succeeded suggests a different model of the universe than was at play in Greek tragedy and epic. In this disparity we can learn a great deal about Seneca’s views of poetics, causality, and hermeneutics.

Before we turn to examine Calchas in Senecan drama, a brief look at his appearances in earlier poetry will help to orient the discussion. Calchas’ literary pedigree extends back to Homeric epic, where he is considered the wisest of the official seers for the Greeks during the Trojan War.\(^7\) His deeds include predicting the number of years of the Trojan War and explaining how Apollo’s wrath might be averted—i.e., the return of Chryses’ daughter to Agamemnon, which enrages Achilles and prompts their infamous quarrel. Though Calchas’ mediating advice is sought after, it is not always met with enthusiasm. In the *Iliad*, Achilles calls him a prophet of evils (μάντης κακών) and says that he never prophesies anything good.\(^8\) At the same time, that the seer’s orders are by and

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\(^7\) *Iliad* 1.69ff; 2.300-322; 13.70.

\(^8\) *Iliad* 1.105.
large fulfilled, even when they are unpopular, is a mark of his prophetic authority.

Calchas’ characterization in Homeric epic also points to an important element of vatic figures more generally: access to memories of the past, insight into the present, and knowledge of what is to come. As negotiators of the intersecting axes of knowledge and time, prophets are necessary, even if they are at times feared, hated, or disbelieved, due to humans’ refusal to accept potentially unwelcome news.

In contrast to the rich body of myths on how other seers, such as Cassandra and Tiresias, received their prophetic gifts, the accounts are silent on the origin of Calchas’ mantic ability. Generally speaking, he engages in intuitive divination, but he also at times interprets the flights of birds (ornithomancy) and other omens. Calchas also makes numerous appearances in Greek tragedy, where again a mainstay of his role is to serve as the mouthpiece of Apollo, or fate. This can take the form of uttering demands that are necessary but painful—the prime example being the sacrifice of Iphigenia that must precede the launch of the Greek fleet from Aulis. In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Calchas’ interpretation of the signs that Agamemnon will come home is overshadowed by Cassandra’s more spectacular inspired prophecy. The authority Calchas carries in his person means that when he speaks, people know that his words are ratified by divine authority. He is also the voice of poetic necessity, another form of *fatum*: as audiences (but not necessarily characters in a play) know, his prophecies always come to pass.

In pre-Senecan Latin poetry, Calchas retains his identity as the preeminent Argive seer. The picture is complicated, however, in the *Aeneid*, where Sinon uses the traditional authority of Calchas to spin a false tale about the wooden horse. Putting words in Calchas’ mouth that the seer had ordered the death of one of the Greeks (whose identity he does not however disclose), Sinon claims that he himself was chosen by the Greeks to be a scapegoat. The dishonest Sinon actually reinforces Calchas’ authority by alluding to his classic attributes: he is the bearer of unwelcome news, and (an element that is often

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74 Aesch. *Aga.* 201ff. In this play, Achilles’ famous pronouncement that a seer is one who ‘tells the truth sometimes,’ is applied to Calchas. For the notion that seers are untrustworthy and divination in general is unreliable and/or dangerous, see Eur., *Helen* 745-755 and Soph., *Oedipus Tyrannos, passim*—though, as audiences know, the substance of the divinatory inquiry always proves true, even if it is not anticipated by the characters. In comedy, and, at times, in other genres (e.g. satire, history, and philosophy), seers are attacked as quacks: they have no real mantic ability and are only interested in duping people for money.
75 *Aen.* 2.185ff.
related) is reluctant to tell the full truth. Calchas returns to his more standard presentation in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where he correctly interprets the length of time it will take to capture Troy and orders the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Ovid adds that the virgin Iphigenia’s blood placates the virgin Diana, and that Calchas always orders this kind of sacrifice. Yet Ovid also cites the alternative version of Diana’s substitution of a deer for Iphigenia, a detail that is in keeping with his overarching focus on animal–human metamorphosis, and that perhaps reflects a ‘lighter’ elegiac mode in contrast to a more savage worlds of tragedy or epic. Iphigenia and Polyxena are similarly presented as interchangeable sacrificial victims throughout much of Greek and Latin literature—and Calchas is normally a background presence as the one who declared the divine edict. As the Elder Seneca’s notice suggests, the question of whether to sacrifice Iphigenia was a common topic for declamatory exercises; as mouthpiece of fate, Calchas both orders the slaughter and presides over it: *deliberat Agamemnon an Iphigeniam immolet negante Calchante aliter navigari fas esse.*

In Seneca’s *Troades*, Calchas has a bit part, virtually a cameo. In contrast to his usual role of speaking to power, Seneca’s Calchas does not converse with any other characters but delivers an eleven-line monologue. The brevity of his appearance, along with the redundancy factor I will discuss, point to the problems that attend traditional prophecy. Seneca’s *Troades* is set after the Trojan War, when the Greek fleet is preparing for its various *nostoi*. As with the sailing to Troy from Aulis at the start of the Trojan War, virgin blood is similarly demanded this time: in act 2, the herald announces to the chorus that the Achilles’ ghost has risen from the underworld to demand that Polyxena serve as his infernal bride and that until then, the Greeks will not be able to set sail homeward.

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76 Smith (1999) on the Sinon scene in the *Aeneid*. For Calchas’ role in particular, see Austin (1964) and Manuwald (1985). Manuwald observes the substitution of Calchas in this scene for the traditional Helenus, emphasizing that Calchas is chosen for Sinon’s tale because of his usual link with ordering human sacrifice (pp. 192-196; 199-200). O’Hara (1990) does not mention this scene in his study of prophecy in the *Aeneid*. 77 *Met.* 12.19ff.
78 *nec enim nescivte tacetve / sanguine virgineo placandam virginis iram / esse deae*, *Met.* 12.27-29.
79 Or ‘softer’, or more playful, as the common generic marker *levi* suggests.
80 The substitution of a stag for Iphigenia at the moment of sacrifice is attested in vase paintings from at least 5th c. B.C.E. and is also depicted in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris*. By putting the myth in the mouth of anonymous sources (*accipient*), Ovid leaves open to interpretation whether in fact it was Iphigenia or the deer who was actually killed.
81 *Sen.* *Sua* s. 3.
82 *desponsa nostris cineribus Polyxene / manu mactetur et tumulum riget*, *Tro.* 195-6. For the full scene, see *Tro.* 168-202.
Next comes an *altercatio* between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon over the very issue that has just been articulated by the ghost (apparently unbeknownst to them). As a matter of filial piety, Pyrrhus argues that the virgin should be slain to honor his father, who deserves a bride in the afterlife. This Agamemnon is vastly different from the antagonistic king familiar from the *Iliad* and Greek tragedy. In Seneca’s revisionist version, he is recast as the wise king who shows compassion even to his foes. To settle the argument, the king does not impose his will, even though he could (as he points out), but instead proposes to refer the issue to the fates:

*AG.* compescere equidem verba et audacem malo
poteram domare; sed meus captis quoque
scit parcere ensis. potius interpres deum
Calchas vocetur: fata si possunt, dabo. (*Tro.* 349-52)

AG. If I wanted to, I could halt your words and tame your boldness; but *my* sword also knows how to spare captives. Instead, let Calchas, spokesman of the gods, be summoned. If the fates order it, I’ll assent.

Though Calchas’ demands have cost him dearly in the past, Agamemnon promises in advance to heed the prophet’s words. After being summoned, Calchas immediately appears and gives the content of what is required. After his short speech, he withdraws completely from the action:

*CA.* Dant fata Danais quo solent pretio viam:
maetanda virgo est Thessali busto ducis;
sed quo iugari Thessalae cultu solent
Ionidesve vel Mycenaeae nurus,
Pyrrhus parenti coniugem tradat suo:
sic rite dabitur. Non tamen nostras tenet
haec una puppes causa: nobilior tuo,
Polyxene, cruore debetur cruer
quem fata quaeentur, turre de summa cadat
Priami nepos Hectoreus et letum oppetat.
tum mille velis impleat classis freta. (*Tro.* 360-370)

CA. Fate provides a way at the normal cost: a virgin must be sacrificed to the tomb of Achilles. And Pyrrhus

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83 See chapter 3 for a fuller treatment of the Pyrrhus–Agamemnon debate.
85 As he himself declares: *sed meus captis quoque / scit parcere ensis*, *Tro.* 349-50. See Herington (1966) for the characterization of this ‘strangely subdued and gentle’ Agamemnon versus the Aeschylean one who had few qualms about sacrificing his own daughter. The Agamemnon of Seneca’s *Troades* is also a much different character from the antagonistic, yet naïve, one who appears in Seneca’s *Agamemnon.*
must hand over his father’s spouse clad in the dress in which Thessalian brides are normally married (or Ionian ones, or Argive ones)—so she’ll be given according to due rite. But it is not this one cause alone that detains our ships: Blood more noble than yours, Polynxena, is owed. The one Fate demands, grandson of Priam, son of Hector, must fall from the tower’s heights and must meet his death. Afterward, let the fleet with its thousand sails swell the seas.

At first, Calchas’ presence seems superfluous at this point in the play. After all, the ghost has already declared the necessary sacrifice of Polynxena by the time the prophet appears, and in the debate between the two leaders over whether Achilles deserves a bride in the underworld, Agamemnon has agreed in advance to do whatever the fates might command. So, vatic authority is doubly pre-cued by the two episodes that immediately precede the actual prophetic appearance. The redundant element, in conjunction with Calchas’ stand-alone quality, further suggests that prophecy is unnecessary. What is more, the specifics of the demands are common knowledge from the mytho-literary tradition—a different type of redundancy, and of fatum. Seneca’s Calchas, however, offers an additional element that is not prepared for, either by what has come before in this particular play or in any single treatment of the post-Troy legend. Not only must Polynxena be sacrificed this time, but Astyanax must also be killed. Even in his brief speech, Calchas manages to offer his own moral commentary on the double slaughter (duplex nefas), as the comparative nobilior cruor indicates. On the one hand, the comparative refers to Astyanax; as heir to the Trojan kingdom, he must not be allowed to live. Yet the term can also be seen through a metaliterary lens. We should recall that Seneca often uses comparatives and superlatives to emphasize his innovations. Here, the innovation takes the simultaneous form of a greater number (two victims) and a worse degree of horror (paradoxically, given the positive valence of nobilis). The speech of Calchas, mouthpiece of fate and of Seneca, both motivates and proleptically joins the deaths of Polynxena and Astyanax before their combined death scene in front of the Greek and Trojan audience.

Seneca’s Calchas is indispensable not as a prophet, since what he says is guaranteed by other entities and will be called into question in a radical way, but as a structuring entity and as a visible marker of poetic design. On the level of poetic structure,

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86 Tro. 524ff. and 663; 754.
Calchas’ speech functions as a join, or seam, in the play.\(^{87}\) In Attic tragedy the compulsory sacrifices of Polyxena and Astyanax never feature in the same work: of the extant post-Trojan plays, Sophocles’ *Polyxena*\(^{88}\) and Euripides’ *Hecuba* deal with the sacrifice of Polyxena, while Euripides’ *Troades* treats Astyanax’s death.\(^{89}\) The prophet’s speech, then, does the work of condensing two episodes that had never previously appeared in a single work by repackaging them into a single treatment. Among Seneca’s Latin models, Ovid had also treated the post-Trojan war events in the *Metamorphoses*, where the two deaths feature in the same work but in different episodes. In Ovid’s account, the death of Astyanax occurs first and is narrated in a very few lines,\(^{90}\) followed by the more dramatic death of Polyxena, a scene which occupies more than fifty lines.\(^{91}\) Ovid apparently views Polyxena’s death as weightier, or more relevant to his own poetic goals, a fact that is underscored by the prominence he accords to her by giving her more lines and a speaking role.\(^{92}\)

The Senecan treatment nods to Ovid’s: he follows the Ovidian order of the two youths’ deaths but gives the two figures roughly equal treatment within the dramatic action. As was mentioned above, however, the Trojan prince is the more important of the two (at least, according to Seneca’s Calchas; Seneca equalizes them), whereas Polyxena

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\(^{87}\) Schetter calls the scene a ‘kompositorischen Angelpunkt’ (1972, p. 275); cf. Fantham’s ‘point of junction’ (1982a, p. 260). By ‘join’ I am thinking more of a formal element in the play’s mechanical construction; by ‘seam’ I mean a bonding of the thematic elements. As we see here, the two are not mutually exclusive.

\(^{88}\) Of what we have of the fragments of this play, it does not appear to feature the death of Astyanax, nor does it include Calchas.

\(^{89}\) Calchas does not, however, play a role in either Euripidean tragedy, though he is in the background as the one who speaks for the god.

\(^{90}\) *Dardanidas matres patriorum signa deorum,/ dum licet, amplexas succensaque templo tenentes / invidiosa trahunt victores praemia Grai; / mittitur Astyanax illis de turribus, unde / pugnante pro se proavitaque regna tuentem saepe videre patrem monstratum a matre solebat*, Met. 13.412-417. Note the embedded reference to Homeric teichoskopia, cued by a form of *sole*, which is a common metalexaggeration marker.

\(^{91}\) *Met. 13.441-480.* There is also a strong linguistic echo in the phrase *leve vulgus* (*Met. 12.53*), just after Iphigenia’s death in the Fama episode. This phrase also occurs in the Polyxena-Astyanax death scene in *Tro. 1128-9:* *magna pars vulgi levius / odit scelus spectatue.* Interestingly, too, Ovid’s Fama occupies the part of the world that is traditionally accorded to the Delphic oracle: its exact center (*orbe locus medio est*).

\(^{92}\) It should be noted that Calchas does not appear in Ovid’s episodes of Polyxena or Astyanax as he does in his account of Iphigenia. In *Met. 12,* the seer successfully interprets an allegorical portent of a snake devouring nine birds. While the other Greeks are at a loss to figure out the omen, Calchas correctly divines that each victim stands for one year of the Trojan war, and that the snake represents the ultimate Greek victory in the tenth year (*Met. 12.18-21*): *at non Thestorides [i.e. Calchas]*: *nec enim nescivit tacetve / sanguine virgineo placandam virginis iram / esse deae...* (*Met. 12.27-29*). Both Vergil and Ovid display the seer’s interpretive skills to full effect, in keeping with the Greek epic and tragic tradition. Seneca will deviate from this model by presenting a different Calchas whose prophecies are challenged, though this only becomes clear in the play’s final scene.
seemed more important to Ovid. This fact suggests that the patterns of exempla can substitute for prophetic knowledge: Calchas may not literally be able to see into the future to know that Astyanax would grow to become futurus Hector, but he knows from past occurrences that if the boy is allowed to live, another generation of Greek–Trojan conflict is inevitable. How Seneca depicts these two human sacrifices recalls the paradigmatic death of Iphigenia in Greek tragedy and in Augustan poetry. His Calchas is interpres fati in a literary-historical sense: he mediates between the ‘original’ murder–sacrifice of Iphigenia and various accounts of the similar ones of Polyxena and of Astyanax, or, to put it another way, between Seneca and his many Attic and Augustan models. Seneca’s presentation, it should be said, dispenses with the divinatory apparatus: Calchas does not interpret or divine any signa but baldly states the requisite double sacrifice, after which he recedes from the dramatic action.

Calchas’ speech is arranged such that the above-mentioned junction is apparent when one is reading the play as a text. Of eleven lines, the first five-and-a-half deal with Polyxena’s death—the future tense verb dabitur cues what is expected from Achilles’ demands and from the agón between the Greek leaders. Exactly at the speech’s midpoint, and in the middle of the line, the focus switches abruptly to articulate the additional element of Astyanax’s sacrifice. The reasons behind the additional youth’s death Calchas leaves unspoken; at the same time, the prophet comments overtly that there are multiple causes (non...haec una...causa). Unprepared for by the drama up to this point, the speech of Calchas is often isolated by commentators as a flaw in Seneca’s dramatic machinery. Not only are his entrance and exit cues abrupt, as if he were picked up and inserted into, then removed from, the play in a clunky way, but the speech seems an attempt to join together too many elements in a short space. It is my contention, however, that the jarring

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93 And also audible, though perhaps less precisely, to a listening audience.
94 Here it is simply that the fates require it. The issue is later picked up by Ulysses, who offers a case for the killing out of political expediency. As I will more fully explicate in chapter 3, Ulysses sees in Astyanax a Hector futurus who must be eradicated. Even without the prophecy of Calchas, then, Astyanax would be killed, and likewise for Polyxena as exacted by Achilles’ ghost. Thus, interestingly, there are three motivations for the two deaths, each with a prophet or vatic substitute (ghost of Thyestes, Calchas, and Ulysses), each with different roles: the underworldly figure, the inspired Apolline prophet, and the mortal usurper. Subsequent chapters will more fully treat the substitute vatic figures of the Troades.
95 Stroh (in Fitch, 2009, pp. 206-7) offers several interesting possibilities for Calchas’ too-quick appearance, including that the seer was there all the time, observing the agón of Pyrrhus and Agamemnon: ‘[H]e must have been longing all the time to pronounce on the ritual sacrifice, which is so thoroughly a matter within his competence.’
quality of the sudden switch draws attention to the importance of this scene within the whole of the play, even as it points to Calchas’ own near-superfluous, and to the fact that his authority will be subverted. In that it isolates and juxtaposes two co-motivating strands—Seneca’s integration of poetic models and his own innovations—Calchas’ carefully balanced speech can be seen as a pièce en miniature that shows the process of poetic composition at work.

As was mentioned above, Calchas’ speech adds a coda of nefas—the young Trojan prince’s death—to the horrific death that is already planned for Polyxena. Schiesaro rightly identifies this additional horror as an example of the ‘maius motif’ that typifies Senecan poetics. In this auxesis of evil, the crimes of previous iterations are outdone by more horrific violence in degree, or number, or type. Here, the motif is signalled by the comparative ‘more noble’ (nobilior) blood than that of Polyxena. The double sacrifice is maius solito twice over: it recalls the sacrifice of Iphigenia but calls for the death of two victims this time, whereas previous works had featured one death each, and it equalizes the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena. When the duplex nefas is evaluated against the backdrop of what is familiar from the mytho-literary tradition, Calchas can be seen not only as the spokesman for fate (his normal vatic role) but also as an agent for the poet Seneca, who deploys the prophet to elucidate aspects of his own dramatic project. In other words, Calchas is a voice for fatum in its poetic as well as its poetic guise.

This complexity of the only scene of prophecy-by-a-prophet in Troades leaves many questions unanswered. For example: is Calchas an authoritative figure in the eyes of the Greeks? He certainly seems to carry weight, since Agamemnon agrees in advance to be bound by the seer’s words, and since the rata verba undo the king’s earlier assertion that enough punishment had already been exacted from Troy even before Polyxena’s sacrifice. And, as Fischer notes, the issue seems settled; there is no further discussion after the speech. On the other hand, the words of Apollo’s prophet are in a sense too late,
coming after Achilles’ pronouncement and the political debate. As subsequent chapters will discuss, they are to be further subverted by Ulysses’ appropriation of the prophetic role later in the play before they are subverted in a more radical way, by the exemplary actions of the Trojan youths. Scholars have recently drawn attention to Seneca’s technique of representing the same event from multiple viewpoints; Littlewood isolates this scene as one example of the phenomenon:

'[R]ather than condemning the agón [between Agamemnon and Pyrrhus] for ignoring the apparition [of Achilles] or the prophecy for making the preceding scenes redundant, a sympathetic reader observes the same event represented sequentially in different modes.'

The interpenetration of the two vatic activities—poetry and prophecy—is a distinctive feature of Senecan tragedy. As I argue throughout the dissertation, Seneca explores issues of human knowledge and causality through the pairing of these two vatic operations. The multiple overt and veiled prophecies, which are themselves embedded within layers of poetry, generates an echo chamber of resonances. Competing (and complementary) interpretations stand without resolution, essentially staging a debate on key ideas, even in the absence of an overt agonistic context.

The chorus of the Troades also serves as a vatic analogue, and individual odes present opportunities for interpretive dialogue on important issues. Immediately after Calchas’ final words, the first of two successive choral odes on death and the afterlife presents the view that Elysium awaits those who, like Priam and Hector, who are fortunate. The second chorus, on the other hand, concludes that there is no afterlife at all, just nothingness. I follow Fischer in adducing Calchas’ speech as part of the broader dialogue the play presents on issues surrounding human mortality and the afterlife. As subsequent chapters will lay out in detail, other characters in the Troades usurp and reinterpret the traditional prophetic role once Calchas has receded: Ulysses in act 3 and Polyxena and Astyanax, who in the final act will call into question the whole of the

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100 Cf. Lawall (1982).
101 mors individua est / ... quaeris quo iaces post obitum loco? / quo non nata iacent (Tro. 402; 407-8).
102 ‘Felix Priamus,’ dicimus omnes: / secum excedens sua regna tuit. / nunc Elysiis / nemoris tutis errat in umbras... Tro. 156ff. The matter is further complicated by the echoing of this subject of death and the afterlife (or not) in Seneca’s prose works.
prophetic machinery that has been in place since the prologue. Though Calchas has long
since disappeared from the action of the play by that point, he continues to function as an
unseen mediating force, offering motivation for, and commentary on, issues of fate and
foreknowledge, poetry and prophecy.

Boyle’s observations on factum’s resonances in Latin as ‘what has been said’ in
addition to ‘fate’ can help shed light on Calchas’ multifaceted role in play.\(^{104}\) Prophets are
well-equipped to transmit metaliterary knowledge, and as Boyle rightly notes: ‘Calchas
knows what must happen because it has already happened/been said—many times—in
the literary tradition.’\(^{105}\) But while Boyle would like to invest Calchas with an unfailing
sense of prophetic authority (in keeping with his traditional role in epic and tragedy,
where his prophecies always come true), I believe that Seneca deviates from Calchas’
normal role, and that this reveals a great deal about Seneca’s poetic project. What remains
tacit is arguably as important as what is spoken: the prophecies of this ‘problematic’
Calchas also offer a metaliterary nod to the seer’s long-lived role in the poetic tradition. In
the cyclic epic Nostoi, Calchas is outwitted by Mopsus in a contest of seers and
subsequently commits suicide. This is an ultimate prophetic sign-off gesture, literally a
self-fulfilling prophecy, since it confirms an oracle he had received years earlier, that he
would die when he met a prophet more gifted than himself.\(^{106}\) With respect to the literary
life cycle, too, Calchas has outlived—or ‘overlived,’ a term Wilson applies to a related
phenomenon in tragedy—this role as successful seer at this point.\(^{107}\)

The tradition of Calchas can be seen as having reached its apex long before
Seneca’s treatment, in a trajectory from his consistent prophetic success in the Iliad\(^{108}\) to
his eventual demise in the epic cycle. When Calchas is brought back by Seneca, it makes
sense that he would be weakened. After all, at this point he has outlived the span of his
‘natural’ literary life, and has been re-placed from his original Trojan context into Rome.
With respect to his imperfect mantic abilities, his foreknowledge is no longer applicable in
a post-Trojan world; now he can only tell the past. As I mentioned above, Seneca’s Calchas

\(^{104}\) Boyle (1994, p. 27). See also Bettini (2008).

\(^{105}\) Boyle (1994, p. 171).

\(^{106}\) Hes. fr. 278 M–W; Tzetze ad Lycophron, Alex. 427, 980.

\(^{107}\) The idea is of a piece with a generic feature: cyclic epic frequently presents itself as ‘belated’ by
resolving or complicating what occurs in Homer.

\(^{108}\) In Iliad 1 and 2 he is cursed as one who exploits prophecy for his own profit; nevertheless, his
predictions ultimately come true.
is shown to interpret *fatum* in both its prophetic and poetic senses. In this way, the Senecan prophet transcends his immediate role in the play to participate in the complex dynamics of literary history.\(^9\) Calchas is ‘revived’ for one additional brief mention in Senecan tragedy: in the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra mentions that he shuddered at his own prophetic utterance.\(^10\) This is an example of the internal (or ‘intrapersonal’) dialogism of Senecan tragedy whereby characters often make brief cameo appearances in a play other than the one in which they more prominently feature.\(^11\)

In addition to Calchas’ role as commenting on belatedness in the literary life cycle, Seneca also deploys him as a participant in the debates concerning causality. When set within the fuller ambit of the surrounding dramatic action of vatic usurpers, the Calchas episode reveals the multiple motivating strands of the causal apparatus. In fact, Calchas’ very words gesture toward confatalia: the plural fates take on the active role: they both provide a ‘way’ (*dant...viam*) and exact demands (*quaerunt*) in order for this passage to occur. What is more, human sacrifice is staged both as a repetition of and an arena for further *nefas*—both the already-written element and the element of free human action. Forms of *solet* often serve as metalexical markers that activate previous mytho-literary treatments; here the repetition of this term internally (twice within Calchas’ speech) further indicate the quality of iteration.\(^12\) This sacrifice will recall that of Iphigenia, but with one more requisite victim. Further, Calchas provides an explicit commentary on causality in his declaration that there is not one single reason for this demand, as the dramatic action thus far has also indicated: *non...haec una...causa*. Calchas knows, and the audience knows, that multiple causes are at play, even if other characters do not see this larger picture.

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\(^9\) See Ker (2009, p. 126ff) on death as a ‘literary-historical dynamic’ in Seneca’s tragedies. Here, however, instead of a ‘genre’ that is conscious of its own mortality, or, alternatively, of its own “overliving” (ibid., my emphasis; ‘overliving’ is Wilson’s term [2004]), we have a trans-generic *figure* famous throughout ancient literature who is unaware of having lived beyond his due literary apportionment. Seneca’s Cassandra is also aware of having outlived her usefulness as a prophet in a post-Trojan world, as the final section of this chapter proposes.

\(^10\) *horruit Calchas suae / responsa vocis et recedentes focos*, *Aga*. 167-8.

\(^11\) See also my introduction for more examples of Senecan cameos.

\(^12\) Pyrrhus has also invoked the ‘customised’ sacrifice by using *solet* in his attempt to persuade *Agamemnon* that this type of thing—sacrificing virgins to appease the gods—is acceptable, and in fact was done by Agamemnon himself; *Tro.* 246-9. In addition to its occurrence twice in Calchas’ speech, Seneca’s Medea uses the term in the first person as she comments on her customary exit by aerial chariot: *sic fugere soleo* (*Med.* 1022).
Seneca makes his Calchas do a great deal of work in the span of a very few lines. The scene itself is compact and densely packed with larger resonances, framed by an artistically balanced speech. Calchas is the mouthpiece of the divine plan, but he also interprets other resonances of fatum. Although Calchas fails as a prophet, he interprets, or at the very least transmits, aspects of the literary tradition and points us to a model of shared causality which is at play in Seneca more generally. As subsequent chapters will argue, Calchas the limited vates paves the way for other figures to add voices to the dialogue surrounding—and indeed, to challenge—fatum.

**Tiresias and Manto: *certa signa?***

In this section, we will examine Tiresias, the second of three traditional prophets of Senecan tragedy, whose divinatory efforts prove unsuccessful. In pre-Senecan myth and literature, he is generally presented as the best of the Theban seers, much as Calchas is the Argive prophet *par excellence*. In addition to his mantic abilities, he is classically famous for his long life (according to some accounts, he prophesied for seven or nine generations at Thebes, which explains his enduring presence throughout Theban myth); for having experienced life as both a man and a woman; and for his blindness, which he incurred as a punishment for revealing the gods’ secrets, or for viewing Hera naked. Seneca’s Tiresias engages in multiple divinatory activities—omen-interpreting, second-sight visions, ornithomancy—all of which prove unsuccessful. His successful prophetic record in earlier mytho-literary treatments serves to throw his limitations in Seneca’s *Oedipus* into sharp relief.

Before we turn to Seneca’s Tiresias, it may prove helpful to cite a few apposite examples of his appearances in earlier poetry. In the *Odyssey’s Nekyia*, Tiresias appears as more powerful than the other shades (he does not need to drink the sacrificial blood potion as others do) and comes up to Odysseus, recognizing him immediately. Tiresias is characterized as an unerring prophet, though one who is often disbelieved or whose advice is ignored; he is also reluctant to reveal the whole of what he knows, ostensibly

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113 Manto could be called the fourth, but as I will discuss, she does not appear independently of Tiresias, and so I am treating them as one vatic unit.

114 *Od*. 11.271ff.
because the news he brings is generally bad.\textsuperscript{115} In Sophocles' \textit{Oedipus Tyrannos}, for example, both Oedipus and the chorus pronounce their faith in his abilities,\textsuperscript{116} yet he is disbelieved by Jocasta (and later, by Oedipus) and feared by many for the truths he might reveal. Tiresias also appears in an advisory role in Aeschylus' \textit{Septem contra Thebas}, in Sophocles' \textit{Antigone}, and in Euripides' \textit{Bacchae}.\textsuperscript{117} Most often he does not appear actually engaging in divination (after all, he is blind), but reveals the will of the gods through gnomic statements or through warnings.\textsuperscript{118} An important pre-Senecan Latin appearance of Tiresias occurs in Ovid's \textit{Metamorphoses}, where his 'official' prophetic capacity is elided in favor of his more sensational aspects: his life as both man and woman and the origin of his prophetic gift—as compensation by Jupiter after he was blinded by Juno. Elsewhere in Latin literature, great (and often transgressive) knowledge and unfailing prophetic ability are the hallmark qualities of Tiresias.\textsuperscript{119}

Even before Tiresias’ first words in Seneca’s \textit{Oedipus}, he is upstaged by an Oedipus who appears to have some degree of prophetic (or at least intuitive) abilities. The protagonist seems aware on some level that he is responsible for the plague (\textit{fecimus caelum nocens}).\textsuperscript{120} As chapter 5 will discuss, Seneca’s Oedipus has a complex relationship with prophecy. Oedipus senses his guilt, but is not clear on either what caused the plague what needs to be done to end it, and so Creon is sent to consult the oracle of Delphi. When the response comes back with only partial information, leaving the identity of Laius’ murderer hidden, Oedipus decides to consult Tiresias. He arrives on the scene immediately and (apparently) without protest when summoned. At first glance, it seems as though his efforts to discover the identity of Laius’ murderer, and thus to fulfill the oracle’s prescription, might be successful. But this Tiresias’ flaws are evident from his first

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{115} Reluctance, or resistance, is a normal feature of inspired prophets; cf. Seneca’s Cassandra, who struggles against the god’s influence and seals her lips against his words (see below for the passage, and for discussion).
\item \textsuperscript{116} E.g. Soph. \textit{OT} 300-304: \textit{διά πάντα νωμόν Τειρεσία, διδακτά τε / άρρητά τ’}, οὐφράνια τε καὶ χθονοστιβῆ, / πόλιν μὲν, εὶ καὶ μὴ βλέπεις, φρονεῖς δ’ ὄμως / οία νόσω σύνεστιν.
\item \textsuperscript{117} In the \textit{Bacchae}, he and Cadmus, both old men who are devotees of Dionysus, are semi-comic figures. Despite the comic relief presented by his cross-dressing in women’s clothing and dancing, he does offer an important piece of information, that the Thebans should worship the god. Pentheus ignores this advice, to his detriment.
\item \textsuperscript{118} As Flower notes of the official Greek prophets: ‘Teeiresias, Calchas, and Melampus may have clashed with their employers, but their predictions were always proven true in the end.’ (2009, p. 242).
\item \textsuperscript{119} E.g. Cicero, \textit{de Div.} 1.40.
\item \textsuperscript{120} A knowledge that he of course shares Seneca’s own audience, which knows more than Oedipus himself. Chapter 5 will treat Seneca’s Oedipus as a case study of human limited (fore)knowledge.
\end{footnotes}
words: in contrast to the standard treatment in which he has access to privileged knowledge because of his physical blindness and subsequent gift of foresight, the Senecan seer has several impediments: he is slow of speech, limited in foresight, and unable to receive Apollo into his chest, ostensibly because of his old age:121

Ti. quod tarda fatu est lingua, quod quaeit moras, haud te quidem, magnanime, mirari addect:
visu carenti magna pars veri latet.
sed quo vocat me patria, quo Phoebus, sequar:
fata eruantur; si foret viridis mihi
calidusque sanguis, pectore exciperem deum. (Oed. 293-298)

Ti. That the tongue is slow to speak, that it seeks out delays, should hardly cause you amazement, great-hearted one:
For one who lacks vision, a great part of the truth remains hidden. But where my homeland calls me, where Phoebus calls, I will follow. The fates must be uprooted; if my blood were fresh and hot, I would receive god in my chest.

Oedipus’ words make it clear that he expects a definitive answer from Tiresias due to his relationship with the god, but Tiresias self-consciously professes his weaknesses and even suggests that Oedipus should already know his limitations. Tiresias’ articulation of his shortcomings as a prophet even before the prophetic inquiry is in itself a kind of foreknowledge. In other words, he is limited in mantic knowledge but knowledgeable about his limitations. This presentation of Tiresias, then, is clearly different from his normal characterization in epic and tragedy as authoritative seer.122 In addition to Tiresias’ initial words, Seneca gives further clues that prophecy’s problems will extend to other figures. Whereas in Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus he is summoned and led in by the king’s retainers, in Seneca’s Oedipus he appears on the scene of his own volition, possibly even independently from having been summoned,123 and must rely on his daughter Manto to be both his physical and interpretive guide.

121 Schiesaro rightly identifies this quality of Tiresias as a flawed vates and connects it to broader themes of silence and speaking, knowledge and tragedy (2003, p. 12). Tiresias is normally presented as aged, but not weak: the passage above also suggests that Seneca’s Tiresias is ‘old’ in the sense of having lived too long in the literary tradition (cf. Wilson’s model of ‘overliving’, with my comments on Calchas above).
122 Tiresias is, of course, inherently ambiguous himself, as he experiences life as both male and female at various points. Chapter 5 will return to the theme of hybridity in the Oedipus (in, e.g., the Sphinx, Oedipus, and Oedipus’ children).
123 Too suddenly, according to some, who note his ‘divine’ entrance as soon as he is summoned by Creon; cf. Calchas’ instantaneous entrance in Troades (see Braginton, 1933, pp. 43-4).
The deployment of Manto with her father is a Senecan innovation, and requires some contextualization. Notices of Manto are scarce in Greek texts, and for the most part she functions as a female appendage of her father Tiresias or as a personification of mantikē, as the etymology of her name suggests. She does not feature in Homeric epic or in tragedy; however, there is evidence that she appears in the cyclic epic Thebais, where she is given as a spoil to the Delphians by the Epigoni.\textsuperscript{124} She ends up at Colophon and according to some accounts is the mother of Mopsus.\textsuperscript{125} Among her Latin appearances, Vergil tells us that she is the mother by Tiberinus of Ocnus, the founder of Mantua and a Tuscan ally of Aeneas.\textsuperscript{126} Whether Vergil is the originator of the etymologized toponym of Mantua as from Manto is debatable; at any rate, he at least capitalizes on the connections between Aeneas, the nascent Italic gentes, and the Theban prophetess vis-à-vis his own birthplace. Here it is suggestive to think of Vergil qua vates as engineering a re-placement of tragic Thebes on Italian shores.\textsuperscript{127} To turn to Ovid, in the Metamorphoses a monitory Manto tries to warn the Theban women that they should propitiate Leto’s shrine. Most of the Theban women heed the advice; however, when Niobe ignores Manto and openly scorns the goddess, she is punished by the loss of her children.\textsuperscript{128} But Tiresias and Manto do not ever appear in tandem until Seneca’s Oedipus—one example of the combination and condensation that characterizes Senecan poetics.

The inclusion of Manto, Tiresias’ daughter who is a prophet herself, as a necessary supplement to Tiresias offers a contrastive foil to Seneca’s solo prophets. That Manto must narrate the signa she sees means an extra level of interpretive remove—and, as the inconclusive extispicy will prove, interpretive problems. An upshot of Tiresias’ entrance passage is that prophetic efficacy is questioned even before any attempt at divination. Tiresias’ initial self-doubting words (along with Manto’s necessary aid) function as a kind of proleptic cue to the audience to be attuned to his flawed mantic skills, as well as to prophecy’s failures more generally. As their abortive attempts at divination soon reveal, limited foreknowledge is the rule in this play. Senecan tragedy stages, time and again, how

\textsuperscript{125} There is a familiar pattern in Greek myth that mantic ability is transmitted through family lines.
\textsuperscript{126} Aen. 10.278-82.
\textsuperscript{127} His epitaph by Donatus, which is inscribed on his tombstone in Campania, famously declares his birth town: Mantua me genuit.
\textsuperscript{128} Met. 6.153ff. Niobe presents herself as above the power of Fortuna, a theme that will recur in Seneca’s tragedies in usurper figures such as Atreus and Medea (see Chapter 3).
interpretation’s problems are compounded as the layers of vatic activity (poetry and prophecy) multiply. On the other side, however, meaning is broadened as opportunity for creation expands; that is, since the later poet is interpreting through the many layers of the poetic tradition.

First comes an oracular consultation (which is not a part of the dramatic action), and since Tiresias is at a loss to ascertain the oracle’s meaning, a chain of attempts to bring to light the identity of Laius’ murderer ensues. This vatic progression forms a significant portion of the drama—about one-fifth, or an entire act’s worth. After lamenting his inability to receive inspired divination, Tiresias tries auspicy, then extispicy, in an elaborately constructed scene of interpreting the signa housed within a heifer. The ill-omened signs that attend the sacrificial preparations, even before the extispicy proper, point to the inconclusiveness of the outcome: for each of Tiresias’ questions in which he requests information about the signs she sees, Manto’s response is couched in convoluted speech that is characterized by questions and doubts; at the same time, there is a poetic quality to her diction. To cite one example of this, Manto’s description of the flame:

MA. Non una facies mobilis flammæ fuit:
imbrifera qualis implicat varios sibi
Iris colores, parte quae magna poli
curvata picto nuntiat nimbos sinu
(quis desit illi quive sit dubites color),
cærulea fulvis mixta oberravit notis,
sanguinea rursus; ultima in tenebras abit. (Oed. 314-20)

MA. No single face but a shifting one did the flame have:
As rain-bringer Iris intermingles colors into herself,
where, vaulting the expanse of the sky with her bow’s
palette she announces the rainclouds (you’d be unsure as to
what color is present or absent), so its blue meandered, mixed
in with yellows, then back to blood red; at the last, it tapered to
black.

The extended simile and allusion to Iris, along with the poetic compound imbrifera and golden or near-golden lines (Oed. 317, 319), further establish a densely poetic

129 Respuesta dubia sorte perplexa iacent...; ambage flexa Delphico mos est deo / arcana tegere. An injunction to exile Laius’ murder is revealed in the oracular response, but not the identity of the murderer himself. This leads to Oedipus’ unwitting self-curse, a stroke of Senecan irony (Oed. 221-222).
130 Oed. 299-402.
131 Bettini (1984); see also Busch (2007). Braginton (1933, p. 16) rightly sees Tiresias as ‘directing’ these divinatory rites.
atmosphere. More negative portents are revealed in Manto’s narration of what she sees: wine changes into blood, and a cloud of smoke settles on Oedipus’ head and blocks the light. But the more obscure the omens are to Manto and Tiresias, the clearer they become to an external audience that, armed with prior knowledge of the Oedipus story, can ‘solve’ the allegorical puzzle immediately.

Manto is not a very successful prophet, but she is arguably a better messenger, or poet, figure when she focalizes the scene for the benefit of various audiences. In this scene there is no time lapse, as is the case with normal messenger speeches; rather, Manto’s description operates in ‘running commentary’ mode, which Tietze adduces as characteristic of certain narrator figures within Senecan drama. Rather than presenting the action in ‘dramatic’ mode, as was the norm in Greek tragedy, Senecan tragedy often features passages of extended description in ‘narrative’ mode, which, like the aside, shatter dramatic plausibility by injecting the presence of the author into the descriptions. Here dramatic time is slowed to allow the minute details of the action to unfold; the retarding of the action also allows for multi-layered poetic expansion via description and allusion. The running commentary has implications for larger issues of Senecan poetics. Although some scholars have argued for these ‘static’ passages as indicia that Senecan tragedy was unsuitable for staged performance, and were rather intended for the recitatio—or

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132 For an extended analysis of the rainbow’s significance in this passage as an objective correlative of ambiguity, see Bettini (1983) and Busch (2007); Töchterle (1994, ad loc.) also notes the intertextual nature of Seneca’s rainbow vis-à-vis Ovid’s Met. 11.585. Manto also proves a ‘reader’ of Ovid in that she echoes the rainbow in the simile of Arachne’s weaving in Met. 6.5-145. The explicitly poetological episode of Arachne’s weaving offers a precedent for Manto’s own creation of poetry on the spot.

133 ambitique densus regium fumus caput / ipsosque circa spissior vultus sedet / et nube densa sordidam lucem abdidit (Oed. 325-327). As Busch observes, ‘[T]his gesture at oracular obsfuscation suggests that the extispicium conceals rather than reveals, even when subject to the aggressively inquisitive gaze of Oedipus as he presides over the sacrifice’ (2007, p. 237).

134 Larson draws a parallel between ‘der unvermittelte Übergang von der Darstellung zum Kommentar’ of Brechtian epic theater and narrated scenes in Senecan drama. In such passages, the ‘impression that Seneca is utilizing the speaking characters as a mouthpiece for his own narrator-like presentation of the action, without concern for their dramatic credibility, is very strong.’ (1989, pp. 294-5). (Tietze) Larson’s approach to Senecan drama is a productive departure from treating these narrative-descriptive scenes as overdone rhetorical elaboration; her perceptive observations provide a jumping-off point for examining the fluidity of actor/Audience roles, among other issues of Senecan poetics. In the narrative mode of Senecan tragedy, Tietze Larson defines the running commentary thus: ‘[A] character describes, for the benefit of another character “on-stage,” action which is supposedly occurring at that moment either on- or off-“stage”’ (ibid). Tietze Larson sees this type of descriptive passage as ‘appealing to the mind’s eye’ rather than engendering an unmediated emotional reaction; this line of thought is at home in both classic rhetorical theory and Stoic literary criticism. Further, it coheres with Nussbaum’s notion of the Stoics as desiring to cultivate a ‘critical spectatorship’ (1993).
alternatively, as non-performed poetic texts—there is no real reason why these passages could not have been part of a regular staged play.

The lack of time lapse should, in theory, mean that there are fewer opportunities for meaning to get lost in transmission, and thus, that these are the authoritative words (rata verba) of the god. Indeed, this is in line with Manto’s interpretation. Manto implicitly claims to present these omens as unmediated information, calling on her father to interpret their larger significance; on closer inspection, though, it is clear that she is already engaging in a process of interpretatio. The poetic packaging further contributes to this sense: observe Manto’s vivid vocabulary, her use of simile and metaphor, the allusiveness of her language, and so on. In her every deliberate choice of what to prioritize on the level of diction and of rhetoric, she acts like a poet. A prophet, on the other hand, generally claims to be able to impart the divine message without injecting his or her own thoughts along the way. Manto’s status as a prophetic figure and a narrating poet are mutually informing, and reflect the disjunction between the transparency prophetic (and some poetic) figures claim to represent and the always-already quality of mediation. Intermediary figure twice over, then, Manto’s position is one of distanced detachment: she is not invested in the action of the play for her own sake, and stands to gain or lose nothing personally based on the results of the divinatory inquiry. As simultaneous mouthpiece for the god and for the tragic poet, her audiences include her immediate internal one as well as external ones.

Tiresias’ response to Manto’s request for her father’s aid in clarifying the meaning of the omens is filled with uncertainty. Perplexed, he blames his mind for not being able to comprehend divine signs that are normally certain. At the same time, he arrives at an insight that is not the answer to the inquiry at hand, but that points to a meta-level issue of prophetic workings—namely, that the gods both do and do not want the requested information revealed. Appropriately for a paradox, he couches his reply in doubtful questions.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{135} See Busch (2007, p. 233ff) for an extended analysis of this scene; he links the trifold divinatory scenes to broader issues of hermeneutics, isolating ambiguity as the key component in a world in which nature has been inverted (cf. \textit{natura vers\ae est}) and analyzing this alongside Seneca’s \textit{NQ} 2, on divination. The questions also recall Cassandra’s doubt-filled questions when she is commenting on herself as a prophet; see the next section of this chapter.
Tl. ... Quid fari queam
inter tumultus mentis attonitae vagus?
quidnam loquar? sunt dira, sed in alto mala.
solet ira certis numinum ostendi notis;
quid istud est quod esse prolatum volunt
iterumque nolunt et truces iras tegunt?
pudet deos nescioquid. (Oed. 328-334)

Tl. ... What words could I utter, uncertain as I am
amid the clashings of a confused mind? What should
I say? There are terrible portents here, evil things, but
buried deep. The anger of the gods is normally indicated
by sure signs. What is this that they both want and also
do not want revealed, and why do they conceal their
hard anger? Something is shameful to the gods.

Tiresias’ commentary activates questions of hermeneutics and of human–divine relations.
In it also resides a paradox of divine wrath: since the gods both do and do not want the
causes of their anger made known, it is unlikely that humans will comprehend and will
thus take the appropriate expiatory measures. On this model, divination fails because of
humans’ limited hermeneutic faculties—a limitation the gods desire. What is hidden
‘should’ be known, since it has happened many times over in myth and poetry. This is
indicated by the use of solet, as well as, more suggestively, by the doubling of fari and
loquar, where the two words for speaking can indicate the mode of plain speech (loquar)
as counterposed to prophetic/poetic speech (fari). But repetition does not necessarily lead
to understanding, if there is not sufficient critical distance. As chapter 5 will discuss, these
themes of limited human perception and understanding coalesce in the figure of Oedipus.

The overall attitude Seneca’s Oedipus presents toward prophecy accords with the
Stoic view of divination as a system of rational inquiry. That is, the gods were thought to
send certa signa that corresponded to what would happen and that could be figured out
by skilled analysis.\textsuperscript{136} Any failure in comprehending what would come to pass was thought
to be the fault of the interpreter’s misreading of signs rather than due to flaws in the
divine machinery (or, still less, malevolence or active obfuscation on the part of the gods).
While Tiresias acknowledges his own inability to divine correctly, he (like Manto) adds his
own interpretive gesture in the form of a moral commentary: this time the nefas is so

\textsuperscript{136} Cf. Cicero, de Div. 1.117-18. For further background on Stoic views of divination, see Bobzien (1998, pp. 91ff.).
terrible that the gods are ambivalent about revealing the information. Vague
language—including the demonstrative placeholders istud and nescioquid—contributes to
the effect of trying to express the ineffable. Of course, the Oedipus legend had been
recounted time and again, but this iteration must outdo (and, Tiresias suggests,
necessarily be worse than) all previous accounts, who is participating in the hic et nunc of
this drama. Both gods and tragic poet are faced with a similar dilemma: the tension
between the impulse to reveal and to conceal nefas. What is more, divinatory activity
features elements of performance, and the divination scenes in Seneca’s Oedipus prompt
examination into the relative degrees of knowledge of the actor– and audience–figures on
the ‘inner’ level of the dramatic action versus those on the meta-levels, that is, Seneca’s
own audiences. That audience stratification produces a wide range of interpretive
experiences based on what level one occupies in this mise-en-abyme schema is dramatized
in the Tiresias–Manto scenes. The meaning of the divinatory signa is patently clear to the
external audience. But to the characters within the dramatic action who do not possess
the advantage of critical distance, meaning remains elusive.

Tiresias and Manto are ultimately unsuccessful prophets. The pair’s botched
attempts at divination are part and parcel of their limited interpretive abilities more
generally. To take one example from the passage above: Manto and Tiresias are unable to
grasp the full significance of smoke cloud that settles on Oedipus’ eyes. It is a clearly
negative omen (this much the characters do seem to understand), yet it is also
simultaneously an allegory foreshadowing the blinding of Oedipus—and, for that matter,
it points backward, toward Tiresias’ own blinding. And crucially, it gestures toward a more
universal phenomenon of not being able to discern meaning due to limited sense
perception and rational thought, as well as language’s inherently imperfect ability to fully
and completely capture human experience.

The pattern of doubt continues into the next scene, that of the extispicium proper.
Though the initial signs are confusing, Tiresias expresses confidence that the reading of
the entrails will yield an unmistakable message. Far from being conclusive, however, the
entrails teem with foul excrecence and the organs are unnaturally situated in the heifer’s

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137 Oed. 332-3.
139 That is, the receivers (listeners, viewers, and/or readers) of the dramatic text or performance.
140 infausta magnos sacra terrores cipient. / sed ede certas viscerum nobis notas, Oed. 351-352.
body, as Manto describes in elaborate detail.\textsuperscript{141} Her liver drips with black bile, and her belly contains two freakishly protruding heads:

\begin{quote}
MA. ac (semper omen unico imperio grave)
en capita paribus bina consurgunt toris;
esed utrumque caesum tenuis abscondit caput membrana, latebram rebus occultis negans.
hostile valido robere insurgit latus septemque venas tendit ... (\textit{Oed}. 359-364)
\end{quote}

MA. And look—this is a bad open for single-man rule—two heads project in equal swellings; and a slender film covers each chopped head, and denies a hiding place for secret matters. A virulent flank rises up in tough strength, and gives forth seven veins ...

Manto’s description culminates in a grotesque description of the cow’s womb, which prompts the overdetermined declaration \textit{natura versa est; nulla lex utero manet}.\textsuperscript{142}

\begin{quote}
MA. quid hoc nefas? conceptus innuptae bovis!
nec more solito positus alieno in loco
implet parentem ... (\textit{Oed}. 373-375)
\end{quote}

MA. What is this atrocity? A fetus in a virgin cow!
And one that’s not located in the normal spot but that fills its mother in a bizarre place ...

The audiences’ disparate levels of knowledge inform the array of interpretive possibilities of what the \textit{extra} signify. What is an unanswerable question (even a rhetorical one) to Manto’s immediate listeners is patently clear to Seneca’s own listener–readers. The external audience is able to answer the question posed to the prophets in advance as well as to grasp the larger ramifications of the prophetic inquiry before they are revealed within the course of the play or later in myth-time—a striking example of the poetry–prophecy intersections. Seneca’s plays draw attention to how poets \textit{and} audiences can have greater access to privileged knowledge than do prophets.

This mytho-poetic knowledge operates on different tracks of time and space than what can be experienced by those who are enmeshed in the dramatic action. Yet Senecan characters occasionally reveal glimpses of apparent awareness of their place in a larger tradition. In the divination scene above, for example, Manto’s use of metaliterary markers

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{141}] \textit{Oed}. 353-383.
\item[\textsuperscript{142}] \textit{Oed}. 371.
\end{footnotes}
such as *semper* and *solet* locate the omens of this play within a tradition of similar omens in poetry. In fact, the idea of precedents is central to how Roman technical divination worked: priests catalogued lists of prodigies and portents, then used these lists to interpret similar occurrences as they arose. Prophecy and poetry similarly criss-cross in Manto’s characterization of the *bina capita* as ‘always’ a bad omen. Here, *semper* might seem at first glance to function like *solet* does, except that there is actually no analogous scene, to my knowledge, where this portent occurs in Greek and Latin literature. Nor does it appear to have been catalogued among the prodigies in Roman cult. The prodigy actually reveals Senecan *inventio* by what at first glance appears to be a metaliterary marker of *sameness.* Divinatory *signa* look forward as well as backward to precedents, and operate by substitution; they can thus be seen as operating in ways analogous to how allegory, metonymy, and related techniques work in poetry.\(^{143}\) The ‘easily recognizable allegory’ Pratt observes prophetically announces later events of this particular play as well as what will come next in the Theban tradition. This is all familiar to the play’s audiences who are steeped in these mytho-literary treatments: the two heads at odds with each other represent Polynices and Eteocles, and the seven veils are the seven gates, or the seven against Thebes. Significantly, these events point forward to Seneca’s own treatment of the ‘next chapter’ of the story in the *Phoenissae*, as chapter 5 will discuss.\(^{145}\)

Prophecy does not, however, always look forward. The meaning of the calf filling its mother in an unnatural place is a grotesque reminder of the backstory of Oedipus’ family. Along with the qualifier *nefas,* the words *natura est versa retro* gesture toward involution vis-à-vis familial relations and time. The incestuous union that has already taken place between Oedipus and Jocasta continues to produce negative ramifications into the future via their offspring, who in turn perpetuate their parents’ *nefas* with their own crimes. In Seneca, the divinatory apparatus (even when it is flawed) serves as a viable

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144 See also Busch (2007, p. 249), who astutely draws attention to Manto’s language as ‘naturally unnatural’—a fitting paradox to explain the *nefas.*
145 Assuming, as most scholars do, that the apparently fragmentary *Phoenissae* is indeed by Seneca and that it is the later of the two plays. It has been suggested that this may have been the last play of Seneca, left incomplete at the time of his death (which would explain the lack of choral odes); alternatively, some see the work as an experiment in a new type of dramatic form, or as two distinct rhetorical or *recitatio* pieces. See Frank (1995a, introduction) for commentary.
means by which to scrutinize past and present poetry well as to attempt to steer future iterations.

Since ornithomancy and extispicy failed, and since Tiresias was not capable of receiving second-sight visions, another method must be tried. This time the ghost of Laius himself must be summoned to betray his killer’s name:

Tl. nec alta caeli quae levi pinna secant
nec fibra vivis rapta pectoribus potest
ciere nomen. alia temptanda est via
ipse evocandus noctis aeternae plagis,
emissus Erebo ut caedis auctorem indicet. (Oed. 390-4).

Tl. Neither birds that slice through the celestial heights on light wing nor organs ripped from still-living breasts can stir up the name. Another way must be attempted. He himself must be called up from the depths of eternal night, so that after he’s been sent forth, he can point out the auctor of murder.

When it recurs throughout Senecan tragedy, via is often a marker of dramatic choice; it highlights deviations from the tradition and thus Senecan innovations. What is more, in alia temptanda est via we hear a direct echo of Vergil’s Georgics 3.8 (temptanda via est qua me quoque possim / tollere humo), which is also the locus classicus of Latin literary belatedness (cf. omnia iam vulgata, Geo. 3.1). In the context of this play in particular, the term also has a paradigmatic significance in conjunction with the famed trifork road to Daulis which Oedipus took. The failure of the ‘normal’ prophetic means is noted by Tiresias as he prepares to attempt a last resort type of divinatory maneuver: a horrific necromantic reverse katabasis. As chapter 2 will elucidate, the underworld in Senecan tragedy functions as a repository for recondite knowledge. This makes infernal figures such as ghosts and furies prime candidates for vatic analogues—or usurpers.

In contrast to the abbreviated appearance of Calchas in the Troades, the episodes that feature Tiresias and Manto comprise a significant portion of the Oedipus. It appears to be a Senecan innovation to include this father–daughter pair, Tiresias and Manto, in company with each other—and Manto occurs rarely enough in texts to be a source of some curiosity.\footnote{After the Senecan presentation, Manto will have a part in Statius’ Thebaid 4.406-645.} For all their prominence, however, these two are still limited prophetic figures. Tiresias is frank about his flawed prophetic abilities, and Manto appears to possess
little independent agency; her powers of interpretation are subordinated to those of her father. Combined, and practically conjoined (they never appear without each other, and Manto speaks only to Tiresias), the pair gives the impression of one too many prophets, but at least one too few successful ones.

The successive scenes of frustrated prophetic inquiry are actually productive of poetic innovation. The search for one specific answer structures the play, and takes the audience through all of the normal divinatory channels—oracles, augury, extispicy, inspired prophecy—until the culmination, a gruesome reverse katabasis. Along the way, the audience goes on a literary–historical ‘journey’ as well, where, far from isolating one particular meaning, the possibilities of poetry are staged as infinitely expansive. The overwhelming presence of the Sophoclean version must have been daunting for any poet who treated this myth in the wake of the Oedipus Tyrannos (and few tried). But against this backdrop, divinatory channels provide a means for Seneca to showcase his poetic dexterity, as the unprecedented extispicium and the raising of Laius demonstrate.\textsuperscript{147} In another site of Senecan innovation, the inclusion of auspicy and extispicy suggests a new Roman context for the Theban seers.\textsuperscript{148} That the officially sanctioned divinatory means fail to produce a definitive answer can also be seen as a subtle critique of institutionalized Roman divination, which had perhaps outlived its usefulness by Seneca’s day. The last resort, a necromantic interview with the ghost of Laius, is obviously beyond the pale of mainstream divinatory practices in Rome—it is even rare in literary representations—and points to the drastic lengths that must be undertaken to attempt to isolate a single meaning in this ‘belated’ world.

**Cassandra: Seneca’s falsa vates**

Cassandra is traditionally a disbelieved prophet, but an unfailing one. She is cursed by Apollo to deliver prophecies that are never believed but that always come true. Though details vary as to how she received her prophetic gift, the normal story is that Apollo fell in love with the priestess and granted her the gift of prophecy; but because she refused his

\textsuperscript{147} And, as I discuss in Chapter 5, Seneca’s decision to treat the Oedipus legend not once but twice further nods to a kind of poetic audacity.

\textsuperscript{148} Roman augures were involved with reading bird omens, and Etruscan haruspices practiced extispicy. Both were included in the as official state collegia by the late Republic; see Potter (1994, pp. 150-8) and Beard (1998).
sexual advances, he punished her so that no one would believe her inspired words.\textsuperscript{149} In Aeschylus’ \textit{Agamemnon}, the \textit{locus classicus} for her character’s appearance, she accompanies the king back to Argos as his captive, where she incurs the jealousy of Clytemnestra and foretells the deaths of the royal Argives, and of herself, before being executed.\textsuperscript{150} Her central scene of prophetic utterance comprises more than 250 lines, and shows a Cassandra who suffers excessively because of her knowledge. Though no one believes her, she proves a ‘too-true’ prophet by the end of the play, after her death (which she had also foreseen).\textsuperscript{151} Cassandra’s various attributes—disbelieved prophetess, Trojan princess turned captive, victim of Apollo—render her an ideal tragic figure, and indeed, it is in tragedy that she looms large. But in other genres, such as elegy and epic, (classical Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman) she is similarly unerring.\textsuperscript{152} Seneca’s Cassandra, however, tells a different story.

Cassandra dominates the action and themes of Seneca’s \textit{Agamemnon}, where she presents a complex vatic figure—one who, I will argue, is a flawed prophet, but a more successful poet. Seneca capitalizes on the malleability of the \textit{vates} to write in new roles for his Cassandra. With both the tensions and fluidity between these two vatic identities at play, her character is made to comment on issues of human knowledge as well as of poetic creation and reception. Seneca focalizes the climax of the play through Cassandra’s interpretation twice, first in a prophetic mode, and then in a poetic mode. The first time, Seneca’s Cassandra exhibits various doubts and shortcomings, and fails to deliver the true prophecies for which she is famed. In the ‘revised’ version of the murder scene, she proves a more efficacious poetnarrator. The rich mytho-literary heritage of Cassandra provides ample opportunity for Seneca to engage with, and to innovate on, poetic models while simultaneously exploring the limits of human foreknowledge.

\textsuperscript{149} Cf. Hyginus, \textit{Fab.} 65.
\textsuperscript{150} Part of her curse was to foresee her own death; that she has foreknowledge of her death in Aeschylus’ version but does not in Seneca comments on her ineffectiveness as a prophet-\textit{vates}, on the one hand, and gestures toward alternative forms of knowledge, on the other.
\textsuperscript{151} Aesch. \textit{Aga.} 1240. See Schein (1982) for analysis of Cassandra’s role in Aeschylus.
\textsuperscript{152} Cassandra has smaller roles in Euripides’ \textit{Hecuba}, \textit{Troiaides}, and \textit{Andromache}. She appears in the \textit{Iliad} as a messenger figure who briefly announces to the Trojans that they should come and see Hector in his final moments in the chariot \textit{Il.} 24.697–706. Here, of course, her instruction is heeded. The \textit{Odyssey’s nekyia} episode presents her as a heartrending figure, where hers is described as the most pitiful voice of the shades (\textit{Od.} 11.421–23).
It has been said that Seneca’s *Agamemnon* lacks a central character. Yet Cassandra takes center stage in the last two acts. Cassandra’s prominence in this drama seems to be a Senecan innovation—in my view, because of the possibilities that inhere in her double role as prophetess and poetological figure.\(^{153}\) Here formal and thematic elements are mutually reinforcing: she has the most speaking lines of any non-choral character in the play and leads her own secondary chorus of Trojan women.\(^{154}\) And in a striking departure from the Aeschylean version, Seneca’s Cassandra does not only survive past the end of the play; she literally has the last word.\(^{155}\) She embodies multiple interpretive roles as narrator, receiver, and interpreter—of the tragic action and of the larger tradition. The following sections articulate the ways in which Cassandra’s is a ‘super-role’ status, and the interpretive possibilities such a multidimensional figure presents.

Seneca presents a far more autonomous Cassandra than the Aeschylean captive who is dragged in against her will, compelled to prophesy, and summarily executed. She is not powerful from the beginning, however. In fact, when Cassandra is first announced by her Trojan chorus in act 4, she is struggling to be rid of Apollo’s influence—a marker of the compelled nature of her prophetic gift/curse. The initial impression of Seneca’s Cassandra is one of a self-aware yet doubt-laden prophet, in contrast to her usual role as a frenzied prophetess who spews utterances without control or reflection. It comes as no surprise that she is not believed by her listeners, since this is part of her curse, but Seneca’s Cassandra frames her utterances with a commentary on her limitations as prophet, similarly to how Tiresias articulates his flaws. Such departures lead Seneca’s audience to wonder what kind of Cassandra she will be.

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\(^{153}\) Though Tarrant does not develop the issue, his comments on the ‘awkward joins’ and ‘grafting’ of scenes surrounding Cassandra suggest a Senecanism in having her narrate the main action (twice) (1976, pp. 5-6). But this poetic clunkiness could easily have been avoided, and on my reading is a deliberate gesture—*inter alia*, to highlight aspects of poetic technique. A similar thing occurs vis-à-vis the figure of Calchas in the *Troades* (as I noted above).
\(^{154}\) As Tarrant observes (1976, *ad loc.)*; see also Henry and Walker (1963).
\(^{155}\) Calder (1976), Anliker (1960, p. 22) and Lefèvre (1972, p. 468) on the importance of Cassandra’s survival throughout the action of Seneca’s play. And see Henry and Walker (1963, p. 6) and Calder (1976, p. 32) on the Senecan tendency to reserve the climax for the fourth act. Cassandra’s first narration of the king’s death does occur in the fourth act, at which point it seems as though it may actually be occurring. It is not until the fifth act that the audience learns that Agamemnon is still living. For Cassandra as messenger figure, see Littlewood (2004, pp. 220ff).
That Cassandra speaks under compulsion operates on several different levels, including the metaliterary one. Cassandra had a special relationship with the god Apollo and originally embraced her role as his priestess; before her first appearance, Clytemnestra introduces her as the one who shakes Phoebus’ *enteas laurus.*\(^{156}\) Yet now she rips off his sacred fillets and wants to claim her freedom:

CH. Sed cur sacratas deripis capiti infulas? (*Aga*. 693)

CH. But why are you tearing off the consecrated bands from your head?

Having torn off the tangible markers of her servitude to Apollo, she resists further possession by the god, as the Chorus observes:

CH. ... nunc reluctantes parat
reserare fauces, verba nunc clauo male
custodiit ore, maenas impatiens dei. (*Aga*. 717-19)

CH. ... Now she prepares to unseal her resistant jaws, now she desperately attempts to contain her words behind sealed lips—a maenad unwilling to submit to the god.

Inspired prophets are often represented as delivering the divine message against their will. And in their transmission of the god’s words, their language can be marked as other than ordinary human speech. Based on the Aeschylean picture of Cassandra, we might expect inarticulate babbling, yet this is not the case. What is more, her words are not even prophetic. Rather, she begins with a rhetorically sophisticated lament bemoaning herself, her fellow Trojan women, and the fallen Troy, before delivering her vision of the murders of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. It is telling that her ‘prophetic’ utterance contains more questions than answers:

CA. quid me furoris incitam stimuli novi,
quid mentis inopem, sacra Parnasi iuga,
rapitis? recede, Phoebe, iam non sum tua;
extinguem flammas pectori infixas meo.
cui nunc vagor vesana? cui bacchor fueens?
iam Troia cecidit: falsa quid vates ago?
ubi sum? fugit lux alma et obscurat genas
nox alta et aether abditus tenebris latet.
sece ecce gemino sole praefulget dies

\(^{156}\) *Aga*. 588. As Trinacty (forthcoming) observes, following Tarrant (1976, *ad* 710ff), ’[I]n her frenzy, she resembles the Sibyl of Cumae and intertextual parallels help hammer home this identification.’
geminumque duplices Argos attollit domos.
Idae cerno nemora? (Aga. 720-30)

CA. For what purpose, sacred peaks of Parnassus,
now that you've stirred me with the goads of new furor,
do you leave me bereft of my mind?
Withdraw, Apollo; I'm no longer yours.
Extinguish the flames you've lodged deep in my chest.
Who is it I wander for in madness this time? For whom must I be the crazed maenad?
Troy has already fallen: why am I playing false prophet?
Where am I? Nourishing light flees; deep night darkens my eyes;
the heavens lie hidden, shrouded in darkness.
But look! Daylight beams forth from two suns, and double Argos raises up twin homes.
Is it the groves of Ida I perceive?

These elements combine to immediately complicate the presentation of the seer, injecting
an high dose of doubt into whether (and how) her words will prove true.

When Cassandra does finally begin to utter her inspired vision, it is far from
straightforward. She refers to the members of the Argive royal household not by name but
allusively, by animal likeness (wolf, lion) or other attributes. In fact, the first time around
she never names names as she sketches out the murders to come with a barrage of
questions:

CA. quid ista vecors tela feminea manu
destincta praefert? quem petit dextra virum
Lacaena cultu, ferrum Amazonium gerens?
quae versat oculos alia nunc facies meos?
victor ferarum colla summisssus iacet
ignobili sub dente Marmarici lupi,
morsus cruentos passus audacis leae. (Aga. 734-40)

CA. What is that madwoman doing, brandishing unsheathed weapons in a womanly
hand? Who is she after in her Spartan attire but bearing Amazon's sword, what
husband? What is this different vision that's turning my eyes now?
The victor over beasts lies there, his neck lowered beneath the disgraceful teeth of the
Marmaric wolf after enduring the bloody bites of the fierce lioness.

It is not surprising for a prophet to be cryptic, but the confused, even disoriented, manner
of Cassandra's presentation reinforces the fact that in her inspired madness, she is not in
control of what she relays. The vague images tumble out of her resistant lips in a
haphazard way, and so it is no surprise if they are disbelieved or misinterpreted. While her
utterances are in fact misunderstood by her immediate listeners, the external audience
(Seneca's) understands the identity of the victims beyond doubt. Of central importance to
the classic Cassandra’s prophetic ability, but also her curse, is the fact that she foresees her own death. It is crucial to Seneca’s portrayal of Cassandra that here she does not unambiguously see ahead to her own death, and, what is more, actually survives past the end of the play. As the following section will discuss, Cassandra’s attitude toward death is complex, and has a great deal to reveal about issues that run the course of Seneca’s prose and poetic writings. When Seneca’s Cassandra expresses both doubt in her prophetic abilities and a desire to be rid of gifts of prophecy, her attitude is linked to the mytho-literary life cycle. Cassandra has apparently outlived her usefulness as Trojan vates—after all, as she points out, Troy has fallen and the Trojan women’s doom is sealed. Cassandra’s original failure, however, paves the way for her second narration, which is the more uniquely ‘Senecan.’

It is clear to the external audience in hindsight, though not necessarily at the time, that Cassandra’s first account of Agamemnon’s death is a prophetic vision rather than what she actually ‘sees,’ since the king is still alive in the scene that immediately follows. In this revised version, Cassandra’s prophetic persona is superseded by a poetic one, and she becomes a more autonomous, efficacious vates. In Cassandra’s second description of Agamemnon’s death, at the beginning of act 5, her tone is vastly different from her disorientation of the previous act. This time, Cassandra narrates what she actually sees simultaneously with the murder itself, in running commentary mode. Declarations replace questions, clarity replaces haze, and her self-reflexive commentary accompanying what she sees reinforces this change:

CA. tam clara numquam providae mentis furor
ostendit oculis; video et intersum et fruor;
imago visus dubia non fallit meos." (Aga. 872-4)

CA. The madness of my prophetic mind never showed such clear visions to my eyes. I see the scene, am right in the middle of it, enjoy it; no doubtful image deceives my vision.

The confident assertion is a far cry from her initial doubts about even such basic matters as where she is and who is forcing her to speak. It is also distinct from the ‘escape clause’

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157 The phenomenon of what I call ‘revisionist parataxis’ is a recurrent aspect of Seneca’s poetics.
158 Staley (2009, p. 62) on Cassandra’s striving for enargeia, signalled by the use of clara and by the content of the visions themselves.
introductory formulae of prophecy, e.g. nisi fallor... or si non vana...\(^{160}\) which O’Hara observes in the *Aeneid* and in other republican and Augustan poetry. The phrase *non fallit* emphatically refutes any such uncertainty in her second narration. But will this be another prophecy of the Agamemnon’s death to come, or the actual event? The fifth act, I argue, features not a prophet Cassandra but a poet–narrator one in the manner of messengers and other narrativizing figures in Senecan tragedy. The thematized stage action also underscores Cassandra’s evolution. In her first entrance, for example, rather than following Agamemnon (as captives should), she precedes him. This simple gesture, I believe, works on many levels. First, it gives a proleptic hint of the independence Cassandra will come to manifest by act 5. Second, it foreshadows the *agōn* in which she will trump Agamemnon in a duel of words and wit. And, not least, it offers an intimation of her attitude toward death, which will become significant in the final moments of the play. All of this is in stark contrast to the Aeschylean presentation, where having been dragged in as captive she is first silent, then ignored by Clytemnestra, then finally utters nonsense prior to delivering her prophecies.

When she is describing the death scene the second time, she no longer recoils from the horror that she was forced to foresee and to describe; rather, now she watches with interest (*video*), participates (*intersum*), enjoys (*fruor*), and exhorts her listeners to experience the scene in the same way (*spectemus*)\(^{161}\) As poets do, Cassandra needs an audience. The identity(-ies) of the audience(s) she thinks she is addressing, however, Seneca leaves unclear. Are we to imagine her chorus of Trojan women, her ancestors in the underworld, Seneca’s audience (that is, ourselves), or some combination?\(^{162}\) While on one level she is addressing her immediate listeners within the dramatic action, her second person address does double duty: on a metadramatic level, she is also speaking to Seneca’s

\(^{159}\) Tarrant rightly contrasts the ‘vague apparitions’ of the previous scene (*Aga. 726-40*) with the ‘absolute clarity’ of the second narration (1976, p. 335). Littlewood also draws attention to the ‘unprophetic’ nature of the second scene and compares it to the banquet scene Atreus views inside the Pelopeian palace (2004, pp. 221-222).

\(^{160}\) O’Hara (1986, pp. 13-14).

\(^{161}\) See Webb (1997) on ancient authors’ self-awareness of their audience and attempts to control their receivers’ reactions.

\(^{162}\) For that matter, the identity of the *miseri* of line 759 is not clear. The proximate audience is the shades, but the vocative in conjunction with the imperative also ‘speaks to’ the external audience.
audience, urging them to watch and enjoy the play along with her. Some have seen Seneca’s Cassandra as aware of, even in collusion with, the external audience and/or author, who have privileged knowledge of the deaths of the royal Argives. Full awareness, however, need not accompany her characterization in order for these metadramatic elements to ring true. In fact, an interpres mediating between audiences within and without the dramatic action could be seen as similarly unaware of the broader scope of possibilities of her message, just like her role as prophet who was not fully in control of her words. On this view, it is an interesting possibility to entertain that even after her freedom from Apollo’s influence, she is still under the control of other issuers of fatum: previous poets, and now, Seneca himself.

There is at least one audience that Cassandra unambiguously compels, and here her poetological role is at the forefront: she mentions her own ‘captive’ audience of Trojan ancestors in the underworld and announces that she is eager to join them so that she can continue reperforming her poetry.

CA. Ne trahite, vestros ipsa praecedam gradus. 
perferre prima nuntium Phrygibus meis
propero: repletum ratibus eversis mare,
captas Mycenas, mille ductorem ducum, 
ut paria fata Trocis lueret malis,
perisse dono, feminae stupro, dolo. 
nihil moramur, rapite, quin grates ago:
iam, iam iuvat vixisse post Troiam, iuvat.

CL. Furiosa, morere!

CA. Veniet et vobis furor. (Aga. 100.4-12)

CA. Don’t drag me. Of my own free will I’ll walk ahead of your steps.
I’m hastening to be first to convey the news to my Trojans: the sea

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163 Commentators often draw attention to the metaliterary quality of focalizing words such as nunc, iam, and novi, which, along with the demonstratives, mark this iteration of poetry vis-à-vis previous ones. Ago, too, contains the additional resonance of ‘to act.’

164 Cf. Littlewood (2004), Schiesaro (2003), and Staley (2009) on what they see as a metaliterary awareness on Cassandra’s part.

165 This accords with the parallel authorial and divine roles, as several scholars, e.g. Schiesaro (2003), and Holland (2000) note. Since Apollo is the god of poetry as well as of prophecy, Cassandra can be seen as still under his influence even when she is a poet figure. Yet she displays autonomy in narrating the poetry she will create, as well as in her attitude toward death.

166 On Cassandra’s ‘captive’ audience, and on audience captivity in Senecan drama more generally, see Mowbray (2012).
packed with overturned ships, the story of Mycenae’s capture, how the leader of a thousand leaders (so he could undergo misfortunes on par with Troy’s sufferings) died by a gift—a woman’s adultery—a trick. I’ll delay no longer; snatch me away. In fact, I thank you: now, at this moment, I’m glad that I’ve outlived Troy—really glad!

CL. Die, you madwoman!
CA. Madness will come for you too.

Seneca is not the first to cast Cassandra in the mold of poet, though his Cassandra is the most highly developed, autonomous poet figure. As was mentioned above, Latin elegists also invested her with poetic features, and even her birdlike speech in the Aeschylean locus classicus suggests poetic, speech. Cassandra does not feature prominently in Vergil’s Aeneid; where she is briefly mentioned, it is as a reliable prophet. First, Aeneas recalls her unfailing prophecies (lamentably learned too late) in foreseeing what destruction the Trojan horse would bring;[167] later, she is quoted as having said that the Trojans’ destiny was to settle in Hesperia.[168] Seneca’s Cassandra also does the work of condensing Vergil’s prophetic Sibyl and his infernal Dido into one super-figure. And Cassandra’s self-characterization as falsa vates forms an interesting counterpoint to Ovid’s Cassandra in Heroides 5 (Onone’s letter to Paris), where she is labeled a nimium...vera vates, a ‘too-true prophet.’[169] The Heroides’ Cassandra foretells the future obliquely, warning that a Graia iuvenca (that is, Helen) is coming to wreak destruction, and Seneca’s Cassandra echoes the Ovidian one in her first prophetic vision.

Another elegiac predecessor is the Propertian Cassandra. Like Vergil’s portrayal, Propertius’ features a future-looking aspect, and specifically, a Rome-centric one. But Propertius has Cassandra play an additional role, as an analogue for the poet himself:

Frangitur ipsa suis Roma superba bonis.
Certa loquor, sed nulla fides; neque vilia quondam
verax Pergameis maenas habenda mali.
[...]
Ille furo patriae fuit utilis, ille parenti:
expertast veros irrita lingua deos. (Prop. Car. 3.13.60–63; 66-7)
Proud Rome itself is being broken by its own riches.

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[168] Aen. 3.182ff. Here Cassandra appears as only one prophetic voice among the many that announce the Rome-looking destiny of the Trojan survivors.
[169] Her. 5.113-134. A ‘too-true’ prophetess is in turn a virtual translation of Aeschylus’ Aga. 1240 ( γαν γ ληθομαντην).
I speak certain words, but there’s no belief;
Similarly, once the truthful maenad [Cassandra] should not have been disregarded by the Trojans as spewing worthless words of evil.
[...]
That furo was useful for her country, useful for her father:
her unheeded speech proved the gods true.

The example mentioned above is quite instructive, as it features the elegiac poet comparing himself explicitly to the ‘truthful’ prophetess whose warnings about Rome go unheeded—with disastrous results. Propertius warns that Rome is now being crushed by its own wealth (frangitursa suis Roma superba / bonis, 3.14.1-2) but that no one believes his presentiments. It is an intriguing possibility to wonder whether, if we triangulate between these figures (Propertius; Propertius’s Cassandra; Seneca’s Cassandra), we can glimpse Seneca himself offering a veiled critique of the Rome of his day. Elsewhere in Seneca’s own corpus, too, we can find an inset ‘cameo’ commentary on Cassandra’s vatic abilities. In the Troades, Hecuba claims that she was a ‘prophet-in-vain’ before Cassandra (vana vates ante Cassandram fui), where the word vana carries both subjective and objective force: ‘disbelieved’ or ‘inspiring disbelief’.170 One of Seneca’s Cassandra’s truest utterances is not a prophecy at all, but a (rhetorical) question about why she is forced to continue playing falsa vates at this point, since there is no more Troy whose doom she is tasked to foretell. There is only, now, a Rome that is heir to Troy. This constellation of ideas also offers a metaliyterary clue to her current state of having ‘overlived’ in the literary sense. Since she has played the vates time and again throughout myth and poetry, this Cassandra can only really appear as distinct against the backdrop of her eponymous forbears by being an unsuccessful prophet or by operating in non-prophetic ways. Seneca’s Cassandra does both.

Even before she describes her vision of the king’s death a second time, Cassandra composes lyric poetry on the spot. In fact, marking the difference between the prophetic and prophetic modes modes (as well as the change in acts) is a linchpin in the form of a lyric interlude that announces the advancing Furies.

CA. 
... vos, umbrae, precor,
iurata superis unda, te pariter precor.
reserate paulum terga nigrantis poli,
levis ut Mycenas turba prospiciat Phrygum.
spectate, miseri: fata se vertunt retro!

170 Tro. 37.
Instant sorores squalidae,
anguinea iactant verbera,
fert laeva semustas faces
turgentque pallentes genae
et vestis atri funeris
exesa cingit ilia;
strepuntque nocturni metus,
et ossa vasti corporis
corrupta longinquo situ
palude limosa iacent. (Aga. 754-68)

CA. I pray to you, shades; waters the gods use to swear oaths,
I pray to you too. Unseal the cover of the dark axis a bit, enough
so the weightless mob of Trojans can peer out at Mycenae.
Watch, you wretches: the fates are directing themselves backwards!
The fifth-clad sisters loom near,
they fling snaky whips,
left hands carry half-burned torches,
while colorless cheeks bloat out,
and black mourning garb
girds their rotting loins.
Night terrors clatter,
and the bones of a huge body
spoiled by long neglect
lie in the muddy neglect

Senecan tragedy features a couple of other polymetric odes, but Cassandra’s lyric irruption
into a non-choral part of the play is unparalleled. As Tarrant observes, ‘This is the only
certain example in the authentic plays of a change from trimeters to a lyric metre within a
speech...’\footnote{171 Tarrant (1976, \textit{ad loc}).} It is at this point that Cassandra, like the Fates,\footnote{172 Cf. \textit{Fata se vertunt retro}, Aga. 759.} also ‘turns’—from prophet to poet. In the next act, having shaken off her prophetic madness, her eyes are no longer
rolled back in her head and she stares straight ahead into the Argive palace. Now, as a new
type of \textit{vates}, actual vision and insight coalesce as she sees the action with fresh eyes.

Schiesaro draws attention to the fact that the Senecan underworld serves as a locus
for both vengeful drives and poetic inspiration (specifically, for tragic poetry). Here,
Cassandra finds here a ready-made audience and a furial origin for her poetry via
(vicarious) revenge—her eager satisfaction at seeing the Greeks pay for their war crimes
against the Trojans. And, as we can see from her physical positioning, she literally has a
foot in more than one world. As liminal \textit{interpres}, she negotiates the boundary between
the underworld and upperworld and even, rather bizarrely, lifts the cover that separates

\footnote{171 Tarrant (1976, \textit{ad loc}).}
\footnote{172 Cf. \textit{Fata se vertunt retro}, Aga. 759.}
the two worlds with her own hands in order to peer inside. The diction further cues her growing autonomy as she mediates between the two realms. Not long before, Cassandra was unable to ‘seal’ her jaws against the god’s words escaping, as the Chorus observes (reserare; see the above passage, lines 717-9). Using the same verb, but in imperative form, she commands the shades to ‘unseal’ the covering over the underworld so that the Trojans can view the Greeks meeting their doom: reserate paulum terga nigrantis poli.\textsuperscript{173} The infernal realm is the divide, but also the link, between her first and second accounts of Agamemnon’s death—and between her twin roles as prophet and poet. Though she was an unwilling prophet-vates, she finally embraces her new vatic role as a poet who is eager to describe to the shades of her ancestors how justice was finally served to the Greeks.

In Seneca, those with vengeful drives are often cast simultaneously as poet-analogues: Atreus, Medea, Juno. Subsequent chapters will articulate the interconnections between the activities of revenge, poetic composition, and the effective (and creative) use of language. Seneca’s avengers are adept at wielding language against their victims; this power differential is apparent in the \textit{agones}. Cassandra does not engage in active revenge against her Argive captors; rather, one of the faces of this vatic super-figure is of avenger-by-proxy, through her narrative recasting of the murders. She proves an adept deployer and interpreter of language—a key component of her ability to navigate second-order language such as wit, allegory, riddles, and so on. Cassandra can also understand and manipulate exempla in ways that poets and orators also can. In this respect, the poet Cassandra proves more successful than her less fortunate \textit{agôn}-partners Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, and also more successful than her prophetic counterpart of act 4. Like others of Seneca’s ‘doomed’ characters such as Thyestes, Jason, and Hippolytus, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have trouble understanding second-order meaning and fail to grasp the nuances of Cassandra’s utterances. To cite but one notice of this disparity in hermeneutic ability: Agamemnon thinks that Cassandra is having a delusional vision of Troy, when in fact she is equating him with Priam as another king who is about to be murdered in his own palace:

\begin{verse}
AG. Credis videre te Ilium? \\
CA. Et Priamum simul.
\end{verse}

\textsuperscript{173} \textit{Aga.} 756.
AG. Hic Troia non est.
CA. Helena ubi est, Troiam puto.

(Aga., 795-6)

AG. You think you see Ilium?
CA. Yes, and Priam as well.
AG. Here is not Troy.
CA. Where Helen is, I think it Troy.

The antilabic structure of their agôn puts into quick relief the sharp divide between what Agamemnon and Cassandra each understands.174 Other forms of knowledge substitute for actual prophecy: based on the mythic equivalence between the two kings, Cassandra is seeing a virtual second Troy in what is about to happen to her Argive captor. Poets and prophets are often cast as able to travel fluidly between the past, present, and future. Here, too, Cassandra’s vision is not strictly forward-looking; the cyclical nature of tragic vengeance looks back to past precedents even as it stretches into the future. And some situations apply cross-culturally as well as in time, as she points out in the semper idem maxim that such fortune can befall even the most powerful.175 This is a more targeted subset of the gnomic statements often made by choruses, as in those sung by the first chorus of the Agamemnon (the ‘Fortuna fallax’ ode).

The king’s retorts prove that his frame of reference is entirely literal—he understands only the surface meaning of Cassandra’s words. He does not understand the ways in which tragic exempla operate,176 and he fails to comprehend how putting on Priam’s clothing could be dangerous to his well-being.177 The two figures possess varying interpretive capacities vis-à-vis causality as well. Cassandra understands what Shelton calls the ‘intersection of two tracks of avenging actions’ that lead to Agamemnon’s death.178 He is a member of the house of Tantalus whose unfortunate doom was foretold by the Delphic oracle, and as Trojan enemy he is overdue for retribution. As I mentioned

174 One could argue that the gap may stem from Cassandra’s curse of never being believed, but it also seems indicative of larger issues of interpretatio and relative power. Cassandra, after all, will understand a great deal by the end of the play, while Agamemnon never achieves a similar level of understanding.

175 Maxims are interesting alternatives to prophecy. In their applicability to a variety of referents and contexts, they can resemble oracular speech; what is more, their universality means that they are not time-bound but equalize the past, present, and future.

176 That is, he (ostensibly) does not understand that he is part of the unbroken chain of revenge that is due to his family’s curse and blood ties, or that he is a character in a revenge tragedy.

177 Lefèvre (1972) draws a parallel between his hubristic donning of Priam’s clothing here and his treading on the royal robes in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon.

above, Cassandra recognizes other possible motivating causes: Clytemnestra’s own jealousy and thirst for power and the larger patterns of talionic justice.\textsuperscript{179} Agamemnon, by contrast, is a poor interpreter of these \textit{signa} on many levels, and so is doomed many times over.

The Argive king is not the only one who fails to comprehend Cassandra’s utterances; Clytemnestra fails to understand Cassandra’s equation of her with her sister Helen.\textsuperscript{180} Nor does she comprehend the full impact of Cassandra’s words which seal her (Clytemnestra’s) doom even beyond the bounds of this particular play. To Clytemnestra in the last line, Cassandra announces \textit{veniet et vobis furor} (1012), which, according to the standard literary treatment is exactly what will occur: the furies will hound Orestes after he murders his mother.\textsuperscript{181} Yet this is not the entire story. Seneca’s Cassandra seems to be unaware of her own death, notices of which are absent from this drama save for Clytemnestra’s curse (or command): \textit{furiosa, morere}. According to the standard patterns of tragic \textit{agones}, the one who utters the final word is the victor. This, I believe, is a pointed gesture by Seneca: in the last line of the play, Cassandra both trumps Clytemnestra in their debate \textit{and} offers an authoritative commentary on the play itself in what proves to be a too-true ‘prophecy’. To say that her prophecy is \textit{true}, however, is not to say that it is unambiguous. \textit{Vobis} refers to Clytemnestra and her family, and indeed, could extend to the drama’s external audience, who will also experience real or vicarious \textit{furor}. And the objective and subjective force of the word \textit{furor} does double duty: it implies being pursued by the goading Furies, and it denotes perpetrating \textit{furor} on others. Of course, it is also a more general term for deluded madness,\textsuperscript{182} and Davis rightly links Clytemnestra’s limited perspective to her obsessive, fury-driven revenge.\textsuperscript{183} Clytemnestra is part of a group of Senecan characters who seem empowered but who are ultimately limited by their single-minded revenge. This is reflected in the tunnel vision of their interpretive capacities. While the less successful characters Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are constrained to a unilinear mode of interpretation, Cassandra by contrast welcomes polyvalency. Yet even

\textsuperscript{179} See Tarrant (1976, \textit{ad loc}.)
\textsuperscript{180} Pratt, (1983, p. 36).
\textsuperscript{181} Cf. \textit{Aen.} 10.67-8 Italiam petit fatis auctoribus (esto) / Cassandrae impulsus furii: num linquere castra / hortati sumus aut vitam committere ventis?
\textsuperscript{182} See Staley (2009, p. 26) on the false \textit{figura etymologica} between \textit{fruos} and \textit{furor} in the same metrical \textit{sedes}.
\textsuperscript{183} Davis (1993).
she takes a prurient interest in the murders, both as victim of Agamemnon and on behalf of her fellow Trojans. In this revenge by proxy, she relishes the slaughter of the Argives even though she does not have a direct hand in it.\textsuperscript{184} Cassandra and Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, each to varying degrees, demonstrate the lack of critical distance that tragic characters (and indeed, humans) experience when they are too emotionally involved in a situation.

The narration of the murder itself can be seen as anticlimactic after the proleptic apparatus that has been set in place from the first words of Thyestes’ ghost to Eurybates’ lengthy account of the storm to the first narration of Cassandra.\textsuperscript{185} In her prophetic ‘redundancy’, she resembles Calchas in the \textit{Troades}. Multiple narration of the same event from different viewpoints, and under the influence of more than one timescale, is intimately tied both to the play’s thematics—which, like the \textit{Troades}, presents the aftermath of the Trojan war in terms of Greek and Trojan equivalence. The nonlinear quality with respect to timescale and causality is emblematic of Senecan poetry. This is a tragic world in which events happen out of sequence, and several times over, and have multiple causes, not all of which are visible. Cassandra makes this clear in her presentation of the events as consequences of a family curse and as revenge for war crimes.\textsuperscript{186} In the iterative–accrescent quality of Seneca’s tragic poetics, the cycles of \textit{nefas} are not simply \textit{semper idem} but prove successively more terrible.\textsuperscript{187} Cassandra’s second vision is emphatically ‘worse,’ both in the violent specificity of its \textit{enargeia} (which forces involvement on the part of the audience) and due to the vengeful satisfaction she derives from the slaughter (and, again, compels her audience to enjoy along with her). The revisionist Cassandra, a formerly disbelieved (but true) prophet who must turn poet to be more convincing, provides a window on the similarly belated poet Seneca.

\textsuperscript{184} She does not only enjoy the revenge for her own sake but (another example of her mediating job) interprets it for the benefit of her Trojan ancestors in the underworld, whom she looks forward to joining in the future.

\textsuperscript{185} Cf. Tarrant (1976, p. 334) on ‘the murder for which Seneca has elaborately prepared his audience.’

\textsuperscript{186} Fantham (1982, p. 3); cf. Ker (2009, p. 133). This appears reflective of the Stoic idea of \textit{confatalia}, of multiple causality for an event in both the divine (that is, fate) and the human realms.

\textsuperscript{187} Cf. Boyle, who sees the past and ‘cyclic history’ as determinant (1983, p. 34ff). Boyle has a nice note on this cyclic mode: ‘The present is dramatised as the product of many pasts and their re-presentation, a representation as morally obscure as it is inevitable …’ (\textit{ibid.}, p. 36). However, I would add that this ‘re-presentation,’ makes use of innovations; the tension between the familiar and the novel forms a locus of poetic dynamism.
While Seneca’s Cassandra possesses various autonomous attributes as poetological figure, her limitations are also telling. Knowledge of the specifics of her own death—time, place, mode—was a standard attribute of the pre-Senecan Cassandra. In fact, it was part of her curse. But this Cassandra is not aware of her own death. The apparent failure is, I think, an aculeate Senecan touch that speaks to the limitations of poetic authority and human knowledge more generally. Cassandra is unable to successfully predict her own death with the same enargeia which she has in abundance for the deaths of both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. On the other hand, it is also a liberation from her customary curse. Instead of being forced to foresee, Cassandra carefully plans the way in which she intends to execute her own death—as a tragedian deliberately scripts the actions of a play, or an individual might plan his or her own death scene.\(^{188}\) As Boyle, *inter alios*, observes, in her willingness to die Cassandra can also be seen as dramatizing the Stoic paradox of the slave who is free.\(^{189}\) Cassandra’s actions appear to respond to Seneca’s statement on attitudes toward fate: her declaration *ne trahite, vestros ipsa praecedam gradus* (1004) echoes *ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt*.\(^{190}\) Similarly to how Polyxena and Astyanax anticipate their executioners to take an active role in their own deaths in the *Troades*, Cassandra tells us that she will eagerly walk ahead of her executioners at the time of her prescribed death. In fact, this action is preleptically cued in act 4, when she precedes Agamemnon in his triumphal procession.\(^{191}\) And, in a kind of miniature katabasis, she has also already peered into the underworld to reveal Agamemnon’s impending doom to her fellow Trojans, thus previewing her own death.

\(^{188}\) My view is *contra* that of most scholars, who assume that Seneca’s Cassandra follows in the same vein of foreseeing her own death as she does in previous appearances. Tarrant (1976) is among the only commentator who does not automatically presume that Cassandra is aware of her death. Cf. Seneca’s ‘staging’ of his own death scene(s) (Ker 2009).

\(^{189}\) See Rosenmeyer (1986, pp. 14-15) on paranetic ‘paradigm and precept’ in Senecan drama, though he does not single out Cassandra in this system. Calder (1976, p. 32ff) argues that Cassandra embodies two Stoic paradoxes: that death is a blessing, and that only the slave is ultimately free.

\(^{190}\) *Ep.* 107.10. Which itself is a paraphrase of a well-known, and oft-quoted, phrase of Cleanthes.

\(^{191}\) Though I diverge from Tarrant on the following point: that she disappears from the action of the play after her long speech (*Aga.* 909) because ‘her part in the play is inextricably linked with the fortune of Agamemnon, and when he is forgotten she must follow him into obscurity.’ (1976, p. 334). On the contrary, she is at her strongest when she describes the murder of, then outlives, her captors, and then makes a shatteringly powerful pronouncements on mortality and freedom more generally. Calder (1976, p. 32) points out that captives should follow their captors, yet I would argue that this rule is followed here as well: Agamemnon proves to be the real captive, whereas Cassandra emerges as more free by the end of the drama.
Cassandra certainly possesses a great deal of autonomy as poet and as someone who is not afraid of death. But she is problematic as a Stoic figure, I would argue, not least because she wants to live to see the revenge executed, and wants to die in order to continue telling the same vengeful story. With Cassandra’s poetic motivations, too, come some limiting factors: she cannot ultimately see through to her poetry’s reception, and she is constrained by her desire to watch and tell revenge. This is apparent in her last few lines, in which she provides a corrective to the question she posed earlier about her continued existence in the wake of Troy’s fall: she is glad after all to have outlived Troy in order to see, to glean satisfaction from, and (most importantly) to narrate the downfall of Argos to her fellow Trojans.\footnote{iam iam iuvat vixisse post Troiam, iuvat, 1011; cf. earlier: 
iam Troia cecidit—falsa quid vates ago?, Aga. 725. Like deictics often do, iam iam and nunc indicate that attention should be paid to this work, which is necessarily in dialogue with previous iterations.} The underworld becomes a place where she can exercise a measure of autonomy as a poet who has infinite time to (re)tell her story, along with a ready-made captive audience.

What kind of vates, then, is Seneca’s Cassandra? It is a complex question to answer. She self-consciously undercuts her own abilities as prophet from the beginning, characterizing herself as a falsa vates. The first time she is compelled to peer into the future, her account is riddled with far more doubt than certainty. In the reprise, after she has distanced herself from Apollo and her divinely sanctioned foreknowledge proves insufficient, she delivers her truest ‘prophecies’ willingly, not as one inspired but as an interpres of past and ‘future’ mythic and historical motifs, including Roman ones, and of the ways in which tragic revenge plots work. As a vatic ‘super-figure’, Cassandra most closely approximates the level of knowledge those on the outside of the play (audiences; the author) possess.\footnote{And thus as (among other things) an analogue to an external audience who is also aware of the mythic and literary past. See Pratt on audience ‘preknowledge’ (1983, p. 32ff) and on the audience members’ varying levels of knowledge; he has more to say on the stratification of the Aeschylean audience than on the Senecan audience (ibid., p. 39).} Yet her foreknowledge is ultimately constrained, based on her involvement in the hic et nunc of the immediate drama. The final lines of the play add yet another layer of complexity to Cassandra’s characterization as vates. Her own desires to see vengeance served and to see her poetry well-received resonate even after the play’s end. The play’s final words are ominous, and are often taken as a straightforward prophecy, but they also reflect the larger patterns of talionic tragedy, and, in a way, ensure
her poetry's continued force. By looking backward in mytho-literary time, down into the
underworld, and inward in self-reflective gaze, Seneca's Cassandra can 'see' ahead (albeit
in a limited way) to the next chapter. Seneca's Cassandra replaces her limitations
prophecy with what she can control: her autonomy as a poet. Although she plans to
continue 'reperforming' her poetry in the underworld and hopes that it will be well-
received, Cassandra cannot foresee where and how she will turn up in subsequent literary
treatments, just as the dramatist cannot ultimately predict his or her work's Nachleben.

Conclusion
This chapter has examined the major traditional (that is, Apolline) prophets of Seneca's
tragedies. Due to their long history of appearing in poetry, prophets are malleable figures,
useful for engaging with the literary tradition. Seneca puts these prophets (Calchas,
Tiresias, Manto, and Cassandra) to work on many levels: as structuring devices, the scenes
in which they appear serve as seams that tie together the play's action, or point to
redundancy. Calchas' speech provides an Angelpunkt, or juncture point, for fate's demands
of the two Trojan youths; this in turn sets up the climax of the play, the double murder-
sacrifice, which overturns what was previously (thought to be) fated. The triple divination
scene of Tiresias and Manto constitutes a large part of Seneca's Oedipus, and showcases
many Senecan innovations. And Cassandra's narration of the deaths of the royal Argives,
twice, is indispensable to the play's larger structure. Traditional prophetic figures and
scenes, then, operate as 'joins' on the level of poetics, where they allow Seneca to
condense and rework multiple poetic models into his own iteration of tragedy—strikingly,
he often leaves these seams of the play visible so that each individual strand can show
through.

The prophet's liminal, intermediary status also means that he or she is well-
equipped to engage with themes of causality, hermeneutics, and human–divine relations.
That each of these prophets fails, where (based on their earlier appearances) one would
expect their prophecies to prove true, comments on human hermeneutics more generally.
In the constellation of multiple motivating causes and interpretive possibilities, Seneca's
prophets mediate as transmitters of divine meaning, but also reveal other types of
meaning—including poetic knowledge. Plurality is reflected on the level of dramatic action, as when the same events are represented from different viewpoints and in different modes: this Cassandra does in her two accounts of the deaths of the royal Argives in prophetic (first) then poetic mode. In similar vein, the succession of divinatory attempts by Tiresias and Manto points to the multiple possible viæ of poetry even as it reveals the failure of prophecy to isolate a particular answer. And Calchas articulates one of the various motivating forces behind the required deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax in the Troades, where what the fates require has increased in this iteration; this time two victims are demanded, an element for which neither the characters in the drama nor Seneca’s own audience would have been prepared. As this chapter has argued throughout, the dominant characterization of prophetic activity in Senecan drama is of problems and pitfalls: redundancy, failed divinatory attempts, even admissions of failure. But these problems, I argue, highlight the possibilities of another vatic realm: poetry. The frustrated attempts at prophecy actually pave the way for poetic expansion and innovation, for engaging with poetic models, and, on the meta-level of poetics, for commenting on poetic activities of creation and reception.

The order in which I have treated these traditional prophets is ascending in terms of their involvement in the structure and thematics of their respective plays, which in turn is linked to their agency. Calchas’ is a bit part, and he is not self-reflective of his own status as vates. Tiresias and Manto occupy an intermediary position, where their attempts at successful divination fail multiple times, thus creating opportunities for narrative and dramatic expansion. The crescendo of the traditional prophets culminates with Cassandra, whom I isolate as a vatic ‘super-role’ figure: she is an interpreter–receiver (audience) as well as a poet figure, and engages with her pasts and futures even beyond this particular tragedy. Seneca’s elision of Cassandra’s normal curse of foreseeing her own death, in conjunction with her role as poet analogue, point to these concerns of the poet. Cassandra is more successful as poet than as prophet. But even her foreknowledge is limited, not least with respect to her own death and possible afterlives—as both an individual and a poet figure. Seneca’s flawed prophets pave the way for other types of figures to take on

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594 Inhabiting multiple interpretive roles will also prove problematic for Seneca’s Oedipus, as Chapter 5 will explore in detail.
aspects of the *vates*. The next chapter turns to discuss how the infernal figures of ghosts and furies usurp the prophetic role.
CHAPTER 2

Seneca’s Infernal vates

Senecan presents his traditional prophets as limited or flawed, as the first chapter argued. The failure of these normal prophets to deliver unproblematic prophecies paves the way for a second vatic species, the ‘infernal’ one, to usurp a variety of prophetic, and poetic, functions. Every one of Seneca’s plays deals with the underworld, and many feature a katabasis or a variant of one (e.g. the necromantic reverse katabasis of the ghost of Laius in his Oedipus). The underworld is inescapable in these tragedies, as the many loci horridi descriptions and infernal characters attest. As this chapter articulates, Seneca’s ghosts and furies serve as more reliable conduits for vatic knowledge than do per se prophets. This is due to a number of factors, some of which are mutually reinforcing. First, in Senecan tragedy, as in previous tragedy and epic, the underworld serves as a repository for hidden knowledge, and offers access to the past, present, and future. Infernal characters serve a mediating function between the upper and lower worlds; this is reflected in their status as interpres-figures. If we envision the actor- and audience-figures of the tragedy as a set of concentric circles, as I suggested in the introduction to the dissertation, ghosts and furies occupy a middle ring. They mediate between those at the epicenter of the dramatic action and those who stand outside of it altogether (that is, the audiences and author); they know more than the play’s main characters but not as much as those on the outside of the play. This arcane knowledge is not readily available in the upper world and is all the more valuable for this very reason—a fact that is underscored by the lengths to which characters will go in order to make contact with the underworld.

The underworld takes on a metaliterary dimension as well, since ghosts, furies, and katabasis scenes in Seneca’s plays are necessarily in dialogue with their infernal prototypes in earlier Greek and Latin literature. What is more, scholars such as Schiesaro have seen Senecan tragedy as staging an infernal locus for poetic inspiration—a font for creative energies that has a destructive, funerary side to it as well. This is in keeping with my larger claim throughout the dissertation that the poetic functions of vatic activity resemble, and

595 Furies have been called tragedy’s ‘muses’; this is especially applicable in Seneca’s world, with references to the underworld (in overt and disguised forms) at every turn.
in fact often supersedes, the strictly forward-looking prophetic ones. Seneca capitalizes
on the linkages of ghosts and furies to vates-figures more broadly, this chapter argues: in
their connection with hidden knowledge and their ability (often under compulsion) to
communicate arcana, infernal figures resemble inspired prophets as well as poets. In
addition to knowledge and time, the underworld also offers access to another dimension
of causal factors, in addition to those found in the heavenly and earthly realms.

Contact with the underworld for Seneca takes the form of katabasis, necromancy,
and artificially constructed underworlds—to name but a few. The oppressiveness of the
underworld extends to the upper world as well: infernal inhabitants rise to infect mortals
and even Olympians with the dark passions that cannot be contained below. With all this
in mind, I provide a brief sketch of some of the major studies.\textsuperscript{96} In a seminal study on
Vergil’s ‘tragic future’ in Seneca, Putnam attests to the overwhelming presence of Vergil’s
underworld in Senecan tragedy. He argues that the \textit{ira} and \textit{furor} that dominate
(especially) books 7-12 of the \textit{Aeneid} are prime motive forces in Seneca, where they are
manifested not only in explicitly underworldly scenes and figures, but also in more covert
ones, such as burial humans (Medea, Atreus, Cassandra, even Oedipus), a burial goddess
(Juno), and alternative underworlds (e.g., the palace of the Pelopidae in \textit{Thyestes}).
Schiesaro, on the other hand, takes a psychoanalytic point of departure: the infernal
energies represent the normally latent passions and desires of humans, especially those of
the tragic poet during the act of creation. Along a similar track, Littlewood isolates the
underworld as a repository for human passions, but stresses the roles of audiences (with
their own anxieties and passions) as activators of meaning. Staley treats the visuality of the
underworld as integral to Senecan drama: the \textit{loci horridi} descriptions as well as the
figures themselves (e.g., hideous furies) make up a vivid drasmascape that reveals moral as
well as poetic issues. For Staley, Senecan tragedy is a large-scale projection of passions
such as anger and paranoia, which work via mental image. \textit{Monstra}, which are innately
visual,\textsuperscript{97} constitute a means for Seneca to represent these would-be invisible qualities.
Whereas for Schiesaro the tragic poet is compelled to examine unconscious emotions,

\textsuperscript{96} The studies I reference in the introductory section include Putnam (1995); Schiesaro (2003);
Littlewood (2004); Staley (2009).

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Monstrum} is etymologized from the verb \textit{monstrare} ‘to show’ and is also related to \textit{moneo}, ‘to warn’; see
Staley’s chapter on ‘Reading Monsters’ (2009, pp. 96-120) for the visual aspect of Senecan drama,
including its moral, epistemological, and (meta)literary implications.
desires, or fears, thus participating in a kind of psychoanalytic journey of the self via the creative process, Staley sees Seneca’s dexterous manipulation of furies as a deliberate ‘laying-bare’ or ‘making-manifest.”

This chapter treats the infernal figures of ghosts and furies, arguing that their contact with the underworld grants access to knowledge that approximates that of the *vates*, another class of intermediaries. In Senecan tragedy, ghosts appear either to the main characters face to face, in dreams, or as visual apparitions. Like many actual prophets, they provide advice or other useful information, or, alternatively, make demands. Within the typologies of Seneca’s underworldly figures, we also see the infernal prologuist, as is the case in the *Agamemnon* (the ghost of Thyestes), the *Thyestes* (the ghost of Tantalus and a Fury), and the *Hercules* (a furial Juno). Prologue-delivering ghost or fury figures neither interact with nor are they visible to the characters who are at the epicenter of the play. They are ‘overheard’ only by external audiences. And their relative degree of knowledge with respect to those within the dramatic action and the outer layers of author and external audience (a realm superordinate to the former and subordinate to the latter) further highlights their liminal, *interpres* status. Infernal prologuists can provide a proleptic sketch of the events that will transpire in the course of the drama (rather than giving purely anterior, background information); such figures can also embody a poetological role in more overtly ‘pre-scripting’, and commenting on, the action and themes that will occur in the play—and even in its aftermath. However, prologuists possess limited agency. Like prophets, they act at a level of remove; nevertheless, in the force they exert by means of ‘scripting’, they can continue to influence the drama even *in absentia*.

Like that of chapter 1, this chapter’s structure follows a model that proceeds ‘outward’ in degrees of agency and of importance—from the major ghostly figures who take part in the dramatic action (Hector, Laïus, Achilles), to the ghost who delivers a more classically expository prologue (Thyestes), to the paired prologue-giving infernal figures who are both most distant from the action and who can be seen as most closely linked to underworld itself: the embodiment of furial energies (Furia), along with the ghost of Tantalus. Seneca’s ghosts and furies assume many functions of the more normative

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598 Staley (2009, esp. pp. 98ff.).
prophet and poet *vates*-figures. The underworld and its characters offer the tragic poet a site for the displacement of human passions, and a home for the equally murky processes of artistic inspiration, creation, and reception.

**Necro-knowledge: Achilles and Hector**

Senecan drama is heir to a long tradition of literary ghosts as mediators between the living and the dead.\(^{199}\) Ghosts in tragedy and epic normally give information, advice, or guidance to those on earth. Alternatively, they might make demands of the living, such as a request for proper burial, or might serve an avenging role. By their very presence, they also necessarily validate the existence of life after death. The boundaries between the living and the dead are not normally permeable; but as physical (or at least quasi-physical) and metaphysical embodiments of the afterlife, ghosts forge a link between the still-living and the deceased. They activate both the hopes and fears of the living with respect to what happens at the point of death, and after. In Seneca this takes the form of commentary on both actual and poetic afterlives. Senecan drama features ghosts as prologists as well as ghosts who interact (in some way) with characters in the dramatic action proper. Some ghosts appear to the living as waking visions, while others appear in a dream; they can arrive on the scene from the underworld either against their will or of their own accord, or characters can visit them in katabases; and they can intervene directly in the play’s action or exercise an effect at a distance. Ghosts provide an opportunity for a temporal and causal perspective that is informed by their having experienced both the upper and lower worlds. The first part of the chapter focuses on these inset ghosts and the second part focuses on prologue-giving ghosts, examining to what extent they are ‘successful’ vatic figures, and what interpretive possibilities the strengths and limitations of each present.

In chapter 1, I argued that the prophet Calchas of Seneca’s *Troades* offers only one motivation, and not the play’s first, for the requisite human sacrifice. The ghost of Achilles, in fact, preempts Calchas by demanding one of the deaths. In act 2, the chorus inquires as to the reason behind the Greeks’ long delay from homecoming:

\(^{199}\) On the underworld as a repository of intertextual material and energy, see especially Hardie (1986); and specifically to Seneca, see Schiesaro (2003) and Ker (2009). The idea gains new force in Lucan and Statius, who redeploy Senecan underworlds in epic contexts.
CH. Quae causa ratibus faciat et Danais moram effare, reduces quis deus Claudat vias. (Tro. 166-7).

CH. Speak to us, what cause creates delay for the Argive ships, too—what god closes off the ways home?

In response, the herald Talthybius announces what he claims to have witnessed: the ghost Achilles has abruptly returned to earth and has demanded that Polyxena be sacrificed as his underworldly bride. According to Talthybius, Achilles’ characteristic anger and sense of resentment persist even in the underworld:

TA. Implevit omne litus irati sonus:
‘ite, ite, inertes, debitos manibus meis
auferte honores, solvite ingratas rates
per nostra ituri maria! non parvo luit
iras Achillis Graecia et magno luet:
desponsa nostris cineribus Polyxene
Pyrrhi manu mactetur et tumulum riget.’ (Tro. 190-6)

TA. His sounding rage filled the entire shore:
‘Go, go, idle ones, carry off the honors that are
owed my shade, release the wretched
ships so they can wend their way through our waters!
Greece paid a not-cheap price to satisfy Achilles’ wrath,
again it will pay greatly: let Polyxena be sacrificed by
Pyrrhus’ hand—a bride for my ashes—and let her wet my tomb.

Achilles’ motivation for appearing on earth is simple: a bride. And although he offers information that the Greeks need and will seek via other channels, his irruption into the world of the living is (apparently) spontaneous. It is not due to human intervention, in contrast to, for example, the elaborate preparations at play in summoning Laius’ ghost. The coincidence of the timing, however, strains belief; it seems to follow linearly from the chorus’ questions, and yet the herald is recounting an event that ostensibly took place some time before. This ‘too-opportune’ quality features in other prophetic contexts; it is paralleled in Calchas’ arriving unbidden but immediately after Pyrrhus and Agamemnon agree to consult him, and likewise for Tiresias’ sudden appearance in the Oedipus. While this may seem a flaw in poetic composition, I believe that it draws attention to

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200 Or ‘hands’; the Latin dative is ambiguous.
201 Also, note Talthybius’ own language describing his emergence and return to the underworld: coeunte and iunxit are colored by marriage-speak.
Seneca's deliberate innovations, and, moreover, serves as a marker of the multiple causality that is at play in the tragedies.

Following his lightning-quick appearance, the ghost reseals the earth and returns to his infernal abode, at which point an eerie calm replaces his strident commands:

TA. haec fatus alta nocte divisit diem,
repetensque Ditem mersus ingentem specum
coeunte terra iunxit. immoti iacent
tranquilla pelagi, ventus abiecit minas,
placidumque fluctu murmurat leni mare,
Tritonum ab alto cecinit hymenaeum chorus. (Tro. 197-202)

TA. After uttering these words, he separated day
from deep night; and, upon returning to the underworld,
sank down. He bridged the huge abyss by uniting it with
the earth. The waters lay still, at peace, the winds ceased
from their threats, and the now-placid sea hummed with
gentle movement; a chorus of Triton-daughters hymned
a marriage-song from the depths.

The marriage hymn sung by Triton’s daughters responds to the ghost’s demand, where it proleptically announces the impending union of Polyxena and Achilles. From Achilles’ perspective, the hymn is celebratory; to Polyxena, however, it is an ominous funeral dirge. To the Greeks, the news is also double-edged. That they can return home is welcome news, but the means necessary to achieve this is distressing. Achilles’ demands provide a cause for, and foreshadow, one half of the play’s climactic finale: the murder–sacrifice of Polyxena as witnessed by the crowd of onlooking Greeks and Trojans, and the spectators’ response.

But to what extent is his reverse katabasis a successful vatic endeavor? He does provide the important information, where his speech offers the kind ‘if–then’ prophetic formula familiar from the usual demands of the dead. Yet what Achilles demands (or foretells) does not unambiguously come to pass in the play, an idea to which I will return in subsequent chapters. Polyxena does, of course, die, and Achilles’ language (mactetur tumulum riget) is echoed in the closing scene. But that she joins Achilles as his underworldly bride is far from unambiguous, and requires a belief in the existence of an afterlife—one of the central questions raised and internally debated several times over in the Troades, and indeed, in Seneca’s larger oeuvre. Achilles’ ‘prophecy’ is also incomplete. Polyxena’s death is only half of the equation: Astyanax must also be sacrificed, as Calchas
will make clear in the next act. Additionally, it is not clear that Polyxena actually falls by Pyrrhus’ hand (*Pyrrihi manu mactetur*), since she anticipates her executioner in taking her death into her own hands. As I will discuss more fully in the next chapter, when she falls angrily on the earth at the moment of her death, the gesture underscores her challenging of the authority of the Greeks, and of *fatum*.\(^{203}\) Achilles’ speech draws attention to questions of agency and power—crucial themes of Seneca’s *Troades*.\(^{204}\) As chapter 1 also argued, the paratactic nature of Senecan scenes reinforces the model of multiple causes. The words of the official prophet Calchas (and the divine authority behind them) offer one causal thread; the underworldly demands of the ghost Achilles form another. The element of human agency completes the divine—infernal—mortal trifecta of causality which I propose is crucial to understanding the model of *confatalia* in Seneca. We can see this element at play in the *agon* between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon, which presents the human sacrifice as due to political expediency.\(^{205}\)

Achilles’ appearance also allows for Seneca’s creative engagement with literary models. Euripides’ *Hecuba* is a crucial intertext for this scene, where the ghost of Achilles similarly demands Polyxena as his bride. In the *Hecuba*, Achilles does not appear *viva voce* (as it were). Instead, the event is focalized through the words of Polydorus’ ghost in the prologue (where he is to be the second victim); then through an allegorical dream in which Hecuba sees a hind being slaughtered; then through the chorus’ brief two-line reporting of his words, which also includes a comment that the Greeks hotly debated whether or not to go through with the sacrifice. In effect, Seneca has both condensed and expanded Euripides’ version. Seneca adds an extra interpretive layer to the vivid picture of Achilles bursting up to the upper world to deliver his demands in person in that he puts the entire scene in the mouth of the messenger Talthybius, who becomes Achilles’ mouthpiece—a virtual prophet for the ghost. The scene in turn participates in the larger-scale Senecan innovation, as chapter 1 proposed, of treating the *duplex nefas* (the deaths of both Polyxena and Astyanax) in a single work.\(^{206}\)

\(^{203}\) Several good commentary—texts on Seneca’s *Troades* exist: Boyle (1994), Fantham (1982), and Keulen (2001). Chapter 3 will further discuss the exemplary (and, I argue, fate-subverting) actions of Polyxena and Astyanax.

\(^{204}\) Braginton (1933, p. 7).

\(^{205}\) Pyrrhus and Agamemnon seem to be unaware of the appearance of Achilles’ ghost, and so they can be seen as independent causal factors, in addition to Calchas (*pace* Stroh 2009).

\(^{206}\) As was discussed in Chapter 1.
Achilles’ speaking ghost in Seneca’s *Troades* also recalls his appearances in epic. Perhaps most obviously, it gestures toward the *locus classicus* of his ghostly appearance, the *nekyia* of *Odyssey* 11, where Achilles presents his commentary on ruling in the underworld vs. being a slave in the upper world.\(^{207}\) This is an especially relevant intertext in light of the debates on kingly power and *fortuna* by Pyrrhus and Agamemnon that follows, and by the first chorus in the ‘Fortuna fallax’ ode. In Achilles’ insinuation that the fleet will be delayed unless Polyxena is sacrificed to him, he upstages the actual prophet before he has a chance to appear. His own demands are in turn reiterated and one-upped by Calchas, who adds a coda of *nefas* to what Achilles requires: not only must Polyxena be murdered, but Astyanax must join her this time. Like Achilles’ ghost preemptively usurps the vatic role, his own role will also be displaced by other forces.

In a play that offers contrastive views of the afterlife, and, what is more, that presents the experiences of the ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ sides in the aftermath of the Trojan War as in many ways equivalent, it is not surprising that two ghosts should appear. Each employs a distinct modality and each has a bearing on one of the two young *morituri*, Astyanax and Polyxena. Achilles, the reverse-katabasis ghost, offers a *conditional* prophecy in the demands he makes of the living: if his wishes are satisfied, the desired outcome will be achieved.\(^{208}\) Hector’s appearance to Andromache, on the other hand, belongs to the epic and tragic tradition of ghosts appearing in dreams to impart some vital bit of information, instruction, or advice to the dreamer. As Schiesaro observes, this dream does *not* operate under an allegorical rubric: ‘In spite of the popularity of the allegorical dream in Greek tragedy and in early Republican tragedy, Seneca failed to use it. [...] His one dream scene does not need interpretation, as allegorical dreams do.’\(^{209}\) The basic picture, as Andromache relates it to the Senex, is that the ghost of her dead husband Hector appears, mirroring her own grief-stricken appearance.\(^{210}\) After ordering her to quit

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\(^{207}\) *Od.* 11.541-592.

\(^{208}\) With the contra-proviso that so long as these remain unfulfilled, the delays will continue. In Seneca, as elsewhere, the distinctions between prophecy, promise, threat, and curse can be blurry.

\(^{209}\) Schiesaro (2003, p. 83). This is of a piece with Seneca’s dismissal of etymology and allegory (two classic Stoic hermeneutic tools) as the keys to poetic interpretation. Dream-interpretation will, however, return in the *Octavia*, in the Nurse’s interpretation of Poppaea’s dream; as I will discuss, the scene presents prophetic material in an infernal context.

\(^{210}\) As Farrell points out (*per litteras*), a mangled body could itself function as a ‘convincing emblem for a literary tradition that is not faithfully preserved but constantly revised by one author after another.’ This is of a piece with the recent work on corporeality in imperial Latin poetics, and specifically, the
mourning, he warns her that, with danger on the horizon, she must find a safe haven for Astyanax:

AN. ‘dispelle somnos,’ inquit, ‘et natum eripe, o fida coniunx: lateat, haec una est salus. omitte fetus. Troia quod cecidit gemis? utinam iaceret tota! festina, amove quocumque nostrae parvulam stirpem domus.’ (Tro. 452-6)

AN. ‘Shrug off sleep, faithful wife,’ he said, ‘and snatch away our son. He must be hidden away; this is his sole hope of safety. Hold your tears. You’re groaning because Troy has fallen? If only she were—in full! Hurry up, take the little sprout of our family off anywhere you can!

Achilles’ ghost shares a great deal with his counterparts in Greek tragedy and epic. Hector’s ghost, on the other hand, shares a special affinity with his predecessor in the Aeneid. In book 2 he comes to Aeneas in a dream with the purpose of advising Aeneas to leave Troy and take the Penates with him in order to fulfill his ultimate destiny. Both appear to the dreamer ante oculos, and the descriptors Andromache and Aeneas apply to Hector are strikingly similar, especially concerning the ghost Hector’s squalid appearance in contrast to his former glory days. Also similar is the language of advice each Hector gives, marked by an imperative (eripe) in the same sedes and commentary on the fallen Troy. His bedraggled appearance also hearkens back to Iliad 24, where there the gods had saved Hector’s corpse from being physically desecrated, despite Achilles’ efforts to the contrary.

Aside from surface parallels, however, the dissimilar tones and functions of the dreams of the Aeneid and Troades reveal the distinct modalities of prophecy in the epic version versus in Seneca’s tragic reinterpretation. On a fundamental level, the dream of the Aeneid offers valuable advice that spurs Aeneas to action and initiates a string of clairvoyant episodes: advice from his mother Venus, an interview with Anchises, and

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’sympathetic’ response of fragmentary or distorted bodies vis-à-vis the belated poetic corpus; cf. Most (1995). Hector has survived ‘whole’ (though sad, resigned, and dirt-caked) to feature in Andromache’s dream; Astyanax, by contrast, will at the end of the play end up dismembered and dead, but, it can be argued, triumphant as death-defying exempla.

211 Aen. 2.270-95. The appearance of Hector in ghost form inaugurates Aeneas’ ‘sack of Troy’ narrative that follows.

212 Tro. 443; cf. Aen. 2.270. Fantham (1982, ad loc.) draws attention to the echoes of Aeneid 2 in Troades with respect to these two dreams of Hector.
another ghostly dream appearance by Creusa. These factors in combination propel Aeneas’ epic journey forward, toward its telos on Italian shores. In the Troades, the picture is much less straightforward. 233 Hector warns his wife to quit weeping (rather hypocritically, since he himself is crying) and to immediately wake in order to hide away their son, the last surviving hope of Troy—yet the vague festina, amove / quocumque gives no explicit instructions on how this is to be done. The problems continue after the prophetic dream ends: when Andromache does awake, she immediately forgets the danger to Astyanax (and Hector’s instructions) and instead tries in vain to embrace her husband’s shade. 234 When she finally seeks a hiding spot for their son, the only place she sees potential shelter is Hector’s tomb, which becomes a makeshift hiding place for Astyanax until he is discovered by Ulysses. While Andromache notes the ill-omened nature of the spot (omen tremesco misera ferais loci, 488), the irony is appreciated at that point only by the external audience, which knows the impending doom of the youth, both from familiarity with the basic mythic plot and, in this play, as the words of Calchas and of Achilles’ ghost foreshadow. 235 A similar irony attends Andromache’s commands to Astyanax to enter the tomb; what is more, her words reveal her to be an unwitting prophet, a theme that chapter 3 will discuss in greater detail.

One of the most productive components of the dream and its aftermath for examining Seneca’s relation to his vatic predecessor Vergil is Hector’s attitude toward his homeland. After naming Astyanax the sole remnant of fallen Troy and urging Andromache to curb her laments, Hector perversely declares that he wishes Troy were completely fallen. 236 His words take on new force when we examine them through the lens of Augustan poetry, as they echo the very sentiment in Aeneid 12 that brings about reconciliation and closes the epic, also ‘closing’ the Trojan story. The culmination of the agreement of Jupiter and Juno (occidit, occideritque sinas cum nomine Troia) functions as a

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233 This fits with the anti-teleological time-cause dynamics of tragedy vs. the goal-driven one of epic.
234 oblitae nati misera quaesivi Hectorum: / fallax per ipsos umbra complexus abit, Tro. 459-60. The marital context echoes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice; Andromache’s forgetfulness also recalls Aeneid 2, where Aeneas similarly forgets Hector’s instructions upon waking.
235 Seneca’s Andromache’s actions echo those of Vergil’s Andromache in Aeneid 3, where she is obsessive in her care for Hector’s tomb, and, moreover, explicitly notes the similarities between the living Astyanax and his dead father.
236 See passage above (Tro. 453-5). His words could also operate on a metaliterary level, gesturing toward the tired ghost’s desire to be granted rest, finally, since he has been made to appear so often in poetic episodes that echo the Homeric locus classicus, and now, a Vergilian reception.
prescribed forgetting, prompted by the fusing of the Trojan and Latin peoples into one while simultaneously erasing Trojan identity.\footnote{\textit{Aen.} 12.828; on this passage, and the effects of repetition on remembrance and forgetting, see Quint \textit{1989, esp. p. 28-9). For Seneca’s \textit{Troades} as a ‘controcanto’ to the \textit{Aeneid}, see Biondi (2001, pp. 25-6); quoted in Ker (2009, p. 134, fn. 66). The temporal modalities of Senecan tragedy (at various points fractured, iterative, recursive, telescopic) are vastly different from that of Vergilian epic, where, as Quint observes, the ‘repetition-as-mastery’ progression ‘describes a teleological epic narrative that moves linearly to its final goal of victory.’ (1989, p. 34).} What is a pessimistic wish for Hector becomes fulfilled in the \textit{Aeneid}, where the wish also serves as the catalyst that makes Rome possible. Yet in a seeming paradox, the repetition calls to mind the very thing that is supposed to be banished from the mind.

Hector’s ghostly visit to Andromache appears to work as prophetic dreams normally do, in that he gives a warning and advice to the living. And yet the pessimistic tone of his commentary on (and wish for) Troy’s doom, as well as his vagueness about how to go about saving their son, suggest that he is aware (on some level) of the futility of attempting to subvert \textit{fatum}, where the word activates the valence of what-has-been-said in the literary record in addition to what is normally thought of as fate. The multiple strands of necessity all lead to the same end, but each individual one provides a means for examining the play of causes. The guarantee of the young Trojan’s doom several times over makes the final actions of Astyanax (and of Polyxena) in act 5 all the more surprising. As chapter 3 will discuss in further detail, the Trojan youths’ actions represent the most plausible challenges to fate’s supposedly unshakable authority. Not only does their self-determination render them handy Stoic exempla, but their willful exercising of choice has an analogue in—even as it is a product of—the choices a poet makes within the strictures of dramatic necessity, and of his or her work as inscribed within a broader poetic tradition.

The appearance of Achilles’ ghost (and, to a lesser extent, Hector’s) cues central debates of the \textit{Troades}: the possible existence and nature of the afterlife, and the immutability (or not) of fate. Some characters believe in the existence of life after death, while others do not; of those who do, there is a subset who eagerly anticipate life in the underworld (since they have ancestors waiting there) or fear it, as does Polyxena, since its existence means that she must give up not only her life on earth but her freedom after death, as Achilles’ underworldly bride. The chorus also participates in this debate. In two
successive odes they present vastly different views, and neither ultimately wins out as the authoritative one. On one level, the appearance of Achilles’ ghost is treated as a unmediated truth by the herald, who claims autopsy. Yet the ghostly episode is already an interpreted narrative, and so the herald acts like a vates twice over. Like a prophet, he utters the will of Achilles (who at that moment represents fate), while crafting his own version of the events for his audience, like a poet. What is more, the two ghost scenes combine in a chiastic way to gesture toward the multiple motivating factors of the fatum that will form the play’s climax. Achilles’ demands motivate Polyxena’s death, and Hector’s ghost comments pessimistically on the fact that the prescribed death of Astyanax cannot be averted.

Laius the anti-oracle

Despite their dissimilarities, the inset ghosts of Troades share that they travel of their own volition and by their own agency from the underworld to upper world. The ghost of Laius in Seneca’s Oedipus tells a different story. After the failure of traditional divinatory means, the raising of Laius’ ghost against his will is an extreme measure to ascertain the identity of his murderer. Throughout this play, the apparent failure of intermediaries to communicate the divine will, or fate, is a central theme. Information straight from the victim himself, the characters hope, will obviate the problems that have compromised all efforts to uncover the truth up to this point. The oracle’s words produced confusion; auspicy failed to reveal unambiguous information; the extispicy operated on several levels of remove, where Manto had to interpret for Tiresias as his eyes, and the meaning of the allegorical signa of the heifer’s entrails were lost on father and daughter. All of this adds up to a lack of a definitive answer, a lack that is due not to too little meaning but to too many potential meanings.

Since all the normal routes of prophecy have failed to isolate the name of Laius’ murder, they must try a different way, as Tiresias proposes:

Tl. nec alta caeli quaelevi pinna secant

218 This is another example of the Senecan technique of ‘parataxis’, and also of ‘internal dialogism’, both of which I explained in the Introduction to the dissertation.
219 Braginton (1933, p. 16) rightly observes that the necromantic summoning of Laius is a ‘last resort,’ following the failures of more normative divinatory means.
nec fibra vivis rapta pectoribus potest
ciere nomen. alia temptanda est via
ipse evocandus noctis aeternae plagis,
emissus Erebo ut caedis auctorem indicet. (Oed. 390-4).

TI. Neither birds that slice through the celestial heights on
light wing nor organs ripped from still-living breasts can
stir up the name. Another way must be attempted. He himself
must be called up from the depths of eternal night, so that after
he’s been sent forth, he can point out the auctor of murder.

Various figures in epic and tragedy journey to the underworld in order to gain valuable
knowledge. Katabasis is not, however, an option for Seneca’s Oedipus, since as king, he is
barred from direct contact with the underworld. 220 This necromantic scenario violently
inverts the normal pattern of human descent to (and, ideally, return from) the infernal
regions. It also provides Seneca an opportunity for creative expansion. 221 The chief
innovations include an intricate, polymetric hymn to Bacchus (the choral ode), a brief
agôn between Oedipus and Creon, and an extended messenger’s speech by Creon
elaborating the details of the ritual. Creon’s account of the underworld parallels other
Senecan descriptions of the underworld or other loci horridi; from line 548 on, it switches
to the running commentary mode, which, like Cassandra’s description and Manto’s
account of the extispicy, vividly describes the event as it occurs. Finally, Tiresias says, he is
heard, and his words have authority: ‘audior,’ vates ait, / ‘rata verba fudi.’ 222 If we are to
interpret his statement in the context of the setting, then it seems only the underworld,
with its certainty of death, can guarantee a form of sure knowledge.

Laius emerges reluctantly when summoned, after an elaborate ritual involving a
libation of blood, milk, and wine, and a sacrifice of sheep. Hecate’s hounds are the audible
harbingers of the ghost’s arrival, while the torvitas of the Erinyes, along with the

220 Oed. 396-400.
221 Indeed, the power of song is a key component of why this ritual succeeds, as the collocation of the
hymn, the magic chants uttered by Tiresias (carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax / decantat ore
quidquid aut placat leves / aut cogit umbras ..., Oed. 561-3; canitque rursus ac terram intuenus / graviore
manes voce et attonita citat, Oed. 567-8. Note the power of poetry to compel as well as to please (aut placat ...
aut cogit). Braginton locates a main difference between this scene and the Odyssey’s nekyia in the
‘uncanny power [...] of his magic song’ (1933, p. 89), while Boyle observes the poetological implications of
carmen in this scene (2011, ad loc.); cf. Töcherle (1994, ad 561). In addition, auctorem indicet (394)
activates the metapoetic realm of authorial creation (cf. auctorem indica, Thy. 638-40), while via points to
one of many possible ‘routes’ of human, or dramatic, choice.
222 Oed. 571-2. cf. the certa responsa given by the (unnamed) oracle or divinity located in the infernal
House of the Pelopidae in Thyestes; I treat this further in Chapter 3.
personified forces of Furor, Horror, Morbus, and so on which leap out of the underworld are visually striking.\textsuperscript{223} These entities also foreshadow those that Oedipus takes with him at the end of the play.\textsuperscript{224} Like Hector’s ghost, Laius’ ghost is filthy, and furious; his initial words comment on the evil ingrained in Cadmus’ line, which always strives to outdo in tragic crime:

\begin{quote}
CR. ... et ore rabido fatur: ‘O Cadmi effera,
cruore semper laeta cognato domus,
vibrate thyrso, enthea natos manu
lacerate potius! maximum Thebis scelus
maternus amor est.’ (\textit{Oed.} 626-30)
\end{quote}

CR. ... and he utters forth with rabid mouth:
‘Too savage house of Cadmus, always made glad
by the blood of relatives, rattle your thyrso, mangle
your children with god-filled hands—just not this!
Mother-love is the greatest crime at Thebes.’

The intermediary figure Laius provides the backstory of Thebes as well as information on the current state of affairs—including an unambiguous indictment of Oedipus. The ghost is emphatic that it is not the angry gods but the actions of a \textit{rex cruentus} that are to blame.\textsuperscript{225} Laius privilege the individual human \textit{qua} agent over any kind of fatal or divine causation. In addition, he reveals his intent to pursue Oedipus for the crimes he has committed, and here, as often, there is spillover between curse and prophecy. Laius offers a gratuitous commentary along with the requested information: he ranks the crimes of Oedipus (and the resulting actions) as a series of progressively worse \textit{nefas}. The crime of parricide cedes to the worse offense of incest—but both of these pale in comparison to fratricidal civil war, the apex of human evil, which will occur in the strife between Polynices and Eteocles.\textsuperscript{226}

The inset \textit{tricolon crescens} of Laius’ rhetorically sophisticated presentation echoes the structure of the three \textit{viae} attempted in order to bring the identity of his murderer to light. The first has to do with the Olympian gods (ornithomancy and oracles) and the

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\textsuperscript{223} The violence that the ritual entails affects the natural world in adverse ways, splitting treetrunks and making the ground wince in pain (\textit{Oed.} 573ff).
\textsuperscript{224} \textit{Oed.} 1059-61.
\textsuperscript{225} \textit{patria, non ira deum / sed sclere raperis [...] / sed rex cruentus}, (\textit{Oed.} 630-1; 634).
\textsuperscript{226} Boyle (2011, \textit{ad loc.}) notes the incongruity of Laius’ relegation of parricide to a lesser offense than the other two, since, after all, he was a victim of parricide. The war between Polynices and Eteocles is treated in Seneca’s second Oedipus play, the \textit{Phoenissae}. 

second with the human–animal world (the extispicium). The third, most invasive, means entails breaching a normally unbridgeable gulf—between the living and the dead.\textsuperscript{227} Although the arrangement is almost certainly a Senecan invention, it is not merely a rhetorical flourish. Rather, the device activates a nexus of questions having to do with what under what circumstances, and by what means, humans should attempt to access forbidden knowledge. On an intertextual level, too, the trifold schema also pays homage to Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Tyrannos}, where the number ‘three’ is charged, and is closely linked to the Oedipus myth. In addition to the content of the Sphinx’s riddle, the place where the three roads fork at Daulis forms a significant detail, as this was where Oedipus killed his father in a circuitous attempt to avoid Delphi, thus unwittingly fulfilling the oracle’s words.\textsuperscript{228}

The necromantic interview is the fullest and most elaborate of the ghost scenes in Senecan tragedy; in fact, there is no real prototype for this scene before Seneca.\textsuperscript{229} In one sense, the scene recasts the father–son dynamic familiar from epic katabases, in which the son questions a dead father’s shade, who in turn provides invaluable advice. One proximate model is that of \textit{Aeneid} 6: Aeneas is given specific information by his father’s shade in the sequel to his visitation by Anchises in a dream, in book 5. While both Aeneas and Oedipus end up receiving requested information from their fathers, the Senecan scene inverts the analogous Vergilian one, in that the angry Laius lays curses on his son, whereas Anchises foretells his son’s ultimate destiny in Italy.\textsuperscript{230} In fact, \textit{both} fathers go beyond telling the minimum of requested information in also laying out the future of their respective descendants: for Anchises this consists in the parade of exemplary Romans he catalogues, while Laius’ dire words foretell the fratricide of Polynices and Eteocles. The gratuitous nature of Laius’ proleptic articulation of what will occur beyond the bounds of this tragedy—pestilence and fratricidal civil war—is naturally unwelcome to the internal listeners, and yet it accords with the external audience’s knowledge of the events to come in Theban myth. Further, in terms of Seneca’s larger poetic output, Laius previews the

\textsuperscript{227} As the liminal Cassandra also does (see Chapter 1); she is also accompanied by furies.
\textsuperscript{228} On the triple fork as a ‘neglected detail’ in Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Tyrannos}, see Halliwell (1986).
\textsuperscript{229} For one reception of this necromantic scene, see Statius, \textit{Thebaid} 4.626-44; Boyle (2008) also notes echoes of this scene in the pseudo-Senecan \textit{praetexta} drama the \textit{Octavia}.
\textsuperscript{230} For more on prophetic dreams in the \textit{Aeneid}, see O’Hara (1990, pp. 163-72). As O’Hara stresses, the shade does not know, or is not willing to share, the entire story but withholds certain key bits of information—the ‘pessimistic’ underbelly of what is an overtly ‘optimistic’ prophecy.
coming attraction of the *Phoenissae*. In the ‘intracorporal’ dialogic quality of Senecan tragedy, the deeper resonances of passages and characters that speak to each other are only clear when one views Seneca’s tragic oeuvre as a whole.

A chief marker of the Senecan Oedipus’ identity is his role as *interpres*. Laius’ ghost, too, possesses heightened hermeneutic ability, a gift that his current infernal abode ostensibly fosters. If Seneca’s Oedipus aspires to be a human oracle, I argue, his Laius can be seen as an oracular antitype. In the tension between these various vatic types resides an inset dialogue on prophetic channels. Laius acknowledges the affinity between the hybridic Sphinx and a similarly monstrous freak of nature: Oedipus. Yet Laius defines the Sphinx’s riddle in different terms. Whereas Oedipus’ interpretation of the riddle’s answer was generalizing (i.e. *all* humans begin life using four legs, then two, then three), Laius limits its scope to refer to Oedipus himself, even as he alludes to the content of the riddle by substituting a tangible object (*baculo senili*) for the Sphinx’s more slippery numbers. He likewise specifies the referent of the oracle as Oedipus alone, as the one to be exiled.

CR. ... repet incertus viae,
baculo senili triste praetemptans iter.
eripite terras, auferam caelum pater. (*Oed. 656-8*)

CR. ... He’ll creep along, unsure of the way, feeling ahead his grim path with his old man’s cane. Dispossess him of the earth; I, his father, will take away his sky.

The fluid timescale that is characteristic of prophecy and poetry (and that is available in the underworld) is operative here. The final words of Laius revisit Oedipus’ complaint at the beginning of the play that he has contributed to the pestilent atmosphere (*fecimus caelum nocens*). They also forecast the play’s climax and ending, when Oedipus uses

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231 *Oed. 642-646.*
232 *Implicitum malum / magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua, Oed. 640-1.* Oedipus himself echoes this passage in the *Phoenissae*. His identity as the Sphinx’s rival, or double, is one he eventually embraces.
233 The substitutive logic offers an interesting parallel with the literary–interpretive tool of allegory, which operates by a 1:1 correspondence of object and referent, versus more open-ended hermeneutic tools, which resemble the Sphinx’s *modus operandi*. Braginton sees Laius as ‘strengthening’ the oracle’s words, since it had already decreed the exile (1933, p.17). I prefer to see Laius as competing with the oracle, in that he privileges a model based on specificity and the exact 1:1 relationship between signifier and signified. This is also in keeping with his antagonism toward Oedipus not only as his killer, but also as *oracular* figure.
234 The focus on the sky also suggests the realm of auspicy, an Italianate twist on the Oedipus legend; auspicy is the first method of divination that was tried, only to fail, in Seneca’s version.
similar language to comment on his self-blinding.\textsuperscript{235} All of this adds to the larger pattern of Laius’ ghost clearing up oracular ambiguity, as two recent commentators have observed. Töchterle calls his method ‘überdeutlich,’ the noun form of which Boyle nicely translates as ‘hyper-clarity,’ further remarking on Laius’ speech that it ‘lacks all the ambiguities of the Delphic oracle. A mixture of exegesis, aggression, prophecy, and commands, it is a masterpiece of clarity.’\textsuperscript{236}

After a superabundance of competing interpretations, and the failure of both superal and human means, the need for a definitive answer is all the more urgent. Laius supplies this information, slashing away competing explanations in priamel fashion (\textit{non ...non... nec...}) until he arrives at the guilty party: \textit{sed rex cruentus}.\textsuperscript{237} The word \textit{cruentus} can refer either to a victim or a perpetrator of violence. Here, though, the surrounding context delimits the meaning to a single individual. Even Laius’ comment that the \textit{maximum scelus} at Thebes is ‘mother-love’ (\textit{maternus amor})—a phrase that would normally be bivalent (love of or by one’s mother)—in this context is allotted a pointed meaning which, in light of Oedipus’ well-known situation, supersedes all the others. An \textit{interpres} figure several times over, Laius mediates not only between the living and dead, but (like a poet) between the realms of those inside and outside the dramatic action. His speech has a leveling effect, bringing the degree of knowledge of the characters within the drama, including Oedipus himself, to approximate that of the super-stratum, an audience that has known all along what he is revealing now to his listeners. In his effort to zero in on a single unilinear meaning, plain truth strips his words of any potential irony. Though his account is explicit, he himself is disbelieved—as is generally the case with prophets and messengers (and even poets?) who bear unwelcome news. In this aspect he mirrors the role of the official Theban prophet, Tiresias, in the Sophoclean \textit{locus classicus}.\textsuperscript{238} Seneca’s substitution of an successful infernal \textit{vates} (Laius) for an inept traditional one (Tiresias)

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item \textsuperscript{235} \textit{Oed.} 1059-61.
\item \textsuperscript{236} Boyle (2011, p. 255). It also reveals subtle understanding of the workings of poetry and rhetoric.
\item \textsuperscript{237} \textit{Oed.} 630-34.
\item \textsuperscript{238} Cf. Braginton (1933, p. 63): ‘The functions of declaration and prophecy given to Tiresias in Sophocles, Seneca transferred to the ghost of Laius […]’. She observes that only part of the prophecy will be fulfilled in the play, but that the words ‘anticipat[e] far later events than the present drama,’ ‘while in Sophocles’ version Tiresias’ prophecy of exile for the guilty is not treated within the play. In this way, I would add, Seneca extends Sophocles’ timescale in his version of the Oedipus legend. Seneca’s \textit{Oedipus} can be seen as previewing his second Theban play, the \textit{Phoenissae}, a theme to which I will return.
\end{thebibliography}
comments on a tragic world where the horrors of the underworld are brought to earth, and displace more ‘normal’ methods of gleaning knowledge.

The titular prophet, Tiresias, recedes into the background as the usurper Laius takes center stage. As I noted earlier, Laius privileges the element of human agency over the will of the gods. Nowhere does he mention the famous oracle that originally foretold his demise by his own son—a pointed omission in light of its normal centrality to the myth. Seneca’s Laius also highlights the disjunction between the obfuscating oracle and the prophētēs, who (at least etymologically) serves as the mouthpiece of a god/fate by ‘uttering forth’ with authority the divine will. Both are intermediaries between the divine and human realms, and both have the capacity to reveal privileged knowledge, but they operate via different modalities. The oracular model is one of polyvalent or uncertain meaning. Oracles conceal through riddling speech; their words can apply to more than one referent; or they omit a crucial piece of information, such as time, place, or scope. Therefore, oracles necessitate the hermeneutic participation of an interpreter. Seekers claim to want to know the truth about their own destiny, but will often privilege a more favorable interpretation over a pessimistic one, while also charging oracles with equivocation. Prophets, on the other hand, generally employ ‘plain speak’ and claim to tell a truth that is ratified by god; their words will (ostensibly) come to pass as uttered whether or not there is a receiver on the other end to hear and interpret them. Their speech is (or seems) transparent, yet their words frequently go unheeded. With both, there is great potential for irony, in the slippage between what the various individuals inside and outside the dramatic action know at various points. Tragedy often dramatizes the irresistible desire to know, and thus control, the future—hence the lengths to which individuals will go to in consulting and interpreting oracles, engaging in divination (and even kataloges), despite the potential costs.

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239 Boyle (2011, p. 256).
240 For example, a situation, individual, or location; this is at play in doublet names for people or places.
241 Poetry necessitates an interpreter; and oracles, at least literary ones, tend to be in hexameter.
242 As in, to use examples from the Aeneid, Aeneas’ vision of Hector and the dream of the white sow in books 2 and 3, respectively. Senecan tragedy does not employ the allegorical dream, though Hecuba in the Troades refers to her well-known dream of the firebrands (... quidquid adversi accidit / quaecumque Phoebas ore lymphato fures / credi deo vetante praedixit mala, / prior Hecuba vidi gravida nec tacui metus / et vana vates ante Cassandram fui, ‘Tro. 33-37’).
243 On dramatic irony in Seneca, see the Introduction to the dissertation.
While Laius’ appearance in the *Oedipus* is the main thrust of this section, his ghost has a cameo in the *Phoenissae*, which is almost certainly the later play.\(^{244}\) Oedipus, now blinded, ‘sees’ a vision of his father’s ghost, whom he imagines (?) continues to punish him. Antigone does not seem to see Laius, and so most commentators regard the apparition as a product of Oedipus’ own guilty conscience, or a product of deluded madness (*furor*). Even if this is the case, however, the ghost’s real or imagined presence has actual ramifications for Oedipus.\(^{245}\) The phenomenon, or epiphenomenon, of even non-existent supernatural forces—those occurring in the mind—will become important in the discussion that follows.

**Infernal prologuists: the ghost**

This section treats the infernal prologuists of Senecan tragedy as a subspecies both of prologue-givers and of underworldly figures. Specifically, it argues that ghost and furies who deliver the prologues are vatic usurpers in that appropriate the functions of either the prophet or the poet—or both. Scholarship on Senecan prologues has tended toward the descriptive, with studies focusing on formal elements: the deviations from Attic tragedy and the various typologies of prologues within the Senecan corpus.\(^{246}\) Notable exceptions include Schiesaro’s comments on the poetological functions of prologuists and (Tietze) Larson’s account of the narrative as opposed to the dramatic mode of descriptive prologues.\(^{247}\) Shelton’s thesis on how dramatic time functions in the *Hercules Furens* is largely shaped by her reading of Juno’s prologue, as I will discuss in Chapter 4. In addition, Tarrant provides a particularly full, lucid account of the workings of Senecan prologues in the introduction to his *Agamemnon* commentary. Before examining the specifics of Seneca’s ‘infernal’ prologues, a brief foray into the territory of Senecan prologues will help orient the discussion. The section that follows is largely indebted to the above-mentioned studies, which, despite divergent aims and approaches, all agree that the Senecan prologue has important implications not just for formal considerations but for the broader themes of time, knowledge, and causality. The unit of the prologue sheds light on issues of

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\(^{244}\) On the relative chronology of the plays, see Frank (1995) as well as Fitch (1981).

\(^{245}\) Cf. Orestes in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*.

\(^{246}\) For example, Anlker (1960). Early on, Braginton (1933) observed the role of ‘supernatural’ figures in delivering the prologue but did not elaborate on fuller implications.

\(^{247}\) Schiesaro (2003); Larson (1989) and Tietze Larson (1994).
Senecan poetics: style and technique as well as the poet’s conception of his place in the literary tradition.

Seneca’s prologues exhibit a great deal of flexibility. They are variously delivered in monologue form by a human protagonist (Medea; Oedipus); or they are ‘semi-detachable,’ given by a figure whose only appearance in the play is in the prologue (Hercules; Agamemnon); the prologue can be in dialogue form (Thyestes); one play features a lyric prologue (Phaedra); and one has no real prologue at all (Phoenissae). Deities, prophets, and ghosts are well-equipped to provide both background information located in the past that have bearing on events to come—in other words, they make good prologuists. In Senecan tragedy, furies, ghosts, and one deity, deliver the prologues, in addition to humans. Every one of the non-human prologuists shares a salient feature: a direct link to the infernal realm. As the introduction to this chapter laid out, ghosts and furies have access to knowledge that is normally unavailable to the world of the living. The infernal prologuists reveal this knowledge in prolepsis of the events to come in their play (or even beyond the bounds of a specific tragedy). Like prophets, these non-human prologue-givers serve an intermediary function vis-à-vis knowledge: they occupy a realm superordinate to that of the play’s characters (who possess limited knowledge due to their lack of critical distance), but subordinate to that of the ‘outer layers’ of external audience, dramatist, and the gods. In this way, they are interpretes. Despite their heightened knowledge, however, Senecan prologuists are limited figures: possessing little no power over what occurs within the action of the drama, they do not interact with the main characters and are only brought into the dramatic action for a single scene. What is more, they often appear unwillingly, as compelled figures—a feature that they have in common with inspired prophets such as Cassandra.

By previewing the events of the tragedy to come, the proleptic prologue participates in the Senecan ‘paratactic’ machinery discussed above: the repetition of a scene from more than one perspective, or in more than one mode. Parataxis disrupts a

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248 I resist using the term ‘detachable,’ as some scholars do, since I see the prologuists who feature only in the prologue and who then disappear as indispensable to the workings of the play as a whole.

249 Probably a late play, and possibly left unfinished, Phoenissae has neither prologue nor choral odes.

250 On the simultaneous ‘superordinate’ and ‘subordinate’ position of prologuists, and on prologues’ ‘framing’ function, see Schiesaro (2003, p. 62).

251 Littlewood reminds that ‘repetition is an opportunity for the creation of a different perspective,’ (2004, p. 91).
linear progression of events, in timescale and in logical cause–effect. The uneven treatment of a scene privileges some vantage points over others, rather like film techniques of panning and zooming (in space), or the use of flashback or flash forward, compression or elongation (in time), or the combinatory montage. According to Tietze-Larson, the Senecan prologue also forms part of the apparatus of the ‘narrative’ rather than the ‘dramatic’ mode, where description ‘is not there to facilitate the presentation of the action to the audience through spectacle for the immediate apprehension of their own senses’; rather, it appeals ‘to the imaginative faculty of the audience, as he acts as the audience’s eyes and ears.’ Instead of approximating a realistic environment, as Greek prologues tend to do, Seneca’s prologues describe landscapes and natural phenomena that are impossible—for example, hyper-panoramic topographical catalogues and the sun’s erratic behavior. The effect can be of viewing a scene through a series of distorted mirrors, and more than once, with the accretion producing a sense of déjà vu. Tietze Larson links this to a model of discontinuous experience whereby the demands the work makes on the imagination displace the conditions of the audience’s own lived reality. What is more, an integral feature of description, what Tietze Larson calls the ‘paysage intérieur,’ is quite useful in approaching Senecan tragedy. To add to her comments on this technique, hyper-panoramic scenes can work on the intertextual level, too, since they draw attention to the synthetic refashioning of earlier mytho-literary scenes. In turn, the prologue figures who engage in elaborate descriptions, such as Juno and Furia/Tantalus, take on aspects of poets.

Due to its manipulation of perspective, its discontinuities in causality, and its juxtaposition of scenes in various timescales, Senecan tragedy has been labeled ‘proto-cubist.’ These qualities of dramatic technique were historically criticized as symptoms of rhetorical excess and of decadence. Yet careful examination suggests that the techniques provide (inter alia) vehicles for showing various causal factors in combination. This is especially the case in Seneca’s revenge tragedies, where the basic talionic pattern is one of

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252 Tarrant (1978, introduction) draws attention to the ‘susension of dramatic time’ that is inherent in the aside and in the prologues that utilize aside-type monologues.
253 Larson (1989, pp. 55-6).
254 Following, in very broad terms, a Brechtian model of epic theater.
255 Both Schiesaro (2003) and Tietze Larson (1985) comment on this quality; Schiesaro actually uses the term.
iteration, but with a sense of increased evil each time. As such, the iterative-accretive pattern (‘maius solito’) can be seen as both a commentary on and an attempt to represent en miniature these larger drives of tragic revenge. Furies are by nature well-suited to appear in revenge tragedy, as they classically facilitate revenge—from Vergil onward, they even appropriate vengeful desires for themselves. Ghosts, too, often have an impulse toward exacting vengeance. And even if they do not actively desire revenge, ghosts exert both backward-looking and forward-driving forces on the living: they both recall the past, and, examples of memento mori, point toward an inescapable future.

The prologue of Seneca’s Agamemnon has been classed as ‘expository,’ in the way that Attic tragedy’s prologues (especially Euripides’) can be. That is, it provides the necessary background for the coming play’s plot, introduces the main characters, and provides important details of setting (time, place, atmosphere). But a more nuanced account of the Agamemnon’s prologue is called for. This play, which is generally classed in the ‘early’ group of Seneca’s poetic output, has a ghost-given prologue, and so offers a good transition between the discussion of the ‘inset’ ghost figures the first part of this chapter treated and the burial prologue-givers of the Thyestes and the Hercules Furens.

Like the ghost of Polydorus in Euripides’ Hecuba and Hermes in Ion, as well as the ghost of Tantalus, the Fury, and Juno, Thyestes has ‘extensive knowledge of both past and future events.’ Also like Tantalus, he is compelled to leave the underworld and travel to the world of the living. Yet unlike the Fury and Juno, he has no real agency to direct the course of—or even to participate in—the play’s events. The ghost of Thyestes fulfills the function of providing background information about himself, his family (including past and future exempla), and what will form the play’s climax: the murders of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. However, he also expresses a desire for revenge, an element which links

256 As the dissertation argues, both the avenger and the poet share an element of creativity as well as of vengefulness which is manifest in the poetic sphere as aemulatio.
257 The role of furies in Roman epic from Vergil on is encapsulated nicely by Hershkowitz: ‘While the tragic function of the Furies, hounding with madness those who have violated the social code, plays a role in the Roman epic conception of the Furies, Allecto widens their sphere of influence to include the terror and badness with which madness is associated: not only do they avenge evil, but they cause it’ (1998, p. 53). In Seneca, too, Furies provide one type of ‘motor’ that drives the dramatic action.
258 Tarrant (1976), introduction.
259 It should also be noted that the prologues of Thyestes and Hercules are each nearly twice as long as that of the Agamemnon.
260 Tarrant draws attention to these parallels (1976, p. 157).
261 ibid.
him to the ghost of Laius in *Oedipus* discussed above.\textsuperscript{262} In a circumscribed way, he foretells what will occur in the coming play, yet his role is quite a bit more complex than that of a straightforward expository prologuist.

First, his proleptic account of the content of the coming play lack a great deal of explicit detail. After an extended introduction of himself and his family, which comprises well over half of the prologue, Thyestes finally zeroes in on the events of this particular play. He announces that the oracle's words will finally be fulfilled, but 'late'—that is, the oracle can be proved true after his death:

THY. sed sera tandem respicit fessos malis  
post fata demum sortis incertae fides. *(Aga. 37-8)*

THY. But finally, though late, the doubtful faith of the oracle is at long last paying post-mortem attention to those fatigued by evils.

In an allusive, compressed way, he announces the return of Agamemnon, then switches abruptly, mid-line, to forecast the leader's impending doom upon his return:

THY. rex ille regum, doctus Agamemnon ducum,  
cuius secutae mille vexillum rates  
Iliaca velis maria texerunt suis,  
post decima Phoebi lustra devicto Ilio  
adest—daturus coniugi iugulum suae. *(Aga. 39-43)*

THY. That king of kings, leader of leaders  
Agamemnon, following whose flag a thousand ships covered the Trojan seas with their sails,  
with Troy conquered after ten long years,  
is here—about to offer his throat to his own wife.

The first part of this segment provides the content of the messenger Eurybates' extended narrative in which the king returns.\textsuperscript{263} The second part encapsulates Cassandra's double accounts of the murder, down to the type of murder weapon and her repeated *iam, iam.*\textsuperscript{264}

THY. iam iam natabit sanguine alterno domus.  
enses secures tela, divisum gravi  
ictu bipennis regium video caput;

\textsuperscript{262} Braginton (1933) and Tarrant (1976) both discuss his identity of 'revenge ghost' as well as of prologue-ghost.

\textsuperscript{263} *Aga.* 392ff.

\textsuperscript{264} Cf. *Aga.* 1011 for *iam iam.*
iam scelera prope sunt, iam dolus caedes cruer ... (Aga. 44-47)

THY. Any minute now the house will swim in
blood alternating with blood. Swords, axes, spears, I see,
the royal head rent by the heavy strike of a two-headed axe;
Now crimes are at hand, now treachery, carnage, bloodshed ...

Yet the information is murky, as if seen through a haze. His words could apply to any
number of mythical situations; he does not provide names or many identifying details but
depends on the foreknowledge of those who overhear his prologue. In this way, his
prologue is like a rough sketch of Cassandra's first vision. As an expository piece providing
the backdrop, the prologue succeeds only in a limited way. Similarly, as a foreshadowing
of the play's events, it is similarly flawed, characterized by omission and lack of specificity.
Thyestes either does not know certain details or does not care to give the full synopsis of
the play. Examining the prologue from a 'Thyestes-centric' perspective, however, can shed
light on its form and content, including possible reasons for its apparent shortcomings.

For the majority of the prologue, the ghost focuses on his own identity: he
articulates his desires and motivations, sketches out his family history, and engages in
self-aggrandizement. He does not give details of the coming play until more than midway
through the prologue. Throughout his appearance, he seems to betray some self-
awareness of his liminal status in terms of time, place, substance, and agency. 265 First, the
line fugio Thyestes inferos, superos fugo both announces his identity and alludes to his
'vertical' position relative to those of living humans and gods. Once on earth, his place is
above the inferi but below the superi (the superal gods); in the underworld, living humans
form the superi relative to his infernal position. 266 Thyestes boasts of his many exploits,
which actually materialize as crimes in his case. Beginning with the backstory of his
family's misdeeds, he shifts to his own greater (that is, worse) crimes, suggesting what he
has learned from the tradition. The underworld operates on different scales of time than
are at play in the upper world, as Thyestes points out. His ancestors are suffering
unending punishment in the underworld for deeds they committed on earth (as his
references to Tantalus and the other underworldly 'sinners' attest in lines 15-21), and his
descendants are doomed to repeat the patterns of mythic horror in increasingly worse

265 As Tarrant astutely observes, 'Awareness of one's mythical reputation is characteristic of Senecan
people' (1976, p. 172).
266 See my introductory comments on 'vertical displacement'.
ways. Thyestes attempts to erase these past exempla with an announcement of what he plans to do, or, more precisely, with what he has already done:

THY. sed ille nostrae pars quota est culpae senex!
[...]
vincam Thyestes sceleribus cunctos meis.
a fratre vincar, liberis plenus tribus
in me sepultis? viscera exedi mea. (Aga. 22; 25-7)

THY. But what a small part of my guilt is that old man!
[...]
I, Thyestes, will outstrip all of them by my crimes.
Am I to be surpassed by my brother, full as I am
with three children buried in me? I've
consumed my own flesh and blood.

In his revisionist history of nefas, Thyestes turns his (unwitting) consumption of his children into a badge of honor, declaring that he has outdone his ancestor Tantalus devouring three children instead of just one.\(^{267}\) He also surpasses his ancestors’ deeds in that he not only consumed his sons but committed incest with his daughter—and, even more perversely (in accordance with the oracle), has actually fathered his own avenger by her:\(^{268}\)

THY. ergo ut per omnes liberos irem parens,
coacta fatis nata fert uterum gravem
me patre dignum. versa natura est retro:
avo parentem (pro nefas!), patri virum,
natis nepotes miscui—nocti diem.

THY. Therefore, so that I might pass through all my children as parent, my daughter carried under fate’s compulsion a full womb worthy of me as father.
Nature has been inverted: I’ve mixed up parent with grandparent,
(the horror!), husband with father, grandchildren with children—day with night. (Aga. 32-6)

As Tarrant observes, his claims invert the normal myth-heroic code in which figures boast of their exploits; this also exemplifies the maius-motif of revenge, and of tragedy.\(^{269}\) Thyestes further betrays his belief that time is not devoid of moral concerns when he

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\(^{267}\) This is also perverse, or at least counterintuitive, logic in that it is actually Atreus who commits the murder and serving-up of children to Thyestes; this forms the content of Seneca’s Thy. 717ff.

\(^{268}\) His compressed words gesture toward the taut logic of the equation of two major crimes: incest and cannibalism.

\(^{269}\) Tarrant (1976); Schiesaro (2003).
reserves his confusion of day with night for the apex of his speech. The last two lines come at the end of the subsection that consists of Thyestes’ vaunting; they feature a would-be *tricolon crescents* which he ‘caps’ with an extra element that would seem to be an anticlimax.  

In fact, the final pair recurs in *Ep. 122*, where Seneca links moral depravity with inversion of day and night as similarly *contra naturam*.  

The proper realm of the ghost is one of darkness rather than light, and his proper vertical place is in the underworld, so in a way Thyestes resembles the displaced *antipodes* of *Ep. 122* who dwell on the opposite hemisphere of the earth, who live in the night hours when ‘normal’ humans are asleep, whose language is ‘inverted’—and whose very existence, like that of ghosts, is in doubt.

The final words of the prologue, where Thyestes also reveals the time of day at which he has been speaking, further hint at an unnatural manipulation of time:

> THY. sed cur repente noctis aestivae vices
> hiberna longa spatia producunt mora,
> aut quid cadentes detinet stellas polo?
> Phoebum moramur. redde iam mundo diem. (*Aga. 53-6*)

> THY. Why do the spans of a summer night suddenly
draw out long winter's hours? And what keeps the falling stars
in the sky? I am making Apollo wait. Now
bring back day to the world.

As with several Greek tragedies, and a few Senecan ones, the prologue takes place before daybreak, while the action proper (or, alternatively, the first choral ode) begins at dawn—the start of the tragic day. As Tarrant observes, tragic ghosts are constrained to follow the conventions of dramatic time: ‘Ghosts are conventionally released for limited periods of

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270 Tarrant observes, with some disapproval, Seneca’s decision to inject the *tricolon of nefas* with an additional element, forming a tetracolon (1976, *ad loc.*) but admits that it is not ‘*sine sensu,*’ as it points to the cosmic ramifications of the Tantalid crimes.

271 In the section ‘*Lucubratio* and its evil twin,’ Ker (2004) analyzes this letter as among the moralizing discourse of proper daytime vs. nighttime activities in Roman culture. In this letter Seneca ‘set[s] the inversion of day and night among the *lucifugae* within the "ever-new declensions" of the vices (*novas declinationes, Ep. 122.17).’

272 In another interesting potential point of contact between the *antipodes* and the ghost, Ker (*ibid., p. 220, fn. 51*) observes that in later notices the *antipodes* ‘had an ambiguous "subsistence" (*ὑποπαρεξής*) somewhere between certainty and fiction (cf. David *Prolegomena philosophiae* 1.19; Isidore *Origines* 14.5.17: *in cuius finibus antipodes fabulose inhabitare produntur).’
time [...] and often must leave the upper world at dawn." The single-scene restriction, in fact, renders them ideal candidates as prologuists.

The phrase *Phoebum moramur*, however, admits of ambiguity on more than one level: in terms of the identity of Phoebus, it can indicate that Thyestes has been deferring the start of the day (and/or of the tragedy), where Phoebus both represents the sun, and, as the oracle god Apollo, delays oracular fulfillment. This confusion of Phoebus–sun and Phoebus–Apollo is one that will recur throughout this tragedy, and indeed throughout the Senecan corpus. What is more, Thyestes’ command to restore daylight acquires an extralayer of complexity, given his earlier equation of day with night. Does he wish for actual day, or its inversion, as he departs? The ghost Thyestes has transgressed so many boundaries that it is unclear what now constitutes ‘day’ for him. Multireferentiality within Thyestes’ speech is not limited to the end of the prologue; nevertheless, it seems to center around the mention of the oracle—which in turn serves to underline his own problematic relationship with prophecy.

Here again, the continuity between the *vates*-poet and *vates*-prophet is at play, in that Apollo is connected with music/poetry as well as with prophecy. Thyestes himself sets great stock by the oracle, not surprisingly—his past has taught him that oracles prove true in the end. But what is true in the characters’ worldview is not necessarily consistent with the worldview held by the dramatist; as we know, a prevailing characteristic of prophecy in Senecan tragedy is that it is flawed. Indeed, Thyestes’ statement that the oracle’s *fides* has been fulfilled (though, crucially, ‘late’) is one of only a very few instances in Seneca of overt acknowledgment of oracular reliability. The other major instance in which oracles are presented as unfailing is also in a Thyestean context, in the *certa responsa* the anonymous oracle in the house of the Pelopidae spontaneously barks. The spontaneous oracular emission in the *Oedipus*, which interrupts Tiresias’ utterance and preempts the voice of Laius’ ghost, occurs in a similar instance of infernal displacement, in the

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274 If we see Thyestes as the oracular counterpart in this section, while Cassandra becomes Apollo’s mouthpiece later in the tragedy, the phrase acquires yet another resonance: he must depart before the second (and third) account of the death of Agamemnon can occur.
275 This parallels, but on a smaller scale, the complex relationship with oracles that the oracular speech of Seneca’s *Oedipus* reveals.
276 The third instance of this is a bit less straightforward: it occurs when the voice of an anonymous oracle preempts the voice of the ghost of Laius in the necromatic scene.
277 *Thy.* 680. Chapter 3 further discusses this odd, apparently infernal, oracle.
necromantic raising of Laius’ ghost. The example in the Thyestes is one of a seemingly out-of-place underworld, one located in a terrestrial palace. As subsequent events will bear out, however, the description of the Pelopid palace as underworld is fitting: Atreus is about to construct a hell on earth. Although the attitude toward the oracle is one of belief, the identity of the oracle is not at all clear in any of these three cases. It is significant (and very Senecan) that all three take place in an underworld of some type—and what is more, in instances where there is a disconnect between what and where the underworld ‘should’ be versus its existence in Seneca’s tragic world. As we know from other accounts, Thyestes does not believe the oracle at first; it is only when it is too late, that is, when it has already been fulfilled, that he understands. The Latin sera points to his unfortunate late-learning of oracle’s full meaning. It also, I believe, hints at anxiety about belatedness in the literary sense.

One of the functions of this prologue is to establish the backdrop of the house of Atreus, which Thyestes does by recounting the various (mis)deeds of his ancestors. Another function of this prologue, as I see it, is to point forward, both to the Agamemnon’s key scenes and to the ‘coming attraction’ of Seneca’s Thyestes. The relationship presented is one of chiastic switch: in the (almost certainly later written) Thyestes, the title character is a weak figure who is dominated by his brother Atreus physically and mentally. In the (probably) earlier-written but mythically later Agamemnon, Thyestes in ghost form has more agency and has the late-vindicating satisfaction of telling his story from his own perspective. As was discussed earlier, the lines in which Thyestes spells out his crimes in positive terms (22-36) encapsulate the climax of Seneca’s Thyestes. I view the apparently out-of-place future tense verbs vincam and vincar as proleptically previewing the events of the (at that point ostensibly unwritten) Thyestes while simultaneously pointing backward in myth time to Thyestes’ own deeds, and those of his ancestors.\textsuperscript{278} The internal vying, or aemulatio, that recurs throughout Seneca’s tragic corpus is at play here: his Thyestes play will surpass his Agamemnon maiore numero, in (inter alia) having not one but two prologuists, a ghost and a fury, whose shared prologue will be twice as long as that of the Agamemnon.

\textsuperscript{278} In prophecy in general, and in Senecan prologues, the shift between past, present, and future tenses destabilizes time; cf. iam iam with the future tense nabit in Thyestes’ proleptic description of the future bloodshed in the palace.
The substance of Thyestes’ prologue speech in the *Agamemnon* prescribes the main action of the *Thyestes*, where this time Atreus will play the brother who boasts of *nefas*. Among the many verbal cues are *hic epulis locis*, which looks to the *epulae* of the Thyestes. Even beyond the two Tantalid plays, echoes of the *Agamemnon*’s prologue recur in Senecan tragedy: the phrase *natura versa est*, which comments on the confusion of family members due to incest, is also found in Seneca’s *Oedipus*—another example of cross-fertilization within Seneca’s dramatic corpus. Thyestes’ words also give a foretaste of the sun’s retreat—the cosmic disturbance which will recur later in the *Agamemnon* as well as, more strikingly, in the *Thyestes*. Such examples of *sympatheia* are integral to the thematics and the poetics of Senecan drama: nature responds to and reflects crimes committed on the human level, and characters’ ever-increasing *nefas* provide a way for Seneca to outdo his poetic predecessors—and even himself. The ghost of Thyestes has special knowledge, but less agency; in fact, he seems cognizant of his limitations. In his account of what he ‘sees,’ for example, he acknowledges that while he may (and does) take satisfaction in the vengeance, he ultimately cannot engineer it. Rather, what will unfold is due to mythic, dramatic, oracular, and literary necessities, along with the individual authorial decisions that complicate efforts at foreknowledge.

Another way that prophecy is problematized in Seneca is that the prophetic figure or scene proves a redundant factor. Although there is an element of redundancy in Thyestes’ appearance in light of the action that follows, his prologue is far from the superfluous and ‘detachable’ one that some have proposed. Thyestes provides one perspective—the first—on the key events that will occur (the deaths of the royal Argives), and he adduces the causal force of oracular necessity as well. In this play we find, in addition to the oracular motivation for the king’s downfall, the vengeful machinations of Clytemestra, the cycles of Trojan and Argive sufferings (as Cassandra presents in her *agones* and in the pair of visions she narrates), and the *sententiae* on the instability of power offered by the chorus. While any one of these causes in isolation could suffice to account for the destruction of the Argives, the matrix of causes that Seneca suggests via

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279 In this way he differs from Seneca’s more explicitly authorial vatic usurpers, e.g. Medea and Atreus, as Chapter 3 will discuss.

280 *Aga*. 37ff. In this aspect he resembles Cassandra, whose detachment from the situation is in tension with the vicarious satisfaction she takes in the revenge. While she lacks actual power to harm the Argives, she substitutes the force of her poetry.
the combinatorial effect of these scenes compels us to reflect on the motive causes as plural.

In contrast to the normal picture of oracular failure in Seneca, the oracle Thyestes mentions has finally proven true; Thyestes’ wish to return to the underworld (libet reverti) will also be fulfilled when he disappears at the end of the prologue at dawn, the start of the tragic day. But just his boasts are swiftly undercut by his disappearance from the play’s action and by the ‘contrastivitā’281 of the ode that immediately follows, and eventually, by the existence of Seneca’s own Thyestes. The oracle’s authority, too, is destabilized by the other forces of fatum that supervene to bring about this episode in mythic history.

**Furies in play**

As the last section previewed, ghosts are well-suited for delivering a tragedy’s prologue, since they are equipped with invaluable knowledge of the past, present, and future. Seneca’s deployment of the ghost Thyestes as the Agamemnon’s prologist is, on a basic level, in keeping with other so-called expository prologists in the tragic tradition. A different picture emerges with his Thyestes, whose prologue consists of an extended dialogue between two infernal figures: the ghost Tantalus and the fury Furia. These two characters are inextricably linked in their shared prologue, and both take on vatic aspects before exiting the play at the end of the prologue. Before we turn to the Thyestes, some background on furies in pre-Senecan poetry is in order, and will in turn inform the readings of the Thyestes and of the Hercules Furens, where an especially funeral Juno delivers the prologue.282

The Furies, or Erinyes, of Attic tragedy have been called tragedy’s ‘muses’. Their multiple roles, some of which seem mutually reinforcing, include the avenging of blood-guilt in order to restore the balance of familial or civic justice; punishing crimes, especially against those who harm kin or who break oaths; infecting humans with madness; privileging the older generation against the younger one (and the dead against the living); and, more generally, a ‘goading’ function in which they spur humans to action by force of compulsion. Like ghosts, furies are liminal mediators between the underworld and the

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281 It is a recurrent feature of Senecan choral odes to question, or offer a differing perspective on, the scene they immediately follow.

282 Chapter 4 will treat Juno, the prologist of the *Hercules*. 
earthly realm. Though furies are attested in the literary record from Homer and Hesiod on, and appear in vase paintings as well, there is no evidence of cultic worship. This factor, in combination with the striking visuality that attends their depictions in poetry, renders them, in a sense, products of the artistic imagination rather than of the religious one.

The Furies loom large in the only extant Attic tragic trilogy, the Oresteia, where their role evolves over the course of the three plays. They emerge variously, and sometimes simultaneously, as cause, agent, and embodiment of vengeful drives. The first mention of furies in tragedy is in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, where Cassandra describes a vision she has of them: traveling as a hideous horde, they feed on human blood, haunt houses, and pursue the guilty mercilessly. In Choephori, the second play of the Oresteia, Orestes’ vision of the Erinyes produces (or accompanies, or follows from) his madness. Whether or not the Erinyes are actually present and sent by Clytemestra’s vengeful ghost (Aeschylus leaves it ambiguous, as the Chorus does not mention seeing them, and Electra denies their presence), they are quite real to Orestes and inspire powerful emotions and drastic actions. Apollo also validates their existence when he instructs Orestes to flee, saying that the Erinyes will follow him until he can seek asylum

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283 In Iliad 9, Phoenix is bounded by the Erinyes sent by his father because he failed to show filial piety; as a result, his sexual abilities are compromised (II. 9.434-605). The same book features a micronarrative in which Althaea invokes the Erinyes against her son Meleager upon discovering that Meleager has murdered his brothers (II. 9.524-99). The Erinyes also appear twice in the Odyssey (15.231-4 and 20.61-90). In Hesiod’s Works and Days, they appear as enforcers of oaths (803-4).

284 Brown links this both to their harmful nature and to their need to be mobile: they ‘can only do harm […] so their aid cannot be invoked for any respectable purpose […]. And, since Erinyes need to be on call whenever a crime is committed or a curse is uttered, it is difficult for them to have a fixed abode where rites can be paid.’ (1984, p. 33).

285 Brown cites fragments of both Alcaeus and Heraclitus (fr. 129.13f. L-P and fr. 94, respectively) that are occasionally adduced as evidence of a possible cultic (non-mytho-literary) role for the Erinyes; however, s/he rejects this at the outset, as Alcaeus’ reference is in the context of a prayer and Heraclitus’ mentions punishment for the sun (1984, p. 264).

286 Before Aeschylus, as Hershkowitz observes, the Erinyes did not inspire madness but were just concerned with retributive justice. It is Aeschylus who ‘makes madness the Furies’ primary tool for avenging the unlawful spilling of blood, after which the Furies become inseparable from madness, in tragedy and in epic,’ (1994, pp. 48-9). As Brown further notes, it is in Aeschylus that the Eumenides and the Erinyes are first equated.


288 Cho. 1048ff.: cf. Theodorou, who views Orestes’ vision of the Furies as a hallucination, a ‘symptom’ that ‘result[s] from his guilty conscience’ (1993, pp. 36-8).

289 Cho. 287-90.
in Athens. By the final play of the trilogy, their role has shifted dramatically: as participants in the court case against Orestes over which Athena presides and casts the deciding vote, they agree to stop punishing with vengeance and instead pledge to act for the good of Athens. Along with this new identity comes a new name, the euphemistic Eumenides (‘kindly ones’) and a new abode under the temple of Apollo on the Acropolis. Although their furial energy is coopted and sanitized in order to initiate a new era of justice based not on blood ties but on the Athenian judicial system, it is contained only in a superficial way. The Eumenides give the illusion of closure, both in the cyclic tragedy of the house of Atreus and with respect to the larger realm of human drives. Vengeful desires and actions continue, of course, in both literature and in human experience. The Erinyes/Eumenides, lurking as they do ominously close to the center of Athenian life, project an image of barely-contained anxiety regarding when and how furial energy might (will) escape—a recurrent tension throughout Greek and Latin poetry.

In myth and art, furies are characterized by their visceral and visual qualities. One can chart a progression through Aeschylus’ trilogy from a vision in the mind’s eye in the first play; to an increasingly insistent force set against Orestes in the middle play; to their emergence in the flesh in the final play, where they finally appear on stage to take part in the action. The progression, according to Gilder, corresponds to the diurnal performance context of the trilogy, where (appropriately enough for infernal figures) they would become fully visible around dusk. Aeschylus presents them as horrendous to gaze on: their hair is entangled with snakes; their eyes ooze blood; they carry implements of ill omen and torture (snakes, torches, whips); they also smell and sound hideous. As with the visions of Seneca’s Cassandra and Oedipus, and of Euripides’ and Aeschylus’ Orestes, they wield power over the mind whether or not they are ‘actual’ beings.

As Padel observes, the furies are intimately connected with tragedy: ‘Tragedy made Erinyes very much its own. Their cluster of roles suited the genre. After the Oresteia, the

290 Choe. 75-7.
291 See Frontisi Ducroux (2007) for this progression; she also notes that the Erinyes were traditionally represented as faceless. It is only after their entrée into Attic tragedy that they take on their horrendous aspect. This issue of sight encourages comparison with the Gorgons, whose ‘problematic status of visibility recalls Derrida’s ‘blind man’s memories’.
292 Gilder (1997, p. 6).
293 For descriptions of the Erinyes, see Choe. 1048ff., Eum. 51ff., as well as (from a Euripidean standpoint) Or. 256ff. and Iph. Taur. 285ff.
Erinyes were connected profoundly, but not only, with tragedy, whose subject matter was central to their demonic province. Seneca’s conception of them responds to and reworks the tragic models and (especially) the Aeneid, in which furial figures feature prominently. Vergil’s deployment of furies is an example of the kind of cross-fertilization (or contagion) of tragic into epic material, and vice versa. Moreover, their role in Vergil’s Aeneid effectively undoes the end of the Oresteia: in the epic, furial figures and energies constitute a prime motive force, where they both set the second half of the poem in motion and bring it to a close. Vergilian scholarship is divided as to the extent, and nature, of this closure; the questions these furies provoke continue to exert a profound influence on the epic’s interpretation.

Senecan tragedy reinterprets the Aeneid’s various furial figures, from collectivities (labeled Furiae, Erinyes, Eumenides, Dirae), to individual ‘per-se’ furies (Tisiphone, Megaera, Allecto), to human victims or embodiments of furial figures (Dido, Aeneas, Turnus). In Vergil, furial powers are not relegated to the underworld but are employed even by the superal deities—by Juno and (more ambiguously) by Jupiter. Once Juno realizes that she cannot influence Olympus in her quest to keep Aeneas from his destiny in Italy, she attempts to secure aid from the infernal powers. Juno summons Allecto, and here, a Fury comes up from the underworld in order to take an active role in the course of the poem. This furial figure deviates from earlier models in that she does not act out of a motivation to restore justice, at least, not in any classic sense. Rather, as Juno’s agent she engages in ‘creative destruction’ as she cuts a swath through the land of Italy, undoing family ties and initiating civil wars as she attempts to thwart Aeneas’ progress while simultaneously prolonging the epic in the new episodes her nova ars creates. The links between the drives that inspire poetry’s creation and furial energy are very much at play in the figure of Vergil’s Juno herself, and in her infernal agents. As chapter 4 will discuss in detail, Seneca’s Juno takes on both the furial and the poetological aspects of her Vergilian prototype. The Senecan predilection for casting humans as fury substitutes is rooted in the Aeneid, where humans become virtual furies once they are ‘infected’ by furial

296 Aen. 7.312. flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.
297 Aen. 7.323-9.
energy. Upon contact, the contagion spreads and becomes epidemic as individuals take vengeance on others who have wronged them, thus perpetuating the cycle. Yet transmission of furial energy does not have to be by direct physical contact. Sight is also a viable pathway, as is the force of the voice. This occurs with Dido, and with Aeneas himself: once he recognizes Pallas’ balmic on Turnus, he flies into a rage, and, now a human fury, brings the epic’s action to a close with his killing of Turnus. This scene will prove seminal for Seneca’s own tragic vision.298

Furies are inescapable in Seneca. Every play either features or refers more obliquely to furial figures or energies. Cassandra, Juno, Atreus, and Medea, for example, call on the furies to aid in their revenge plans, taking on furial aspects themselves in the process.299 When the underworld appears in extended mention, as in a description of a katabasis, furies complete the picture. As the introduction to this chapter articulated, gods, ghosts, and even the Pythia (in addition to humans) deliver prologues in Greek tragedy. The use of a fury to deliver a prologue, however, is unprecedented before Seneca. Furia, the embodiment of furial energies, appears in the prologue of the Thyestes, where she sets the ominous, infernal tone for the coming play. Yet this is only half the story, as she shares the role of prologuist with the ghost of Tantalus, whom she (ostensibly) forces to appear with her against his will and to infect his descendants’ house. This dualistic prologue exemplifies the accretive poetics of Seneca, which is also a poetics of escalation. The prologue points ahead to the increased nefas of the coming play and stages a multi-voiced agōn on the theme of past, present, and future evil.

**Thyestes: the ghost and the fury**

The ghost of Tantalus, just released from the underworld against his will, opens Seneca’s Thyestes, similarly to how the ghost of Thyestes opens the Agamemnon. His initial words consist of a set of alarmed questions which point to the agency of the Fury as behind-the-scenes instigator of the tragedy, and his self-introduction seems almost an afterthought.300

TAN. quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit

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299 Braden notes the ‘rhetorical role that Seneca gives to the Furies, whose more usual function had been to punish rather than to encourage crime.’ (1970, p. 17).
300 In contrast to the ghost of Thyestes, who names himself almost immediately (Aga. 4).
avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?
quis male deorum Tantalo invisas domos
ostendit iterum? ...

TAN. Which of the infernal ones drags forth from
his ill-omened abode the one who snatches at ever-fleeing food
with his eager mouth? Who wrongly shows Tantalus
once more the reviled dwellings of the gods? ... (Thy., 1-4)

Unlike Cassandra, whose first appearance is also peppered with questions, Tantalus knows
where he is; however, he questions who is hounding him and who has dragged him out of
his underworldly abode. Nor does he know what his new role will be now that he has left
the underworld with its eternal sameness—a prospect that causes him anxiety. As has
been seen, prophetic figures (including ghosts) are often unwilling to divulge information,
and so must be compelled—this goes for the Sibyl and Cassandra as well as for Seneca’s
Laius. The more immediate parallel is Thyestes’ ghost in the prologue of the
Agamemnon, who similarly expresses his desire to return below (libet reverti). Yet Tantalus
is not at all reluctant to give the contents of the prologue, thus living up to his epithet
loquax and pointing to one proposed reason for his initial punishment (he talked too
much and revealed the secrets of the gods).

From the beginning, novelty is set against the unchangingness of the past, where
words such as inventum, peius, recenti, and iam activate the metaliterary mode of poetic
innovation, signalling the new version against the backdrop of the old. The inherited
nature of his (and his descendants’) evil is based on both mythic patterns and the literary
tradition, and, as is often the case in Senecan tragedy, the lines are blurred between
outdoing one’s familial precedents in crime, on the one hand, and literary innovation, on
the other. Both are analogous to the model of one-upsmanship in revenge, and with both
there is a quality of filiation, of the inheritedness of evil from the older generation.
Tantalus appears to have self-conscious knowledge of his literary identity: his words in
quod malum transscribor? suggest that he is being ‘written into’ a new role while

301 On Tantalus under this rubric, see Schiesaro (2003, p. 29), who notes his ‘doomed resistance to Fury’s
instigation, [which] recalls the similar reaction that seers display when the god violently overpowers them
and forces them to speak.’ He cites Apollo’s violence against the Sibyl at Aen. 6.77-80 and 100-1 as
parallels.
302 Taking his cue from the verbal echo of transcribor, Hinds views Ovid’s Ibis as a model: ‘Ovid’s
Underworld judge will “reassign” to Ibis (189 transcribet) the torments of Sisyphus, Ixion, Tityos and
Tantalus; Seneca’s Tantalus imagines all those same torments being “reassigned” to himself (13
simultaneously recalling an Ovidian model. After his initial barrage of questions, Tantalus assumes some functions of a proleptic prologue-giver, announcing the current state of affairs and forecasting future events:

TAN. ... iam nostra subit
e stirpe turba quae suum vincat genus
ac me innocentem faciat et inausa audeat.
regione quidquid impia cessat loci
complebo; numquam stante Pelopae domo
Minos vacabit. (Thy. 18-23)

TAN. ... Now from our family tree there's a thron coming up that could surpass its own race, make even me innocent, and dare the undared. I'll fill whatever empty space is left in the sinner's quarters; as long as Pelops' house still stands, Minos will never be idle.

The 'prophecy' of Tantalus appears to be based on his recognition of the patterns of embedded nefas in his family which will be perpetuated with each successive generation. Like that of Thyestes in Seneca's Agamemnon, Tantalus' prophecy-prologue forecasting the events to come is not overly specific as to content. Rather, it lays out the scope and force of the continued (but successively worse) evil, as well as his own role in this: his own past crimes will pale in comparison with those of the new generation. In this way, he inverts the boasts of the ghost of Thyestes, who claims that his own crimes will exceed those of his forebears.

While the influence of the Aeneid informs the presentation of furial figures in Senecan tragedy, there is no exact Vergilian equivalent to an actual fury delivering a prophetic account of things to come.\textsuperscript{303} The abstraction of Seneca's Furia figure may have been inspired in part by Vergil's Dira, or even by Ennius' Discordia, but the multifaceted role of Seneca's Furia is unprecedented in any single model in either Greek or Latin literature.\textsuperscript{304} Seneca's is a new type of Latin fury in that she is present, active, speaks, and has a measure of both knowledge of and power over what is to come, even while she is in

\textit{transcriber}); in the process the curse-poetry of the Ibis is "transcribed"—in metapoetic terms, and with a slightly bolder metaphor in Latin than in English—into the Thyestes,' (forthcoming, p. 38); \textit{contra}, see Tarrant (1985, p. 18).

\textsuperscript{303} The Harpy Celaeno in Aeneid 3 would probably be the closest parallel.

\textsuperscript{304} Ennius' Discordia, who is a similar figure and a probable model for both Vergil's Discordia and Seneca's Furia, is not known to have spoken; also see Staley (2000, p. 331ff) for the aspects of Discordia/Furia as overwhelmingly visual and as associated with human passions.
some senses an abstraction, as her name suggests. In her diction, and in her goading function, Furia also shares a great deal with both Vergil’s and Seneca’s Juno, but with some key differences. Juno’s motivations are clear (she herself spells them out), but Furia’s are unclear. The latter comes on the scene unbidden, apparently of her own volition; and while like other literary furies she incites madness in others the identity of who (if anyone, other than the poet) compels, or requests, her appearance is left ambiguous.

Furia’s first words abruptly interrupt Tantalus mid-line; the antilabe verbally underlines their shared role in the prologue, yet Furia’s two extra syllables suggest her greater agency. Tantalus is Furia’s own furial agent, and indeed, her first word is a command to Tantalus: perge. This fury’s ‘prophecy’ is effected by means of both direct command to Tantalus, and by an extended string of jussive subjunctives that all manners of increased nefas be perpetuated:

FUR. ... Perge, detestabilis
umbra, et penates impios furiis age.
certetur omni scelere et alterna vice
stringatur ensis. nec sit irarum modus
pudorve; mentes caecus instiget furor,
rabies parentum duret et longum nefas
eat in nepotes ...
[...] ... impia stuprum in domo
levissimum sit facinus. et fas et fides
iusque omne pereat. bella trans pontum vehant ...

FUR. ... Come on, hateful shade; goad this
sinful house with furial frenzy. Let there be vying
in every kind of crime, and let the sword be drawn in
alternating succession. And let there be no limit to
wrath, nor any shame; let blind rage sting their minds,
the madness of their parents endure, and the unending nefas
pass on to their grandchildren ...
[...] ... in this impious family, let sexual crime be the most trivial one.
Let what’s right, and good faith, and all lawfulness disappear completely.

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305 As Schiesaro observes, noting Furia’s heritage as a (Vergilian) furial figure, ‘Whereas in Aen. 7 Allecto is instructed by Juno, in the tragedy her counterpart, Furia, acts of her own accord, and the absence of a divine figure prevents a further displacement of moral responsibility on the gods.’ (2003, p. 35). See Gilder (1997) for an extended treatment of Latin furies: his Chapter 3 treats the Senecan fury as an inheritor of Augustan (and especially Vergilian) poetry. Subsequent chapters detail post-Senecan interpretations of fury figures, especially in imperial epic.

306 Thy. 23

307 They share lines 82 and 86 as well as line 100: sequor.
Let them transport wars across the seas... (Thy. 40ff)

The fury’s speech oscillates between the ominous, but vague, foreshadowing of the passage above and specific images of what will occur later in the play. In her allusivity and elision of referents, Furia’s speech resembles that of an oracle: her words do announce what will happen, but in a way that is open to multiple competing interpretations. The command *imple Tantalo totam domum*, for example, both echoes the ghost’s words and provides a sketch of what will occur in the last act—yet it is also ambiguous, as it could refer to Tantalus (that is, the dead grandfather), or to his eponymous grandson, or even to the mythic embodiment of perverse insatiability. Furia provides vivid images of scenes that will indeed come to pass, including the play’s climax, but using jussive subjunctives rather than the future tense of prophecy:

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FUR. ... ignibus iam subditis
spument aena, membra per partes eant
discerpta, patrios polluat sanguis focos,
epulae instruantur. (Thy. 59-62).
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FUR. ... now let the cauldrons froth with fires set under them,
let the torn-off limbs go bit by bit, let blood stain the
father’s hearth; let a banquet be spread.
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But significant details are elided—including the identities of the victims and the criminal agents—which makes Furia’s speech sound more oracular than either prophetic or proleptic. A number of linguistic features cue the ambiguity: impersonal jussive subjunctives and especially passive verbs (*certetur*); reference to individuals by family relation rather than by specific names; and condensed allusion to the content of other mythic precedents. For example, *Thracium fiat nefas / maiore numero* refers to the story of Procne, Tereus, and Philomela, but this cannibalistic feast will feature *three* child victims, rather than a single one.308 As Tarrant and Fitch point out, the verb *tollere* is decidedly ambiguous: it means both ‘to kill/do away with’ and ‘to lift/raise,’ where it refers to the Roman practice of lifting a newborn to its father’s eyes in order for the father to claim

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308 Cf. Thystes’ boast in *Agamemnon*, when he bragged of outdoing Tantalus’ crime in terms of number; the triangulation between the Tantalus, Thystes (in the *Agamemnon*), and Procne in terms of vying for the worst *nefas* (actual and literary crime), see Littlewood (2004, pp. 70-138) and Schiesaro (2003, pp. 179-80).
paternity.\textsuperscript{309} The word does double duty in that it also looks ahead to the final act, where it will take on a more specific, horrific, and visceral meaning when Thyestes \textit{literally} raises his sons to his lips: he unwittingly drinks their blood mixed with wine. The external audience alone ‘hears’ the dialogue; they also already know the basic outlines of what will occur in the plot, which forges a link between the prologuists and the audience based on level of knowledge. Yet they do not know the specifics of how this particular iteration will play out—an example of how \textit{interpreters}-characters can actually possess \textit{greater} knowledge than the knowledgeable external audience.

In analogous fashion to how a god can compel a prophet to act or speak against his/her wishes, one of the key attributes of a fury is compulsion of human victims. Furia has forced Tantalus to come up to the upper world and will not allow him to return until he infects the Tantalid house with \textit{furor}. Forcing him to speak is not among the ways in which Furia induces Tantalus to act—though forcing him to watch is.\textsuperscript{310} While the prologue, and the play as a whole, insistently stages the tension between speaking and not speaking \textit{nefas}, Tantalus is not reluctant to speak. In fact, he declares that, in keeping with his normal mythic role as the one who spilled the secrets of the gods and who was punished as a result, he will be similarly talkative now,\textsuperscript{311} even though he knows the stakes this time around. His loquacity renders him an ideal prologuist and provides a counterpoint to the normal picture of the unwilling prophet who has to be forced to speak. Furia initially demands that Tantalus be a spectator at the events (or play) that are about to unfold, including the cannibalistic banquet of the last act. What actually happens is more complicated: at the moment he acquiesces willingly, as he indicates with the single word \textit{sequor}, Furia dismisses him back to his infernal abode, and he does not in fact return as a spectator of the inset play of the slaughter and feast.\textsuperscript{312}

The edges between prolepsis and prophecy are blurred in this prologue. Either way, what is announced in the prologue is in some ways confirmed, but in others challenged, by the later dramatic action. The final portion of the prologue reveals

\textsuperscript{309} See Tarrant (1985); Fitch (2004).
\textsuperscript{310} \textit{Contra} Schiesaro: ‘Tantalus before had been punished for talking too much; here, he is striving (unsuccessfully) to remain quiet’ (2003, p. 39). This tension forms a backbone of Schiesaro’s main thesis. \textit{Fas} has been replaced by \textit{nefas}, but, in an apparent paradox, it is a spoken \textit{nefas}.
\textsuperscript{311} \textit{ingenti licet / taxata poena lingua crucier tur loquax, / nec hoc tacebo, Thy, 91-3.}
\textsuperscript{312} On Trinacty’s reading (forthcoming), \textit{sequor} also works on the metalinguistic level, where it signals the place of \textit{this} Tantalus, in \textit{this} version, against the backdrop of earlier instantiations.
temporal compression as well as distortion of time and space—and, as often in Seneca, these operate on the metaliterary plane. The end of the prologue is marked by frequent tense-changes, in an extended account of the landscape’s response to the evil, and by allusion to the events of the play and those in Seneca’s larger corpus. For example, the sun’s erratic path here both foreshadows its disappearance in act 5 and reworks the similar solar behavior in the Agamemnon’s prologue and elsewhere in Senecan tragedy. It is as if the Fury were making a mental checklist, ticking off various Senecan conventions, one of which is having the sun serve as an objective correlative for the moral behavior of the play’s characters. The phrase actum est abunde similarly operates on more than one level, where the immediate reference (Tantalus has infected the house, and so he can be dismissed) vies, in a playful way, with the metadramatic resonance—‘the show is over; go home.’ In addition to proleptically announcing act 5 of the Thyestes, it also concludes the inset ‘play’ that consists of Furia’s and Tantalus’ agonistic prologue.

On a meta-level, too, the withdrawal of Tantalus from the play’s action is quite interesting in what it suggests about audiences. Seneca’s audience already knows the horrific actions that will occur; now that Tantalus is about to disappear, the earlier phrase spectante te potetur takes on a more patent metadramatic cast—that is, as referring to the external audience. On this interpretation, actum est abunde could function as a warning label—a final opportunity for the external audience to leave. If it continues watching (or listening to, or reading) the play beyond this point, it necessarily becomes complicit in the cycle of nefas that successive retelling perpetuates. The metadramatic slippage between

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313 In seeing the agôn between Furia and Tantalus as a miniature play in which they share scripting roles (but with Tantalus as playing a role subordinate to Furia), my reading differs from that of Shelton: she sees Tantalus as present at the banquet of act 5; on her reading, the actum est abunde of line 105 is happening simultaneously with the end of the play (1975, p. 259). While Senecan parataxis subverts ‘normal’ temporal–causal linearity, I do not see the model of simultaneity put forth by Shelton by Volk (2009) as the operative one in the Thyestes, at least for the scenes in question. Rather, other nonlinear models (iteration, recursion, seriality) characterize the play’s timescale.

314 As is the norm with non-human prologuists, both Furia and Tantalus recede from the action at the close of the prologue and do not reappear (pace Shelton).

315 Both Schiesaro and Littlewood (2004) draw attention to the external audience’s viewpoint. Schiesaro’s levels of spectatorship ‘multiplied and thematized’ (2003, p. 60) and that the ‘audience [is] granted a privileged epistemic viewpoint’ from the beginning (ibid., p. 62). I would qualify Littlewood’s perspective by saying that the ‘extra’ knowledge is already in place due to these figures’ infernal nature.

316 Aniker observes the apparent incongruity of Furia’s swift dismissal of Tantalus after she had compelled him but does not speculate as to possible reasons (1960); he simply observes that Tantalus is (apparently) not present to observe the final events as spectator. Shelton (1975) draws a parallel between this prologue (which refers to all the horrendous events of the final two acts) incongruity and Juno’s
the inscribed audience as ‘you’ and the external audience, including the spectator’s initial reluctance but eventual relish, is not limited to the Thyestes. There is similar play between the levels of audience in Cassandra’s narrative: she includes herself among the audience (spectus) and self-consciously articulates the process involved in aesthetic appreciation (video et intersum et fruor), where original compulsion gives way to involvement and enjoyment. Both Tantalus and Cassandra, then, can be seen as dramatizing the involvement of an external audience that watches something disturbing and irresistible: from initial resistance to eventual relish.

That two infernal figures share in the duties of giving the prologue is a Senecan novelty. Their agonistic interchange is also suggestive of the model of poetic confatalia. Tantalus represents the relationship between the force of the literary tradition (he is initially reluctant to seek out anything new and prefers his familiar, but ‘safe,’ tortures of the underworld over the unknown) and innovation (as represented by Furia’s creative drive). In their agōn, the past cannot cancel out novelty—after all, the Thyestes continues past the prologue—but it undergirds the present instantiation. This is indicative of the model of poetic confatalia in which the fātum of past iterations is not completely canceled out by the present one. Eventually even Tantalus submits to the allure of creation, to a point where he becomes not just a witness of but an active participant in the tragedy of crimes.  

The two prologuists together form one inseparable poetological figure: they share the framing task of providing the mythic backdrop (Tantalus has a greater share in this) and giving a proleptic account of what will occur in the course of the play (Furia has a greater share in this). Both also participate in establishing the atmosphere of the play, which consists of inversion, paradox, accretive nefas, and the continued influence of the dead on the living. Similarly to how Juno uses Hercules’ innate tendencies in order to effect her revenge, Furia seizes on Tantalus’ weaknesses, which she knows in advance. She does not silence Tantalus, nor does she force Tantalus to recount (and thus perpetuate) the evil of his family’s line. Rather, she capitalizes on Tantalus’ propensity for excessive talking, and for participating in irresistible nefas. This is a crucial element of the modus operandi of furies, and of their insidious nature: not only do they spur their victims to act

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similar narration in the Hercules’ prologue. As will be discussed in the following section, however, I differ with Shelton in the degree to which, and manner in which, these temporal discontinuities occur.

317 Thy. 66-7.
with furor, but they accomplish this by working with an individual’s predisposition. By eliciting and refocusing a human’s inherent furor, furies infect the larger world.

What kind of Tantalus is this, and what kind of Fury? While Tantalus displays some of his normal attributes, this is a surprising first impression of the figure. For Seneca’s revisionist Tantalus, his characteristic evil has apparently been mitigated by his punishment, and he is now reluctant to perpetuate the evil—in fact, he actually commands his descendants to cease bloodshed and claims that he will stand in the path to block the evil.\(^{318}\) He only becomes complicit once he has been infected by furial energy. Several questions surround Seneca’s fury: her identity is a mystery, as are the motivations for her arrival, and her lineage and past history—these are all left unanswered. What is clear is that she is not a simple allegorization of furor\(^{319}\) but takes on an inventive role as well as a creative one, which, in combination with her vengeance-seeking, leads to tragic poetry. In Schiesaro’s words, the furial role is expanded in Seneca: furial types do not simply aid in avenging blood crimes but they ‘reperpetuate it with an ever-increasing artistic malice,’ where the ‘emphasis is not on vengeance, but the manner of vengeance, the creativity and joy of it.’\(^{320}\) In her coopting of Tantalus to serve her own ends, I add, the Fury acts simultaneously as poet figure and proleptic prophet analogue. As with Seneca’s Juno, whom the next chapter treats, Furia’s foreknowledge of the play’s events, along with the mode of presentation and the specific verbal echoes later in the play, suggest her role in scripting the action, where the lines between plotting versus foreseeing the future are unclear. Tantalus’ words activate the static, already-fixed past, while Furia’s allude to the still-to-be-written future of poetry.\(^{321}\)

In their agonistic prologue, which is really, on one level, a vying over the tragedy’s very existence, the force Furia exerts on the tragedy can be seen as thrust, where Tantalus’ attempts to curb the nefas can be equated to drag. Furia obviously wins out, in that the tragedy happens beyond the prologue, and since she compels the cooperation of Tantalus, who is initially resistant but who finally submits. Despite Tantalus’ best intentions, dramatic necessity, along with the unbroken chain of evil in his exemplary family, proves

\(^{318}\) moneo, ne sacra manus / violate caede neve furiali malo / aspergite aras. stabo et arcebo scelus, Thy. 93-5.

\(^{319}\) Nor is Tantalus is simply an allegory of thirst or lust; elsewhere Furia mentions the personified abstraction of this force as feminine Libido victrix (Thy. 48).

\(^{320}\) Schiesaro (2003, p. 101).

\(^{321}\) E.g. inveni dapes / quae ipse fugeres, 66-7 points to poetic inventio.
that revenge will continue to beget revenge—and revenge tragedy. Together, the
prologuists doubly guarantee that, however triumphant Atreus may seem, this iteration of
revenge will not be the last.322

Conclusion
As this chapter has argued, Seneca’s infernal characters (ghosts and furies) do double duty
as poet and prophet vates. Their liminal status makes them well-suited for this role, where
they serve as interpretes between the living and the dead. What is more, infernal figures
mediate between internal players and those outside of the dramatic action; they occupy a
middle position, where the main characters of the dramatis personae form the inner ring
(with the least access to knowledge), and the outer ring is inhabited by those on the
outside of the drama: author, audience, gods. An exchange of knowledge, and often of
power, occurs when infernal figures ascend to the upper world (or vice versa). On the
metaliterary level as well, their relation with other ghosts and furial figures links the
Senecan iteration with his poetic models. In Greek and Roman poetry, the underworld is a
repository for hidden knowledge and experience—this is why characters seek the advice of
ghosts and engage in katabasis or (less frequently) necromantic activity, despite the
potential dangers. As this chapter has sought to show, Seneca’s infernal figures dramatize
the intersections between hidden knowledge and causality; in this way, they serve as vatic
analogues.

With respect to causality, ghosts and furies provide an alternative model, and
apparent origin point, for what happens in a given tragedy. Ghosts function like prophets
in that they give advice or warnings to the living, which can then alter the course of
events. But since infernal figures no longer operate strictly within the world of the living,
their agency is either curtailed or absent—as Hector’s dream-appearance to Andromache
dramatizes. The timescale experienced by furies, too, is fluid: they propel the action of
revenge tragedies, even as they look back toward the past, when they spur on the living
punish crimes against blood relations. Because of the cyclical (iterative–recursive) nature
of vengeance, they not only perpetuate a particular tragedy but initiate sequels as well. So,
they can be seen as the engine that keeps Tragedy going. In Seneca, infernal figures never

322 When looking on Seneca’s corpus in hindsight, the existence of the Agamemnon also guarantees this. So
do, looking further into the future, the events of the Trojan War.
act alone to engender events—they may be a concomitant cause but are not the sole cause. This has important bearing on larger issues of Seneca’s poetics of multiplied causes, where the motivating action is not single-stream but shared. The infernal figures’ limitations are reflected in the dramatic structure. Ghosts are only on stage for a single episode—and, for that matter, living humans only descend to the underworld for a maximum of one scene in katabasis. Even when they have receded from the play, however, these infernal figures continue to exercise a force on the dramatic action, albeit at a level of remove. The unseen forces often transcend the action of a single play, as is made clear by echoes of various ghost and fury figures across Seneca’s dramatic corpus. We see this ‘intracorporal’ operation at work in, for example, the cameo of Thyestes’ ghost in the prologue of Agamemnon, in a relational nexus not just with his predecessor, the living Thyestes, in Seneca’s Thyestes, but also with the infernal prologuists of the Thyestes (Furia and Tantalus), and indeed with other prologuists—and ghosts.

Seneca’s Juno is a special case. As chapter 4 will discuss, she has furial as well as avenging attributes. To conclude, the underworld in tragedy is often conceived of as negative or ‘anti’-space that is devoid of any productive elements. From a different perspective, however, it is rich in meaning, teeming with alternative forms of knowledge, timescale, and causal interactions. Seneca saw in the underworld a locus of poetic and psychological energies into which he could tap as an access point (and site of displacement) for what is not allowed in the upper world. The underworldly dwellers are similarly malleable: ghosts and figures can be lifted to ‘infect’ the upper world with infernal knowledge. As actual prophets also do, and as poets often lay claim to, they have access to the past and the future. And finally, with its vestiges of a mytho-literary past that live on to ‘haunt’ successive iterations of poetry, the underworld gestures toward tantalizing possibilities that are neither time-bound nor mortal: it gives substance to, and its inhabitants corporealize, both actual and poetic afterlives.
Chapter 3
Vatic Avengers and Accidental Prophets

The first chapter argued for the traditional prophet in Senecan tragedy as marked by flaws and failures, and chapter 2 presented vatic figures in the forms of the infernal figures (ghosts and furies) who take over the functions of poets and prophets. The remaining chapters will focus on human (or human-like) vatic analogues whose actions reveal an overwhelming preoccupation with ‘the self’—both physical, biological selves and less tangible forms of self, such as literary ones.\(^{223}\) These characters’ vatic self-fashioning stems from several motivations: revenge, a desire to assert autonomy, a quest for knowledge. Alternatively, a nontraditional vates will utter a statement that is an ‘accidental’ prophecy; that is, it only proves prophetic (to the character him- or herself) after the fact, in which quality it shares a great deal with the ironic. In addition to reflecting on the characters themselves, the operation of replacing traditional with nontraditional vatic ‘selves’ also coalesces with the poet’s goals to create a novel version that also interprets the literary past. In the schema laid out above, a threefold division reflects the three ‘vertical’ (actual or metaphysical) realms of the universe: heavenly, infernal, terrestrial. What these figures have in common is that, regardless of their goals, modalities, or even degree of intentionality, their words and actions represent a challenge to fatum. In the way that they interpret or transmit fate, ‘non-prophets’ are engaged with alternative modes of knowledge that resemble, but differ from, that of traditional prophecy.

Chapter 3 presents two subsets of figures who displace the traditional prophetic role, either by deliberate usurpation or by less overt means. The avenger type desires to control others; the second subset aims at full autonomy but is not vindictive. Seneca’s ‘avenger-vates’ Medea and Atreus appropriate vatic functions in the service of their revenge. But rather than engage in traditional prophecy, these characters attempt to exert total control over humans, nature, and gods. As the following sections will examine, poetic aemulatio and revenge operate under similar conditions of one-upsmanship and self-

\(^{223}\) A focus on the self has been a recent trend in Senecan scholarship. Several studies, including a multiauthored volume on the self in Senecan prose and poetry (Bartsch and Wray, eds., 2009) add new dimensions to the debates on how Seneca conceptualizes the individual self, or selves.
conscious innovation. On the other hand, the *Troades* features numerous non-avenging vatic substitutes: Ulysses, Andromache, Polyxena and Astyanax challenge prophecy in a more incidental way, but one that is still engaged with questions of the individual in the face of *fatum*. Ulysses takes on a more active usurper role, and outdoes the prophet Calchas; he is a hybrid type between the avengers the first half of the chapter treats and the incidental prophet of the second half. Andromache is unaware that some of her statements will prove to accurately foretell the future.\(^{324}\) And in the final moments of the *Troades*, Astyanax and Polyxena subvert prophecy in an even more drastic way. This pair does not deliberately plot revenge on their captors. Instead, through their heroic actions, they end up inadvertently undermining the entire course of *fatum* that was put in place from the beginning of the play, and indeed, that is familiar from other literary treatments. Subversion of prophecy provides a forum for the dramatist to innovate on previous versions, and also offers a meta-level commentary on the processes of poetic creation and reception.

**Avenger-vates**

Prophecy is already problematized in Seneca’s revenge tragedies due to the avengers’ goals. On a basic level, there is no place for the traditional prophet who would reveal the future or divine the will of the gods, since the authorial avenger figures elide this role in their quest for total control. The lack of per se prophetic elements in the *Medea* and the *Thyestes* stands out in light of prophecy’s centrality in previous treatments of these myths. In Seneca’s *Medea*, for example, no mention is made of the Argo’s famous prophetic power,\(^{325}\) and Medea’s own usual link with prophecy is elided.\(^{326}\) In her invocation to the infernal powers, the tripods are not traditional Pythian ones, nor are the *vittae* those of Apollo.\(^{327}\) Instead, the normal prophetic implements have been recast in a context having to do with the passions and with poetry. Perversions of prophecy also occur in the *Thyestes*. Atreus overtly usurps the role of a *vates*-prophet in one key scene, the gruesome murder-sacrifice of Thyestes’ sons which is presented as a ritual sacrifice and an

\(^{324}\) In this aspect, incidental prophecy and irony are quite related.

\(^{325}\) See choral ode 2, where the famous prophetic voice is mentioned primarily to draw attention to its absence (*ipsaque vocem perdidit Argo, Med. 349*).

\(^{326}\) For example, Pindar’s Fourth Pythian begins with a prophecy by Medea (l. 9ff).

\(^{327}\) *sonuitis, aerae, tripodas agnosco meos / favente commotos dea* (*Med.* 785-6).*
unprecedented scene of divination on human subjects. Atreus also plays dramaturge in the final two acts, but he does not know that his actions are already being mediated by the messenger who narrates the event, or by Seneca, or by the tradition more generally. And the emergence of a spontaneous, anonymous oracular voice in an infernal context further complicates the vatic picture. One overarching problem with prophecy is that both Medea and Atreus strive to play too many interpretive roles simultaneously, which, as the case of Oedipus will make even clearer, creates problems for overt and substitute *vates*. Seneca’s primary avenger characters, Medea and Atreus, chart a progression in which they ‘evolve’ from human figures with some access to the divine, to figures who take on certain aspects of prophet-*vates*, to (seemingly) all-powerful beings—essentially, self-styled deities and author figures—by virtue of their vengeful, creative passions. The driving force of *furor* leads to a superhuman mindset on the part of the antiheroes. In their totalizing self-conception, there is no room for traditional prophecy, or indeed, for any type of intermediary.

Atreus’ extreme autonomy is especially in evidence in the final two acts, in the context of gruesome scenes of human sacrifice, extispicy, and the preparation of a cannibalistic feast. After killing Thyestes’ children, Atreus plays the officiating priest in an intricate divinatory scene in which he inspects their entrails. But this is no ordinary extispicy: the organs are from *human* subjects, and, what is more, the slaughter is so fresh that these are ‘still-living’ parts.\(^{328}\)

\begin{verbatim}
NU. erepta vivis exta pectoribus tremunt
spirantque venae corque adhuc pavidum salit;
at ille fibras tractat ac fata inspicit
et adhuc calentes viscerum venas notat.
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
NU. Organs snatched from living breasts quiver,
and arteries exhale, and the still-fearful heart leaps;
But that one handles the innards and looks into the fates
and divines from the still-warm fibers of the viscera. (Thy. 757-60)
\end{verbatim}

Atreus both engineers the divination and interprets the corporeal *signa*. While others would recoil in horror at the human sacrifice, he alone is unmoved by the strange

\(^{328}\) *Thy.* 757ff. The verb *tractat* carries a metapoetic valence, as (literary) ‘treatment’ can in English (*OLD* s.v. II.2.b). In addition to physically touching and examining the organs, he is ‘handling’ what has been spoken in previous bodies of poetry: *fata*. 
portents: *movere cunctos monstra, sed solos sibi / immotus Atreus constat*. The
divinatory scene can, on one line of interpretation, be seen as a playacting parody in which
Atreus only *pretends* to seek the favor of the gods for these murder–sacrifices (and for the
next stages in his revenge, the grisly cannibal banquet). He has, after all, already taken on
the role of deity himself, and so this might be a self-indulgent performance in which he
seeks his own favor in making sure that everything is done according to due rite. On this
view, the slipperiness of the organs is symptomatic of the slippage between performance
and actuality, between playing roles and authentic experience. In addition to a sham
divination, the scene features a bizarre oracle, which further points to the problems with
prophecy. Night rules in the haunted *lucus* of the Pelopids, and, even more ominously,
there is a *superstitio inferum* in broad daylight.329 Oracles are not consulted here; rather,
the oracular voice is spontaneously emitted from the infernal palace:

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NU. ... nec dies sedat metum:
ox propria luco est, et superstition inferum
in luce media regnat. hinc orantibus
responda dantur certa, cum ingenti sono
laxantur adyto fata et immugit specus
vocem deo solvente. (Thy. 677-82).
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NU. ... Day cannot relieve fear: the grove has its own
kind of night; an ominous sense of the infernal
rules even in the middle of the day. Here ratified responses
are given to oracle-seekers; fateful words are released from
the inner sanctum with a huge roar, and the cavern bellows
out with a god answering his voice.
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The oracular scene is anomalous on many levels. First, as chapter 1 discussed in detail,
oracles do not dole out easily interpretable responses—quite the opposite. To those
seeking answers in the Tantalid *lucus*, however, prophecies are given in apparently
unambiguous terms. But by whom are they ratified? The phrase *responda certa* is striking:
the messenger does not specifically identify the authority behind these oracles, nor does
he say whether the booming voice comes through in unmediated form, or, as a normal

329 *Thy.* 703-4, where *constat* is suggestive, etymologically, of the Stoic value of *constantia*. Someone who
possesses this trait stands firm and is not able to be moved no matter what. In addition to taking on the
authorial role, Atreus plays a perverse *sapiens*. Elsewhere, Seneca cites the *sapiens* as being aware of and
embodiment the divine: *prope est a te deus, tecum est, intum est*, Ep. 41.1; cf. *De Ben.* 4.7-8. This idea Seneca's
antiheroes take to the extreme, but misapply, in their transvaluation of the positive quality of self-reliance.
330 *Thy.* 677-80.
oracle, through a mediator. On one view, the words are *certa* because they fit in with
Atreus-as-god’s revenge plan. The question remains open, and it is suggestive to think that
this may be the actual voice of a deity, as the booming quality of the voice also suggest.
The scene has important bearing on the play’s architectonics of human–divine relations.
The actual oracular scene, which would otherwise be an instance of straightforward
prophecy, is complicated several times over. For one thing, several vatic roles are
juxtaposed in the infernal divinatory montage of child-murder: Atreus assumes and
conflates the roles of god-figure, divining *vates*, and inquirer. But the unbidden oracle
interrupts Atreus’ perverse ‘divination.’ And the fact that the scene is focalized through
the messenger’s own mediation means additional layers of slipperiness.

Medea also fashions herself as having access to the divine sphere through her
familial connections and through her link with magic. In similar vein to Atreus, Seneca’s
Medea also plays several vatic roles. As granddaughter of Helios, her connection with the
sun-god will prove helpful in her first revenge plot (she uses his magic implements in
killing Creon and Creusa) and the aftermath of her crimes, in her escape plan (his serpent-
drawn chariot is the *machina* by which she flees). Medea’s divine lineage, however, takes
second place to her usurping of infernal power and the force of her own vengeful drives.
At the start of the tragedy, she wants to play burial *pronuba* at Jason’s impending wedding
to the Corinthian princess. And in her extended invocation to the underworldly gods
and the gathering of magical *materia*, she attempts to harness the infernal powers as
adjutants in her vengeance. What begins as a selective coopting turns into her control (or
perception of control) over the entire underworld. By the end of the play, she sees the
Erinyes as fully under her sway. While she employs the implements of both the
underworldly and superal gods in the first stages of her plot, the murder of Corinthians,
she emphatically does *not* need them for the *ultimum scelus*—the murder of her own
children, one in front of his father. By the end, she will have ‘evolved’ to Medea
*omnipotens*, if we are to believe her interpretation. Seneca’s Medea also takes on aspects of
a *vates*-priestess and poet in the scene in which she gathers the herbs and other magical

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331 *Thy.* 697-82.
332 *hoc restat unum, pronubam thalamo feram / ut ipsa pinum, postque sacrificas preces / caedam dicatis
333 *Med.* 952-4. As will be discussed below, however, Medea fails to foresee that the Erinyes will also turn
against her for the murder of her brother Absyrtus.
implements that she will use in her plot against the royal Corinthians. Like Atreus’
victims, hers are presented as still having life in them even as they are further mutilated.
The *scelerum artifex* Medea creates a seething cauldron of what will be the means of her
revenge, and of her revenge poetry. In the description of her speech (*venenis verba non illis minus / metuenda*) resides a pointed reminder of the power of the poetic word.

**maius nefas: crimes of poetry**
Not only do Atreus and Medea take on aspects of vatic priests, they come to see
themselves as equivalent to (or even more powerful than) gods, as the fifth acts of their
respective plays makes clear. Early on Medea claims: *Fortuna semper omnis infra me stetit*, which is literalized, in a way, when she kills one of the children on the roof and
then flies off in a snake-drawn chariot, leaving the carnage of her murderous rage
behind. Similarly, in the fifth act of the *Thyestes*, Atreus claims to stand on par with the
Olympians, and says that he would want the gods to be the audience for what is to
come—except that he has already sent them away. While Medea and Atreus’
superhuman aspirations obviate the traditional prophetic role, there is ample room for the
*artifex*. In fact, Medea and Atreus each present themselves as highly accomplished *vates-
poets, in which guises they exemplify Seneca’s privileging of the poetic-vatic mode over
the overtly prophetic one.

As Chapter 2 discussed, the calculus of Senecan revenge includes multiplication
and augmentation, which parallel the innovations which the poet must attempt in the
wake of earlier models. One means by which a ‘belated’ tragedy can achieve distinction is
by being more gruesome than previous iterations. In Senecan tragedy, this poetics of
outdoing is bound up with morality as well, as Schiesaro observes: ‘Any repetition of nefas

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334 *Artifex* can refer to makers of two types: artists and gods. So, too, *fata* can be seen as the utterance of
both. According to Stoic thought, *anima* (or *spiritus*, or *pneuma*) carries all *fata*.
335 *Med*. 737.
337 The perfect tense verb hints at a metalinguistic resonance as well; the Euripidean Medea also flies off,
leaving earth-bound Fortune behind. The powerful force of Seneca’s Medea’s anger, along with her
strident boast, supplies a vivid example of the third choral ode’s explanation of the popular maxim that the
spurned woman is a match for any natural force. Medea proves the maxim true in a literal way: in the
*adynaton* of fire and water joining in her person, she emerges as stronger than either of these incompatible
elements in isolation.
338 When Atreus does mention the gods, it is only to question their existence, since he has usurped the
divine place, as Curley notes (1986, p. 148).
is necessarily worse than its model—more obsessive, more painful, more ‘guilty.’”

These iterative-recursive patterns of intertextual—and even sometimes intratextual—poetic *aemulatio* dovetail with the goals of the criminal—poet characters Atreus, Medea, and Juno. In Senecan tragedy, artistic ‘crimes’ resemble actual ones. These paired phenomena coalesce in the poietological figures who do violence to the literary models even as they exact their revenge on their human targets. Agapitos locates this ‘dramatic transgression’ in the areas of poetic norms and canons, where the style ‘approaching *vitium*’ can be seen as an exercising of one’s creative autonomy. In fact, criminality that is manifested as grotesque art parallels the labels of decadent and baroque which critics from Quintilian onward applied to Seneca’s own style.

The striving for increased *nefas* in Senecan tragedy is often marked by a comparative or superlative. This phenomenon, which Schiesaro calls the ‘*maius* motif,’ characterizes both Medea’s and Atreus’ poetic (and actual) practice, and is an integral component of Seneca’s own poetic program. It can be seen as sharing in the rhetorical technique of *auxesis*, or *amplificatio*, though it is thematized as more than this in Senecan tragedy. In the targeted use of the comparative and superlative degrees, the ‘belated’ version can assert itself over and against the base form (positive degree) of the prominent poetic model(s). With respect to Latin poetry, the gesture stretches at least back to Propertius, who announced the coming of something ‘greater’ than the *Iliad*, which was, of course, the *Aeneid*. Vergil himself then echoes the term in book 7, and this cues the second, ‘Iliadic’ half of the poem. And perhaps most apposite to the present study is Ovid’s notice of the coming attraction of his Medea tragedy in the less-weighty elegy in the last line of *Heroides* 12, as Hinds perceptively points out: *nescioquid certe mens mea maius agit!* The *maius*-motif forms a point of intersection between a poet’s aspirations and

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340 See Agapitos (1998, pp. 3-4) on the ‘comparative of surpassing.’ Schiesaro provides the most extended account of this phenomenon. Earlier, however, Seidensticker (1985) articulated the ‘*maius solito*’ element in Seneca, dubbing it the ‘*comparativus Senecanus*.’ Agapitos also sees this as an ‘inverted aristea’, where a horrendous *malum/nefas* takes the place of a *sumnum bonum* (p. 7); cf. Braden (1970, p. 22). Rosenmeyer takes a different tack, locating the importance of inversion not (just) on the human plane but as participating in the sympathetic reverberations of human *nefas* writ large in the cosmos (1986, p. 147).
341 Cf. Ep. 114.11 on prose style.
343 See Leigh (1997) on *auxesis* as a tool and marker of literary one-upsmanship.
344 *nescioquid maius nascitur Iliade* (Prop. Carm. 2.34.66)
345 *maius rerum mihi nascitur ordo, / maius opus moveo* (Aen. 7.44-45).
the desire to commit an unprecedented act of revenge. In lines 363-4, the fivefold alliterative *m’s* draw attention to the *maius*-motif and its connection with Medea’s name.\(^{346}\) In two similar statements, the Nutrix claims that Medea will surpass her ‘old’ anger, and her past crimes:

\begin{quote}
NU. non facile secum versat aut medium scelus:
se vincet. iuae novimus veteris notas.
magnum aliquid instat, efferum immane impium.
vultum Furoris cerno. \textit{(Med. 393-6)}.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
NU. It is not an ordinary or middle-grade crime she is scheming:
she’ll surpass herself. I recognize the sure signs of her old anger.
Something huge presses on, fierce, monstrous, unholy.
I’m looking at the face of Furor.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
NU. vidi furentem saepe et aggressam deos,
caelum trahentem: maius his, maius parat
Medea monstrum. \textit{(Med. 673-5)}.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
NU. Often, I’ve seen her raging and assaulting the gods,
dragging down the the sky; greater than these,
greater is the \textit{monstrum} Medea is preparing.
\end{quote}

On one line of thought, Nutrix can be seen as a kind of reader of the Medea tradition, as clues such as \textit{veteris, notas, vultum},\(^{347}\) and \textit{vidi...saepe} suggest. Seneca’s Medea must outdo not just the crimes of her Euripidean and Apollonian prototypes, but also what more recent Medeas—significantly, Ovid’s—had accomplished. The weight of the many Ovidian Medeas: the elegiac ones as well as, crucially, his own tragic protagonist, would have been quite a daunting prospect for Seneca (and his Medea) to try to outdo. We have no way of knowing whether, or how, Ovid’s Medea engaged in the kind of poetic self-fashioning that we see with Seneca’s Medea, since only a two-line scrap of his Medea tragedy remains. But it is provocative to think that in the many poetic genres in which Seneca’s Medea crafts her poetry, up to and including tragedy, she is in dialogue with and tries to surpass her most recent predecessor.


\(^{347}\) \textit{Vultus} can refer to a stage mask, and so we also can read the line above as: ‘I’m looking at the mask of Furor.’
The culmination of Atreus’ and Medea’s superhuman aspirations occurs in act 5 of their respective plays, where the dénouement of the larger play unfolds as also an inset revenge tragedy.\(^{348}\) Both avengers exploit the target of their revenge as simultaneously an audience of the tragic performance they engineer. The dramaturges Atreus and Medea control the scenery, props, and pacing; they force others to play certain roles; and they determine what to reveal, and when, to their own immediate audience. After killing Thyestes’ children in a perverse ritual sacrifice, Atreus stages a cannibalistic feast by Thyestes on his children, during the course of which he forces his brother to engage in a perversion of tragic reversal and recognition. Medea kills one child in front of the Corinthians, then has Jason play spectator at the death of their second son, after which she flies off as \textit{dea ex machina} in her own revenge tragedy.

\textbf{Medea machinatrix}

As chapter 1 set forth, in Senecan tragedy it is normal for the poetic aspects of vatic figures to replace the strictly prophetic ones. For Medea, the full-scale elision of prophecy allows her poetological features to take over. Seneca’s Medea, this section will argue, is a polygeneric poet figure who is made to comment on the process of poetic creation as well as on the place of Senecan poetry within the larger tradition. Medea’s name and epithets form one locus for examining Senecan poetics and poet-analogues. Seneca scorns etymology and allegory as the primary tools of poetic interpretation;\(^{349}\) however, they can be of use in slicing through preliminary layers of meaning. Here, etymology establishes Seneca’s Medea’s combination of neurotic self-assertion and authorial megalomania. As Segal observes, that Medea’s name comes from the Greek ‘to contrive’ (\textit{mēdomai}) and related to \textit{mētis} (‘cunning intelligence’) can be traced back before Euripides to Pindar’s Fourth Pythian Ode.\(^{350}\) Further, her identity is encapsulated in the epithet \textit{machinatrix}, which Creon applies to Medea. This \textit{hapax legomenon}, the feminine form of the more

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\item Boyle (1997, p. 117) draws attention to Atreus’ assuming of the multiple roles of ‘character, actor, audience, and dramaturge’ in this last act. For Schiesaro (2003), the primary identification is with the poet-criminal (e.g. Atreus/Medea) and Seneca the poet. Scholars have also noted these characters’ self-referential awareness of their literary selves; so, Atreus’ punning \textit{Atreus iratus} can signal ‘the title of a possible future play, like the \textit{Hercules Furens}’ (Braden, 1970, p. 17). Similarly, Medea’s self-characterization in the series \textit{Medea superest—Medea fiam—Medea nunc sum} reflect her literary heritage and chart her progression to a fully-actualized tragic heroine.
\item This is in contradistinction to the norms of Stoic poetic theory. See De Lacy (1948).
\item See Segal (1983b, p. 241); see Traina (1979) on \textit{m}-alliteration and Seneca’s Medea.
\end{enumerate}
common *machinator*, draws attention to the singularity Seneca’s Medea strives to carve out for herself in the realms of both actual revenge and poetic prowess. Specifically, it advertises that she is a tragic inventor, as it recalls the Greek *mechanē*, or Latin *machina*. The *hapax* is also a pun, a bilingual calque on the etymology of Medea’s name: *malorum machinatrix facinorum* means Medea, and this is a Medea who will fully live up to the name—epithet combination *Medea machinatrix* by the end of Seneca’s play.

Vatic usurpers either ignore or claim to manipulate time; Medea does both. When she promises to invade the realm of the gods and to upheave everything, her assertion that even one day is too long for the time she needs to accomplish her revenge takes on a pointed poetological significance. The span of a tragedy was classically confined to a single day, but Medea boasts that she can triumph under an even shorter constraint of time. There is no place for prophecy in a world in which Medea has taken over not only the role of the gods, but those of dramaturge and of all forces of nature. That Medea evolves to her full tragic potential over the course of the play is reflected in the progression in which she identifies herself. First is the third-person *Medea superest*—the raw material from previous Medeas which she will draw on for her current tragedy. The Senecan Medea claims elemental inclusivity, to embody all of nature:

\[
\text{ME. Medea superest; hic mare et terras vides}
\]

\[
\text{ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina (Med. 166–7)}
\]

\[
\text{ME. Medea remains; here you gaze on sea—earth—}
\]

\[
\text{steel—fire—gods—lightning.}
\]

Her self-description offers a suggestion of *krasis*, an example (or subset) of *sympatheia* by which more than one body is combined to form one new whole. In *krasis*, the properties of the original substances are changed as substances come into contact and are then recycled into a new whole; some of the original properties are preserved in the recombination, while others are transformed as they blend with the new properties. The *krasis* model is also suggestive for poetics: the reaction of molecules of previous lyric, epic, tragic, elegiac Medeas colliding and being reconfigured yields the current one. The

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351 *sternam et evertam omnia* (Med. 414); *invadam deos / et cuncta quatiam* (Med. 424-25).
352 As Rosenmeyer observes (1986, p. 112-14). Stoic thought is not, however, explicit on how *krasis* works with respect to time, whether it is static or temporally fluid.
353 On Stoic *sympatheia*, see Rosenmeyer (1986) and Sambursky (1959).
filiation-and-innovation model of poetry on the level of words and thoughts parallels the material recomposition of initial elements into new, different ones.\textsuperscript{354} Here, though, the model need not be destroyed, just supplanted. In this process–state of coextension, more than one body can occupy the same space simultaneously—something that is easier to ‘see’ with literary corpora than with actual physical bodies.

As poetological figure who both controls and embodies all the elements, Medea provides an important window on Senecan poetics, specifically, the impulses of creative synthesis. As Rosenmeyer observes, ‘The craving for fusions, seemingly at odds with literary and dramatic selectivity, is part of the power of the Senecan vision ....’\textsuperscript{355} In the second stage of her progression, as she engineers her preliminary plot (which consists of killing the royal Corinthians), she declares that she will ‘become’ Medea (fiam). And finally comes her triumphant declaration Medea nunc sum (910) once she has resolved to kill her children. Chrono-biological as well as literary life cycles are activated in her physical maturation along with the generic ascent she stages, where this tragedy is the telos of, and heir to, all the others that came before. Throughout the play, in fact, she presents her previous life of helping Jason in his Argonautic quest as lesser, and perceives that she has greater power now that she is a wife and mother.\textsuperscript{356} Similarly, the earlier lyric, elegiac, and epic Medeas were just preludes to this one. The old Medea has not ever really been Medea, she tells us; rather, what she did before, up to and including murder, was a ‘rehearsal’ (cf. prolusit), for the current situation.\textsuperscript{357} Her previous crimes were for Jason’s sake; now she reinterprets her crimes (and even the ones which Jason had committed) in light of the current iteration, in which her growing autonomy as woman, as avenger, and as vates affords her (and Seneca) scope for poetic choice.\textsuperscript{358}

Within Medea’s revenge preparations resides a poetically sophisticated commentary on the process of artistic creation: the elaborate polymetric canticum in which she prays to the infernal deities, then gathers the magical elements necessary for

\textsuperscript{354} Rosenmeyer (1986, p. 115).
\textsuperscript{355} 1986, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{356} Med. 134-6.
\textsuperscript{357} Med. 907.
\textsuperscript{358} Med. 447-8; 458; 498. The Chorus participates in this language of known vs. new ‘paths’ of poetry, for example, in the nota via of choral ode 3 (Med. 579ff). This time Medea’s new monstrum will surpass the old ones, according to the Nurse (Med. 675). In these passages, the metaliterary markers novus, notus, and via draw attention to this iteration over and against the previous ones.
the execution of her plan. This lyric interlude cuts Seneca’s play in half and functions as a prologue for her (Medea’s) inset play that follows. Like Juno’s prologue, and that of Thyestes’ ghost, this one occurs at night. The morning that follows initiates the day of her tragedy—the extra day for which she had begged Creon in order ostensibly to prepare for exile, but in reality to plot and execute her revenge. The lyric passage is simultaneously an opportunity for a virtuosic display of poetic fireworks by Seneca, via Medea; highly allusive, it features a variety of inset poetic genres. The extended incantation of over 100 lines in which she addresses Hecate and the underworldly gods showcases poetic dexterity even as the content of her song extols her own mastery over nature. Variety is the hallmark of her poetic talent: Medea’s song includes four distinct types of meter, and this type of polymetric canticum is unparalleled in Senecan tragedy. A poetics of plurality is represented more concretely in the catalogue in which she gathers the raw material for the tragedy she is plotting. This medley of materia consists of magical substances from various realms: from all portions of earth, and from the heavens and underworld. These deadly materials (or ‘props’) include the mantle given her by the Sun as well as deadly blood from Nessus and magic feathers from the Stymphalian bird and Harpy. She caps all of this with a prayer to Hecate to aid in her vengeful plan.

In her creative appropriation of source material, Medea engages in ‘pluralistic pollination’ instead of devotion to a single source—a model that coheres with what little we know of Seneca’s own approach to poetry. Medea literally acts out this approach to poetics when she engages in a nocturnal gathering of materia in the service of her revenge—and the revenge tragedy—she is creating just then. The source material she

359 This mirrors in miniature the larger (Senecan) play, where in place of a traditional prologue, it begins with Medea’s elaborate kletic hymn to the infernal powers.
360 For similar nocturnal preparations of selectio and poetic composition, cf. Seneca’s Juno in the Hercules (see my Chapter 4).
361 Interestingly, this eclectic approach characterizes Seneca’s prose works as well, as he synthesizes components from numerous philosophical schools, not just Stoicism (and, what is more, adduces examples from a variety of poets in order to illustrate and model his philosophical ideas). For this passage, see the Introduction to the dissertation.
362 Med. 740ff.
363 As Hine (2000) and Costa (1973) observe, ad loc.
364 As Fyfe observes (1983), her magical songs likewise have a powerful effect, as they serve to put the natural world under her sway.
365 On magic as an image of the poet’s art, and the links between bewitchment and carmina, see Masters (1992).
366 See Ep. 84.2-3 (and my comments on this passage in the dissertation Introduction) for Seneca’s poetics of plurality.
draws upon is extensive both geographically and temporally, as is detailed in the sweeping catalogue of actual and mythical locations. In turn, the *canticum* furnishes an opportunity for Seneca, via Medea, to showcase his poetic versatility: facility with a variety of genres and condensation of multiple models.\(^{367}\) After Medea gathers her material from all corners of the earth, the focus narrows to the specific infernal grove where magical plants and herbs as well as animate entities like snakes will be the fodder for the poetry she is concocting and the potion of her revenge. Her seeking to reanimate the dead serpents can also be seen in metaleterary terms, since mythical serpents such as Python and the Hydra, along with the Colchian serpent from her own past experience, are revivified in her current project.\(^{368}\) Like Atreus in the sacrificial rite, Medea *sacerdos* attends to all the details with minute precision: the principle of *selectio* is reified when she slices the most crucial (and most deadly) stalk she needs with her fingernail—which I see as a miniaturization of the Ovidian sickle with which his Medea sliced the poisonous tree.\(^{369}\) From the mélange of physical, metaphysical, and poetic *materia* in this *canticum*, Medea distills what will be both her actual revenge and the parallel act of violence she does to her poetic predecessors by replacing them.\(^{370}\)

**Atreus, Medea, and (more) Crimes of Poetry**

As actor in her own plot, Medea kills one of her children in front of the Corinthians, then (as dramaturge) forces Jason to play spectator at the death of their second son, after which

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\(^{367}\) See Rosenmeyer (1986, ch. 10) on the function of the poetic catalogue as a mechanism of attempted control over nature. As he observes, the panoramic topography is mythical rather than actual, as it is a fusion of various times and places. Some of these are real physical locales, some are not, and some are adynata: they could not actually coexist. A visual approximation would be a collage or montage.

\(^{368}\) Med. 690ff.

\(^{369}\) In the catalogue of Medea’s gathering of magic herbs, she cuts the final stem *ungue ... cantato* (*Med. 730*). This passage is indebted to Ovid’s *Met.* 7.224-227 and *Her.* 6.64 (canta *... falce*). It echoes Horatian poetic theory as well; in the *Ars Poetica* he analogizes sculptural and poetic composition (*AP* 32-37; 285-294). The thrust of Horace’s *praeseuctum deciens ... ad unguem* is that Roman poets strive for perfection through meticulous refinement, as do sculptors in the precise rendering of details. In engaging *limae labor*, to test something ‘to the nail’ was to put the finishing touches on it, as the nail serves as a more delicate tool than, say, a chisel. At the same time, nails were often the final details to be added to a statue. Seneca’s Medea and Oedipus, in the scene in which he gouges out his eyes (*Oed.* 943-979), and imagines digging into his brain (*Phoe.* 159-181), use their actual nails to craft their plot—a corporealized poetics of precision.

\(^{370}\) See Fyfe (1983, p. 82); cf. Rosenmeyer’s comment that her eclectic gathering ‘serve[s] to invest the caustic agent in Creusa’s gift with polygeneric potency’ (1986, p. 167). On view here are the twin processes of creation and destruction inherent in poetics, where to create a new version is to do necessary violence to one’s models.
she flies off as *dea ex machina* in her revenge tragedy. But Medea’s decision to present her actions as drama seems almost an afterthought, as is intimated by her offhand comment that her first audience was not satisfactory and that a still-more-fitting spectator—Jason—is necessary to slake her vengeful thirst. The inset drama of criminal acts in the *Thyestes* is even more explicitly staged as revenge tragedy than is Medea’s child-killing in front of audiences. As dramaturge, Atreus also scripts himself into several roles, which also function as potential titles of his play: *dirus Atreus, Atreus furens, Atreus iratus*, and *Atreus rex*. The mask offers immunity to conventional morality, giving the actor/character an ‘out,’ as also applies to the tragic poet—with the salient difference, of course, that Atreus is actually committing the crimes, while the tragic poet only ‘creates’ them in representational form. Atreus engineers his act of revenge to include tragic features, including an inset *agón, peripeteia, anagnōrosis*, and dramatic irony. The apex of his dramaturgic role comes in the fifth act: Atreus claims to stride on the same level as the stars, and to surpass the gods, whom he has by this point sent away.\(^{372}\)

Seneca’s avenger-figures wield language like a weapon against their victims. The disparity between what they say and what they mean is not realized by others until it is too late—also an example of dramatic irony. Seneca’s avengers manipulate language on the micro-level of diction, the intermediate level of rhetoric, and the macro-level of poetics. Medea, Atreus, Cassandra, and Juno each possess greater facility with second-order language such as wit, metaphor, and allegory than do their more literal-minded *agôn*-partners, and they wield these verbal weapons against their clueless victims. As Webb has shown, it was a staple of ancient rhetorical theory that the successful orator or poet could predict, and so control, the reaction of his or her audience via vivid, powerful language (to this I would add a subtle understanding of the patterns of mytho-poetic exempla and of human behavior in general).\(^{373}\) Linguistic and hermeneutic prowess also create a bond of intimacy, even collusion, with audiences. As Schiesaro and Littlewood (*inter alios*) each observe, the relationship of Seneca’s criminal-poets with the external

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\(^{371}\) *Thy.* 703. We are not sure whether the original title of the Senecan play was ‘Atreus’ or ‘Thyestes’.

\(^{372}\) *Thy.* 885.

\(^{373}\) Webb (1997).
audience poses interpretive complications, since the positive values of aesthetics are at odds with morality.\footnote{Schiesaro (2003); Littlewood (2004).}

For Medea, ‘specialized’ poetic language takes the form of magical incantations, curses, spells, and prayers, perhaps reflecting the differences in how Latin poetry genders language. For Atreus, on the other hand, facility with language, and with rhetoric and logic, is part and parcel of his desire for total control. That Atreus’ level of knowledge far surpasses his brother’s is apparent in the relationship of each to language on both micro- and macro-levels. Thyestes is not knowledgeable about the direction of the plot, and he interprets Atreus’ language only on the literal level. Atreus, on the other hand, displays clever mastery of language, as can be seen in his use of wit, double entendre, and literary allusion.\footnote{See Meltzer (1986) on ‘black humor’ and wit in Seneca’s Thyestes.} Atreus’ riddles, puns, allusions, and other forms of second-order language, I argue, operate in a quasi-oracular way. The under-meanings are lost on Thyestes, who is enmeshed in the inner circle of the play, but the knowing external audience (with its more panoptic perspective) understands his references. As Atreus is able to use this type of language creatively to realize his plot, so Seneca uses irony to illustrate the gaps in knowledge between the strata of characters within the play, and between the internal players and the superordinate layers of audiences, deities, and authors.

By contrast, not only does the unfortunate Thyestes fail to comprehend his brother’s verbal cues and meanings, he does not even understand signs that come from his own body.\footnote{For example, he misinterprets the awful distress in his bowels after having consumed his children as ordinary indigestion.} Atreus’ informed hunches replace actual prophecy; based on his own predisposition to lust after power, he predicts that Thyestes will follow the patterns of family evil.\footnote{‘Atreus is a larger figure than Thyestes in part because his thoughts have this metadramatic resonance; while Thyestes fails to master his body and tongue Atreus’ ambitions echo in more worlds than one. Knowledge of the plot and of the literary tradition from which the plot is created is a knowledge the audience shares with Atreus ...’ (Littlewood 2004, p. 213).} In the anagnōrisis scene, Atreus’ earlier words about his brother’s predisposition toward excessive power are borne out.\footnote{Thy. 922-4; Thy. 303.} As similar as the brothers are, their distinct epistemic positions mean that Atreus will continue to have the upper hand over his brother. As Schiesaro observes: ‘While Atreus successfully combines passion and rational knowledge [...], Thyestes owes his demise largely to his mistrust of intuitions as
cognitive tools. In his self-conscious predicting (and thus controlling) of his audience-victim's response, his power mirrors that of an effective orator or author. Atreus combines creativity with the knowledge a tragic poet has of exempla, and of recognizing the patterns of human behavior. In the play-within-a-play of the fifth act, Atreus self-consciously pictures and predicts the response of Thyestes. Like Medea, Atreus desires to watch the spectrum of reactions from his audience-victim unfold: body language, verbal reactions, and even what color he turns.

AT. libet videre, capita natorium intuens
quos det colore, verba quae primus dolor
effundat aut ut spiritu expulso stupens
corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est.
miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser. (Thy. 903-907)

AT. I relish seeing what colors he turns as he gazes upon his boys' heads, what utterances his first stab of pain spews forth, how, dumbstruck with the breath knocked out of him, his body stiffens. This is the fruit of my labor. I want to see him not in a wretched state, but as he's becoming wretched:

His words emphasize that the process matters even more than the result—in other words, he would like to view and experience the action-over-time phenomenon that is inherent in being a spectator at a play. In his lusting after total control, he wishes to be not just the dramaturge of his revenge tragedy, but also a character in it, and a spectator.

Seneca's avengers believe that they have complete control over time, knowledge, and events, and they refuse to acknowledge any other perspective or form of agency except their own. This takes the form of self-fashioning as godlike (and authorial) figures, and renders prophecy, or any mediating entity, unnecessary. Of course, extraneous forces do exercise control, and know more than these characters—not least, Seneca and his audiences. There are a few hints that these avengers do not possess complete control. For

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381 This does not only include propensity for evil; Atreus and Medea predict that Thyestes, Creon, and Jason will be overcome by their feelings of humanity. The avengers exploit this trust for their own ends.
382 See Schiesaro (2003, p. 96) and Tarrant (1985, ad loc). The actual murder-sacrifice of the boys has already been narrated in graphic detail by the messenger; and a second time in Atreus' cooking of the children. On the descriptions of the killing and eating of the children, Poe (1969, p. 358): 'The poet invites his readers to participate vicariously in an experience which is both sadistic and masochistic'; cf. Littlewood's 'sadistic spectatorship' (2003). On another interpretation, Atreus simply scripts what his brother will do within 'his' play.
example, Medea initially prays to the infernal forces for aid in achieving her revenge. In fact, her prayer to the Erinyes in lines 13-14 will be answered, but in a way that she did not expect, in that the Furies end up pursuing her for the murder of her brother Absyrtus.\footnote{Med. 958-66. See chapter 5 for the related phenomenon of oracular overfulfillment in Seneca’s Oedipus plays.} Here, her prayer works in ways that oracles generally do. We see referent switch (intending for Creusa to be the target, she unwittingly calls down curses on herself), and also time lapse (the fulfillment comes at a much-delayed time, at which point it takes her by surprise). With respect to time, Seneca’s avengers have an attitude of obsessive presentism. They use the past only to the extent that it forms a baseline they can use to outdo what has happened, and they ignore the future entirely—which, of course, negates any chance for would-be injured parties alive or dead, including ghosts of those they have wronged, or furies, to exact revenge on them.

One of the most telling Senecan deviations from the Euripidean model, the lack of an Aegeus scene, reflects this presentist bent. In the Euripidean version, Aegeus gives Medea hope of a safe haven in Athens in return for her promise that she will cure his childlessness. Seneca’s Medea has no such guarantee of harbor. In fact, she has convinced herself of triumph in this particular iteration (which she presents as the culmination of all other Medea-treatments), but her success ends there. Schiesaro says of her privileging the past and present over the future that ’Medea is obsessed by a desire to push her life backwards, to deny the future any real possibility of unfolding, and deviating from the past.’\footnote{As Schiesaro notes (in Volk and Williams, eds., 2009, pp. 228-9), Medea’s wish to turn back the clock to when she was Jason’s bride is marked by legal language of restitution; e.g redde (272-3; 482; 489), where the verb both echoes Ovid’s Heroides’ Medea and smacks of legalistic (specifically, divorce) proceedings.} I would qualify this statement, adding that while Medea is concerned with undoing the past (Ungeschehenmachen),\footnote{Schiesaro (2003, p. 211). This term refers to an attempt to ‘live backwards’, to unwrite what is written, or to undo what has been done. The desire to live backwards is also echoed in the word retro. Retrogression is a key thematic term in Seneca’s tragedies.} she does so in a way that recalls her past successes, in order to underscore that her current actions are even greater. The ‘eternal present’\footnote{Schiesaro (2009, p. 229).} mindset, in combination with a misguided sense of complete self-sufficiency, characterizes tyrants, children, and avengers.

Medea’s success as individual and as poet figure is short-lived, however. It seems that Seneca’s Medea has cut off her own future, and the reception of her poetry: she has
not made preparations for life after her exile and flies off into an unknown realm at the very end of the tragedy. There, not only might no gods live (as Jason’s final words declare), but Medea’s poetry, too, is nullified, with no one to appreciate her work in the future. The link between autonomy and isolation is also apparent in Atreus’ attitude: in his dual role as dramaturge and avenger, Atreus essentially ignores all else except what he himself is plotting. Both Medea and Atreus are unaware of (and, arguably, unconcerned with) what will happen after this tragedy. They ignore or misinterpret any hints that they will be punished for their murders as they punished others, or that future Medeas and Atreuses might displace them. This is part and parcel of their blindness to the larger cycles of revenge(-tragedy), and to the fact that there are forces superordinate to themselves at work.

In their appropriation of vatic-poetic and vatic-prophetic functions, and in their purported assumption of terrestrial, infernal, and divine power, Atreus and Medea can be seen as having a ‘super-role’ status similar to those of Cassandra and Juno, as discussed in chapters 1 and 4, respectively. As the Introduction to the dissertation proposed, those who play super-roles are characterized by the ability to move fluidly between realms (superal, infernal, human), and by heightened access to past, present, and future knowledge and experience—in which intersecting axes they resemble poets and prophets. Despite their self-professed omnipotence, however, Seneca’s Atreus and Medea exhibit shortcomings which gesture toward the limited power of humans more generally. Atreus and Medea each interpret events as stemming directly from them, and as not having ramifications beyond what they explicitly intend. But the signs of cosmic upheaval tell otherwise. The Stoic notion of sympatheia held that human behavior and larger nature were interconnected, and that what happened in one realm was bound to affect and reflect (or refract, or magnify) the other. Medea and Atreus\footnote{Cf. the figures of Hercules and Oedipus, which Chapters 4 and 5 will treat, respectively.} interpret the cosmic changes as both caused by and subject to them. In the third choral ode, Medea is compared to flood, fire, and other destructive forces of nature. These become not just tropes but actualities as she harnesses these very forces to aid her revenge. And in the extended incantation to the infernal gods, Medea details her cosmic powers in terms of their effect on nature—
including over apparent *adynta*, where she is able to change even the course of the seasons.\footnote{Med. 757ff. Schiesaro (2003) sees Medea’s desires in Freudian terms (although Medea’s vengeful desires are quite deliberate and conscious); for Schiesaro, Medea as avenger-poet the rule of the ‘unconscious, which **elide chronology** and ‘abolishes causal links’ are at play (2003, p. 231). Medea’s actions can also be an extreme manifestation of the point that uncontained passions will ultimately harm the one who has them in addition to victims. Here, passion (in the guises of *furo, ira*, and *amor*) runs rampant proves detrimental to those around her—not only her intended victims but incidental ones, her children.}

Similarly, when the sun turns backward and the constellations fall, Atreus views the sun as a partner in crime rather than as a **signum** responding to, or warning against, *nefas*. Atreus’ interpretation of the celestial events is vastly different from that of the Chorus and the messenger, who see the sun’s disappearance as a horrific marker of the fact that all nature has been overturned. While the sky is dark and empty, he should seize the opportunity for more evil—to complete his plans for *maius nefas*.\footnote{See **die nolente** (Med. 890), which is a possible play on *deo volente*.} In the single-mindedness that accompanies their desires, Seneca’s avengers perceive the direction of causality not as stemming from the divine sphere or even as bidirectional; rather, the only interpretation that makes sense to them is that they themselves possess total control.\footnote{On cosmic Medea, for example, *mundus vocibus primis remit* (Med. 739); cf. Med. 414.}

Atreus has the last word in the *Thyestes*, an ominous curse which at least offers the illusion that he might prove successful in his revenge plot—though as Seneca’s audience knows, and as even the prologue of the *Agamemnon* bears out, the Atreid house will continue to be plagued. The situation is different in the *Medea*. While the title character has appropriated the prologue (twice), has dominated the middle sections with her poetic catalogue and later with her staging of her revenge as tragedy, and has trumped her adversaries in their *agones*, she does not have the last word in the play, even as she flies off into the ether, unharmed and apparently triumphant. Rather, Jason offers a final enigmatic commentary that threatens to undermine all that has come before in the tragedy. Not only are there no conjugal gods, according to Jason, but there may be no gods whatsoever where Medea is headed: *per alta vade spatia sublime aethereis, / testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos.*\footnote{Med. 1026-7.} Commentators often note that ‘gods’ are the first and last words...
of the play, thus bookending it structurally and thematically. As Jason’s bitter rebuttal closes the play, it re-opens the crucial questions of tragic metaphysics.

**Challenging fate beyond revenge: *Troades***

The second part of this chapter analyzes the figures of Seneca’s *Troades* who challenge fate but without a motive of personal vengeance. Some, like Polyxena and Astyanax, are characterized by exemplary self-possession in the face of danger. Others are ‘accidental’ prophets, since they are not cognizant of how their actions and utterances will either subvert what has been foretold or will prove true incidentally, in ways they did not foresee. These figures, I will argue, underwrite the model of multiple strands of causality (*confatalia*) which characterizes Senecan poetics. In chapters 1 and 2, I suggested that Seneca’s paratactic presentation reinforces the notion of distinct, but interrelated, causal factors that motivate the murder–sacrifices of Polyxena and Astyanax, which are the twin climaxes of the *Troades*. To recap in brief, the ghost of Achilles demands Polyxena as his underworldly bride in order for the Greek fleet to sail home. Next, Pyrrhus and Agamemnon debate whether or not to sacrifice Polyxena; their *agōn* is separate from the appearance of Achilles’ ghost (in fact, they do not seem to be aware of the apparition), and the logic of the leaders’ argument stems from issues of *Realpolitik*. Immediately afterward, Calchas arrives on the scene to resolve the debate over whether Polyxena should be sacrificed. Not only does he confirm that Polyxena is to be sacrificed in accordance with fates’ demands, but he articulates an additional necessary condition for the Greeks to set sail: the sacrifice of Astyanax. So, there are infernal, human, and superal motive forces at play, each apparently separate from the other.

Calchas is the join. His speech is the most succinct of the three accounts—only eleven lines—yet he provides the unprepared-for Senecan innovation, the juxtaposition of two requisite sacrifices in a single work. The prophet’s words are explicit that multiple strands of causality will be at play in the tragedy (*non...haec...una causa*). As this section

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393 In fact, Seneca’s *Troades* is full of ‘doublets’ (and multiples in general).
395 *Tro. 203ff.*
396 There was apparently no single literary work (tragic or otherwise) in which both Astyanax and Polyxena were sacrificed.
will argue, the relationship in the *Troades* between the normal vatic figures, vatic analogues, and challengers allows Seneca to dramatize the workings of *confatalia*. What is more, in Calchas’ speech the *fata* take on the active role of demanding the Astyanax’s sacrifice—another new element in Seneca’s version. That the *fata* are both plural and active gestures toward the model of *confatalia*, where the *fatum* of what is fixed is but one half of the equation, the other half being the unpredictable elements of human choice. The challengers of the *Troades* (consciously or not) destabilize the antecedent causal force of *fatum*, replacing it with the *eph’hēmin, or in nostra potestate*, component of autonomy.

First, Ulysses attempts to take over Calchas’ role as prophet; he demands of Andromache that she hand over her son to be killed. His appearance is more complex Calchas’ brief cameo. His first words signal that his role is engaged with the prophetic element (he calls himself *duae minister sortis*). And like other vatic figures in Seneca, he possesses heightened linguistic and rhetorical facility as well as knowledge of how mythic patterns operate. This can be seen when Ulysses adduces other examples of small entities that grow to be dangerous in order to explain why Astyanax must not be allowed to live, a point that is encapsulated in the maxim he gives: *generosa in ortus semina exsurgent suos*. In his cunning deceptiveness, Seneca’s Ulysses recalls the attributes of previous Odysseus/Ulysses figures. But his explicit link with the prophetic adds a new dimension in which he can be made to engage in more subtle ‘debates’ on causality and poetics.

Ulysses is a fitting figure for illustrating (or embodying) the prophetic and poetic fusion in that he is adept at second-order speech (including deception and storytelling) from Homer onward. In fact, his simultaneous appropriation of the prophetic role and sidestepping of actual responsibility in Seneca fits with his propensity for ‘doublespeak’. He absolves himself from blame by stating that he as the mouthpiece of two entities, fate and popular opinion, he should not be blamed for the content of the speech, and that there are actually *many* reasons why Astyanax’s life is being demanded:

UL. *Durae minister sortis hoc primum peto, ut, ore quamvis verba dicantur meo,*

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397 *Tro.* 536. The specific examples he cites include the calf that matures to be a dangerous bull; the *tenera virga* that grows into a mighty tree; smoldering embers that spark into a fire (*Tro.* 540-545).

398 For doublespeak as the prerogative of autocrats, see Bartsch (1994).

399 He reiterates that he is just the mouthpiece for Calchas when Andromache begs him for Astyanax to live, but as a slave; *non hoc Ulysses, sed negat Calchas tibi* (*Tro.* 749).
non esse credas nostra: Graiorum omnium
procerumque vox est, petere quos seras domos
hectorea suboles prohibet. hanc fata expetunt.
[...]
... augur haec Calchas canit;
et, si taceret augur haec Calchas, tamen
dicebat Hector, cuius et stirpem horreo. (Tro. 524-8; 533-535).

UL. As representative of hard fate I first demand this:
that even though the words are spoken by my mouth,
you not believe them to be my own. This is the utterance of
all the Greeks and their leaders, whom Hector’s
offspring prevent from their belated homecoming which they seek.
The Fates demand this child.
[...]
The seer Calchas prophesies these things; and even if
the prophet Calchas were silent on these matters, Hector
used to utter them, and I tremble even at a young child of his.

Ulysses’ declaration provides subtle commentary on an overarching theme, and principle
of dramatic technique, of Seneca’s Troades: multiple motivating factors. His words echo
those of Calchas, who claimed that there was not one single cause for the Greek fleet’s
delays. Ulysses actually one-ups the prophet’s articulation of the many causes at play: he
provides reasons from the past that, he hopes, will persuade Andromache. Even if there
had not been an explicit call for Astyanax’s death, he would have been killed anyway,
according to her husband’s words. The logic stretches into the future, too: the patterns of
historical exempla dictate that if he were allowed to live, the boy would grow to become a
great threat to the Greeks as a ‘future Hector’ (futurus Hector).

Ulysses’ articulation fits in with the pattern of multiple motivating factors for
Polyxena’s death: the ghost Achilles’ demand for an underworldly bride; the demands of
fate as uttered by Calchas; and political praxis, which forms the content of Pyrrhus and
Agamemnon’s agon. The meta-level of the poetic tradition yields an overarching cause,
since Seneca’s audience expects that they will be sacrificed based on all earlier treatments.
What is surprising is that both will perish in a single work; Seneca’s treatment of the
duplex nefas is an example of and a commentary on poetic innovation. That Ulysses
attempts to displace and outdo the traditional prophet while insinuating his own
commentary on and articulating additional reasons for the boy’s death—has not factored
into scholarly discussions vis-à-vis the Troades. His words might serve a consolatory
function under different circumstances, but Andromache is too emotionally enmeshed in
the situation to understand the logic of any of these causal strands (political; divinely sanctioned; exemplary–literary). She does not care about the reason(s) behind the demand for her son’s death; she is solely concerned to protect her husband’s memory, and their son. In her agôn with Ulysses, Andromache accuses the Greek outright of shirking responsibility, of doublespeak, and of cowardice:

AN. O machinator fraudis et scelerum artifex,  
virtute cuius bellica nemo occidit,  
dolis et astu maleficae mentis iacent  
etiam Pelasgi, vatem et insontes deos  
praetendis? hoc est pectoris facinus tui.  
nocturne miles, fortis in pueri necem,  
iam solus audes aliquid claro die. (Tro. 750-766).400

AN. O contriver of deception and and artisan of crimes!  
No one has ever fallen because of your excellence in war, but by  
the schemes of your evil-doing mind even the Pelasgians are felled.  
You allege that it is the doing of the prophet and the innocent gods?  
This deed is one of your own heart. Soldier of night, brave when it  
comes to slaughtering a boy, now you dare some solo crime in  
broad daylight!

Andromache charges him not only with appropriating the seer’s words, but with outdoing them. In a different context, in fact, her words would be a compliment. The implication seems to be that Calchas would not order such a horror as Astyanax’s death, yet he was (in)famous for having ordered Iphigenia’s death in previous mytho-literary iterations.401 Ulysses’ primary intent is to induce Andromache to reveal her son; in contrast to Calchas, he does not refer to the other main reason for the Greek fleet’s delay: the continued existence of Polyxena. In fact, he is explicit that there is a single cause for the delay: haec una naves causa deductas tenet, / hic classis haeret.402 Haec una causa is in direct contrast to Calchas’ earlier words non haec una causa, and the responison can be seen as a kind of intra- and meta-textual agôn between Calchas and Ulysses over the causal mode of the tragedy—an interesting Senecan twist on face-to-face agones. If we are to trust the normal

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400 Note that the lines between praise-speech and blame-speech are elided in that the terms machinator and artifex are generally positive; here, however, Ulysses is a contriver of evil. Cf. Seneca’s Medea, who is machinatix malorum facinorum.

401 Calchas had in fact shuddered when ordering Iphigenia’s death in Seneca’s version (Aga. 36). This is another example of Senecan characters ‘overhearing’ each other across the bounds of a particular play; this dialogic function is also exhibited by Cassandra and Hecuba who echo each other’s words regarding being a false prophet (Aga. 705 and Tro. 36-40).

402 Tro. 552-3.
patterns of tragic debates, the winner is the one who has the last word, which would here be Ulysses.

Whether in order to convince Andromache (whose worldview is more simplistic at this point, since she only wants to protect her son and the memory of her husband), to showcase his own inventiveness, or both, Ulysses usurps the words of Calchas when he articulates an additional clause to fates’ demands. Nowhere in Calchas’ earlier speech or in the tradition in general is the destruction of Hector’s tomb a requisite component of the demands; here, however, Ulysses declares that the entire busta must be razed to the soil.\(^{403}\) Whereas earlier in the play the novel element was that Astyanax must be sacrificed in addition to Polyxena, with Ulysses it has morphed into the sacrifice of Astyanax as well as the destruction of Hector’s tomb—which is also a second death for Hector and for his son, since he is hidden within his father’s tomb. Andromache comments that to destroy a burial mound was a deed that even the Greeks had previously left undared before now.\(^{404}\) The creative storyteller Odysseus/Ulysses is a prime vehicle for showing poetic innovation; significantly, Seneca’s Ulysses is a novel figure explicitly with respect to prophecy, in that he usurps the office of and outdoes the words of the traditional prophet Calchas.\(^{405}\) Indeed, in his promise to overturn and upheave everything (funditus cunctas eruam, 685), Ulysses echoes the totalizing sentiments of other usurpers, notably Atreus and Medea.

**Andromache: accidental prophet**

The unintentional prophecies uttered by several Senecan characters remind the audience of the various distinct epistemic levels and contribute to irony, as they will come to take on a meaning that the character did not intend, or even comprehend. Here the lines between irony and oracular speech are blurred. Andromache plays the dual role of accidental prophet and unwitting ironist in a couple of instances. First, in her decision to conceal Astyanax in his father’s tomb, she foreshadows his impending death by burying

\(^{403}\) *hoc Calchas ait / modo piari posse redituras rates / si placet undas Hectoris sparsi cinis / ac tumultus imo totus aequetur solo.* (Tro. 637-40).

\(^{404}\) *fuerat hoc prorsus nefas / Danais inausum. templum violastis, deos / etiam faventes: busta transierat furor,* Tro. 668-70.

\(^{405}\) *responsa peragam; funditus busta eruam ... / pergam et a summo aggere / troham sepulcro,* Tro. 663; 664-5.
him in advance, thus fulfilling both the fates’ demands and Ulysses’ request (of which she has no direct knowledge at this point).\footnote{Tro. 641ff.} A similar irony attends Andromache’s command to Astyanax to enter the tomb, and her words reveal her to be an unwitting prophet:

AN. ... fata si miseris iuvant,
habes salutem; fata si vitam negant,
habes sepulcrum. (Tro. 510-11).

AN. ... If the fates help the miserable,
you have salvation; if the fates deny life, you have a tomb.

In one of the resonances of \textit{fatum} as ‘death,’ Andromache inadvertently forecasts Astyanax’s impending doom either way. That is, \textit{si miseris iuvant} can be taken as equivalent to \textit{si vitam negant}, where \textit{salus} then equals \textit{sepulcrum}. A few lines later, Andromache continues to utter unwitting prophecies when she wants earth to split open (literally) so that Astyanax will have a hiding place. This previews the end of the play, where he leaps down to his death into the midst of Troy’s ruins. Andromache’s language also gestures toward the current location of Priam’s ‘kingdom’, the underworld, now that Troy has fallen.\footnote{sponte desiluit sua / in media Priami regna, Tro. 1102-3.}

The ghostly context also foreshadows her later remark that even in dying, Astyanax resembles his father.\footnote{sic quoque est similis pater, Tro. 1117.} Here, Andromache’s comments on their son’s similarities to his father further this atmosphere of the unintentionally prophetic; it is striking how closely her declaration about the manner of her son’s death matches what actually will occur in the fifth act:

AN. o morte dira tristius leti genus!
flebilius aliquid Hectoris magni nece
muri videbunt ... (Tro. 783-5).

AN. O type of killing, more wretched than terrible death itself!
The walls will see something more lament-worthy than the slaughter of great Hector ...

Even beyond the bounds of this particular play, Andromache’s words act in prophetic, proleptic, and ironic ways. For example, the games in which her son will never take part
are the *lusus Troiae*, the equestrian re-enactments by young Roman boys in honor of their Trojan heritage. As with the dream of Hector, this scene participates in a nuanced intertextual dialogue with one of Seneca’s major influences. Poetic time is not linear, a fact that Senecan tragedy repeatedly dramatizes, and here is a good example. The Trojan games Andromache mentions point backward in terms of cultural memory, but point forward in both chronological and metaliterary time: it appears that real Roman boys participated in Trojan games, and Ascanius similarly will do so (and has done so) in Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Here again, Andromache proves the unfailing prophet, since Astyanax will never participate in the actual Trojan games; instead, the actual *futurus Hector* will do so in Italy, where he will be immortalized in Rome’s new national epic. Through the complex interactions between the characters in his play and their intertextual engagement with the *Aeneid*, Seneca effectively gestures toward his own poetry both as inheritor of and anachronistic precursor of Vergilian poetry.

On the broader literary–historical level, too, Andromache’s unintended prophecies that nevertheless come true reveal that she is a type of a vatic figure. One variation on Senecan ‘problems’ with prophecy is that while actual prophecies do not come to pass, incidental statements like Andromache’s prove to foretell events correctly. It is Andromache, in equating Astyanax with his exemplary father, who forecasts that he will be the savior of his people in a new beginning for Troy. She hopes, though with trepidation, for a *Troia rediviva*—an identity Augustan and early imperial ideology embraced for Rome. Of course, it is not Astyanax who will inaugurate the new Troy but Aeneas. With the new instantiation, however, comes the hefty price of cultural erasure, which Andromache did not foresee. The tone of Hector’s ghost was much more pessimistic, as Chapter 2 discussed: the instructions he gave to his wife via prophecy-dream were unhelpful in securing a safe haven for their son. Seen through this interpretive lens, Seneca’s ghost of Hector and Andromache inadvertently join forces to ‘pre-script’ some key elements of the *Aeneid* and trojanizing imperial ideology, while also providing a subtle commentary insinuating that a *Troia rediviva* in Rome—at least, one based on

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409 *Aen.* 5.545ff. Fitch (2002, p. 240-1) notes: ‘At Rome [the *lusus Troiae*] was a traditional display, often used by emperors to parade their young heirs in public.’

410 As Cassandra also does in her address to her Trojan ‘audience’ in the underworld (*Ag*.* 741ff*).
Aeneas’ bloodline—may not be an entirely positive thing.411

As I have argued, in her transmission of past and future knowledge, Andromache is a vatic figure; also like the traditional inspired prophet, she is not in full command of, nor does she possess complete knowledge of, what is said. Certain resonances of her speech become clear to her only later in the play, and some of what she says will not come to pass until (in myth time) the events after the play’s end. What I am calling Andromache’s ‘accidental’ prophecy does double duty, and then some: it foretells what will happen in the fifth act, with her son’s exemplary death which will surpass his father’s; what is more, it foreshadows (from the internal timescale of the drama), or recalls and provides an action for (to Seneca’s audience) a famous ritual that Romans engaged in, and that is also commemorated in a scene from the Aeneid.412

The previous section, in conjunction with the first chapter’s analysis of Calchas and the ghostly appearances of Achilles and of Hector, have articulated several ways in which prophecy is destabilized in Seneca’s Troades. The multiple motivations for the play’s climax complicate prophecy, as do Ulysses’ assumption of the prophetic role and Andromache’s incidentally true prophetic–proleptic words. But the greatest challenge to prophetic authority occurs in the last act of the play. In act 5, the autonomous actions of Polyxena and Astyanax call into question all of what was previously set in place by overt prophecy and by prophetic substitutes. In the first part of this chapter, I argued that the avengers Medea and Atreus are a particular species of vatic ‘usurpers’ who style themselves as not subject to the gods or fate. Polyxena and Astyanax will subvert fate’s prescriptions not through revenge but through heroic actions. The Troades is especially well-suited to present a plurality of viewpoints on matters of life, death, suffering, and triumph, since it presents dual perspectives on the Greek and Trojan experiences in the aftermath of the war. The paratactic presentation underscores the multiple interpretations concerning the existence, or not, of the afterlife. Two successive choral odes present opposite views on what happens after death, and various characters, too, weigh in on the

411 As Joe Farrell points out (per litteras), Hector’s jealousy that whatever survives of Troy in Italy will be not his own descendants but Aeneas’ could be a contributing factor in the pessimistic (or bitter) tone; there is a Homeric precedent here in Aeneas’ antagonism against Priam’s house in Iliad 20.
412 Cf. the earlier dream of Andromache in which Hector appears to her; the mechanisms are much the same, where the dream alludes to the contents of the Aeneid as if it had not happened yet—which it has not, in terms of actual chronology, though it has in literary–historical terms. This signals the fluidity of time that vatic activity—prophecy, but especially poetry—can access.
debate. For Hecuba and the Trojan chorus, death is easily consoled, as the words liber and felix suggest the promise of reward, and a reunion with loved ones in the underworld, for those who have acted well in life. For Andromache, however, death is not a harbor but a source of continued unrest. As she has observed from her husband–ghost’s visitation, an individual may not be able to rest but may continue to be tortured, and to harass those in the upper world, as a ghost. The final act of the Troades presents the most arresting examination of these themes: the intersection of the various views on death/the afterlife with questions of fate/human autonomy. The dialogic quality of the drama, with its many speaking voices and layers of embedded performances, permits Seneca to engage these topics in ways that a straightforward philosophical treatise could not.

Many causal factors lead to the Trojan youths’ sacrifice and these are, for the most part, mutually extricable—a quality that is reinforced on the level of structure, with the ‘stacked’ presentation of multiple causes. Any one factor on its own would have been sufficient to necessitate these youths’ deaths. The accretive effect produced by the many causes would seem to corroborate that fate’s demands will be fulfilled—even to justify the deaths—by intimating that these murder–sacrifices are inevitable, but that no single party can be blamed. Scholarship has not fully elucidated the ways in which prophetic strands both unravel and coalesce in act 5 of the Troades—an issue that has tremendous interpretive bearing on this play, and on Seneca’s poetics more broadly. It is a salient feature of how Seneca engineers his poetry is that these multiple competing interpretations stand in tension without resolution. As Busch notes, applying Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘dialogic’ to Senecan tragedy, staging these opposing worldviews in terms of an irresolvable debate means that the tragedies provide no closure, or single definitive answer. In fact, the open-ended aporia insists that the audience must continue to confront these looming questions. Within this ‘radically unresolved’ debate, Busch argues, Seneca puts the onus of interpretation (and continued reinterpretation) on the audiences as well as on himself. In this model of shared responsibility, the audience’s job is ‘to arbitrate empathetically, honestly, and rationally between the various points of view presented, as it is Seneca’s to facilitate such arbitration by orchestrating a fair and meaningful dialogue.

\footnote{The points about Senecan dialogism are neatly summarized in Busch (2009).}

\footnote{ibid.}
between them.\textsuperscript{415}

**Autonomy and subversion: Polyxena and Astyanax**

The various motive forces in the *Troades*—the ghost Achilles’ demands, fate’s decree as relayed by Calchas (and by Ulysses), political exigencies seen in the *agôn* between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon—can each also be seen to represent a major ‘realm’, that is, infernal, superal, human. Any one strand should be sufficient to guarantee that the youths will be sacrificed in accordance with what had been foretold. Yet this is not straightforwardly the case. In the final act of Seneca’s *Troades*, sets of embedded audiences witness or hear about the deaths of the Trojan youths Polyxena and Astyanax, which are presented as dual performances. The deaths themselves occur offstage and are recounted to the Trojan women by one level of audience, the messenger, who describes them as if at a stage show or gladiatorial spectacle.\textsuperscript{416} Yet an in-person audience of both victorious Greeks and vanquished Trojans also viewed the murder-sacrifices as an *actual* murder, and, if we are to believe the messenger’s description, as a performed *representation* of one. The slippage between performance and reality mirrors the moral ambivalence of this scene: the victorious Greeks have ordered the double execution, yet they have done so by decree of fate. Further, many of the Greeks are reluctant to have these youths killed, yet they realize that Trojan stock must be eradicated in order for the Greeks to return in victory without fear of a reprise, in the form of a second Trojan–Greek war.

To return to the issue of overt prophecy: the assumption in scholarship has been that fate’s demands have been fulfilled by the end of the play. On this view, what had been foretold via many times over in the first four acts—not to mention in various pre-Senecan treatments—finally comes to pass, as Polyxena and Astyanax are both killed in a double murder–sacrifice. But on another view, which I believe is in keeping with the operations of prophecy and poetry in Seneca more generally, the attitudes and actions of the Trojan youths represent a distinct challenge to the prophetic apparatus. The pivot here is their

\textsuperscript{415} ibid., p. 266.

\textsuperscript{416} The whole event is called the ‘final act’ of falling Troy, *partem ruentis ultimam Troiae vident*; note the metadramatic resonance of ‘pars’ as a ‘role’ in a play (OLD, s.v. 9). The theatrical paradigm suffuses the messenger’s interpretation, while certain spectators respond as if to a gladiatorial display (see below). Ker examines in detail how Seneca ‘multiplies death through an accumulation of distinct visual perspectives,’ using the *Troades* as a central text to illustrate this Senecan technique (2009, p. 131).
attitude toward their impending doom: Polyxena and Astyanax meet death with calm self-assurance, without fear or cowardice. What is more, they do not just face their deaths willingly but anticipate their executioners, actually taking death into their own hands. While Pyrrhus is reluctant to deal the death-blow, Polyxena strides ahead of her executioner, like Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*. Similarly, Astyanax leaps from the Trojan tower of his own accord, before Ulysses can strike him. Astyanax turns the mirror to the audience, gazing defiantly at the spectacle of his spectators, while Polyxena keeps her eyes modestly lowered as she radiates beauty. As the onlookers’ loud wailing is momentarily quelled, the youths’ unbroken silence is a sobering counterpoint. It reveals their steadfast resolve and perhaps also tacitly insists that the action (and even its representation?) is literally *nefandum*. In the end, it seems, no words suffice to capture the ineffable experience of the Trojan pair.

Not surprisingly, the two youths are often adduced as Stoic exempla. But even if we do not insist that one or both must function as analogues of the Stoic *sapiens*, their extreme autonomy in contradistinction to the mindset of everyone else who was present is clear, further calling into question whether *fatum* really has come to pass in accordance with that the prophets in the play have foretold, and with what Seneca’s own audience would have expected. On my view, the actions of Astyanax and his resemblance to his father fulfills Andromache’s *incidental* prophecies rather than the overt ones of Calchas and of Ulysses. Similarly, Polyxena’s defiant attitude as she pours blood into the ground makes one wonder what kind of bride she will be for Achilles, or if indeed this is her destination. The scene draws attention to problems with both prophecy and poetry: the twin strands of what is knowable versus what is not, of human choice against the backdrop of what has been written, coalesce in the scene of *duplex nefas*. Until this point, the audience of Greeks and Trojans had been divided, a fragmentation which stemmed

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417 *Pyrrhum antecedit (Tro. 1147); ... audax virago non tulit retro gradum. / conversa ad ictum stat truci vultu ferox, Tro. 1151-2. As commentators such as Boyle (1994, *ad loc.* ) have observed, this could be in dialogue with Seneca’s idealizing portrait of the *sapiens* who is not dragged by, but keeps up with, and even precedes, fate: *‘non trahuntur a fortuna, sequuntur illam et aequant gradus; si scissent, antecessissent.’* (Prov. 5.4); cf. Vit. Beat. 8.5

418 *vultus hoc et hoc acres tulit / intrepidis animo, Tro. 1092-3.

419 Literally—the messenger describes her as a stunning sunset at *Tro. 1138-42.

420 Astyanax arguably embodies greater autonomy and Stoic *apatheia* than Polyxena, whose last gesture is (presented by the messenger as) one of anger, when her lifeless body falls and makes the ground heavy for Achilles. The young Tantalus in the *Thyestes* displays similar characteristics by meeting Atreus’ death-blow with self-possession.
from differences in political allegiance, from their involvement in the situation, and from
their individual levels of compassion. For example, many of the Greeks in what the Trojan
 messenger calls the *levē vulgus* jockey for prime viewing spots, and one particularly
inhumane *ferus spectator* takes his place on top of Hector’s tomb to view the execution.421
But Polyxena’s death scene produces the greatest audience alignment, as is reflected in the
play’s totalizing language: *everyone* reacts with pity, fear, and wonder.422

NU. *stupet omne vulgus ...
movet animus omnes fortis et leto obvius
Pyrrum antecedit. omnium mentes tremunt,
mirantur ac miserantur. (*Tro. 1143; 1146-8*)

NU. The entire crowd is stunned ...
her brave spirit moves all as she strides
before Pyrrhus to meet her death; the minds
of all quake in fear, are awe-struck and feel pity.

The tension between the scene as a representational as well as an actual double execution
is suggested by the diction. ‘Pity’ (*miserantur*) and ‘fear’ (*tremunt*) explicitly gloss
Aristotle’s articulation of the emotions a tragedy should produce in its viewers, but Seneca
injects an additional element of wonder (*mirantur*) into his version.423 This extra term cues
the rhetorical–poetic technique of *ekplēxis*, the visceral response in one’s audience due to
surprise based on especially vivid and powerful thoughts or words.424 Here again, the
unpredictable element proves the most striking, and so the most productive for achieving
a particular effect even in an audience who may seem immune (e.g. the Greeks who would
be glad to see the obstacle to their detainment removed; onlookers whose hearts are
hardened due to bitterness in war’s aftermath; perhaps Seneca’s own audience who
already know that the young Trojans are doomed to be sacrificed).

Polyxena and Astyanax subvert what had appeared to be fixed *fatum*: their actions
are unprepared for by the dramatic action up to this point and are even surprising to

421 *Tro. 1087.*
422 Here again my reading runs along different track (or at a different pace) from that of Shelton, who
observes with respect to these lines that ‘Seneca’s succinct Latin captures well the vacillating crowd’s
response.’ (2000, p. 110). I see the disparity as occurring earlier, while it is here in the final scene that the
responses are most alike.
423 They do not tremble physically, but experience a mental tremor. This comes just after the initial ‘terror’
that affects everyone: ... *terror attonitos tenet / utrosque populos, Tro. 1136-7. As Leigh (1994)
perceptively notes, attonitus is a Latin gloss of *ekplēxis.*
424 On internal audience response in this scene, see Mowbray (2012).
external audiences. As the youths’ attitude of self-possession represents the *eph'ēmin* strand of *confatalia*, so too, the scene offers several examples of the corresponding component of free authorial choice with respect to what I am calling ‘poetic *confatalia*.’ First, treating the pair in tandem is a Senecan innovation;\(^{425}\) and in these figures’ attitude toward death, Seneca sets them up as exemplars. What is more, these final events call for a reinterpretation of the entirety of what has come before in the play, and even what what has been taken for granted in the mytho-literary tradition. Astyanax and Polyxena both embody the positive Stoic quality of meeting death with equanimity,\(^{426}\) but a different logic motivates the action of each of them. Astyanax’s belief in the afterlife, and his wish to be reunited with his father and other exemplary Trojans, trumps the immediate context, which would produce fear in most humans.\(^ {427}\) As he leaps down into Priam’s *regna*, he is doing so on two levels: he is falling into the actual city of Troy, but since Troy has fallen, he is simultaneously leaping into Priam’s current kingdom, which is in the underworld.\(^{428}\) What is a hope for Astyanax—the existence of an afterlife—becomes a source of detestation for Polyxena. The best case scenario in Polyxena’s view is that there is nothingness after death; only here will she escape slavery in both life and the afterlife. For both, death can be seen as salvific and liberating. For Polyxena, this is *because of* the future that awaits her on earth (i.e. exile and forced marriage) and *despite* a potential marriage in the underworld; for Astyanax, this is *because of* the possibility of being reunited with his loved ones, and *because of* the opportunity to be remembered as an exemplary Trojan. The final gestures of both Astyanax and Polyxena call for a re-evaluation of the preceding events. Polyxena’s death is not a suicide *stricto sensu*, but it is a form of autonomy. In deciding against the certain slavery of forced exile and a loathsome marriage, she exercises what is still in her power: how to meet her death.\(^{429}\)

The viewpoints of Polyxena and Astyanax are in dialogue with the various perspectives offered by characters earlier in the play, and especially, by choral odes 2 and 3

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\(^{425}\) Where doubling is part of the overall structure of the *Troades*, and is indicative of larger themes having to do with the winners and losers, and their virtual equivalence, in the aftermath of war.

\(^{426}\) Cf. *NQ* 6.32.4.

\(^{427}\) Although he functions as a Stoic exemplum, he is an ‘incidental’ one, as he is not consciously espousing views held by Stoics; in a similar unintentional way, the youths subvert the unquestioned ratification of prophetic utterance, and thus fate, or divine will.

\(^{428}\) In this way he echoes the first choral ode: *Tro.* 159-60.

\(^{429}\) This recalls the *eph'ēmin* component of *confatalia*, normally glossed as ‘free will’ (or some equivalent).
which deal with similar concerns. It is clear that the youths do not merely dramatize but extend the choral opinion on these same matters in that they provide specific, moving examples of what the chorus only alludes to with vague abstractions. Seneca’s victims are characterized by a focus on the past, and his avenger characters are obsessed with the present—this is one of the ways in which they challenge the need for prophecy. Polyxena and Astyanax display a similar presentist bent, though due to urgent necessity rather than to calculated choice. What is ultimately in their control is the here-and-now—which in their case entails the pressing matter of how to meet death. The future is murky. After all, the appearance of the ghost of Achilles could have been the product of a deranged imagination, and Hector’s appearance in dream form to Andromache could have been just that: an apparition, without the ‘substance’ or spirit of Hector himself behind it. Despite the young Trojans’ prioritizing of the present, with their choice comes an opportunity for performance beyond their current actions, in how they will be remembered in future receptions. The messenger’s extended description is already an example of this. While the combined self-assertive and hic-et-nunc impulses were twisted to vengeful ends by Medea and Atreus, the young Trojans’ mindset more closely resembles the idealized vision of the sapiens—or, indeed, of anyone who acts with both self-possession and judicious reflection.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown Seneca’s revenge tragedies as well as his Troades present examples of non-prophet individuals who, intentionally or not, assume the functions of prophet or otherwise destabilize prophecy by their words and deeds. In Seneca’s Thyestes and Medea, the antiheroes attempt to play too many roles, to the exclusion of any other possible authority, as they engineer their respective plots of revenge, which they stage as inset dramas. Medea and Atreus desire total control over the supral, human, and infernal realms, and ignore anything that does not fit in with their immediate goal of revenge. This factor renders prophecy unnecessary and simultaneously creates opportunities for poetic innovation. As poetological figures, the avengers do indeed appear omnipotent. Yet even as they script others into their plot and execute their revenge successfully (for the present, within the framework of their particular plot), they are short-sighted as to the larger

430 This coheres with Stoic thinking on eradicating harmful hopes, fears, and anxieties—the so-called prospective passions.
workings of tragic patterns—including the talionic recursiveness which ensures that suffering will continue to be meted out to those who take revenge.

Various non-prophet voices usurp the strictly prophetic one in this play, thus destabilizing prophecy as the sole, or primary, means for communicating fatum. This in turn points to the multiple causae that lead up to the climax of the play, the double murder-sacrifice of Polyxena and Astyanax. The many venues for fatum include the authoritative utterance of Calchas, the strident commands of Achilles’ ghost, and the debate by Pyrrhus and Achilles concerning political necessity. Ulysses briefly attempts to take over the prophetic office, as he echoes and extends the eleven-line speech of Calchas. While Ulysses is well aware of the power language wields in the arts of persuasion and rhetoric, Andromache plays unwitting prophet. Her words and actions are ironic prolepseis of her son’s impending death—the very event she is desperately trying to avert. In this way she proves a ‘truer’ prophet-analogue than the ghost of her dead husband, who appears to her in a dream—not as an authoritative guide to the future but as an ineffectual adviser-figure.43¹

In addition to the avengers and unwitting prophets, the Trojan morituri also offer a challenge to fate. It is inevitable that the youths will be sacrificed, and they do indeed meet their doom. But the final act also offers two positive acts of self-definition. The heroic actions of Astyanax and Polyxena call into question the entire system of fatum that appeared to be rigidly fixed—both what is articulated earlier in the Troades and what should happen as is expected from previous mytho-poetic treatments. In contrast to a vengeful, fury-induced subversion of fate, however, the alternative they present is of a deliberate exercising of selfhood. The events that the external audience knows will occur after the bounds of the play further call into question whether the divine plan has been sufficiently fulfilled. Seneca’s Trojan youths, then, trump what has been prophesied—that is, fatum. Their autonomous attitudes have ramifications beyond this particular tragedy, in ways they cannot predict. Not only does their preemptive appropriation of their death invalidate the specific prophecies uttered within the Troades, but their actions continue to resonate into exemplary-poetic futures. In act 5 is a clear example of the twin motive

43¹ As was discussed in Chapter 2, literary ghosts in dreams generally (when they are not malevolent) offer some glimpse of the future and/or advice to the living. Hector’s ghost does not serve this purpose, as in his pessimism he does not offer a solution to the impending doom of his son.
forces of <i>confatalia</i> in Senecan tragedy, and specifically, of how the strand of what is ‘up to’ the individual can rise above what has been pre-scripted.<sup>432</sup> Polyxena and Astyanax give us an example of poetic inventiveness, as well as of individual self-definition, as the power of actual and the poetic selves coincide.<sup>433</sup> Seneca also uses the young Trojans to write in a retroactive cause for the Greek fleet’s failure. The youths’ actions against the backdrop of the inset play of act 5 suggest that the strictures of fate were not enacted to the tee after all. Significantly, Seneca the <i>vates</i>-poet here provides a revisionist interpretation of, and a kind of contrafactual <i>action</i> for, the post-Trojan war mythic history. Under this rubric, the scene is recast as a primal one: had things gone differently and the young Trojans not taken matters into their own hands, the final act suggests, perhaps the Greek fleet would have reached home <i>en masse</i> after all, and the whole of the Greco-Roman poetic tradition from Homer and the cyclic epics on might have taken an entirely different course.

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<sup>432</sup> This shares in the idea raised in <i>Ep.</i> 98.2 that the soul is stronger than fate (and see Rosenmeyer’s analysis of the implications for this idea in Senecan prose and poetry (1986, p. 69ff). The actions of Seneca’s Juno, Hercules, and Oedipus also dramatize this idea in various ways and to various degrees, as Chapters 4 and 5 will argue.

<sup>433</sup> <i>Ep.</i> 80.7; among other treatments, see Staley (2009, p. 123ff) on the theatrical paradigm at play in Seneca’s moral epistles.
Chapter 4

Juno and Hercules: *vates*, Creators, and Destroyers

As previous chapters have discussed, Senecan drama presents many perspectives on prophets and poets as interpreters of *fatum*. This chapter argues that Juno, the prologuist of Seneca’s *Hercules*, is a vatic figure who has more success as a poet than as a prophet, and that her role offers useful inroads into Seneca’s own poetic project. After detailing both Juno’s strengths and limitations, the second part of the chapter focuses on Hercules as an inadvertent usurper of the play that Juno, as dramaturge, sets in motion. The decision to include Juno, an Olympian deity, in a treatment of the Senecan *vates* might at first glance seem counterintuitive. But Seneca’s Juno is a multifaceted figure who is concerned with her place vis-à-vis poetry: she desires not just to transmit but to participate in creating her version of *fatum*. Like Atreus and Medea, Juno is an avenger figure who strives to invent a novel form of punishment that will destroy her opponent while glorifying her both personally and in her persona as poet. Juno, however, offers a variant on Seneca’s other avenger figures, as well as on his funerary figures.

Seneca’s human avengers attempt to play the role of a god. But the nominal deity Juno, having been unseated from heaven, recognizes that in her weakness she must draw her strength from elsewhere. Appealing to the underworld, Juno allows herself to be infected by the furies in order to effect her revenge against Hercules, and, through him, against Jupiter. She descends to earth in order to directly influence human affairs. This Juno, an Olympian–infernal paradox, also shares a great deal with Seneca’s ghost and fury prologuists who draw on underworldly knowledge to give a proleptic sketch of the coming dramatic action, thus exhibiting characteristics of prophet- and poet-*vates*. The actions of Hercules, too, have significant bearing on the vatic themes in this play. While his energies are directed toward magnifying his own deeds and to securing a place on Olympus, his autonomous actions in act 5 give the play a different direction than the one Juno intends. Similarly to how the Polyxena and Astyanax of Seneca’s *Troades* inadvertently challenge the prophetic utterances of Calchas, the demands of the ghost Achilles, and (to greater
and lesser degrees) the previous iterations of the post-Trojan legends, Hercules ends up subverting the plot of Juno—another instance of undoing *fatum*.

**Setting the stage: Juno’s models**

As we saw in chapter 2, prologuists can serve as prophet-analogues in that they have heightened knowledge and give a proleptic account of what will transpire. As forecaster of events to come, Seneca’s Juno fails to give an accurate picture of the basic trajectory of the plot. Instead, what we see in the prologue is Juno engineering her revenge against Hercules as she would like for it to occur. She does this in explicitly authorial ways, planning to execute her revenge as a tragedy. The Juno of Seneca’s *Hercules*, I argue, replaces the normal vatic-prophetic function of predictive prologuist with one of poetic creation. Whereas the avengers Medea and Atreus stage inset revenge tragedies that occur in act 5 of their respective plays, the prologuist Juno already stands at a level superordinate to the dramatic action and does not interact with the play’s characters. Because of her status as poet-figure and as deity, it might seem inevitable that what Juno says will come to pass. Several recent studies, in fact, have drawn attention to the poetological aspects of Juno, in which guise they have also seen Seneca engaging with his poetic models—specifically, with Vergil’s *Aeneid.* Juno’s complex roles with respect to interpreting *fatum* renders hers a vatic ‘super-role’ that is analogous to the one of Cassandra that chapter 1 proposed. Like Cassandra, Juno proves a more successful poet than predictor of what will come, yet she is ultimately unable to provide a full, accurate picture of the play-to-be, either *qua* poet or *qua* deity.

Seneca’s Juno is anomalous on many levels. First and foremost, she is the only god to appear among the *dramatis personae* of Senecan tragedy. Yet she is more infernal than Olympian, since she draws her strength from the underworld and appropriates funerary energy in order to exact her revenge. This Juno recalls but expands on Euripides’ Hera: Seneca’s Juno is more prominent, active character, in keeping with her earlier appearances in Latin poetry, most notably, in the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*. Extending the view

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put forth by Schiesaro and Littlewood, who point up Juno’s successes as poet
analogue, and responding to the claims of Shelton, who sees the workings of nonlinear
time in Hercules as primarily revelatory of psychological processes, I argue that Seneca
presents his Juno as a vatic figure whose authority is challenged. Despite the fact that she
is both dramaturge and divinity, and despite her access to the knowledge contained in
heaven, the underworld, and earth, Juno ultimately can neither foresee nor control how
events will play out in the drama she introduces. Other characters, as well as unseen
forces, intervene to disrupt her carefully laid-out plot. In Juno’s status as simultaneously
empowered and limited resides a parallel to an actual poet’s ability to change fatum, on
the one hand, but also to exercise only limited control over his or her future reception.

As do Seneca’s other avenger figures, Juno draws poetic inspiration as well as the
energy for her revenge from the infernal realm. The vertical displacement engaged in by
Juno consists of a katabasis twice over: a descent from the aether to the underworld, and
from the heavens to earth, where she intervenes in human affairs to effect her revenge
against her stepson. In contrast to the furial figures, and to certain prophets, who can be
compelled to travel above or below against their will, Juno acts of her own accord to
further her revenge plot and to (re)establish her own divinity. First, Juno descends from
the aether to earth in order to influence human actions, then she invokes underworldly
forces. She uses this infernal energy to infect Hercules with furor so that he can destroy
himself as his own summus hostis. It is peculiar enough for a goddess to utter an
invocation, as she should not need external aid; this Juno is doubly anomalous in her
admission of weakness and her appeal to underworldly powers. With Juno, as with the

435 Schiesaro argues for Juno as author figure, saying that the ‘plot she conceives in the prologue is the plot
that happens’ and that the prologue ‘functions as a preliminary, superordinate phase of the play, [...] which
replicates the author’s perspective.’ (2003, p. 186). I agree with his view of Juno as dramaturge but
disagree that the plot that Juno plans comes to pass.
436 Juno qua divinity also suggests the confatalia model, where the workings of the universe are not fully
determined; rather, god/fate cedes control over creation and allows human action also to shape the world.
437 For Juno as infernal poetological figure, I am indebted to Schiesaro’s extended account of how the
passions can inspire tragic poetry, and how tragic poetry in turn dramatizes the passions (Schiesaro,
1997b and 2003).
438 On this phenomenon see especially Schiesaro (2003); also Littlewood (2004) and Staley (2009). For
parallel examples of the ‘reverse katabasis’ vis-à-vis the Senecan prologue, cf. the ghost of Tantalus and the
Furia (Thyestes) as well as the ghost of Thyestes (Agamemnon).
439 In a parallel way, Hercules also descends to the underworld to complete his final labor, which Juno set.
440 In summoning the powers of the underworld, she also betrays her Augustan heritage; Juno had
similarly invoked the furies in Aen. 7 and in Met. 4.
441 Herc. 635.
other avenger-\textit{vates} I identified in chapter 3, actual revenge and poetological \textit{aemulatio} dovetail as she must contend not only with her actual enemies (Jupiter and Hercules) but also with the force of the mytho-poetic tradition. Formal characteristics also emphasize Juno’s desire to outdo. The \textit{Hercules}’ prologue is the longest in Senecan tragedy, comprising 124 lines, and mirrors the massive overreaching and transgression of boundaries displayed by both Hercules and Juno.\footnote{Cf. the massive 1996-line post-Senecan drama \textit{Hercules Oetaeus}.} It is even more the case in the \textit{Hercules} than in other Senecan tragedies that what the prologue sketches out does not entail prophecy \textit{per se}, or even prolepsis, but rather is a function of a poet’s sketching out a plot.\footnote{This idea is set forth in a series of lectures by Farrell at Oberlin College (‘Juno’s \textit{Aeneid}: Narrativity, Poetics, Dissent’ (2008)).} This is clear in Juno’s extended monologue, which gives the impression of access to the workings of the creative poet’s mind.

Before we turn to examine Seneca’s \textit{Hercules}, a brief sketch of the continuities and deviations from his chief models (Euripides’ \textit{Herakles}, Vergil’s \textit{Aeneid}, and Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}) will help orient the discussion. Hera is not a principal deity in Attic tragedy and does not feature prominently in Euripides’ \textit{Herakles}. In the Euripidean version, Amphitryon gives the prologue, which is basically expository in nature. Hera does not appear in person to participate in the revenge against the hero but does so through proxies. Not only does she stay behind the scenes, she also exacts her revenge at several levels of remove. First, she sends the official Olympian messenger Iris to command Lyssa to infect Heracles with madness. Lyssa is a complex figure: furial in appearance, one might expect that she would be the embodiment of madness, based on the etymology of her name. Yet Euripides’ Lyssa is benevolent and is initially resistant to inflict harm. When commanded to madden the hero, in fact, she states that she does not enjoy goading humans to revenge.\footnote{\textit{Herm.} \textit{846-9}; as Staley (2009) observes, this inclination is perverse for a fury.} As Pratt observes in detailing the differences between Seneca’s \textit{Hercules} and Euripides’ \textit{Herakles}, the ‘second prologue’ at the juncture when Euripides’ Iris and Lyssa appear apparently influenced Seneca’s decision to employ Juno in this
inceptive way. By contrast, Seneca’s Juno takes a more active role, calling on the furies to infect her first so that she can unleash the forces of madness against her nemesis.

While Hera is not a principal deity for Greek tragedy, her Roman counterpart Juno is an integral figure in both Latin poetry and politico-religious life. The complexities of Seneca’s Juno within the larger play cannot fully be appreciated without first examining her Augustan literary heritage. It is in the Aeneid that Juno’s furial—and poetological—nature first comes to the forefront. Vergil’s Juno is marked by an inceptive function. Setting the Aeneid in motion, she is the first to speak and frames the epic in terms of her saeva ira toward Aeneas and his fellow Trojans. Similarly, she initiates the second half of the epic; in the second proem, she promises even greater episodes than the epic’s first half—a sentiment that the phrase maius opus movebo encapsulates. When she cannot cancel plots that are at odds with her goals, however, she imposes delays (morae), as when she engineers the storm that will blow the Trojans off course. Juno retards the epic’s forward thrust toward a Rome-looking end while simultaneously spurring on the action. The Augustan Juno’s fluid travel between the various ‘vertical’ realms (underworldly, earthly, and Olympian) will also inform her appearance in Senecan tragedy. In the Aeneid, it is Jupiter who embodies the teleological drive, while Juno attempts to hinder the epic’s progress. But teleology is out of joint with tragedy’s iterative–recursive models of cause

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445 Pratt (1939, p. 15).  
446 Ibid. ‘This discussion of procedure is presented as a development of thought within Juno’s mind.’ This interpretation, of a progression of ideas being narrated simultaneously as they occur to Juno is in keeping with Tietze Larson’s ‘running commentary’ model of such scenes in Senecan tragedy, with the distinction that here the commentary does not accompany action but an interior thought process. This also serves to create a shared intimacy between audience and prologuist. Herington sees passion as ‘violently injected from the outside’, specifically, that its ‘generation [is] in the heart of Juno’, as is indicated by the personified forces which he views as Juno unleashing on Hercules (1966, p. 36). This is all contra Shelton, who largely subsumes the role of Juno under that of Hercules himself.  
447 See Hardie (1986); Putnam (1995); Feeney (1991); Hershkowitz (1998); Padel (1992). The present discussion of Vergilian fury-types is largely indebted to these seminal studies.  
448 As Fitch observes, ‘[Juno’s] first words [...] self-reflectively signal her concern for beginnings, poetic and otherwise, a concern which manifests itself throughout the poem.’ (1987, p. 101). Vergilian commentators also stress (an infernal) Juno’s initiation of a second beginning in Aen. 7. See Hardie’s on Juno’s role in ‘signposting’ (structurally as well as thematically) the two halves (1986, p. 231ff).  
449 Aen. 7.44.  
450 This furo often derives its energy from the forces of the underworld, as in the desire for revenge which is the purview of the furies. Its force is innately destructive (of both others and oneself), yet its effects can also be creative. See Hershkowitz (1998) for an in-depth analysis of epic madness. As Hershkowitz observes with regard to Juno’s summoning of the fury Allecto, ‘[T]he madness she provides makes the second half of the poem possible, fuelling the narrative by its destructive energy’ (p. 54).
and time. The Senecan Juno herself suffers from this incompatibility, as her revenge plot will be thwarted by Hercules’ actions later in the play. In this way, Seneca repurposes the Vergilian Juno’s inceptive and delaying functions as well as her link with the twin destructive and creative energies of a poet.\(^{451}\)

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, conjugal jealousy and hurt pride motivate Juno to exact revenge on various rivals with whom Jupiter has betrayed her, or, alternatively, on his children.\(^{452}\) We see the same revenge-by-proxy scenario that characterizes the Ovidian Juno in the prologue of Seneca’s *Hercules*. In two major episodes in the *Metamorphoses*, Juno takes inflicts harm on a Theban rival: book 3 features her machinations against Semele, while in book 4 she is set against Ino.\(^{453}\) The second instance provides an especially apposite intertext with the Senecan play, since it features Juno descending to the underworld in order to effect her revenge. In Ovid, the example of mad Pentheus furnishes a model for her insane rage, while the furies supply the power that she lacks.\(^{454}\) Juno’s relative lack of agency means that she must be creative in her modes of revenge. Ovid’s Juno, however, inverts the Vergilian model of a potent Juno managing a horde of furial handmaidens: instead, in katabasis she is interrupted and then dismissed by the fury Tisiphone.\(^{455}\) Seneca will continue in the Vergilian–Ovidian vein of oscillating between Juno’s power and her limitations. The additional element of her self-conscious commentary as dramaturge-figure also gestures toward a poet’s inability to see into the future of his or her poetry’s reception.

### Juno: a furial inception

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\(^{451}\) Cf. Feeney’s remark on anger in the *Aeneid* as a ‘causal force’ (1991, p. 129); in addition, he sees Juno’s opening words as a ‘tragic prologue.’ For the *prior vs. recens causa* for Juno’s anger, see *Aen*. 3.258-61.

\(^{452}\) Nagle (1984) provides an extended treatment of the linkage between *amor* and *ira*, and their manifestation in vindictive actions, that characterizes the Juno of the *Metamorphoses*.

\(^{453}\) Ovid’s emphasis on the Theban origin of Juno’s rivals injects an element of tragedy into his *Met.*, a contamination model similar to how furies ‘infect’ the *Aeneid* with tragic madness. In the example of the *Met.*, however, the effects are tempered by the episodic nature of the work (that is, she cannot be seen as underwriting the entire poem) and by the elegiac bent of the contexts.

\(^{454}\) *ipse docet, quid agam (fas est et ab hoste doceri), / quidque furor valeat, Penthea coaeae satiscue / ac super ostendit. cur non stimuletur etaque / per cognata suis exempla furoribus Ino*? (*Met*. 4.428-31) On Juno’s katabasis as an ‘extreme measure’ necessitated by her lack of power, see Nagle (1984, p. 244).

\(^{455}\) Gilder (1997) examines this shift in the power dynamic between the Juno figures of Vergil, Ovid, and Seneca. Seneca will in turn invert Ovid’s model: the actual furies do not have a speaking role, but instead Juno both coopts their aid and turns herself into a fury.
Seneca’s choice to cast Juno as prologist speaks to vatic themes, several of which are intertwined. For one thing, it allows Seneca to demonstrate his ability to synthesize Augustan poetry, especially Vergil, since Juno is such an integral component of (and poetological persona in) the Aeneid. Seneca also employs this prologist to comment on the process of poetic creation—specifically, the extent to which a poet has control over the interpretation of his or her work. Here we find Seneca inserting his own vatic voice in the debate on the uses, and aesthetics, of poetry—a many-voiced debate in which he engages with interlocutors past, present, and future: his contemporary milieu, Stoic forebears, poetic models, and (to the extent he can) his successors. Juno as self-conscious poet shows Seneca engaging with, and extending, Augustan poets’ concern with their status as vates rather than as poetae.\footnote{Newman (1967). See the dissertation Introduction for more on Roman conceptions of the vates-poet.}

The early imperial vates who writes in the ‘high’ genres of epic or tragedy must take into account Vergil, Ovid, and Horace, who themselves (each in their own way, as Newman has shown) redefined what a poet-vates is and does.

Juno’s opening monologue gives the impression that we have direct access to the contents of the creative poet’s mind, as she imagines (and articulates for the audience to ‘overhear’) the events that will unfold in the play. The scripting function displaces a strictly prophetic, or even proleptic, vatic one. As tragic poet, Juno sets events in motion in a way that will (she hopes) bring her revenge plan to fruition. Her first words are a bitter complaint that she is now only Jupiter’s soror, her role of coniunx having been subverted by his countless paelices. Here she gives the proximate motivation for her plot:\footnote{Her first words, in fact, seem to form an unbroken line of thought with her earlier remark in Ovid that her role has been downgraded from soror et coniunx to merely soror (Met. 3.266). Paëlex also signals her Ovidian pedigree; as Fitch observes, the word crops up 44 times in the Met., replacing adultera to refer to both human and divine mistresses (1987, ad loc.).}

\begin{quote}
IU. Soror Tonantis—hoc enim solum mihi nomen relictum est—semper alienum lovem ac templo summi vidua deserui aetheris, locumque caelo pulsa paelicibus dedi; tellus colenda est, paelices caelum tenent.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
JU. Sister of the Thunder-god (since that’s the only title I have left), a virtual widow, I’ve abandoned the Jove who always belongs to another and the regions of the lofty aether; ejected from heaven, I’ve ceded my place to whores. The earth is my new dwelling-spot; whores inhabit the heavens. (Herc. 1-5)
\end{quote}
The evidence of her displacement is inescapable: it is reflected in the constellations, the celestial markers of Jupiter's former lovers and offspring. Juno's sense of resentment gives rise to an eclectic mélange of poetry. Seneca's Juno is a purveyor of poetic knowledge. As she launches into a tour of the night sky in the form of a poetic catalogue, she uses deictic markers to identify Jupiter's katerizaried lovers. The allusive encapsulation she gives of each mythic story recalls its Ovidian prototype. In the prologue's first few words, then, Juno (and, by extension, Seneca) is shown to be a perceptive reader of Ovid and of Vergil. Another catalogue details the boundaries Hercules has already breached—including his irruption into the underworld—introducing the hero by several periphrases before finally naming him. Juno's sense of resentment and anxiety run along two tracks, the personal and the cosmic: she sees Hercules as both impinging on her divinity and as threatening the order of the universe. Since the hero had conquered the underworld with ease, she fears that his superbia will lead him to mount a similar assault on the heavens:

\begin{verbatim}
IU. caelo timendum est ...
... sceptra praeripiet patri
nec in astra lenta veniet ut Bacchus via:
iter ruina quaret et vacuo volet
regnare mundo.
[...]
quaeerit ad superos viam. (Herc. 64ff; 70)
\end{verbatim}

JU. It's heaven that we must fear for ...

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458 In her mention of Thebes as especially to blame for her current resentment, Juno again betrays her Ovidian heritage, since Ovid's Juno was also focused against the Theban rivals. Seneca's Juno declares that Thebes has made her a stepmother 'so many times' (una me dira ac fera / Thebana tellus matribus sparsa impiss / quotiens novercam fecit, Herc. 19-21). This nods to her indebtedness to tragedy as well, since Thebes is the locus classicus of Attic tragic 'otherness,' Zeitlin's hypothesis (1990) that has garnered a great deal of support. The metalarterary marker quotiens also gestures toward past iterations.

459 In the self-command in which she urges herself onward in anger, Juno reveals her, or at least Seneca's, linguistic dexterity and metalarterary knowledge: perge, ira, perge et magna meditantem opprimé (Herc. 75). Ira provides both a latinized version of her Greek name, Hera, and a key attribute of her identity: rage. While Hera was allegorized as Aer, Juno (at least in the wake of Vergil) might plausibly be allegorized as Ira. In a bilingual, chiasric cross-reference to the Aeneid, it also recalls her famous words in the proem: mene incepto desistere. There, the elision provides a Greek calque (menis means 'wrath' in Greek), and, on the intertextual level, gestures toward a model for the Aeneid, as menis is both the subject of the Iliad and its initial word, in the accusative case. 'Ira' stands in a similar relation here, where it activates the Vergilian Juno, famous for her saeva ira.

460 E.g. de me triumphat ... (Herc. 58).

461 In hypocritical fashion, she ignores the fact that one could give the same story about her, since she has also transgressed the boundaries, invading the underworld and using furial energy to infect the mortal realm.
... He'll snatch away his father's scepter, 
and he won't climb to the stars on a slow track, 
like Bacchus: he'll seek a path by upheaval, and 
he'll desire to rule in an empty sky.
[...]
He's seeking the road to the gods!

Realizing that the labores she has devised not only did not hinder Hercules but actually increased his heroic reputation, Juno responds to this model of escalation in a commensurate way, by devising a completely unprecedented task. Like Hercules, she travels to ‘lower’ realms (earth as well as the underworld) because they offer different potential venues for tapping into hidden knowledge. Littlewood sees Juno as unaware of the risks in appealing to the infernal region: in the ‘self-defeating logic of anger’, Juno ‘does not properly comprehend either that she is equally as damaging of Olympian order as Hercules is or that her struggle is a single episode in a larger process...’.

Taking a different tack, I see Juno as significantly more self-conscious about her limited power as a displaced Olympian, and fully aware of the danger to herself when she invokes the furies, but as unaware of her limitations as a vates—specifically, that the plot she devises in the prologue will be overturned due to Hercules’ machinations, and due to the existence of an author whose power supersedes her own.

Juno’s complaints against Hercules reveal that the pair is inextricably linked—as Rosenmeyer succinctly puts it, in this play Juno is Hercules’ ‘clone’. The hero needs Juno’s antagonism to undergo, and succeed in, the labors that will win him fame (in this he represents the etymology of his Greek name: ‘glory of Hera’), while Seneca’s Juno in turn needs Hercules to provide the raison d’être for her continued resentment, and thus her tragedy. As a reader–interpreter of the tradition, especially of Vergil, Ovid, and Euripides, Juno intends to outdo her models by fashioning a new nemesis for the hero: Hercules himself. But Juno can only defeat her opponent by actually taking his side in the struggle. The near-paradox reveals her ingenuity, as she must contend not only with her physical antagonist but also, on the meta-level of poetic creation, with less-tangible poetic rivals.

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462 Littlewood (2004, p. 73).
464 regam furentis arma, pugnanti Herculi / tandem favebo, Herc. 120-1; cf. line 216.
What Juno cannot foresee, she tries to control via language. Like other Senecan characters, she uses poetry as a vehicle to attempt to exercise influence over a still-unwritten future, and over what has already been decided.\textsuperscript{465} The last part of the prologue forms a running commentary accompanying the plot Juno is hatching. In a kind of internal proleptic sketch, she gives a hint of the solution she will employ but does not fully elucidate her methodology until the prologue’s end.\textsuperscript{466} This strategy of deferral hearkens back to her infamous delaying tactics in the \textit{Aeneid}. Midway through her speech, however, Juno interrupts her invocation upon realizing that she herself must first experience \textit{furor} in order for her plan to succeed:

\begin{verbatim}
 IU. ut possit animum captus Alcides agi,
magno furore percitus, vobis prius
insaniendum est.—Juno, cur nondum furis?
me me, sorores, mente deiectam mea
versate primam, facere si quicquam apparo
dignum noverca.
\end{verbatim}

JU. So that Hercules’ mind can be roused, struck utterly mad,
you must first be fury-filled. Juno, why aren’t you already
raging? Infect \textit{me} first, sisters, drive me out of my mind,
if there’s something I can achieve that’s worthy of a stepmother. (\textit{Herc.} 107-112)

Seneca’s deployment of the polygeneric poet-figure Juno, I argue, works on one level to comment on the imperial tragedian’s task: to take account of not only Greek but Roman models, in many genres. Juno’s initial words, which arrive in the form of two successive poetic catalogues, reveal her vatic aspirations. Through his poetological stand-in Juno, Seneca gives an early indication that this tragedy will not be a mere imitation of Euripides but will incorporate a variety of influences, including Augustan poetry. Synthesis of literary models is one part of the vatic equation for Seneca’s Juno; another is the self-conscious process of reflecting on poetic inspiration and artistry. In Seneca, the drive to create tragic poetry, as Schiesaro articulates, can be seen as embodied in the infernal regions and figures that permeate Senecan tragedy. Significantly, and appropriately, given the poet–prophet linkage that is at play in the Latin \textit{vates}, there is a parallel in the two overarching species of divinatory activity, inspired prophecy and technical divination.


\textsuperscript{466} \textit{sed vicit ista. quaevis Alcidae parem? / nemo est nisi ipse; bella iam secum gerat’}, \textit{Herc.} 84-5. Fitch (1986, \textit{ad} 63) observes that her nascent plans do not become fully clear until the prologue’s end.
A third element, which is a salient attribute of a poet but not generally of a prophet, is the poet’s concern with his or her reception. It is this piece that reveals a poet’s limited ability to see into the future.

**Time for Juno**

Time and knowledge both factor into the calculus of vatic activity. As the previous chapter articulated, temporal fragmentation and disjunctures characterize Senecan plays, and the prologue of the Hercules exemplifies these phenomena. Timescales that are nonlinear contribute to prophecy’s failure, since straightforward foreknowledge proves incompatible with alternative models. Seneca’s treatment of time has loomed large in recent scholarship. Shelton and Owen,⁴⁶⁷ for example, draw attention to time in Seneca’s tragedies as nonlinear, marked by iteration, recursion, and other forms of distortion. In addition, Schiesaro adduces Senecan ‘parataxis’—the tendency to represent a given event from multiple perspectives in successive scenes. In Shelton’s book-length account of time in the Hercules, she views time out of joint as both symptom of and adjutant to the psychological experience of furor. Shelton accounts for the frequent switch of verb tenses (in which Juno describes actions such as Hercules’ assault on Olympus as already having been accomplished) by proposing that the prologue should be thought of as occurring simultaneously with the action of the first act.⁴⁶⁸ On her view, the scenes present different aspects of the same event—the generation of Hercules’ madness—which she views as stemming entirely from within his own psyche.⁴⁶⁹ The treatment of events twice, where later acts repeat (but with variations) what the prologue has already presented, is for

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⁴⁶⁸ Anlker (1960), in his earlier study on Senecan prologues, notes the issues of inconsistent verb tense but dismisses the issue as ‘causal anachronism,’ offering the dissatisfying explanation that Juno has confused the actual sequence of events in her mind (see also Shelton on Anlker). On simultaneity and its alternatives in Seneca’s Thyestes, see Volk (2006).
⁴⁶⁹ Contra Herington, who in direct contrast to Shelton, sees Hercules’ madness as deriving completely from without—that is, from Juno: ‘Seneca, therefore, like Euripides, has the passion violently injected from the outside; unlike Euripides, however, he actually shows the generation of that passion, during the prologue, in the heart of Juno’ (1966, p. 36; this corresponds to his vision of the prologue as a ‘cloud of evil’). According to Shelton’s articulation of the central tenet of her argument: ‘I want to show that Seneca’s interest and intention is psychological drama, and that the structural and stylistic techniques he employs are well suited to producing successful psychological drama.’ (1975, p. 14). But relegating the role of Juno to at best a subset of Hercules’ own personality and drives, however, Shelton overlooks crucial ways in which Seneca employs her to engage with literary models as well as, on my view, to comment on poetics and causal dynamics.
Shelton a problem. She is emphatic that the Junonian prologue ‘does not predict future occurrences, but, rather, discusses present events’—a claim she substantiates by noting the prevalence of present tense verbs. According to Shelton, the time at which the prologue occurs is not unambiguously antecedent to that of the first choral ode.

While I agree that the various perspectives given by the prologist and by other characters have important bearing on how to negotiate the play’s treatment of causality and time, I disagree with Shelton’s view of the prologue as occurring simultaneously with the actions that are presented in subsequent acts. Rather, I believe that the poet-vates Juno’s prologue consists of a string of events that she intends to write into the coming revenge tragedy. The planning comes first, and the inconsistencies arise due to the fact that what happens in the tragedy does not follow the plot line she scripts, detail by detail, in the prologue. That some of the prologue’s verbs are in present tense while others are in perfect or future is due precisely to this authorial function, on my view: Juno is planning how the play will proceed, and is articulating this simultaneously as she thinks, to be ‘overheard’ by the external audience. Messengers’ speeches or running commentaries in fact often feature an oscillation between perfect (or imperfect) and present to describe an event that happened in the past but that is being reimagined in the present—the so-called ‘historical’ or ‘vivid’ present. In similar vein, Juno’s prologue looks ahead to what will occur (this accounts for the future tense verbs as well as the jussive subjunctives), but the vividness of what she is imagining causes slippage into the present tense. And since telling a story necessitates sequencing tactics, some verbs are in past tenses. Finally, the complicating factors of metaliterary time are also at play in this temporal equation. The fact that some of these actions have already occurred in previous treatments creates a sense of déjà vu, while the novel elements (that is, Seneca’s innovations) stand in sharp relief against this backdrop of sameness.

As prologist, Juno stands outside the temporal framework of the dramatic action. Her fluid movement along the vertical axis of space has already been discussed, but she

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470 *ibid.*, p. 19.
471 At the beginning of the prologue it is dark, as is clear from the references to the constellations, yet she mentions the coming of daylight at the end of the prologue. Fitch nicely characterizes the incipient dawn as ‘hesitant’ (1986, *ad* 120f).
472 As was discussed above, the prologue indicates that Juno can exercise a good deal of control over time, which makes the events that will come all the more surprising.
also has power over the axis of time. For example, she chooses the day for her tragedy
(inveni diem)\textsuperscript{473} and exhibits apparent knowledge of Juno’s place in the poetic tradition, as
metaliterary markers such as sero and quotiens indicate. During the prologue, the poet
figure Juno can condense and control the timescales of the play she is about to execute. In
leaving the action of the play just before dawn, Juno resembles the ghost prologuists who,
according to dramatic convention, are forced to leave the world of the living at this
appointed hour. Yet in Juno’s case, the time at which she exits is her own choice. Even
here, however, Juno recognizes the dramatic convention of the prologue’s ending with the
transition from night to day. But the register of her words reveals generic confusion—or
multiplicity:

IU. movenda iam sunt bella: clarescit dies
ortuque Titan lucidus croceo subit. (Herc. 123-4)

JU. Now’s the time when wars begin: the sky grows
light, and the sun is coming on bright with saffron-hued rays.

We have already seen intimations of a lyric and elegiac Juno, and one who can deploy
mythological and astronomical poetic catalogues. Here, martial epic is another genre with
which Juno (and, by extension, her author) displays familiarity. Wars that begin at
daybreak, a detail familiar from Homer and Vergil, points to the interpenetration of epic
and tragedy.\textsuperscript{474} But the scope of epic battles has been domesticated by a Juno who desires
personal revenge against a husband who has betrayed her, even as bella are also magnified
to a cosmic scale. What is more, these wars will play out within the individual organism,
twice: first by a goddess who is infected by furial energy, and then by a hero who must
wage war against himself. The impression of wars internalized, a Senecan innovation, is
previewed by the audience’s ‘overhearing’ of Juno’s plans in her own words.

Based on what we see from other prologue-givers, Juno should be giving a
proleptic sketch of what will occur within the drama, along the lines of a prophet-type
guarantor of future events. For Juno scriptrix, however, what she is planning in the
prologue will (or should) come to pass not due to foreknowledge but because she is
setting in place the dramatic machinery that will impel subsequent events. Seneca’s Juno

\textsuperscript{473} Cf. Furia’s inveni dapes / qua eipse fugeres, Thy. 66-7, a link to poetic or rhetorical inventio of subject
matter.

\textsuperscript{474} See Hershkowitz (1998); and on similar generic concerns, cf. Martindale (1993).
can put time in the service of her poetic goals, engineering the end of her prologue to coincide with the impending dawn. One can even imagine Juno scripting her tragedy by night, delaying the start of the day until she deems fit. As the night of Hercules’ actual conception was extended by two or three times its normal span, the night of the ‘conception’ of his tragedy (this time by his noverca rather than by Alcmene) replicates this expansive distortion.475

Seneca’s Juno capitalizes on Hercules’ characteristic competitive drive in order to effect her revenge in the (her) drama that is about to unfold.476 She realizes that the only suitable opponent for Hercules is Hercules himself:

IU. ... quaeris Alcidæ parem?
nemo est nisi ipse; bella iam secum gerat. (Herc. 84-5)

JU. You’re seeking a match for Hercules?
There’s no one but himself; so now let him wage war with himself.

IU. me vicit? et se vincat, et cupiat mori
ab inferis reversus ... (Herc. 116-7).

JU. He’s already defeated me. May he defeat himself, too,
and may he long to die, though he’s come back from the world of the dead.

The labor she engineers is couched in terms of being unprecedented, and not being able to be outdone on either the actual or the metapoetic level. But the events of act 5 do not accord with Juno’s prescribed plot, and prove Juno to be a vatic figure of limited success (both prophetic and poetic). As Juno articulates in the opening speech, Hercules is not content merely to fulfill the tasks she has assigned him. He has accomplished each labor that Juno has set with alacrity, thus magnifying his renown throughout the earth and leading to her having to be increasingly inventive. His ambition gives Juno scope for

475 Juno not only devises the content of what will become the play, but, if one interprets dies as also referring to the unit of the tragic day, she also as a hand in its performance context—another telling clue to her role as dramatist of the play that is to follow.
476 Hercules is apparently unaware of the poetological resonances of labor; Juno, however, is. That Juno recognizes and predicts this quality of Hercules can be seen in parallel with Atreus’ predicting his brother’s reaction in Thyestes and furthermore coheres with what the rhetorical handbooks say about an effective writer/speaker being able to utilize vivid language to foresee, and so control, their receivers’ response (Webb, 1998 and 2009).
creativity, and in turn, the ever-more-difficult tasks provide Hercules with the opportunity to garner even greater renown—a key component of their symbiotic relationship. 477

In contrast to the prevailing views that focus either on her poetological power (Littlewood; Schiesaro) or her superfluity when compared to Hercules (Shelton), I view Juno’s role as poet as indispensable to the play, but as ultimately flawed. Portions of her proleptic prologue do actually come to pass, as when Hercules goes mad and murders his family, but the complete destruction of Hercules that she intends ultimately fails. Despite Juno’s status as both deity and authorial figure, either of which might point to accurate knowledge of the future, her control over the intricacies of the plot’s unfolding once it is out of her hands is nonexistent. I propose that Juno is a limited vates twice over: she can neither foresee how the events will transpire, nor can she fully influence the future trajectory of what she scripts. Once Juno has set the plot in motion, she cedes so that the action of the tragedy can play out, analogously to how the actual tragedian has no control over a play’s interpretation each time it is performed or read. She plans what she intends for Hercules ultimus labor, but Hercules, the next section will argue, ends up undoing Juno’s plot.

**Hercules vivax**

When Juno leaves the dramatic action at the prologue’s end, her influence over the course of events also ends. This allows Hercules to take center stage as the dramatic action unfolds. Most scholars who stress Juno as a poet analogue have tended to assume that her poetic output accords with what she intended, as she imagines and recounts it in monologue form in the prologue. But the picture is more complicated, as I will argue in this section. Despite her authorial and divine status, Juno is neither able to foresee nor to control the direction her poetry will take, and other forces combine to challenge her actual revenge as well as her vision for her tragedy. That Hercules subverts Juno’s prophecy-cum-plot is an often overlooked element, but one that is crucial to understanding this play (and, arguably, Senecan poetics in general). It is my contention

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477 See Juno’s comments in the lines I have cited above: Herc. 33·36; 39·42. Later, Hercules echoes and outdoes this quality of zeal combined with industry when he begs for even more labores instead of well-deserved otium.
that Hercules, once he has returned from the underworld, subverts *fatum*, though he is unaware of the implications of his behavior.

Before we turn to examine how Hercules challenges Juno’s plot (one level of *fatum*), a look at how the overt prophetic element is treated in *Hercules* is in order. In short, it is all but absent. As elsewhere in Senecan tragedy, the traditional routes of prophecy prove insufficient or are elided altogether, to be replaced by other modalities. The attitude toward prophecy is closer to a line Euripides’ Herakles utters: ‘no prophet do I need to tell me this.’ The sentiment is taken to the extreme in Seneca: no actual prophets appear, and the traditional riddling prophecy that Hercules will be killed by one already dead (that is, by the centaur Nessus) is a pointed omission in the Senecan version. Instead, what is stressed is Hercules’ own autonomy against the backdrop of what has been put in place earlier—and, analogously, Seneca’s own innovations as a poet writing in the wake of the already-told versions. His *Hercules* largely follows Euripides’ *Herakles* in plot line. Yet the dramatic action takes on a different cast as it is filtered through other influences: Augustan poetry as well as Seneca’s own life and oeuvre. Where the normal methods of prophecy are absent, other factors supervene and reveal a poetics of multiple motivations. This multi-pronged model (what I call poetic *confatalia*) takes precedence over a single-stream one and highlights the possibilities that inhere even in so-called ‘belated’ poetry.

In Hercules’ attempt to assert his will, he resembles Seneca’s avenger figures Atreus, Medea, and Oedipus (a self-avenger), as well as Juno herself. Hercules is a fitting figure to examine the issues surrounding individuality and human choice in the face of *fatum*. Hercules is not Hercules without opponents: he can only live up to his name and reputation if he is faced with worthy challenges. It is not surprising that the Stoics capitalized on these qualities of Hercules in order to illustrate the human *autarkeia* and *constantia*. As Galinsky observes:

> ‘In the Stoic allegories, Herakles personified this ‘élan vital.’ Unlike the Epicurean, the Stoic creed was not passive. Besides enduring adversity, 
> the ideal Stoic would constantly and actively practise and exercise virtue, 
> and even would look upon adversity as an opportunity for such exercise. Epictetus [...]’

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479 The overt prophetic element does, however, re-emerge in the post-Senecan *Hercules Oetaeus*.
480 Galinsky (1972, p. 147). For ‘The Will’ in Seneca, see Inwood (2005, pp. 132-156). Unfortunately, Inwood only treats Senecan prose, and does not examine the figures of Senecan tragedy vis-à-vis the will.
gives a spirited, popular illustration of Herakles’ exemplary value in that respect (I.6.32-6)....

Seneca’s Hercules demonstrates, time and again, that it is only in facing adversity that one can fully realize one’s selfhood. Hercules believes that he has boundless power and knowledge, and is thus immune to fatum. Like other Senecan (anti)heroes such as Medea and Atreus, he attempts to rival the gods. Act 3 begins with a would-be prayer that is really a boast of his power over all three realms. Hercules’ hubristic claim to knowledge that surpasses even Apollo’s offers veiled commentary on the limits of prophecy—and the possibility of alternative sources of authority:

HE. da, Phoebe, veniam, si quid illicitum tui 
videre vultus; iussus in lucem extuli 
arcana mundi. ...
[...]
... vidi inacessa omnibus, 
ignota Phoebo quaeque deterior polus 
obscura diro spatio concessit lovi; 
et, si placent tertiae sortis loca, 
regnare potui. (Herc. 592-7; 606-10)

HE. Grant pardon, Apollo, if your face has seen anything that’s forbidden to behold; under orders, I’ve dragged up the secrets of the universe into the light. ...
[...]
... I’ve gazed on what’s hidden from all, those murky spaces unknown even to Apollo, which the infernal realm has granted to underworldly Jove; and, if the surroundings of the third lot had satisfied me, I could have ruled there.

Not only has he seen things inaccessible to the Olympian gods, but he has even breached the laws of mortality, as his triumphant return from the underworld proves.

HE. ... noctis aeternae chaos 
et nocte quiddam gravius et tristes deos 
et fata vici; morte contempta redi. 
quid restat aliud? vidi et ostendi inferos. (Herc. 610-13)

HE. ... I’ve conquered the abyss of eternal night, and, 
what’s even more oppressive than night, the grim gods 
and the fates; I’ve spurned death and returned! What else is left? I’ve beheld the infernal ones—and displayed them.

But Hercules is far from omniscient, despite his claims to the contrary. Once back on earth, Hercules is not aware that his katabasis has caused him to wreak havoc on his
community, and to do unintentional harm to his loved ones. In his absence, the tyrant Lycus has usurped rule in Thebes and is now threatening Hercules’ wife Megara with forced marriage.\(^{481}\) The damage the absent Hercules does to his city remotely foreshadows the horror Hercules \\textit{furens} will mete out directly, but still inadvertently, to his family. Similarly, the actual underworld he visited is a precursor to his later hell on earth when he discovers that he has murdered his wife and children; experientially, the latter one is much worse. When Hercules’ mind does ‘foresee’ (\textit{praesagit nefas}, \textit{1148}),\(^{482}\) the evil has already come to pass—and, what is more, has actually been perpetrated by him.

A problematic relationship with prophecy is also apparent in the curses and prayers Hercules utters which will come to take on meaning beyond what he intends. As the introduction discussed, dramatic irony is closely related to prophecy, and verbal irony in particular resembles oracular speech. An example of this type of conjunction occurs in Hercules’ description of the child as being of a ‘wicked’ father (\textit{hic video abditura / natum scelesti patris, Herc. 1002}). While Hercules intends for the phrase to refer to the tyrant Lycus, his subsequent realization and assumption of guilt reveal that his words were unintentionally prophetic—or, to put it another way, ironic. After his sanity returns comes a triply ironic self-address: he demands to know the identity of the ‘author’ of the horrific crime, declares that whoever does not point out the enemy to him is his own enemy, and wants to know why Hercules’ ‘conqueror’ remains hidden.

\begin{quote}
HE. saeae clasis auctorem indica.
ruat ira in omnes: hostis est quisquis mihi
non monstrat hostem. victor Alcidae, lates? (\textit{Herc. 1168-9})
\end{quote}

HE. Reveal the author of this cruel calamity.
Anger must flood down on all: whoever does not show the enemy
to me is my enemy. Conqueror of Hercules, are you hiding?

On the level of the dramatic action, he himself is the crime’s \textit{auctor}, a fact that he does not yet know. Like Oedipus, he conceives of the perpetrator as an individual separate from himself. On the metapoetic level, possibilities for referent of \textit{auctor} include the various poets who have treated this legend—Seneca as well as his predecessors. Hercules, unlike

\(^{481}\) Upon recovering from his madness, Hercules’ string of disoriented questions resembles those uttered by Seneca’s Cassandra once she has shaken off Apollo’s possession.

\(^{482}\) The same verb, \textit{praesagit}, is used in \textit{Hercules Oetaeus}, where this time Deianira uses it to refer to events that are actually able to be foretold (\textit{HO}, 745).
the play’s audience, is not aware of these meta-level shades of meaning; in this way he
transmits coded information unknowingly. That the auctor can be the internal author-
figure Juno is further pointed up by the qualifier saevae—one of her chief Vergilian
epithets. In turn, Hercules’ (unknowing, and so ironic) equation of the enemy with
himself appears to validate Juno’s proleptic articulation of the plot she details in the
prologue. To give another example of the slippage between what Hercules’ unwitting
utterances that the play’s audiences know to be true, his prayer at 926ff. is a variation on
his earlier one to Jupiter and Apollo, which was more self-aggrandizement than prayer.
What is more, this second prayer will be literally answered—an element Hercules did not
foresee but that comes to pass as Juno plotted. A similar example of this slippage occurs
when, immediately after his return to earth and upon being told about the sorry state of
affairs in the wake of his absence, Hercules is bitter that his ‘final foe’ (summus hostis)
must be Lycus. Such a pitiful nemesis is not worthy of Hercules’ strength. As the
audience knows, and as Juno has already decreed (in fact, his words echo hers from the
prologue), the ‘foe’ she intends will be neither Lycus nor Juno but Hercules himself. To
what extent her plan has been fulfilled by the end of the play is a complex matter, as the
following sections discuss.

In the force of his will and his arrogation of knowledge, Hercules has a great deal
in common with Oedipus, Medea, and Atreus—and Juno. But in contrast to the avenger
vates, Hercules most often uses his strength for good, as when he rids the earth of harmful
monstra, thus spreading peace in Arcadia, Thebes, and beyond. However, in his attempt to
exert his influence in all three spheres (human, superal, infernal), he treads a dangerous
hubristic path that threatens both himself and others. This creates the unfortunate
situation of actually doing harm when his expressed goal is to help humanity. Hercules

483 Other possible auctor candidates are Hercules, Seneca, and previous poets who treated this myth.
484 Here, the genitive adjective saevae properly refers to the feminine noun cladis, but it can be seen as a
transferred epithet gesturing toward Juno.
485 Herc. 635. Cf. his later (unknowing) double entendre when he wants to see his conqueror (Herc. 1155-
6).
486 Seneca tragicus constantly stresses the disparity between those who understand second-order speech
versus those who do not. In most cases, this in cast in an overt agonistic context, as with Cassandra vs.
Agamemnon (and vs. Clytemnestra); Atreus vs. Thyestes; Medea vs. Jason (and vs. Creon). Hercules does
not possess such linguistic facility, while Juno does. Interestingly, however, he does not meet his supposed
opponent within the course of the play; thus, there is no Juno vs. Hercules agon, as there is with other
deployers and victims of revenge. This points to the interchangeability of Juno and Hercules and
underscores the fact that he is to be his own summus hostis.
claims to have eradicated all fear for humans in his katabasis—and indeed, the chorus in ode 3 echoes this sentiment. Not only does Hercules pray for an end to the above-mentioned plagues (physical and mental), he even wants to cancel out the force of death itself for himself and for all mortals. That this goal threatens the very nature of the universe, Hercules does not seem to know. Moreover, he does not realize that a Hercules who has eradicated all threats to humans would cancel out the need for a Hercules (or any heroes) whatsoever. To some extent, his pacificatory goals appear successful. But fear of death and underworldly terrors do in fact remain for humans. The only individual whose fear Hercules can actually control is his own, as the final act will make clear. Even though Hercules is ignorant of Juno’s plan to have him destroy himself, he (along with some help from other characters) interrupts it, changing the course of events and giving the play a new direction from what Juno scripts, though one that is in keeping with the Euripidean version (and, presumably, with Seneca’s own plan). His inadvertent unseating of Juno’s plot is in keeping with his characterization elsewhere as challenging authority figures, gods, and fate.

Hercules also participates in another type of vatic activity, this time in a set of imagined scenarios that substitute for actual foreknowledge. After recovering from his madness, he realizes in horror that he has murdered his wife and children and resolves to end his life. He imagines all sorts of ways in which he might die: the Caspian cliffs and the ales avida of Prometheus could rend his body; bound to the Symplegades, he could be crushed by the rocks; or—what he settles on—he could heap up a pyre and self-immolate. Here, in the monologue that offers access to the contents of Hercules’ mind, resides a counterpart to Juno’s opening speech. The scene also dramatizes the praemeditatio futurorum malorum, the Stoic mental exercise in which one steels oneself against the worst possible horrors that could befall humans by conjuring them up in the

487 Fitch (1986, p. 40) notes the shortsightedness of Hercules’ plan: ‘In his obsession with peace and order he prays for an end to natural threats, to storms, floods, poisonous plants (Herc. 931-6)—a noble vision, perhaps, but one that fails to understand the nature of the world.

488 Hercules will respond to the choral sentiments in his desire for self-punishment in act 5, where he desires to be buried beneath the underworld since he is known even here; his earlier boast morte contempta redi also appears to be at play. The existence of a sub-underworld, even an imagined existence as suggested by the choral ode, is proof that such fears will in fact always remain for mortals.

489 Herc. 1202-1218. ... quin structum acervans nemore congesto aggerem / crure corpus impio sparsum cremo? The punishment he decides on, burning himself on a pyre, also gives a coming attraction of an early reception of Hercules, the Hercules Oetaeus, where it forms the climax of that play. In the HO, however, this is not a form of imagined suffering; rather, it is the hero’s pathway to apotheosis.
mind. In urging individuals to preempt the future as they imagine it ahead of time, this fatalistic exercise offers an alternative to foreknowledge.\textsuperscript{490} If one practices the exercise, one has already grasped in one’s mind the worst things that could befall a human, and so one will be armed against them when and if they do arise. One does not have to be a prophet to engage in this activity; it is available to all, and a wise individual will make use of it in conceptualizing (and so, counteracting a negative response to in advance) all possible forms of torture, hardship, and death. This activity also has links with rhetorical and poetic \textit{inventio}: the effective poet or orator will be able to think up an array of such examples and will be able to deploy them in elaborate detail.\textsuperscript{491}

After his foray into various forms of imagined self-destruction, Hercules decides to live on after all. In doing so, he thwarts the plot which Juno had articulated in the prologue, showing how human action can disrupt \textit{fatum}, or the authorial–divine plan. The chief differences between Seneca’s play and the Euripidean \textit{Herakles}, along with the continuities that take on new interpretive force when seen through the lens of Seneca’s own biography and oeuvre, loom large in the final act. In the Euripidean version, it is Theseus alone who persuades his friend not to commit suicide. Seneca, however, reserves Amphitryo (who is Euripides’ prologuist) for the dénouement, where he can act as the voice of apparent (and parental) reason who dissuades Hercules from his intended suicide. The three-way passion-restraint scene after his realization that he has murdered his children and wife is an innovation that allows Seneca to treat the scene in a way that parallels an episode from his own early life.\textsuperscript{492} The autobiographical vignette is recounted in \textit{Ep. 78}: in his younger days, Seneca writes, he desired to commit suicide due to poor health but was dissuaded out of filial duty.\textsuperscript{493}

\begin{quote}
Saepe impetum cepit abrumpendae vitae: patris me indulgentissimi senectus retinuit. Cogitavi enim non quam fortiter ego mori possem,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{490} See Armisen-Marchetti (1986) on the \textit{praemeditatio} of Seneca. Hadot (1981) uses ‘exercise spirituel’ as an overarching rubric for individual exercises practiced for psychic health and moral improvement in antiquity. Some examples of the \textit{praemeditatio} in Seneca’s prose works include \textit{Ep. 70.18}; \textit{Marc. 9.1-5}; \textit{NQ 6.32.12}; \textit{Ep. 30.18}; 70.18; 114.27.
\textsuperscript{491} See Nussbaum (1993) on the corresponding role of the receiver of literature/art in Stoic cognitive-affective theory.
\textsuperscript{492} Seneca’s Amphitryo echoes many of the Euripidean Theseus’ sentiments in the passion–restraint scene. The Senecan interpretation of the scene will be discussed below.
\textsuperscript{493} My reading of this scene of the \textit{Hercules} in light of \textit{Ep. 78} (and \textit{Ep. 77}) is greatly indebted to the studies of Wilson (2004) and Ker (2009).
sed quam ille fortiter desiderare non posset. Itaque imperavi mihi, ut viverem; aliquando enim et vivere fortiter facere est. (Ep. 78.2)

Often, I contemplated the impulse of ending life: the old age of my very kind father held me back. For I considered not with what fortitude I could die, but with what little fortitude he would be able to bear my absence. Therefore, I commanded myself to live. For sometimes even to live is to act bravely.

Both Wilson and Ker draw attention to the marked similarities between the content of Ep. 78 and the scene from the Hercules. Ker notes that the initial decision of both Hercules and the young Seneca, a gesture of radical autonomy, accords with Stoicism’s condoning of suicide under certain conditions. And in her study of ‘tragic overliving,’ Wilson links a character’s decision to live on after contemplating suicide to a related literary phenomenon: an author’s anxiety about the lifespan of his or her work within the larger tradition. The main characters of Hercules experience ‘afterlives’ in the Senecan version, albeit in different ways and with differing degrees of apparent knowledge. For Juno, this consists in her new role as prologuist, and as vatic figure whose plot is undermined by the characters in her own play despite her divine and authorial status. Seneca’s Juno, as we have seen, displays significant awareness of her powers as well as her limitations. Verbal cues hint at Juno’s cognizance of having overlived in a metaliterary sense, as does the accreted layering of genres her prologue presents—genres which must be taken into consideration by this latest Juno.

And Seneca gives his Hercules a new, post-Euripidean afterlife by utilizing the hero to illustrate themes that also recur in Seneca’s prose works, such as the human will, forbidden knowledge, and the appropriate conditions under which to commit suicide. As I have suggested, Hercules (along with Juno) also participates in the debates concerning poetry’s creation and interpretation, specifically, the relative degrees of power an author has versus receivers. It is not because but despite Hercules’ strong will and autonomy that he proves a vatic usurper (an unwitting one). When Hercules does subvert Juno’s plot, and when he ‘guesses right’ and predicts the future or undoes what appeared to be a fixed plot, it is due not to awareness that he is participating in any larger story but to forces beyond his comprehension.

494 Or at least, that Seneca is appealing to the literary sensibilities of his audience, who have encountered other Junos. As often in Latin poetry, metaliterary markers include adjectives and adverbs that refer to frequency and lateness.
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the two main characters of Seneca’s Hercules dramatize how poetry can offer an alternative to strictly forward-looking foreknowledge, but how even an author’s control (or a god’s) can be limited. Seneca’s Juno, a relatively disempowered deity, acts as vates who replaces the proleptic functions of the prologue with ones of a creative poet, while Hercules (and others) in turn challenge Juno’s revenge plot inadvertently. By the end of the play, Hercules has appeared to trump fatum, or what has been prescribed by Juno as both divinity and the inset author-figure Juno. From this perspective, Hercules vivax challenges the apparent fixity of the storyline as he is used to interpret his past (literary) lives, and the life of his own author Seneca, through his words and actions. As a representative of the force of the individual within a larger tradition, he proves both usurper and co-creator of the play, albeit an unwitting one. Juno, on the other hand, yields full control when she leaves the execution and interpretation of what she has scripted ‘up to’ the actors and audiences, who share in the ongoing activation of meaning. Both characters, however, are subject to a superordinate entity whose presence they cannot know—that is, Seneca. Seneca’s deployment of Juno as a figure who neither knows nor can control future events allows him to offer an analogue for the creative dramatist who also cannot foresee how the play will be interpreted by performers and audiences. Concomitantly, his use of a deity suggests a model of cosmology (and of ongoing divine-human relations) in which a god sets the universe in motion and then retires to let chains of events play out on the level of human action. I see one of the interpretive possibilities of Seneca’s Hercules as commenting on the relationship between various causal forces human, divine, and the third category of fate. That a divinity is (or can be) a separate entity from fate is underscored by Juno’s limitations in this play. Juno is constrained by various forms of fatum—that of the forces of the literary tradition and of her own author, Seneca, as well as, on an internal level, by the actions of Hercules and other characters who disrupt her plot. In this model of competing causal forces, even a goddess is not above fatum.

Both Hercules and Juno illustrate in various ways the elements of free authorial choice, on the one hand, but also an uncertain reception. This is in keeping with the
framework of ‘poetic confatalia’ I articulated in the Introduction to the dissertation, which took account of the multi-stranded causal nexus that subtends any given work. As was discussed above, Hercules’ actions upheave Juno’s plot that he will destroy himself. While Hercules does not experience full victory within this tragedy, the possibility remains that he will do so in the next chapter, as it were, since in the final lines Theseus—a kind of deus ex machina—promises Hercules asylum in Athens. The apotheosis of Hercules did, of course, feature in pre-Senecan treatments of the myth and will again come to pass in the Hercules Oetaeus, an early reception of Seneca’s Hercules that is transmitted in both main MS branches of the Senecan dramatic corpus, E and A, and that was for centuries (and occasionally still is) thought to have been penned by Seneca.

Juno knowingly cooperates with her nemesis in order to set her plot in motion, but unforeseeable elements throw a wrench into an apparently pre-scripted plot. This cooperative model set within an agonistic one draws attention to the layered forces that drive the play. Because the plotline deviates from the play Juno sketched out in the prologue, it would appear that Juno is unsuccessful as a vates figure (poetic and prophetic), and that Hercules has effectively trumped fatum. But there is a further paradox in that Juno only thrives (at least, in her role as the noverca who sets up ever-increasing tasks for her stepson-nemesis) insofar as Hercules continues to endure as a hero. The pair is symbiotically linked via their goals, which, despite being at odds, combine to form this iteration of poetry. Juno is the only deity to appear among the dramatis personae of Senecan tragedy. In the Hercules, as in Seneca’s other tragedies, both the limitations of Juno and the conspicuous absence of Jupiter put one in mind of the more overwhelming silence surrounding the gods in Senecan tragedy. This in turn gestures toward the possible futility of these superal gods (for example, Apollo and Jupiter) and their subsumption by other forces. On this view, it is not surprising that traditional prophetic activities fail to elucidate key information. Finally, new interpretive possibilities, even necessities, are engendered by the scene in which Hercules reverses his earlier decision to commit suicide. As we can see from this scene, which is in dialogue with Ep. 78, through tragedy Seneca can encode an autobiographical detail from his own

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495 Herc. 1341-44.
youth, thereby showing the applicability of mythic exempla to real-life situations, and
the ability of human experience to be fed back into poetry.
Chapter 5

Oedipus: the vates, the Self, and the Limits of interpretatio

The first four chapters have argued that the vates is central to Senecan tragedy and that this figure operates in complex ways. Normal prophets fail to deliver accurate prophecies but often prove better poets, while alternative vatic figures come to take on (either deliberately or incidentally) the prophetic role. Seneca’s two plays dealing with the Oedipus myth (the Oedipus and the Phoenissae; collectively, the ‘Theban plays’) contain traditional forms of vatic activity such as extispicy and ornithomancy and alternative ones like necromancy. The various ways in which prophecy is fails, is replaced, or otherwise proves an unsatisfactory mode of transmitting knowledge in Senecan tragedy, along with the more successful poetic activities, are at play in Seneca’s Oedipus and the Phoenissae.

This chapter elucidates how these vatic strands can be seen to coalesce in the figure of Oedipus, who plays a vatic ‘super-role’ in Seneca’s two Theban plays. As we saw in chapters 1 and 2, the element of prophecy is intimately associated with the Oedipus legend, and is pointed up by the various viae in which prophets and prophet-analogues engage. Concomitantly, the failures of these divinatory means, and the shortcomings of the prophets, point to larger issues of limited human understanding of abstruse meaning.

With respect to vatic activity, Seneca’s Oedipus features a set of dynamics similar to the organizational principles of this dissertation: first, the per se or normative prophetic channels are insufficient for bringing to light the identity of Laius’ murderer until the ghost of Laius himself is compelled to utter the sought-after information. The infernal vates is more successful than the superal one, but still has limitations. The human vatic usurper, Oedipus, also aspires to a vatic role (or, more precisely, a set of vatic ‘super-roles’). His inhabiting of multiple interpretive roles proves problematic for accessing the knowledge he seeks, since he does not have the requisite distance from to allow for reflective engagement. Hermeneutic operations are emblematized by the figure of Oedipus, who classically has a complex relationship with oracles, prophecy, and understanding. Oedipus’ close link with the oracular (actual oracles and oracular speech) is, of course, older than Seneca: in the mythic tradition he trumps the Sphinx by solving
her riddle that no one else had been able to solve, but he is not able to grasp the meaning of the Delphic oracle. He is able neither to comprehend that he cannot avoid the fate it has foretold for Oedipus, since it has already happened, nor, more generally, can he arrive at understanding of his own complicated identity. The Senecan Oedipus both echoes and extends the Sophoclean presentation in ways that point up the complex interrelationship between poetry and prophecy, and specifically, that gesture to humans’ place as limited interpreters in both of these arenas.

The first part of this chapter analyzes the figure of Oedipus as an oracular substitute, specifically, as one who tries but fails to be interpres fato sui. The second part of the chapter examines one more variation on the theme of prophetic problems. In Seneca’s Theban plays, it is not that oracles and prophecy go unfulfilled but that they are overfulfilled; that is, they prove ‘true’ in ways that outdo what was originally foretold. Oracular overfulfillment also creates dramatic irony: what is hidden from those enmeshed in the dramatic action is patently clear to the external audience. The marked contrast between what ‘should’ be known based on seemingly obvious clues and what characters fail to see highlights a human propensity to believe what is preferable, and to ignore or misinterpret signs that point to unwelcome information. This is one of the reasons that even when an oracle utters a message in plain speech, it can fail to be comprehended correctly. The notion of critical distance in theater offers a fitting model for conceptualizing Oedipus’ relationship to knowledge, as the chapter will elucidate.

Within the poetry–prophecy connection, I connect oracular overfulfillment with the analogous phenomena of aemulatio and a poet’s self-consciousness. The second part of this chapter also argues that Seneca’s Oedipus plays dramatize the confatalia model of multiple, mutually reinforcing causes. This schema operates on the level of dramatic action as well as, in parallel ways, on the meta-levels of poetic creation and reception, in what I label ‘poetic confatalia.’ I suggest that in the interrelationships between Seneca’s Oedipus and his literary models, and between Seneca’s Theban plays, we can see characters and scenes that dramatize the activities that surround poetry: creation, reception, and (crucially) interpretation.

496 Phoe. 139; I will refer to this quote in the third person, interpres fato sui, for ease of sense. The theme of being an ‘interpreter of the self’ is a recurring thread throughout Seneca’s Oedipus and Phoenissae. Oedipus’ self-professed inability to be interpres fato sui points to human limitations in this endeavor more generally.
A maius monstrum

As chapter 1 analyzed, traditional prophecy is flawed in Senecan tragedy. Tiresias is a self-proclaimed failed prophet: too old to receive divine inspiration into his chest, it is not despite but because or although he lacks physical sight that this Tiresias’ second sight proves faulty. Tiresias must rely on his daughter Manto to be his interpreting eyes in the extended extispicy scene; however, her mantic powers also prove imperfect. Where one channel fails to elicit the identity of Laius’ murderer, other methods are tried, as is encapsulated in Tiresias’ declaration alia temptanda est via, just before the reverse katabasis. The divinatory viae form a progression of ever-more-invasive, but also increasingly specific (and Senecan) means of prophetic and poetic inventiveness: from the vague symbols revealed by the flights of birds, to the ‘slippery’ allegoresis of the scene of extispicy, to the final human (and infernal) interview with the ghost of Laius, who reveals his killer’s name directly. One of the chief ways in which prophecy is shown to be flawed in Seneca’s Oedipus and Phoenissae is by too many available meanings. Indeed, multiplicity is the norm in these two plays as well as throughout Seneca’s larger tragic corpus. That multiplicity serves to problematize prophecy makes sense, since the goal of a prophetic inquiry is to isolate the single right meaning (that is, what will happen) out of an array of potential outcomes.

Several strands of overt vatic characteristics coalesce in the figure of Seneca’s Oedipus, who, like his Juno and Cassandra, can be seen as a vatic ‘super-figure’ in that he plays a number of interpretive roles, and levels, simultaneously. Oedipus classically has special skill in decoding second-order language, as is evinced by his having solved the apparently insoluble riddle of the Sphinx. Seneca’s Oedipus self-consciously wants to become an oracular figure himself. As this and subsequent sections will posit, this actually limits, rather than enhances, his hermeneutic abilities. In many respects, Oedipus is especially well-suited to comment on issues relating to an individual’s capacity for self-knowledge and autonomy—issues that recur throughout the prose and poetic corpus of Seneca.497 But for all Oedipus’ facility with forms of extrinsic interpretation, he is far less

497 See the recent work on Seneca and the self by, inter alios, Bartsch and Wray (eds., 2009) and Inwood (2005), as well as several of the contributions to Volk and Williams (eds., 2006). The chapter’s title alludes to the volume edited by Bartsch and Wray (2009), entitled Seneca and the Self.
adept at self-knowledge. On one hand, he misinterprets the Delphic oracle’s words relating to the events of his own life—that he is fated to kill his father and marry his mother—but he fails to live by the famous inscription above the entrance at Delphi: *gnōthi seautōn*. Oedipus proves a limited *interpres fatty sui*, as he himself comes to realize late in the play.

**Naming names**

The oracle of Delphi is a crucial component of the Oedipus legend, so it is not surprising that we should find many references to it in Seneca’s Theban plays. Even apart from the oracle itself, however, oracular language is manifested in a variety of ways. As with oracular utterance, the gap between a descriptive phrase and its referent means that the oracle can be taken in more than one way. The varieties of second-order language such as double entendres, puns, and so on in Seneca’s Oedipus plays are too numerous to fully detail here, but a few targeted examples will draw attention to how language is destabilized when plurality takes over. Naming, family terms, and forms of address can operate in oracular ways, even when the surface meaning seems unambiguous—especially in Oedipus’ family, where kinship terms are always already multivalent due to the involution of the Labdacid house. In Oedipus’ overcrowded family tree, a relational term applies to more than one person, and an individual occupies more than one semantic position, or categorical level, simultaneously—for example, Antigone is both Oedipus’ daughter and (half)-sister. In these two plays, Seneca’s use of such language is pointed: the default is for proper names to be elided in favor of kinship terms. The trend is also reflective of oracular speech, where the specific term is often subsumed by a general one, which allows for more than one referent. Seneca’s Jocasta and Oedipus in fact *never* call each other by name in their many lines of dialogue.498 Instead, they alternate between non-incestuous mother–son terms and incestuous conjugal terms. To cite but one example of this, when Jocasta is preparing to kill herself, she wonders,

\[\text{IO.} \quad \ldots \text{hoc iacet ferro meus} \\
\text{coniunct—quid illum nomine haud vero} \\
vocas?\]

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socr est. ...

[...] ... hunc, dextra, hunc pete
uterum capacem, qui virum et natos tulit. (Oed. 1034-36; 1038-9)

JO. By this sword my husband lies dead.
—Husband? Why am I calling him by this untruthful name?
He is father-in-law....

[...] ... Strike this capacious womb, right
hand, which contained both husband and children.

By contrast, the regular by-name address of other characters—Creon, for example—throws the involution of Oedipus’ family into even sharper relief. In the Phoenissae, even more strikingly, Seneca one-ups his own pattern: here, no character addresses any character by proper name. The effect is of a swirling mass of familial terms and identities that are too close for comfort. Despite the complexities that characterize most family dynamics, a normal family tree should not be an insoluble puzzle. But members of this family each occupy too many branches. The naming patterns, especially the elision of proper names, are extreme, but they are not mere rhetorical flourishes; instead, they participate in the thick atmosphere of oracular confusion that stems from too many available meanings.

Naming continues to be problematic vis-à-vis Oedipus himself. Referent, number, and timeframe are integral components of how oracular speech operates, as each can generate ambiguity. Oedipus is a ready-made repository for this type of uncertainty; in fact, the potential for ambiguity is multiplied with an Oedipus who is inheritor of so many prototypes in the mytho-literary tradition. Who exactly Oedipus is, how many Oedipuses there are, and the change of Oedipus(es) over time are all questions staged by Seneca’s Oedipus and Phoenissae. The patterns of multiplicity with respect to self-naming also comment on the problems that surround the many identities of Oedipus: child of Laius; parricide and begetter of children by incestuous relations; Sphinx deposer, riddle solver, and vatic usurper—and point to Oedipus’ status as a malleable metaliterary figure. Each of the Theban plays features a trifold progression of self-naming that culminates in an episode of self-inflicted violence on which Oedipus provides commentary. This progression, I argue, echoes the crescendo of divinatory attempts to reveal Laius’
murderer. The divinatory chain also culminates in a scene of violence, a necromancy in which Laius himself is brought to the upper world, forcibly, and is compelled to speak.

As a subset of how names operate in the Theban plays, the pattern of self-naming by Oedipus underscores his problematic relationships: to his family, to himself, and to oracles. Both the Oedipus and the Phoenissae feature a similar trifold pattern of self-referentiality. Each instance brings out some inherent tensions in his fraught identity, as character type and as inheritor of previous Oedipus-figures familiar from myth and literature. When Oedipus alternates between second-person address to himself and referring to Oedipus/himself in the third person, the dualism suggests fragmentation. How many Oedipuses are there, and how ‘whole’ is Seneca’s Oedipus? The first time Oedipus refers to himself, he signals his special relationship to knowing when he interrupts Creon mid-line to say: Fare, sit dubium licet: / ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur. Appearing to be aware that his name is derived from the Greek ὁδός, the verb ‘to know’, Oedipus makes a neat pun by juxtaposing his name with noscere, the Latin for ‘to know.’ Like oracles and the Sphinx, Seneca’s Oedipus clearly enjoys wordplay. Another instance of self-naming occurs in the extended self-address when he is preparing to gouge out his eyes, where he stresses the magnitude of his deed and its effect on nature as a whole: solvendo non es: illa quae leges ratas / Natura in uno vertit Oedipoda. There is a tension between this particular Oedipus and pre-Senecan ones, where this one is so great that Nature itself hinges on him; alternatively, this Oedipus could be said to be aware of the Stoic notion of sympatheia. Self-naming culminates in a third example, after his self-blinding, when he declares that such a vultus befits ‘Oedipus’: lux te refugit. vultus Oedipodam hic decet. The utterance also activates a metalliterary reading: the verb dect often signals what is fitting or expected for a character to do based on his or her previous appearances in literature. What is more, vultus activates the dramatic realm; denoting

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499 On naming and Seneca’s Oedipus, see Petrone (1988), Segal (1982b); on the self-blinding scene in relation to Oedipus’ name, see Busch (2007).
500 Oed. 215-16.
501 Oedipus does not explicitly allude to the other derivation of his name, from the Greek [oid-] root meaning ‘swollen,’ but later in the play the messenger does offer the competing etymology. As Segal (1983b) observes, the link between Oedipus’ name and knowledge is at play even before Sophocles, stretching back at least to Pindar.
502 Oed. 942-943.
503 Oed. 1003.
‘mask’ as well as ‘face,’ it reminds that Oedipus is both a character in the *hic et nunc* of this particular drama and a well-known figure from myth and literature.

The *Phoenissae* features a similar trifold pattern of self-naming, but the second play is more explicit that Oedipus is a character who ‘overlives’ in a metaliterary sense (and even with respect to his biological life, according to his admission). Even more strikingly, when Antigone has persuaded him not to kill himself, the emphatically placed deictic *hic* gestures at one individual within an array of previous Oedipus figures: *hic Oedipus Aegaeae transnatabit freta / iubente te ... iubente te vel vivet.* The three instances each of self-naming in the *Oedipus* and the *Phoenissae* gesture toward the multiple Oedipus figures past and present, of which the Senecan Oedipus seems (on some level) to be aware. At the same time, the third-person referentiality offers a false sense of critical distance that is not borne out by his actual epistemic position in either of the Senecan plays. Naming patterns form but one key mechanism by which plurality of meaning is shown to destabilize language.

Oedipus’ relationship to language, especially second-order language of the type that oracles and poets employ, renders him a vatic analogue. In addition, he is a literal usurper. The proximate cause of his rise to power at Thebes as an outsider is actually his hermeneutic ability. Having rid the Thebans of the Sphinx by solving her seemingly insoluble puzzle, and following Laius’ death, Oedipus has been granted what will become a dubious honor: kingship at Thebes. Like others of Seneca’s vatic-usurper figures, Oedipus equates mastery of language and meaning with power over himself and over others. He asserts his individualistic strength of will via intellectual and hermeneutic activities. Unlike Seneca’s other avenger-*vates* such as Medea, Atreus, and Juno, however, Oedipus does not attempt to harness these powers for revenge. Rather, his is a desire to rule benevolently, and to end the monstrous plague (*lues*) that has settled over Thebes, for which he feels a sense of responsibility. Oedipus’ singular interpretive skill is validated by those around him—after all, the Thebans saw fit to make him king due to his success at solving a puzzle—and he boasts of it himself.

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504 The three relevant instances of self-naming or self-address in the *Phoenissae* are: *Phoe.* 89-90; *Phoe.* 178-181; *Phoe.* 313-19.
505 *Phoe.* 313-14; 319.
506 *Oed.* 216.
CR. Ambage flexa Delphico mos est deo
arca tegere. OE. Fare, sit dubium licet:
ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur. (Oed. 214-216)

CR. It is the custom of the Delphic god to cover
hidden things in twisted enigmas. OE. Speak out,
however doubtful it may be: to know ambiguous
matters is given to Oedipus alone.

The irony with respect to this self-reference, of course, is that etymology does not equal
destiny, and ‘knowing’ does not necessarily translate to self-knowledge. The very pieces
that are the most essential to Oedipus’ identity (i.e. who he is and what he has done) are
obscured from his understanding.

Oedipus also acts as vatic analogue when he utters statements that will prove true
in ways he did not intend.507 Incidental prophecy often dovetails with irony, as the full
import of a character’s speech is not understood by him or her until later, but are apparent
to those who possess a more panoptic perspective—i.e., external audiences, authors,
deities. Oedipus’ vague presentiments of guilt in his prologue fit into this schema, as does
his more explicitly future-directed exhortation to continue to do violence against himself
in the Phoenissae by digging into his brains (audies verum, Oedipu ... nunc manum cerebro
indue).508 He will in fact hear the truth, though he does not at first believe it, and this
disbelief initiates a new chain of agonistic interplay between him and Creon. Another ‘too-
true’ utterance is cast in the form of a paradox, as in the following: in the context of the
paradoxical nature of his family, ‘the only safety for Oedipus is not to be safe’ unica
Oedipodae est salus / non esse salvum.509 Oedipus is both a master of paradox and, due to
his incestuous relationship, a living paradox.

As the previous sections have discussed, Seneca’s Oedipus occupies several
interpretive roles simultaneously, even as he plays too many contradictory roles in his
unnatural family. The Sphinx’s riddle gestures toward hermeneutic entanglement, since
the answer to its riddle—a human—is also every attempted solver of the riddle, all of
whom fail until Oedipus. In Roman divination, a monstrum is a sign that offers hidden

507 Cf. Andromache the ‘incidental prophet’, whom I analyzed in Chapter 3.
508 Phoe. 178-181. I quote the passage in full in the discussion below in my reading of the Theban plays and
poetic confitaitia.
509 Phoe. 89-90.
advice by showing (monstrare).\textsuperscript{510} The word generally refers to a portent which ‘shows’ or ‘warns’ due to its anomalous, or spectacular, quality; in other words, it stands out against the backdrop of what is ordinary in nature. The Sphinx herself, since she is made up of lion, woman, and bird elements, is a classic example of a monstrum. Monstra are not necessarily destructive in nature, but this one is: perched atop Mt. Cithaeron, she destroys anyone who fails to solve her oracular riddle. Oedipus himself, I claim, is also a hybridic monstrum who strives to usurp the Sphinx’s role and identity. Even before his dealings with the Sphinx, Oedipus is already a monstrum by virtue of his freakish pedigree, and due to the incestuous familial relations that have produced further ‘monstrous’ figures in the form of children. His body also serves as a monstrum that announces his identity: the scars from his ankle-piercings provide physical confirmation of the prophecy that Laius received before Oedipus’ birth. But while there was a prophecy that he would kill his father, he does so accidentally, not knowing that the man he killed in a fit of rage was his true father. With regard to the Sphinx, it was not explicitly foretold via prophecy that Oedipus would destroy her. Yet not only does he solve her riddle, he desires usurp her place.

Seneca makes the parallels between the two hybrid figures explicit: now that the Sphinx is gone, Oedipus announces, he will go on to take her place on Cithaeron as a maius monstrum:

\begin{flushleft}
OE. ... dira ne sedes vacet,
monstrum repone maius. hoc saxum insidens
obscura nostrae verba fortunae loquar,
quae nemo solvat ... (Phoe. 121-124)
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
OE. ... And lest that terrible spot lie unoccupied,
restore a greater monstrum there. Perched on that rock I shall utter the obscure words of my own lot,
which no one can solve ...
\end{flushleft}

In linking himself with Mt. Cithaeron, Oedipus marks himself as a tragic figure, and moreover, one who has special access to hermeneutic prowess since the Sphinx had guarded its passes. One of the many examples of Senecan responson, or intracorporal echoing, occurs in the context of an infernal vatic scene. The Oedipus of the Phoenissae

\textsuperscript{510} For a useful analysis of the resonances of monstra in Senecan tragedy, see Staley (2000) and Staley (2009, pp. 96-120).
echoes and fulfills the words of Laius' ghost, who in the *Oedipus* had called his son a more convoluted *monstrum* than Oedipus' own Sphinx:

CR. ... quique vix mos est feris,
fratres sibi ipse genuit—implicitum malum,
magisque monstrum Sphinx e perplexum sua (*Oed.* 639-641)

CR. And—hardly the custom even among wild animals—
he has fathered brothers for himself, a twisted evil,
a greater and more inviolated monstrum than his own Sphinx.

But what does 'one's own Sphinx' mean? As with another vague oracular phrase in the Theban plays (*maximus scelus Thebis materne amor est*), the slippage between the subjective and objective meanings of the phrase (that is, between possession and embodiment) creates ambiguity. 'Mother-love' can mean either love *for* or love *by* one's mother. With Oedipus, however, the additional meaning of amorous relations with his mother trumps both of the other more usual resonances. A similar bivalence is at play with respect to Oedipus 'own' Sphinx: the Sphinx 'belongs' to Oedipus in that he has dethroned her, and Oedipus himself comes to own her attributes and indeed even her place on Mt. Cithaeron later in the *Phoenissae*. It becomes clear that he does not just equal the Sphinx in monstrousness but outdoes her, in this way living up to his wish to become a *maius monstrum*.511

Similarly, Oedipus reveals his aspiration to be an oracular figure. This is a fitting role for him, since boundary-overstepping and category confusion produces plurality of meaning. When he describes having outfoxed the Sphinx, Oedipus' own language is redolent of her enigmas, as is evinced by riddle of three terms (*nodosa sortis verba; implexos dolos; triste carmen*) that point to the single referent of what he solved. In both Theban plays, Oedipus and the Sphinx are linked by virtue of their dexterity with language and interpretation, and by their 'monstrous' qualities. When Oedipus tells the back story of the Sphinx, he does so in a way that is itself convoluted and cryptic—and three-footed. The end of the play will in fact features a three-legged Oedipus, whose extra leg is not due to the natural progression of time but to his premature aging when he blinds himself and must use a cane. In blinding himself as punishment for something that he did when he

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511 The etymology of the Sphinx's name ('strangler') may also be a pointed gesture toward Oedipus as murderer.
was a two-legged man, but that was foretold as fated when he was an infant (or before he had legs at all), he mixes up the natural progression of human life stages—another example of the perverse, involuted quality of his identity. The presentation highlights the lack of sure-footed meaning due to too many potential signs and referents:⁵¹²

OE. carmen poposci: sonuit horrendum
insuper,
crepuee malaee, saxaque impatiens morae
revulsit unguis viscera expectans mea;
nodosa sortis verba et implexos dolos
ac triste carmen alitis solvi ferae. (Oed. 98-102)

OE. I demanded her riddle: from above she screamed horrendously, her jaws clapped, and impatient at the wait she tore at the rocks with her claws, eager for my entrails. The gnarled words of fate, the convoluted tricks, and the dire riddle of the winged she-beast—I solved them.

After deposing the Sphinx from her place on Cithaeron by solving her riddle, he outdoes her in the enigma he sets referring to himself as an insoluble puzzle. Here, he is armed with the knowledge that was only a vague premonition before, in the play’s prologue: not only was he the source of the plague at Thebes, but, as he now knows and his acerbic comment reveals, he himself is an embodied lues:

OE. ... saeva Thebarum lues
luctifica caecis verba committens modis
quid simile posuit, quid tam inextricabile?
‘avi gener patriisque rivalis sui,
frater suorum liberum et fratrum parens;
uno avia partu libero peperit viro,
sibi et nepotes. monstra quis tanta explicit?
ego ipse, victae spolia qui Sphingis tuli,
haerobo fati tardus interpres mei.
(Phoe. 131-139)

OE. Savage pestilence of Thebes, joining together
death-bringing words in obscure meters, what did she contrive that was similar, what that was so labyrinthine?
‘Son-in-law to his grandfather and rival to his own father, brother to his own children and father to his brothers; in a single birth the grandmother

⁵¹² The idea of ‘footedness’ also, of course, hearkens back to Oedipus’ own name and physical deformity, his pierced ankles, which are both sign and content, as well as (according to one etymology) name. This thematization of feet is also at play in the key verb incido, which bookends the Oedipus: at the beginning he has ‘stumbled’ onto kingship (in regnum incidit, Oed. 14) and at the end he fears ‘stumbling’ on his mother-wife as he leaves for exile (ne in matrem incidas, Oed. 1050).
produced children for her husband, and also grandchildren for herself.’
Who will disentangle such *monstra*? I myself, who carried off spoils of the Sphinx, will be stuck, a slow interpreter of my own fate.

The passage above is key to understanding themes of identity and the relative transparency of meaning in Seneca’s Theban plays. Oedipus’ speech is itself thick with oracular ambiguity. To cite but two brief examples, he uses wordplay in reference to being a *rivalis* to his father. The word was popularly etymologized from *rivus* or *rivilus*, to refer to two animals who drink from the same stream, and here the connection with Jocasta is (unfortunately) all too clear.\(^5\) Further, Oedipus supplies meta-level commentary on his riddle, prefacing it by posing the enigmatic question—which is at once a literal and a rhetorical one—what else could be so *inextricabile*? The adjective is striking: Vergil uses the usual six-syllable word to describe the inescapable labyrinth: *hic labor ille domus et inextricabilis error*.\(^6\) Oedipus’ words, then, recall not only the confusing labyrinth itself, but also the *domus* and *error* of the Vergilian line—two words that are of central thematic importance to his life story. In addition, Oedipus’ speech works as oracular speech does in that the *number* and *referent* are vague. In his question of who will unravel such *monstra*, he makes one wonder how many *monstra* there are and just who it, or they, might be. This ambiguity spills into the next line: we might expect that *ego ipse* will prove the answer, and it might be, but the enjambment (also) initiates an admission of his limitations as *interpretes*.\(^7\) As Frank observes, the line is pleonastic, as *haerebo* and *tardus* amount to the same idea.\(^8\) Yet again, Oedipus is plagued with redundancy, and with too much meaning where there should be only one.

To supplement the discussion of Oedipus as *interpretes*-figure, a brief reminder as to the resonances of Latin *interpretatios* is in order. The activity of *interpretatios*, with its role of mediating *interpretes*, is indispensable to both poetry and divination. As was put forth in the Introduction to the dissertation, authorial and divine functions can be seen as parallel in terms of epistemic position, where they transmit information not directly but through

\(^5\) Maltby (1991, *ad loc*).
\(^6\) Aen. 6.27.
\(^7\) In Plautus’ *Poenulus*, the epithet *interpretes Sphingi* was applied to Oedipus. Seneca’s Oedipus casts himself as a Sphinx-replacement: the new, improved Sphinx.
\(^8\) Frank (1995a, *ad loc*).
channels of words, signs, gestures, and also through animate mediating entities. On this view, meaning-making is not limited to the product of an artist’s (or god’s) intention but is activated at the point of reception. Even if not in an ‘official’ capacity, i.e. as prophet or exegete, every receiver still engages in the hermeneutic process of interpretatio. But the message is not always coterminous with what the artifex originally meant—and even when the message seems transparent, it can be disbelieved or otherwise misapprehended by those on the other end, as is shown time and again in accounts of the ‘slipperiness’ of prophecy and of poetry. It is important here to note that for prophecy as well as for poetry, the vehicle is not limited to verbal or written language. Other potential transmitters of meaning include symbols, gestures, and natural phenomena, and occur in the interstices of these verbal and non-verbal signa. What is more, even meaning that seemed fixed can take on new resonances with new experiences, and over time.

The chain of divinatory activities in the Oedipus demonstrates both the multiple potential pathways to meaning and how (despite or because of these pathways) a single unambiguous answer may not be available. Seneca’s Oedipus is surrounded by, and in fact actively pursues, various modes of access to recondite knowledge: oracles, riddles, haruspicy, extispicy, and necromancy. Like others of Seneca’s vatic characters and usurpers, Oedipus seeks totalizing knowledge via earthly, divine, and infernal channels. Yet he is Janus-faced with respect to knowing, obsessive in both his quest to know and to avoid his fate as foretold by the Delphic oracle. Seneca’s Oedipus does not just want to have knowledge; rather, he desires to engage in the hermeneutic processes that ‘to know’ entails—in a word, interpretatio.

**Oedipus: interpres fati sui?**

Here we turn to examine a specific subset of interpretation: Oedipus’ flawed self-knowledge. His limitations run along several tracks: hubris; blind ignorance; misunderstanding; misapplication of knowledge. Seneca’s overtly prophetic figures such as Tiresias are aware of their own limitations. And Seneca’s Oedipus, unlike his Sophoclean counterpart, is aware of his guilt from the play’s beginning, at least on some level.⁵⁷ This Oedipus is haunted by the pasts he cannot escape and is at similar pains to

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⁵⁷ *Oed. 36. fecimus caelum nocens.*
avoid his future (or what he perceives to be the future), all while caught in the *hic et nunc* of his particular play. His realization comes late, however; earlier, he ignores any potentially unwelcome information. In his arrogance, he believes that he can trump Apollo and avoid his fate. This proves even more impossible for a ‘belated’ Oedipus figure, since his *fatum*\(^{518}\) has been written many times over—most notably, in the Sophoclean *locus classicus*. His limitations stem from a variety of factors. For one thing, he misinterprets the *timescale* of what the oracle foretold. On a basic level, what is being prophesied (that is, *fatum*) has already happened, both in his own specific past (because he thinks that Polybus and Merope are his actual parents, he believes that he has thus far avoided and can still avoid killing his father and marrying his mother), and on the metaliterary level, in previous Oedipus treatments.

One of the key differences between the Senecan and Sophoclean protagonists, in fact, is that while Sophocles’ Oedipus dramatizes the process of going from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge, Seneca’s Oedipus has a certain degree of intuitive knowledge, even if he cannot always apply it to his benefit. In turn, his hunches reveal a key aspect of ‘belated’ poetics: the classic Aristotelian elements that are supposed to characterize a tragedy, *peripeteia* (reversal) and *anagnorisis* (recognition), may be either irrelevant or replaced by other elements, since they have already, in a sense, occurred. Self-commentary in the prologue reveals Oedipus’ paranoid fear and his desire to evade the fate that was foretold by the Delphic oracle: *infanda timeo, ne mea genitor manu perimatur; et ...(maius) nefas ... / cuncta expavesco* (Oed. 26). In this way he also enters into a dialogue with the Stoic view of the harmful prospective emotions (fear, anxiety, and hope). According to traditional Stoic thought, these are to be avoided since they allow the passions to hold sway—and, concomitantly, allow an unseen future to usurp and replace the present.

Despite his triumph as Sphinx-deposer, Oedipus’ ultimate degree of success as a vatic figure is in question. Formal characteristics of the oracle’s utterance reinforce the layers of impenetrability through which one must cut in order to elucidate meaning. Oracles and Sphinxes generally speak in hexameter, which underscores that poetry and prophecy are both forms of second-order language requiring interpretation. In the

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\(^{518}\) Note that it is a fixed form of the perfect passive participle from *fari*. See the dissertation Introduction for an explanation of the resonances of Latin *fari/fatum*, following Bettini (2008).
Oedipus, Creon follows the standard model, reporting the oracle’s response in hexametric oratio recta.\(^{519}\) In the Phoenissae, by contrast, Oedipus delivers his riddle in iambic trimeter, the ordinary meter for spoken lines of a play. The metrical touch calls attention to Oedipus’ complex relationship with oracles. On one line of thought, it reveals the fact that as an ordinary human, he is a limited vates at best. And this segment is particularly fascinating in that it contains an explicit reference to the process of interpretatio, gesturing toward the problems that inhere in attempting to be interpres fati sui.

The Senecan Oedipus also proves limited due to his inhabiting of too many interpretive roles simultaneously. The ouroboric nature of self-knowledge—introspection without perspective—is epitomized in the figure of Oedipus, whose quest is frustrated by the fact that he oscillates between multiple interpretive roles. While one might think that access to multiple levels of knowledge might make him better at interpretation, it actually proves a detriment, since he is ultimately unable to play any one part satisfactorily.\(^{520}\) Additionally, the accretive layers of previous literary treatments against which this Oedipus must carve out his identity adds further confusion. So, not only is Oedipus incestuous in his actual relationships; he is also ‘hermeneneutically incestuous’ respect to the various interpretive positions he occupies. Seneca’s Oedipus proves himself to be the answer to the riddle, its setter, and its solver. Or, more precisely, its attempted solver: as the rest of the play will bear out, he does not prove a successful interpres fati sui after all—far from it. This might seem counterintuitive at first, until one remembers that an interpres, by definition, entails mediation between parties. Oedipus, who has proven his prowess in interpretive activities, is unsuccessful in the enterprise of self-knowledge. By extension, the passage intimates, since even a master interpres is at a loss to engage in successful self-interpretation, what chance does any normal individual have in this endeavor?

Oedipus is also a limited interpres in that he treats all vatic entities (such as oracles and the Sphinx) and all hermeneutic activities (those applied to external events vs. internal ones) the same. As chapter 2 articulated, the modalities of oracles and prophets are distinct, even if they ultimately lead to the same answer; failure to acknowledge the

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\(^{519}\) As Ahl observes, Creon is a ‘creative’ figure, as the Latin version of his name signals; the verb creo means ‘to think’ or ‘to create’, (2008, p. 20). But is this Creon interpreting the oracle in a creative way, or reporting verbatim what he has heard?

\(^{520}\) Cf. the similar sentiment in Seneca’s Ep. 120.
differences in how to go about interpreting each will necessarily lead to misfires.

Seneca’s Oedipus construes the oracular response in such a way that it presupposes only a single answer, like a riddle, when oracle-speak is by nature polyvalent. Oedipus is a master of language and symbolic meaning, and he can even apply this to solving seemingly insoluble problems, as he proves when he outfoxes the Sphinx. Yet this is not the same as pursuing deeper avenues of self-knowledge. And part of interpretatio includes an admission of one’s limitations in this arena—the other side of the Delphic gnōthi seautōn is the Socratic side, a realization that human knowledge is necessarily imperfect. Oedipus is not prepared to realize this limitation, and through his characterization of this attitude, Seneca comments on the always-flawed nature of self-knowledge. As he often does, Seneca exploits the tensions of a paradox to articulate complex philosophical issues. Full understanding is impossible not despite but because of a lack of intermediary (in the form of an individual, work of art, philosophical or religious beliefs, etc.). In other words, self-self transparency is just an illusion; when unmediated, there is nothing off of which this knowledge can refract. Ultimately, just as characters within a play cannot achieve critical distance due to their limited perspective, an individual cannot attain psychic distance from him- or herself. The idea is much more effective when dramatized through individuals working through these issues in a theatricalized (whether performed or read) setting than stated in a philosophical tract. Through his dramatic characters that illustrate the tragic condition, which is to say, the human one, Seneca philosophus and Seneca tragicus can meet in the middle.

Oedipus’ essential failure to be interpres fati sui and his comments on this failure activate several questions having to do with literary knowledge and hermeneutics of the self. One important reason why he falls short is his aim to occupy all of these interpretive places, and his related reluctance to cede any control, or indeed, to acknowledge the priority of forces other than himself. A vates is a liminal figure; by definition, this subset of interpres is defined relationally, as mediating between spheres. As a general rule, prophets do not inquire about their own concerns but about issues that affect other individuals or collectivities; thus, they can be seen as operating at a level of remove, or critical distance, from both the giver and the receiver of the prophetic inquiry. By attempting to engage in interpretive activity vis-à-vis himself, Oedipus elides this mediating aspect of inter [duas]
partes, as does anyone who engages in this process. This reveals a salient aspect of interpretatio: a poet, a prophet, even a text or work of art, serves a mediating role, acting as a filter through which to access hidden knowledge, where very often this is an attempt at self-interpretation. Oedipus’ professed failure as ‘interpres fati mei’ suggests that multiple roles in hermeneutic, psychological, and familial arenas have collapsed on themselves. The implosion is both reflective of his own problematic identity and is part of the human experience more generally. What also emerges from Seneca’s treatment of Oedipus, however, is that knowledge is not static but variable, due to a host of interpenetrating causal factors. The mutually reinforcing layers of time, experience, and perspective present constriction of meaning, as well as expansive possibilities of meaning. The same applies to poetry.

**Oracles ‘overfulfilled’ and confatalia**

We will now turn to analyze a particular subset of the vatic element that occurs in Seneca’s Oedipus, which is (I contend) linked to a specific model of causality that works on the level of dramatic action as well as on the meta-level of poetics. Then I will suggest what this can tell us about a poem’s (and poet’s) relationship to predecessors and successors. Causality is integral to a discussion of Seneca’s Theban dramas, not least because of the link between cause and responsibility. One of the classic interpretive enigmas of the Oedipus myth in general (and particularly Sophocles’ treatment of it) resides in the question of whether Oedipus should be held responsible for having committed the incest and parricide, or excused since he was fated to do so. Seneca’s two Theban dramas stage, in a dialogic way, various answers to this question, in a way similar to the presentation of multiple motivations for the need for the sacrifice of Polyxena and Astyanax in the Troades. In the Theban plays, what is overtly presented in terms of multiplicity is not just the causes but also the divinatory methods leading to the answer. As was said above, cause and time both operate under conditions of instability in the Oedipus myth—this is explicit in Seneca’s version. This is due in one sense to the fact that

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521 This is one of the proposed etymologies of interpres; the actual root is unclear (see TLL VII.1, p. 2250 and OLD, s.v.). For interpretatio, see TLL VII.1, p. 2253.
522 See my tripartite discussion of the Troades in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, where each realm (superal—infernal—terrestrial) provides a distinct causal factor leading to the prescribed sacrifices of Polyxena and Astyanax.
what Oedipus perceives as not having happened (the parricide and incest), and so still avoidable, has already been done, both in this particular iteration and in other iterations. In this way, the dramatic action as perceived by Oedipus moves on a time–cause scale that is at odds with what actually happened in mythopoetic time.523

One way in which prophecy in Senecan tragedy is problematic occurs with what recent commentators have called the ‘overfulfilled’ oracle: ‘übererfüllt’.524 Oedipus declares that he has exceeded what was prophesied not only by mating with his mother and killing his father, but also by killing his mother. The phenomenon of overfulfilling an oracle is not mere rhetorical amplificatio but is a key component of the larger matrices of causality in Senecan drama. Oracular overfulfillment has much to say about issues of joint causality and, I believe, presents productive possibilities for understanding Senecan poetics.525 The overfulfilled oracle underscores the shared responsibility between the human agents and divine machinery, or fate. In this aspect, it reflects the Stoic notion of co-fated events, or confatalia. The Oedipus legend is based on a tension between ignorance and knowledge, and on the dictates of fate vs. so-called free will, so it is not surprising that Seneca found here rich fodder for illustrating this causal model. The Oedipus myth was linked to confatalia in Stoic thought long before Seneca. In fact, the birth of Oedipus was one of the classic examples adduced by Chrysippus and other Stoics to illustrate the workings of co-fated occurrences, as opposed to simple events: while Oedipus’ birth was fated by the oracle (the proximate cause), it was also contingent upon Laius and Jocasta producing a child—in other words, human action was required.526 As Cicero, quoting or paraphrasing Chrysippus, articulates in his treatise on Fate,

[30] Quaedam enim sunt, [Chrysippus] inquit, in rebus simplicia, quaedam copulata; simplex est: ‘Morietur illo die Socrates’; huic, sive quid fecerit sive non fecerit, finitus est mortiendi dies. At si ita fatum est: ‘Nascetur Oedipus Laio’, non poterit dici:

523 Here is one more variant on how the time–cause dynamic is nonlinear in Senecan tragedy. Whereas often scenes are actually staged more than once, to form a kind of prismatic picture of the dramatic action, here it is Oedipus’ perception that is off.
525 As was articulated in the dissertation Introduction, the double meaning of vates as ‘poet’ and ‘prophet,’ as well as the resonance of fatum as ‘that which has been spoken,’ strengthens the link between the actions of prophecy within the dramas and the external workings of the poet. On fatum’s link to both prophecy and poetry, see Bettini (2008); Boyle (2011).
526 Cicero Fat. 30.1-6. For analysis of this passage, see Long (1996) and Bobzien (1998); for another reference to multiple causality, see Sen. NQ 2.38. For further background on confatalia in Stoic thought, see Algra (1998, pp. 513-541, esp. pp. 531-534).
'sive fuerit Laius cum muliere sive non fuerit'; copulata enim res est et confatalis; sic enim appellat, quia ita fatum sit et concubiturum cum uxoré Laium et ex ea Oedipum procreaturum, [...] Haec, ut dixi, confatalia ille appellat. Cicero, De Fato 30.1

[30] For, [Chrysippus] says, there exist two types of events, the simple and the conjoined. The simple event is: ‘Socrates will die on that day’; in this instance, whether he does or does not do some action, the day of his death is fixed. But if it is said [or: fated] in this way: ‘Oedipus will be born to Laius,’ it will not be possible to say: ‘whether or not Laius sleeps with a woman’, for the event is conjoined and co-fated [συνεμφάνετον]. [Chrysippus] calls it that because it has been fated [or: said] both that Laius will sleep with a wife and that he will engender Oedipus by her [...] These events, as I said, Chrysippus calls confatalia.

Like most of Seneca’s characters, Oedipus refuses to entertain the possibility that more than one cause is at play for what he has experienced; in fact, his interpretation of causality as single-stream is a key limiting factor for him and other characters, and proves one of the chief differences between the inner circles of the dramatis personae and Seneca’s audiences, who are aware of more causal strands due to their critical distance—a disjuncture that produces irony.

A parallel model also subtends the meta-level of poetics, and Seneca’s Theban plays dramatize and comment on this phenomenon. Like actual events, the dramatic action of a play is co-motivated by two main strands: first, what must occur due to the mytho-literary tradition and the demands of dramatic necessity, and second, the unpredictability of specific authorial innovations. The first part of the equation, or what is pre-fixed, is analogous to the antecedent causal component of fatum, while the second part is represented by the poet’s own decisions, which has an analogue in the the eph’ hēmin / in nostra potestate (‘up to us’ or ‘in our power’) component of confatalia. With respect to what I am calling ‘poetic confatalia,’ the double meaning of the Latin vates as ‘poet’ and ‘prophet,’ as well as fatum’s meaning as ‘that which has been spoken/written,’ in addition to ‘fate,’ strengthens the link between the internal action of the dramas and the workings of any one iteration of poetry amid the larger tradition.527 The problems with prophecy that characterize Seneca’s tragedies provide a window on this phenomenon, I argue, and vice versa: despite the strictures of the mytho-literary tradition, the vast opportunities for authorial innovation mean that only so much can be predicted based on what is known or expected from past iterations. On the other hand, there is enormous scope for innovative creativity on the part of the poet—not just despite but even because

of previous iterations of poetry. Within Seneca’s own corpus, the salient differences between his Oedipus and his Phoenissae draw attention to the autonomous nature of the individual poet who creates, against the backdrop of what-has-been-said in the literary tradition. The final part of this chapter will examine the meta-level workings of what I call ‘poetic confatalia,’ using Seneca’s Theban plays as a case study of how Seneca innovates not only on the poetry of his models, but even intracorporally, with respect to his own poetic output.

As with Cassandra the ‘too-true’ prophet (nimium vera vates), it is not that oracles go unfulfilled at Thebes but that they are overfulfilled: that is, what they have said is but one part of what will come to pass, as Oedipus comes to realize.\footnote{Fontenrose (1983) calls this quality ‘avertissement trompant’ and argues for an active obfuscation of meaning of oracular speech; but the other side of this notion is, of course, that the onus of interpretation on the receiver; for a useful recent study on how oracles work in literature beyond just the classical world, see Wood (2003).} The overfulfilled oracle, I believe, exemplifies the phenomenon of too many available meanings—a phenomenon that poses interpretive problems for distilling possibilities down to a single one. Oedipus offers a commentary on the overfulfillment: he bitterly accuses Apollo of ‘lying,’ meaning that his oracle failed to reveal the full story of what would happen. In addition to mating with his mother and killing his father, the additional element is that Oedipus would also cause his mother–wife’s death. When Seneca’s Oedipus articulates that he has outdone what the oracle originally foretold by killing both parents, he both implicates himself in the scenario and charges Apollo with mendacity:

OE. Fatidice te, te praesidem veri deum
compello: solum debui fatis patrem;
bis parricida plusque quam timui nocens
matrem perem: scelere confecta est meo.
o Phoebe mendax, fata superavi impia. (Oed. 1042-1046)

OE. Fate-speaking god, you—truth-guardian of the gods—
I call you to task: I owed only my father’s death to fate;
twice a parricide, and even more guilty than I feared,
I’ve killed my mother: this was done by my own criminality.
Apollo, you liar, I’ve surpassed my own wicked fate!

While Apollo is to blame for withholding key information, according to Oedipus, the god did not cause the actions. He only failed to let Oedipus know in advance so that he could avoid his fate (which, of course, Oedipus thinks is still possible). Seneca’s Oedipus believes
that he is entirely responsible for both parents’ deaths, as his prologue intimates and his later comments reveal more explicitly:

OE. cuncta expavesco meque non credo mihi. (Oed. 26)
OE. I fear everything, and I fear me; I do not even trust myself.

OE. ... fecimus caelum nocens. (Oed. 36)
OE. ... I’ve made heaven harmful.

He sees the unfortunate events as stemming solely from human agency—his own—and acknowledges full responsibility for the plague even before he consciously knows that he is actually had a part in. But that a more complex causal model is at play can be seen even on the micro-level of poetic diction: the quick shift from self-address to apostrophe to Apollo underscores the shared responsibility between the human agent and supra-human forces—in other words, what happens is co-fated. Senecan characters tend to ascribe only a single motivating cause to a given event, and this is a symptom of their limited powers of interpretation more broadly. Jocasta, attempting to console Oedipus, offers a different interpretation, but one that is still based on a single causal factor. She declares that Fate, not Oedipus, is to blame:

JO. Fati ista culpa est: nemo fit fato nocens.

JO. It’s fate’s fault; no one’s made guilty by fate. (Oed. 1099). 529

Although the other resonance is arguably not on Jocasta’s mind, the meaning of fatum as what-has-been-written is also intimated by Jocasta’s rationale. On this reading, Seneca’s Oedipus cannot possibly be guilty precisely because he (that is, previous Oedipus-figures) has already done (or been made to do by his poets) these actions many times over.

The chorus in ode 3 seems to respond to, and to reject, what Oedipus and Jocasta each have posited as the single causal factor. According to the chorus, it is neither Oedipus, nor the family curse of the Labdacids that has led to the current state of affairs. Instead, the angry gods are to blame:

CH. non tu tantis causa periclis,
non haec Labdacidas petunt
fata, sed veteres deum

529 This is in direct rebuttal of Oedipus’ lines in the prologue; nocens in the same final sedes in both lines.
irae sequuntur ... *(Oed. 709-12).*

CH. You aren’t the cause of such great dangers; the fates aren’t after Laius’ family; no, it’s the age-old wrath of the gods that hounds us ...

This theistic model is more akin to Homeric human–divine interactions, where gods both actively aid and punish mortals. Moreover, it should be noted that orthodox Stoicism did not believe in divine wrath but in a benevolent, though largely impersonal, Providence.

So far, the causal model as perceived by characters and choruses within Seneca’s *Oedipus* is one of logical disjunction: *either* individuals are responsible for what happens or human action is irrelevant in the face of the supra-human gods or fate. Ultimately, none of these strands in isolation offers a full picture of the motive forces. Taken together, however, these discrete threads add up to what is the case: it is actually an amalgam of forces that engenders the dramatic action.530 Here again, the internal players do not possess the necessary perspective on the events to be able to appreciate the co-fated aspect, while those external to the dramatic action do (or can). The competing viewpoints on responsibility offer an example of the kaleidoscopic parataxis that characterizes Senecan poetics. In complex ways, the various accounts refer to the causal schemata of the dramatic action and of the world at large, and offer a meta-level commentary on these similar dynamics of poetic creation.

Time and again, Seneca’s characters reveal a linear mindset: they entertain only one explanation for motivating cause and presuppose a single fixed outcome. In short, they are not comfortable with the ambiguity of more than one interpretive possibility. Taking the characters’ and choruses’ various perspectives in side-by-side fashion, however, allows for a dialogic mode to pose and question multiple interpretive possibilities. The dramatic form is inherently suited to staging various viewpoints, and Seneca makes the classic tragic *agon*, with its fixed formula of a single victor, more malleable in order to have his characters and choruses engage in these more fluid forms of debate. In this way, Seneca gives voice (or ‘voices’) to many of the central concerns that he addresses in his prose corpus, presenting various viewpoints on a given issue without having to come

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530 See Schiesaro (2003) on Senecan ‘parataxis’ and ‘framing.’
down definitively on a single side. Seneca’s dialogic tragic corpus proves that drama is, inter alia, a viable vehicle for staging philosophical debates.

The fifth choral ode of the Oedipus, which occurs just after the gruesome self-blinding scene, offers a more nuanced model of causality and poetics. Four act-dividing choral odes are standard in post-Attic tragedy. There is no analogous example of five choral odes in Seneca; here, the extra one sets up what is essentially an abbreviated sixth act. The very existence of the ode can be seen in terms of overabundance on Seneca’s part, a structuring element linking the poetics of overfulfillment to the thematization of multiple causae. In this choral ode’s view, both human action and divine will are subordinated to the larger dispensation of the fates:

CH. Fatis agimus: cedite fatis.
[...]
non illa deo vertisse licet,
quae nexa suis currunt causis.
it cuique ratus
prece non uilla mobilis ordo.
multis ipsum metuisset nocet,
multi ad fatum venere suum
dum fata timent. (Oed. 980; 987-93).

CH. We are driven by the fates; yield to the fates.
[...]
the woven events which run for causes of their own,
these are not able to be changed—even by a god. The pre-fixed
order for each one of us goes immovable by any prayer.
Fear itself harms many; many have come upon their own
fate even as they fear the fates.

Whereas Jocasta’s conception of ‘fate’ was singular, the chorus refers to plural fates, under whose control everything happens. These fata, like those Calchas mentions in the Troades, gesture toward the co-fated model. Under the picture of ‘hard’ determinism which the choral ode above presents, attempting to outwit fate (as Oedipus did) is a vain endeavor. What is more, prayers and supplication—maybe even human action in general—are all necessarily too late, because what has been written has been written. The picture of pessimism vis-à-vis human autonomy, on the one hand, represents the ‘idle argument’

531 See Bobzien (1998, pp. 182ff) for the ‘idle’ or ‘lazy’ argument (ὁ ὑγρὸς λόγος) against determinism in Stoic thought. The basic set of premises is that if what is fated is bound to occur, then there is no sense in attempting to exercise one’s autonomy, i.e. by working hard or by striving to act well. The sources for the ‘idle’ argument, Cic. Fat. 30 and Origen Cels. II 20, 338.26-7 and 342.64, both employ a medical analogy: if a
picture of deterministic causality, which in Stoic thought is used to excuse negative human behavior such as complacency. While the overall message of the ode above is that the fates are to blame, the riddling ambiguities of the identity and number of the fates, along with just how many causes there are, and the relative positions of each, offer a tantalizing hint of co-fatedness model that I see at work in Seneca’s plays. But under the ode’s surface message of hard determinism, I believe, resides a more nuanced fatalistic picture than first meets the eye.

In the interplay between this choral ode and what came before, the multiple causes, and the various viewpoints on these causes, are in evidence. As Boyle observes, the poetry is carefully engineered to foster this dialogism: the first word of this ode replicates the first word of the preceding choral ode, ‘even as it inverts the latter’s “philosophical” position.’ Of course, a lot has happened in the intervening dramatic action—not least, Oedipus’ excruciating decision to blind himself and the horrific act itself, the description of which ends in a prayer to the gods that is punctuated by eyes that spewed blood instead of tears. In its relegation of human action to a subordinate position, ode 5 can be seen a direct challenge to the act of radical autonomy in which Oedipus has just engaged, and also his concluding prayer to ‘all the gods.’ Depending on how one takes the Latin *quae nexa suis currunt causis*, the causes derive from, or are interwoven with, run along the same track as, or work for the benefit of, the fates themselves. These issues are also in dialogue with the Stoic hypothesis of an unbroken continuum of cause–effect. As Rosenmey er states, ‘[T]he Stoics recognized no causeless change.’ The interconnected quality is in keeping with Stoic notions of *sympatheia tōn holōn*, in which the individual is reflected in, and reflects, the tone of the cosmos. Yet a continuum as opposed to a many-dimensional matrix of causes would seem to negate the element of human choice (or, for that matter, the spontaneous intervention of a deity, like that of Juno in the *Hercules*). While this view stands in opposition to Stoic *confatalia*, it also, interestingly

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534 *Oed*. 974-5.
536 *ibid.*, p. 110).
enough, offers Oedipus absolution from his ‘crimes’ of parricide and incest and renders his act of self-punishment an extreme—even superfluous—measure. It is in this last choral ode that the label \textit{Fatumstragödie} that has been applied to Seneca’s Oedipus proves most fitting, though perhaps we should emend the label to reflect the plural Fata.\footnote{Boyle calls it the ‘Fate Ode.’ (2011, p. 335). Commentators disagree as to whether this ode is act-dividing, thus making \textit{Oedipus} a six-act rather than a five-act play. Töchterle (1995) and Fitch (2006) take a conservative tack and do not view it as a separate ode, while Boyle (2011) makes a convincing case for its stand-alone quality as an ode. On \textit{Fatumstragödie} as a subcategory of Senecan tragedy, see Lefèvre (1966; he also classes \textit{Agamemnon} among these Fate-tragedies), and, more recently, Fischer (2010).}

\textbf{A poetics of multiple causae}

As the final portion of this chapter will discuss, in Seneca’s Theban plays the phenomenon of overfulfilled oracles can be seen on the meta-level of poetics as well, where it elucidates the workings of poetic creation and reception. Under the influence of Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics}, Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Tyrannos} is often held up as the canonical example of what a tragedy should be. Few dared to reinterpret the Sophoclean masterwork. We know of no major treatment of the Oedipus story in Latin poetry; not even Ovid, whose \textit{Met.} 3, dealt with Theban themes, chose to take on the portion of the Oedipus story that deals with the realization of his guilt and subsequent self-blinding.\footnote{The genres of comedy and satire present different possibilities; thus, Varro’s Menippean satire ‘Oedipophyestes’ can hardly be seen as a serious reception of the Sophoclean play.} It is thus striking that Seneca chose to treat the Oedipus myth not once but twice. In a similar way to how oracles and prayers are outdone, Seneca can be seen to ‘overfulfill’ his poetic project by treating the Oedipus legend twice over. The salient differences between Seneca’s \textit{Oedipus} and his \textit{Phoenissae}—most significantly, that Jocasta lives on in the \textit{Phoenissae} while she commits suicide at the end of the \textit{Oedipus}—show this model of multiple causal strands on the level of poetry at work.\footnote{Cf. Wilson’s (2004) notion of tragic ‘overliving’, a literary phenomenon that refers to a character’s, or work’s, exceeding its natural life span to participate in the larger tradition, which is in turn linked to a poet’s own sense of anxiety surrounding his or her own ‘belatedness’} Oedipus offers Seneca a many-sided challenge, and consequently, an opportunity to display his poetic prowess. In this way, his Theban plays present productive avenues for examining the creative process of the poet. What is more, in the very existence of the second play resides Seneca’s attempt to outdo the earlier Seneca—a pointed reminder of the capacity for innovation that is in an author’s power, which in turn illustrates the unpredictable \textit{eph’hēmin} element of \textit{confatalia}. 

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\begin{itemize}
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\end{itemize}
The *Phoenissae* is itself an enigma. In form, it is anomalous: totaling just 664 lines, it consists of two independent halves with separate settings and characters but with no act-dividing choral odes. The first half features the exiled Oedipus and Antigone. In an extended Passion–Restraint scene, Antigone convinces him not to kill himself. The second half, which is set at the gates of Thebes, stages issues of civil war, fratricide, and an anguished Jocasta’s attempted intercession between her warring sons. The dramatic action of the *Phoenissae* occurs temporally after the events of the *Oedipus*, and it is generally believed that this was the latter written of Seneca’s Theban dramas. But the fact of Jocasta’s survival—or rather, revivification—in the second play generates new interpretive possibilities, as the horrors of the Labdacid family are evaluated anew. Through the revisionist lens of the *Phoenissae*, parricide and incest are no longer the worst crimes, as the other play made explicit; civil war between brothers has now displaced them to become the *maximum scelus*. The dynamics of internecine strife is also, of course, an especially relevant issue in the Rome of Seneca’s day. Oedipus of the *Phoenissae* responds to his counterpart in the earlier play via a critique. In direct contradiction of his declaration in the *Oedipus* that his blindness would be a more fitting punishment than death, since it would allow for his continued suffering, here he laments that he has not paid the penalty since he lives on. Gouging out his eyes was not enough, declares the *Phoenissae*’s Oedipus. The first version was just a prelude to the protracted death-substitute that still tortures him with life (*coepi mori*), and now he must outdo the earlier self-mutilation by digging into his brain.

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540 The play has been variously viewed as (some combination of) a work left incomplete; a ‘bold experiment in dramatic technique’/essay in originality; or a pair of set pieces for *recitatio* or for the *suasoriae* schools. For Seneca’s *Phoenissae* as a radical experiment in drama, see Tarrant (1976a, 229f., 251-3); see Frank’s commentary (1995a) for an authoritative introduction to the play’s themes and transmission. It is generally agreed that the main precedent for the first half is Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*; the main model for the second half is Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*.  
541 *Oed.* 629-30.  
542 See Schiesaro (2003) on the ’maius’ motif as a key aspect of Senecan tragedy, on both the level of dramatic action, where characters strive to outdo their mythic predecessors (often based on vengeful drives) and on the meta-level of poetic *aemulatio*.  
543 This episode, as Fitch (2006) observes, carries distinct Roman politico-exemplary undertones (see p. 277 for the Coriolanus episode); Boyle (2011, introduction) also notes that it echoes the Coriolanus episode.  
545 *Phoe.* 178-181; the passage is quoted in full below.
Prophecy again coalesces with poetics in the relationship between Seneca’s two Theban plays. Regardless of which play was actually composed first, the fratricidal strife between Polynices and Eteocles in the Phoenissae is presented as confirming, at long last, the prophecy made by Laius’ ghost in the Oedipus, in which he forecast that brother would attack brother. This example of ‘intracorporal’ oracular fulfillment offers yet another Senecan innovation on straightforward prophecy. The second half of the Phoenissae also finally reifies the allegorical signa of the extispicium of the Oedipus, in which the two grotesque heads in the cow’s womb foreshadow the warring brothers and the seven veins represent the seven gates of Thebes. Without the existence of the second play, the only confirmation of the gruesome extispicy would be the external audience’s knowledge of the later events of the Labdacid myth, and their ability to link the Seven Against Thebes with these signa. Commentators often observe that the two seemingly separable halves of Seneca’s Phoenissae are indicative of two main models: Euripides’ Phoenissae and Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes, respectively. But absent from discussions of Seneca’s Theban plays is the vatic element in the prophecy of Laius’ ghost and the divination scene mentioned above that span both plays—elements which, it should be noted, are apparently unique to the Senecan version.

It is my contention that Seneca bases his poetics on a model of multiple causal factors that operates in an analogous way to the Stoic multi-strand conception of occurrences in the larger world—what I call ‘poetic confatalia’. Oedipus is a suitable figure for examining these themes, since one of the overarching questions is that of his guilt (or not) for his actions. A related issue is that of his agency in the self-blinding scene upon realizing his part in the horrific acts of murder and incest. Seneca’s treatment of the blinding scene is quite different from Sophocles’; after all, the later Oedipus must distinguish himself from his predecessors, and one way he can do this is in the manner of his self-punishment. One obvious way would have been suicide; Seneca’s Oedipus entertains the thought but ultimately rejects it as not horrific enough to pay for his crimes against his father, his mother, and nature. Upon reflection, he decides that death would have atoned for his parricide, but that something else is needed for the unprecedented

\footnote{Oed. 868-881.}
nefas of incest with his mother. To this end, he has to invent a punishment commensurate with what he has done (or, as his words here suggest, what the fates have led him to do): secum ipse saevus grande nesioquid parat / suisque fatis simile.

He finally decides on self-blinding as suitable for paying for his crime. Seneca’s Oedipus innovates on the analogous Sophoclean scene in many ways. In the OT, Oedipus blinds himself after realizing that his mother-wife had hanged herself; in fact, he uses a pin from her dress to accomplish the act. The Senecan scene is, not surprisingly, more graphic in its level of gruesome detail and features a more emotive self–self agôn over the relative values of life and death, responsibility and guilt. Seneca’s Oedipus gouges out his own eyes while Jocasta lives on; his is a simultaneous attempt to rid himself of sense perception and to inflict unbearable pain on himself.

OE. Natura in uno vertit, Oedipoda, novos commenta partus, supplicis eadem meis novetur. iterum vivere atque iterum mori liceat, renasci semper ut totiens nova supplicia pendas.—utere ingenio, miser! quod saepe fieri non potest fiat diu; mors eligatur longa. quaeretur via qua nec sepultis mixtus et vivis tamen exemptus erres ... (Oed. 943-951)

OE. Nature invents novel forms of childbirth for one individual, Oedipus, alone; she must alter itself to produce the means of my punishment. To live repeatedly and die repeatedly must be allowed, so that you can always repay new penalties as often as you’re reborn. Use your ingeniousness, you wretch! What cannot happen often must happen in a drawn-out way: seek out a prolonged death. Choose a method by which you can wander not mingled with the dead and yet removed from the living.

It is not the self-blinding but his continued suffering on earth that will prove the real punishment. Not only must he live on while deprived of one of his senses, but he must

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547 For an extended analysis of this scene, see Mader (1995).
548 Oed. 925-6.
549 As many scholars observe vis-à-vis the Oedipus figure in general, the blinding has psycho-sexual implications: it can be seen as analogous to castration, which is imagined as a suitable punishment for an incestuous crime. In addition, Boyle views the blinding as analogous to exile (2011, p. lxvi).
550 For the act of blinding in Sophocles versus in Seneca, see Boyle (2011, p. lxvi) and Mader (1995). Boyle notes the over-the-top visceral quality of Seneca’s Oedipus, who digs out his own eyes by the roots, in marked contrast to Sophocles’ more ‘tame’ version.
continue to grapple with the ramifications of his incestuous relationship with Jocasta, since their children, who are living tokens of the incest, torment him whenever he sees them or even thinks of them. As his words in the above passage make clear, Oedipus finds in this suffering a way to continue existing in a liminal state between the living and the dead. Actual death can only happen once, so it is not sufficient; since mors cannot happen often, Oedipus realizes, it must happen serially and in a way that defers death while drawing it out.\textsuperscript{551} The Senecan character, then, casts the \textit{mors longa} in terms of paradox and cause. As he also comes to realize, though, he will not any longer be able to deprive himself of the knowledge of who he is and what he has done, nor will he be able to close his mind’s eye in the same way that he has permanently closed his actual eyes.\textsuperscript{552} As we saw above, Oedipus comments on having overfulfilled Apollo’s oracle, which just mentioned the parricide and incest. While the element of his self-blinding is not foretold by any oracle or prophecy, it is ‘fated’ in the sense that it must occur due to the overwhelming influence of the Sophoclean iteration. One unpredictable aspect is the horror with which Seneca’s Oedipus outdoes his Sophoclean predecessor. All of this illustrates the shared causes for a given outcome as well as the illusory nature of much of what he (and we) might think of as free will: even this radical act of apparent choice is bounded by what came before, and itself will exercise an influence on the future in unknown ways.

As was previously discussed, individual Senecan plays often feature scenes in a paratactic relationship; that is, they represent events from different viewpoints and/or at different times. This replaces a linear temporal–causal relationship with other models such as serialization. The phenomenon also exists on the larger intracorporal level of Senecan poetry, as here, where these two plays’ treatment of the Oedipus myth can be seen as engaging in an ongoing dialogue. Though some characters make cameos in more than one play in the Senecan oeuvre, an important distinction is that Oedipus is the only one who features as \textit{protagonist} in more than one Senecan play.

\textsuperscript{551} See Ker (2009, p. 135) on the phenomenon of \textit{mors longa} in the \textit{Oedipus} and \textit{Phoenissae}, the resonances with Seneca’s views on the length of life elsewhere in his corpus, and the possible literary-historical implications of \textit{mors longa} in the Theban plays.
\textsuperscript{552} Oedipus in \textit{Phoe}, 179 (and 229) goes one further, wanting his ears to be removed as well to complete his sensory deprivation; again, this is a kind of wish for exile from the ordinary world of society, and from his own tortured experience. The latter is not, of course, possible.
This double Oedipus, I believe, can tell us much about Senecan poetics via the relationship between the two Theban plays. On one track, the Phoenissae is both later in myth time and (most likely) was written later in Seneca’s career. The very existence of the Phoenissae and its characters offers a window on authorial choice—most notably, in the revivification of Jocasta, who had perished by her own hand in the Oedipus (Seneca’s and Sophocles’ both). The second half of the Phoenissae literally brings Jocasta back to life while simultaneously undoing (by rewriting) the end of Seneca’s Oedipus in which she commits suicide. Antigone replaces the cast of personified forces (Morbus, Dolor, Pestis, etc.) who had accompanied Oedipus as guides on his outward bound journey of exile.\footnote{Though perhaps in the forces she replaces can be seen an allusion toward the monstrousness of Antigone as a product of incest.}

The ghost of Laius makes a cameo, but only as a hallucination perceived by Oedipus alone. And Oedipus himself has apparently outlived to star in a new (half of a) tragedy, where his overarching wish is now to die. James Ker offers a nice formulation of the Oedipus–Phoenissae diptych as spanning the poetic career of Seneca, where the mors longa is begun with the (probably early) Oedipus and carried through his career, where the figure re-emerges in the (probably late, and possibly unfinished) Phoenissae.\footnote{Ker (2009, p. 135). For this model of death versus that of a single ictus, cf. Oed. 937/949, where protraction (a kind of death in life) is the preferred model so that Oedipus can punish himself adequately. This is an interesting twist on the sentiment of mori cotidie that is present in Seneca’s prose works, and that characterizes Stoic spiritual exercises (ibid.).}

The latter play provides Seneca an opportunity to comment on the poet’s urge to emend; it makes visible several self-conscious ‘improvements,’ in a similar way to how we can see the poetological characters Atreus and Medea also revising their earlier ‘work’.\footnote{On Medea and Atreus as poet-figures with their own audiences, see Chapter 3, and cf. Mowbray (2012).}

Here one of the chief inventions includes the revivification of Jocasta; another is the revisionist declaration that fratricidal civil war is even worse than parricide or incest, which had been conceived of as the most horrific crimes in the first play. Here, too, Oedipus continues to be tortured with the knowledge of his sons’ fratricide—and with the continued existence of his mother–wife and children—even outside the bounds of a single play, so it really does embody a ‘fitting punishment’ in terms of duration and intensity. In the mouths of his vatic characters, vates Seneca is able to offer a commentary on his earlier Oedipus play, via the intracorporal reception piece and self-critique of the Phoenissae. Among the many verbal cues to this revisionist attitude occurs in Oedipus’
phrase *melius inveniam viam*, where *via* and the comparative *melius* both point up poetic choice and comment on the paradoxical nature of self-punishment. What was a perverse wish to live as a form of intended punishment has now, in the reprise, been recast as an opportunity for striving to outdo. Oedipus laments that he fell short in his punishment the first time around: *quantulum hac egi manu*, and rethinks his earlier intention not to die:

OE. ... quid moror sedes meas?
mortem, Cithaeron, redde et hospitium mihi
illud meum restitue, ut expirem senex
ubi debui infans: recipe supplicium vetus. (*Phoe. 31-3*).

OE. ... Why create delay for my own dwelling place?
Give me back my death, Cithaeron, and restore to
me my abode, so that I might die an elderly man where
I should have died as an infant: accept the old punishment.

In the earlier play he was afraid of the vague ‘everything’ in the prologue (*cuncta expavesco*) before learning what he had done, and specifically feared continued incest with Jocasta after his horrific realization (in his blindness at the end of the Oedipus, he feared ‘stumbling on’ her as he departed Thebes in exile). But this would seem a lesser offense, in a way, since he had already engaged in such relations. The first Oedipus’ fears of guilt were borne out—and then some—as the chain of divinatory techniques finally culminated in a revelation of his parricide and incest. In the *Phoenissae* he adds the specific fear of renewed incest, but this time with his daughter, and with full knowledge of his past precedent of sexual transgression; he casts this, in an allusive way, in inter-generational terms: *omnia post matrem timeo*. The sentiment is itself echoed and reworked by later in the play, where the direction, generationally speaking, is upward: *timeo ... / post ista fratum exempla ne matri quidem / fides habenda est:* after these brotherly examples, Polynices dares not trust even his mother.

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556 They also echo Oedipus’ words about Apollo’s oracle as both destructive and salvific: *una iam superest salus, / si quam salutis Phoebus salutis viam* (*Oed. 108-9*).
557 *Phoe. 9*.
558 *ingredere praeceps, lubricos ponens gradus, / i profuge vade siste—ne in matrem incidas* (*Oed. 1050-1*).
559 *Phoe. 478-80*. 
As I noted above, in direct contradiction to his declaration in the *Oedipus* that he had paid the penalty owed with his blindness, Oedipus has changed his mind. This creates more opportunities for more self-punishment, and for more poetry. We learn that the first version was just a prelude (*coepi mori*). Interestingly, though, he still does not choose death. Rather, he realizes that he can pay fully (and Seneca can outdo more effectively in gruesomeness) if he outdoes the earlier Oedipus’ self-mutilation in an even more invasive way:

OE. ... audies verum, Oedipus: minus eruisti lumina audacter tua, quam praestitisti. nunc manum cerebro indue: hac parte mortem perage qua coepi mori. (*Phoe. 178-81*)

OE. ... You’ll hear the truth, Oedipus: you’ve dug out your eyes with less boldness than you’ve offered them up. Now clothe your hand with brains: finish off your death with this part by which death was begun.

The rhetoric of outdoing the earlier (Senecan) version of Oedipus also features echoes of other Senecan tragedies, as when Oedipus declares that he wants to hide not in but beneath Tartarus, and Hercules’ similar wish. In this constellation, Oedipus can be seen as both individual with his own concerns within a particular play, and also a transliterary figure who can serve as a vehicle for commenting on poetological issues.

The first half of the *Phoenissae* consists of an extended Passion-Restraint scene between the exiled Oedipus and Antigone, where she persuades her father(-brother) not to kill himself. Here Antigone plays the role of the Stoic adviser, in a parallel position to the Amphitryo–Theseus pair vis-à-vis Hercules. As with the analogous scene in the *Hercules*, the scene in the *Phoenissae* also echoes an episode (or two) from Seneca’s own life, when he was dissuaded from suicide by love for his father, but with the genders and the generations of the participants inverted in the biographical notice. If we read

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560 *Phoe. 172.*
561 *Phoe. 145; cf. Herc. 1225-6.*
562 And, as Boyle offers (2011, *ad loc.*), it echoes the Passion-Restraint scene between Phaedra and her nurse; I see the gender disparity between the one whose passion is (supposed to be) being restrained as an integral component in the differences between the two scenes. With Oedipus and Antigone, one path suffices for both, as Antigone his physical guide along the road, and their path in terms of mortality (of whether to live or die) is linked, too (*Phoe. 76*).
563 *Ep. 78*; see my discussion of the links between the similar scene in the *Hercules* and Senecan biography in Chapter 4.
backwards, the Oedipus–Antigone scene also activates an uncanny echo of the story (put forth by later sources) about Seneca and his younger wife Paulina, for whose sake he claims to have decided against suicide.\textsuperscript{564}

In interesting ways, then, Seneca’s \textit{Phoenissae}, when read with his \textit{Oedipus}, shows a prophecy that is fulfilled beyond the bounds of the individual play in which it features. The dialogues within and between the plays also show that what is able to be predicted from an earlier instantiation—even one by the same poet—is limited, due to the unforeseeable intervening forces of authorial innovation and the meanings that will be activated by each receiver with each successive engagement. What is more, as the events in Seneca’s own life (not least, his theatricalized death scene) bear out, the lines between an author’s work and an author’s life can become blurred, as elements of one often spill over into the other. The scene in the \textit{Hercules} in which Hercules is dissuaded from suicide was clearly co-motivated by the Euripidean treatment of Hercules, along with an episode from Seneca’s youth. But Seneca surely could not have foreseen how his Antigone–Oedipus scene would take on new resonances following the events of his own life, as his biographers (and ‘mythographers’) would interpret it anew. A Senecan reception of Seneca, the very existence of the \textit{Phoenissae} when viewed against the backdrop of Seneca’s larger oeuvre provides a commentary on the intertwined phenomena of poetic creation and reception, and specifically, of what Emily Wilson has labeled ‘tragic overliving.’ On the model of what I am labeling ‘poetic \textit{confatalia,}’ these examples suggests that only so much can be predicted, or rather controlled, by the poet. Seneca \textit{tragicus} has the task of innovating on earlier models, and in this way subverts \textit{fatum} in the process of reinterpretation. But unforeseeable forces of interpretation in every subsequent act of reception also challenge already-told \textit{fatum}, even as they recall the poet’s memory.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This chapter has treated Oedipus as a subspecies of the \textit{vates}—one desires to exercise autonomy over and above fate, and especially to attain self-knowledge. Oedipus is an apt

\textsuperscript{564} For this scene, see \textit{Ep. Mor.} 104. For a more in-depth analysis of Paulina and Seneca, see Ker (2009, pp. 25-32; pp. 68-9; and elsewhere).
figure through which to explore issues surrounding prophecy and hermeneutics, due
to his complex relationship with oracles and his dualistic obsession to know and his
refusal to believe what he does discover. What is more, he believes that he can still avoid
his fate, not knowing that it has already happened to him, and continues to happen, in
that he killed his father, mated with his mother, and engendered children by his mother-
wife. Causality links issues of prophecy and of poetics, and the myth of Oedipus, with the
indispensable presence of the oracle that drives the action, along with the attempted
evasion of fate by the protagonist, suggests a model of co-fatedness for both actual events
and poetic processes (what I call ‘poetic confatalia’). The individualism of Oedipus
represents, in broad strokes, the eph’hēmin component of co-fated occurrents, which is
also analogous to the element of poetic creativity that is not able to be foreseen based on
the plotlines of the myth or on previous iterations of poetry. Through his Oedipus, Seneca
also presents the hermeneutic activities involved in poetic creation and interpretation,
and those of attempted self-knowledge, as parallel processes. As Oedipus’ situation
insinuates, striving after totalizing knowledge—especially self-knowledge—even despite
access to multiple hermeneutic avenues and technologies of the self, is always and already
doomed to fail.

Oedipus presents a special challenge for Seneca, since Sophocles’ Oedipus
Tyrannos is both the locus classicus for the Oedipus legend and is often held up as the
paradigmatic example of tragedy. Seneca takes on the task of rivaling the Sophoclean
version not just within the body of his Oedipus plays (in ways I have articulated
throughout this chapter and in Chapters 1 and 2) but in writing a second play on the
Labdacids, where one of the chief differences is the afterlife, or ‘alter-life,’ of Jocasta. This
still-living Jocasta in the Phoenissae undoes, and so rewrites, his Oedipus. The
incongruities between the first and second Theban play reveal much about Senecan
poetics, and indeed, about poetic filiation in general. The declaration of Oedipus that he
has ‘overfulfilled’ the oracle mirrors the accretive poetics of Seneca more broadly, as it
proves once again to be not one of ‘either–or’ but of ‘both–and’; more often ‘both–and–
and.’ Similarly to how Seneca interprets Hercules through (Seneca’s) own experience, the
second half of the Phoenissae allows for an excursus on the vagaries of fratricidal civil war,
and the problems of pietas it presents—issues that were at the heart of the concerns of the
nascent Roman empire. The connection is made more explicit by the fact that the
mythical Oedipus (in the forms of theatre, recitatio, and pantomime) enjoyed a
renaissance in the early Julio-Claudian empire—with even Nero acting the role of Oedipus
on stage. Taken together, Seneca’s Theban plays can be seen as a kind of meta-text on
poetic creation and interpretation. In the self-conscious revisionism of the second play, we
can see Seneca rewriting Seneca.
Conclusion

Seneca’s prophets, non-prophets, and poets

As this dissertation has sought to elucidate, prophecy is indispensable to Senecan tragedy, and it does not operate in straightforward ways. The traditional prophets fail to deliver complete, unerring prophecies—a shortcoming they themselves articulate—and a variety of alternative figures come to assume vatic roles. In Latin, a vates can be either a prophet or a poet, or both. Seneca draws upon this inherent dualism in order to explore, through his vatic characters, issues of fate, foreknowledge, and hermeneutics. Seneca’s characters attempt to know events in advance in order to control some part of the future, and this takes many forms: explicit prophecy; usurpation of the prophetic role and/or subversion of fatum; replacement of prophecy with other modalities. But is foreknowledge either attainable or advisable? As the case of Cassandra shows, special knowledge can be a curse as well as a gift. Seneca’s Oedipus is obsessed with knowing (and so trying to avoid) a future he fears. Other figures, like Atreus and Medea, refuse to engage with the future altogether. In the tunnel vision of their revenge, they fail to comprehend that they too are subject to being attacked or challenged. It is debatable whether or not their attitude toward an unseen future is the wiser path. In the many failures of Senecan characters to divine the future resides the suggestion that we should look to other avenues. Some of Seneca’s characters, the vatic-poetic subset, seem aware of the possibilities of writing to prove more effective at exercising influence over an unseen future than straightforward prophecy. What none of Seneca’s characters are willing or able to espouse (and this attitude leads to problems for them) is the idea that events will fall out in accordance with divine will: ex decreto dei.\(^565\)

Prophecy and its substitute operations provide a way for Seneca to interact with his poetic predecessors and to comment on poetic creation and reception, including various poetic ‘afterlives’. In these meta-vatic operations, it is suggestive to see Seneca qua vates acting in ways that resemble poet- and prophet-figures as, through his own vatic

\(^{565}\) NQ 3.10.12. This is a commonplace in Stoicism, and is a goal of the sapiens; it is closely related to the idea of living in accordance with nature (secundum naturam).
characters, he engages with various forms of *fata* past, present, and future. The idea that poetry is able to transmit certain philosophical or metaphysical ideas in ways that a prose treatise cannot is familiar from Seneca’s *Ep. 108*. Not every poetic genre, however, would have been suitable for the kinds of issues that Seneca was interested in examining: the multilayered tectonics of cause and time; human–divine relations; and rhetoric and poetics. Drama, with its inherent multi-voiced dialogism, is an especially suitable vehicle for staging debates through its various characters and choruses, within a specific play and even across other plays. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on the individual figure, the *vates*, as an inroad into examining prophecy, since numerous poet- and prophet-figures feature in his plays, and, what is more, engage in dialogue not only with characters in their individual plays but with their prototypes (e.g. previous Cassandra, Calchas, furial figures, and so on).

Seneca does not only use his vatic characters to stage these internal debates; I also see him reinterpreting the term *vates* (which Vergil and other Augustan poets had previously redefined to emphasize the role of the poet to engage in contemporary ideological debates) to also encompass a non-sectarian philosophical dimension. Seneca *vates* is, I propose, a kind of philosopher-poet, where the two roles are mutually informing. This idea is reflective of Seneca’s comments on (and dramatization of) poetry’s efficacy to encode and question philosophical material in ways that prose cannot. It is suggestive to wonder whether Seneca envisioned a kind of chiastic relation of hierarchies between the failure of prophecy (and relative degree of success of poetry) and the greater success of poetry to communicate what might be ineffable in prose texts. I emphasize ‘non-sectarian’ with the qualitification that the tragedies can, and arguably do, encode or reinforce (or question) Stoic beliefs. While Seneca is a self-identified Stoic, he also had training in other schools, and his tragedies are certainly open to non-stoicizing readings. Along the lines of Hine’s questioning of *interpretatio stoica*, I believe that the philosophical currents that we see in Senecan tragedy can, and should, be seen not in terms of orthodoxy but rather as informed by (and informing of) a common store of philosophical and ‘humanistic’ questions that recur across the various schools. Similarly, we see Seneca drawing on a variety of genres and source material in his poetic output. We

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also find this philosophical flexibility and generic multiplicity reflected in Seneca’s own oeuvre. In this respect, we might profitably return to the model of selective pluralism that finds praiseworthy in the bees (Ep. 84), and also in the many-voiced chorus of the same letter, both of which were mentioned in the Introduction to the dissertation. With prophecy, plurality leads to problems, as it is incompatible with isolating a single definitive meaning. But with writing, if we are to judge by what is explicit and implicit in Seneca’s works, eclecticism produces a sum that is greater than any one of its constituent parts.

**Seneca futurus: prophecy in the Octavia**

The various vatic threads that are at play in Senecan tragedy coalesce in an early reception of Seneca, the praetexta drama Octavia. Of disputed date and authorship, it is transmitted in one of the two main branches (E) with the authentic Senecan tragedies and with another pseudo-Senecan play, the Hercules Oetaeus, and was once widely thought to have been penned by Seneca himself. The author employs many of the same motifs and techniques as the authentic Senecan dramas; in addition, one can hear frequent echoes of Seneca’s prose works, which in turn comments on his status as a polygeneric author in a more productive way do than the notices by his detractor Quintilian. The Octavia features members of the Neronian inner circle cast as a tragic house: the plot centers around Nero’s intended divorce of (and subsequent exile and plans to murder) his wife Octavia, who is also his stepsister; the concurrent plot is his remarriage to his mistress Poppaea Sabina. As with Seneca’s Agamemnon, the Octavia features two choruses, one of which is sympathetic to Octavia, the other to Poppaea. It also features Seneca himself as a character who engages in an agôn with Nero; a variation of the Passion–Restraint scenes familiar from Senecan tragedy, the scene is simultaneously an example of the ‘mirror-of-the-prince’ dynamic familiar from Senecan prose, in De Clementia and elsewhere. Seneca is beaten by the emperor in their debate—an ostensible nod to his real-life failures as tutor–adviser to the young prince.

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567 For Seneca’s ‘many genres’, both prose and poetic, see Ker (2006).
The Octavia is intriguing and invaluable, both as our sole surviving specimen of the Roman praetexta drama and on its own merits. For the purposes of this study, however, it is most relevant as an early reception piece of how prophecy operates in Senecan tragedy. Prophecy’s centrality to the Octavia has been noted by commentators, especially by Kragelund; however, it is generally adduced to comment on issues of dating (i.e. imperial succession) and politico-historical reality. I would like to extend Kragelund’s observations to focus on literary-historical aspects as well: I propose that the prophetic modes of the Octavia offer valuable insights on, while also innovating on, how prophetic elements operate in the authentic Senecan tragedies. While there are no overt vates in the Octavia (with one possible exception: Seneca himself), many of the same prophetic modalities are to be found in the Octavia as in Senecan drama. As this section will discuss, prophecy in the Octavia fails for the many of the same basic reasons as well, while other activities and figures come to assume the role of the traditional prophet. The vatic successes and failures in the Octavia provides a way of engaging with the themes prophecy cues in Senecan drama (e.g. causality, of poetics, of subjectivity, hermeneutics) by encouraging us to read Seneca backwards.

Octavia, like Andromache and other Senecan characters, plays the incidental prophet in the fabula praetexta that bears her name. Invested with an ominous sense of her own impending doom, but without specific foreknowledge, her statements provide incidental prophesies to those with a more removed viewpoint. The disparity between the meaning she intends and the resonances only the external audiences would understand, produce irony. For example, the statement Toleranda quamvis patiar, haud umquam queant / nisi morte tristi nostra finiri mala has the surface meaning of applying to her own particular situation. In fact, the declaration will prove true by the end of the play, though she has no specific knowledge of Nero’s designs against her. And sentiments such as extinguat et me, ne manu nostra cadat could be uttered by nearly everyone who had contact with the imperial domus—even by Seneca himself.572

569 Kragelund (1982).
570 Her vague presentiments are similar to the intuitions of Oedipus in his prologue that he is responsible for the Theban plague (Oed. 36).
571 Oct. 100-1.
An adynaton, Octavia’s declaration that various impossibilities will occur before her husband’s wicked mind will be one with hers, also serves as an alternative to prophecy—as the external audience knows, this is already the case, since Nero is no longer in love with her and is no longer sharing her bed.\footnote{\textit{Iungentur ante saeva sideribus freta / et ignis undae, Tartaro tristi polus, / lux alma tenebris, rosicidae noti dies, / quam cum scelesti coniugis mente impia / mens nostra, semper fratri fratrism extincti memor}. (Oct. 222-25).} At least one of Octavia’s incidental prophecies also features the telescoping of time that is a distinctive, recurrent feature of imperial Latin poetry.\footnote{In contrast to a grand vision of what will happen with respect to Rome’s origins or present age from the viewpoint of the remote past (as in the \textit{Aeneid}), the span of time between prophecy and actual event is dramatically foreshortened in imperial poetry. Telescopic time activates a sense of immediacy and one of belatedness.} Octavia also correctly ‘prophesies’ that Poppaea will not only be a wife but a mother soon.\footnote{Oct. 188.} The statement is ironic, of course, and Octavia will soon learn the true state of affairs, if she does not already know them. In a play, the timescale of prophecy (as of irony) must necessarily be foreshortened if the prophecy is to be borne out as true within the course of the dramatic action.\footnote{This is also how dramatic irony operates; see the ‘irony’ section in the dissertation Introduction.} The content of Octavia’s unwitting prophecy, Poppaea’s pregnancy, also proves the trump card in Nero’s \textit{agōn} with Seneca. Seneca speaks of Nero’s happy union with a wife with whom he will produce children as if forecasting some future event. But Nero (along with the audience) knows that this is already the case, since his mistress is carrying their child.\footnote{For Seneca’s forecast, see \textit{Oct.} 533-5; Nero’s rebuttal: \textit{et ipse populi vota iam pridem moror, / cum portet utero pignus et partem mei. / quin destinamus proximum thalamis diem}? (Oct. 589-591).} 

Senecan ghosts and furies have access to hidden knowledge and often act as vatic analogues, as I argued in chapter 2.\footnote{As Boyle succinctly puts it, ‘Senecan ghosts do not lie.’ (2008, p. 224).} In a scene that resembles the spontaneous appearance of the ghost of Achilles from the underworld in Seneca’s \textit{Troades}, a furial Agrippina plays the prophet. She proves an even more accurate forecaster of the true events than Achilles’ ghost—indeed, she is both ghost and fury, and is herself being hounded by the shade of her husband Claudius. Holding a torch, a harbinger of a happy wedding or of a funeral, Agrippina’s ghost cryptically foretells events that would actually occur. She prophesies the death of Nero (Oct. 618) in a remarkably similar way to how the historians’ and biographers’ descriptions depict the events of 68 C.E., most notably, his
flight from the city and the lashes he endured according to Suetonius’ biography. As often in Senecan tragedy, and in Greek and Roman literature more generally, the lines between prophecy, curse, and promise are blurred: Agrippina’s declaration in line 628ff. (veniet dies tempusque quo reddat suis / animam nocentem sceleribus, iugulum hostibus, / desertus ac destructus et cunctis egens) reflects these interrelated phenomena. In addition to her coded prophecy of Nero’s death, Agrippina as funeral pronuba also gestures toward the doomed marriage of Nero and Poppaea. Her appearance just before dawn on the wedding day of the imperial couple further contributes to this ominous atmosphere. In this way, the author of the Octavia writes history through drama, by encoding it as an ex post eventum prophecy. Seneca did not write history, and so it is suggestive to see the Octavia’s author as supplying this ‘missing’ complement to Seneca’s oeuvre, while also commenting on his otherwise wide-ranging genres.

Poppaea’s description of an ominous dream offers the most extended engagement with prophecy in the Octavia. The subsequent dream interpretation by the nurse, which is also an intended (and failed) consolatio, echoes an important genre in which Seneca wrote. What is more, in the dream-and-interpretation scenario resides another set of coded prophetic, proleptic, and ironic references. Poppaea, like Octavia and, in different ways, like Agrippina and the Seneca character, functions as an incidental prophet. Due to her limited perspective, she does not know that her words can be interpreted in a way that actually reveals (from the point of view of the external audience) or prophesies (from the perspective of those within the drama) events that would actually occur in the inner circles of the imperial household. Portions of her narration operate in oracular ways, where elliptical diction produces ambiguity via timescale shift, multiple referentiality, and, more generally, the inherent polyvalency of certain key words.

An overarching ambiguity is that the identity of Poppaea’s coniunx is left unclear. This is made possible by her multiple husbands (and emperors) past, present, and future: at the time of her dream, she had formerly been married to Crispinus and Otho (who will

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579 I am indebted to the commentaries of Ferri (2003) and Boyle (2008) for the historical details I reference above.
580 Seneca wrote several consolationes. The Consolatio ad Polybiurn was written around 44/43 C.E., during Seneca’s exile, and was addressed to the emperor Claudius’ literary secretary and freedman Polybius, who had lost his brother.
581 See Ferri (2003) and Boyle (2008) for perceptive comments on this section, as well as the extended treatment by Kragelund (1982).
become emperor after Nero’s death), and is that day scheduled to marry Nero. Crispinus and Nero are both mentioned in the course of her dream; Otho is not, and must be supplied by the external audience who has knowledge from history, or lived experience, that he was also emperor. Her limited timescale does not admit of as many interpretations as does the audience’s, since they know the missing piece of Otho’s future reign. The infernal context of the dream is also suggestive of the hidden knowledge of the past and future that the underworld activates. Nowhere does the plural form coniuges appear, and in fact she uses a form of the singular coniunx three times in her brief speech. The adverb quondam supplies still more ambiguity, since the word carries a past or a future valence; it can even operate in the ‘occasional’ sense. Proximus also works in a similar way, as it can mean ‘most recent’ as well as ‘next’ or ‘following.’ In the phrase ensemque iugulo condit saevum Nero, the identity of whose throat a sword is buried in, is also open to multiple interpretations in the entangled imperial domus. According to the historical record, Nero forced Crispinus’ suicide in 66 C.E. before committing suicide himself soon after. So, too, in Poppaea’s uncertainty about ‘which’ blood she sees (quem cruorem coniugis vidi mei?)—that is, of which of her husbands—the strained Latin reinforces the cryptic confusion.

In an attempt to reassure Poppaea, the Nutrix interprets the dream in a way that offers incidental prophecies within oracular speech. It also functions as a consolatio, one of the signature genres of Seneca. Here again, Poppaea’s marriage to multiple husbands, and to more than one emperor, offers scope for polyvalency and for lack of precision, seen when the Nutrix refers to princeps tuus. One wonders whether to take this as referring to the current emperor Nero, or to her future emperor (and her past husband) Otho. A similar vagueness, but with an infernal twist, attends Nutrix’s echo of Poppaea’s phrase thalamos toros. While on one reading she is forecasting marital happiness, her words, like those of oracles, also contain an ominous under-meaning: ‘eternal abode’ also

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582 coniugem quondam meum, Oct. 729.
583 Interestingly, though, the description of her marriage couches is plural: toros ... iugales ... meos (Oct. 726-7). There is an additional ambiguity in that torus can be a marriage bed as well as a funeral couch, as Kragelund observes (1982, p. 33).
584 Oct. 733.
585 Oct. 739. Her speech also resembles the doubt-filled questions of Cassandra in Seneca’s Agamemnon.
586 Oct. 752.
587 Line 742 in toros stabiles futuros ... domus aeternae echoes the passage above (Oct. 726-7).
suggests the underworld. And as the audience knows, Poppaea will die by Nero’s hand not long after the action of the play. Mythological exempla also factor into this atmosphere of dense ambiguity. Malleable figures of myth can actually suggest the opposite of what one means, as occurs when the Nurse, equating Poppaea and Nero with Juno and Jupiter, declares that Jupiter is swayed by no mortal woman and that Juno’s place is secure as Jupiter’s one and only. Not only does this run counter to what we know about the relationship of the deities, but it is the pair Octavia and Nero that most closely resembles Jupiter and Juno, due to their simultaneous status as each other’s sibling and spouse—a resemblance that was reflected in imperial propaganda and that was already mentioned by Octavia’s nurse earlier in the play. On another reading, Poppaea’s Nurse is a too-true, though unwitting, prophet if we see either Poppaea or Octavia (or both) as Junos-on-earth, with Nero’s own string of infidelities reflecting Jupiter’s.

The multiple, shifting strands of time and knowledge that characterize the underworlds of Senecan drama are also at play in the Octavia. Here, the dramatist reimagines the underworld as the imperial domus: a hell on earth. Poppaea’s infernal dream is itself a prophecy: everyone who shows up in the underworld of her dream would, within a few years of the play’s action, be killed (or be ordered to commit suicide) by Nero—including both herself and Nero. The interchangeability of the victims of Nero’s violence reflects the historical reality and gives a sense of the tragic, infernal atmosphere of the imperial household at this time. But even more than this, the author of the Octavia capitalizes on these ambiguities not only to cleverly comment on imperial history but also, I suggest, as one reading Seneca through the lens of prophetic scenes and figures that do not operate in the expected ways. As Seneca did, the Octavia’s author engages with questions of interpretatio via engagement with straightforward prophecy and its alternatives.

It is Seneca himself who delivers the closest approximation to a per se prophecy in the Octavia. As poet- and prophet-vates, he delivers a catalogue of the ages which culminates in the current one. Significantly, he does not prophesy beyond the immediate

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588 Oct. 219-221.
589 Oct. 283-5; however, the chorus is wrong: maxima luna / soror Augusti i.e. Octavia, does not any longer share her husband–brother’s bed. This oracular slippage in familial terms recalls similar phenomena in Seneca’s Oedipus and Phoenissae; again, due to a convoluted, incestuous relationship, but this time the incest is among siblings rather than with a parent/child.
moment but stops—or is interrupted—right when Nero enters the play for the first time. The only reference to any would-be future in his prophecy of the end of ages due to wickedness and the dawn of a new era, in accordance with the Stoic theory of palingenesis, the periodic destruction and subsequent rebirth of the cosmos. But any potential futurity is eclipsed by the presentist bent of Seneca’s speech: in conjunction with Nero’s impeccably timed entrance, it suggests that the end of ages is now, during Nero’s reign, with no need to prophesy further. Or, on a slightly different interpretation, it suggests either Seneca’s inability to foresee past the point of Nero’s rule, during which Seneca would commit suicide—or else his unwillingness, perhaps due to the irrelevance of anything that is beyond the scope of that particular historical moment.\footnote{In this way, Seneca’s speech could have generic implications, signalling how prophecy works in the praetexta drama—that is, by presentism and foreshortened timescale. This must remain an unprovable hypothesis, however, since we have no basis for comparison with other examples of the genre.} Although Nero one-ups his former tutor to ‘win’ the agōn, Seneca’s commentary on the degeneracy of the current age does, of course, prevail in the standard historical treatments—thus proving him a successful vates. In addition, the play’s final lines (which the chorus delivers) echo Seneca’s own earlier statements about the wickedness of the present day.\footnote{urbe est nostra mitior Aulis / et Taurorum barbarorum tellus. / hospitis illic caede litatur numen superum. / civis gaudet Roma cruore. Oct. 978-82.}

In light of the readings above, it can be suggestive to think of the entire Octavia play as an extended prophecy \textit{ex eventu}, and/or a running piece of irony.\footnote{As often, the lines between prophecy and irony are blurred; see my comments in the Introduction on the links between prophecy and irony, and on the informing presence of one’s relative vantage point with respect to knowledge.} None of the characters actually know that they are playing vatic roles except for Seneca himself, who attempts to offer ‘prophecies’ in the forms of \textit{sententiae} and a grand cosmic vision. He fails within the course of the tragedy but can be seen as triumphing, offering a ‘too-true’ prophecy, when read with the historical and biographical accounts. A major way that the Octavia responds to, interprets, and attempts to outdo Senecan tragedy is via prophetic scenes. The audience of this praetexta drama, equipped by hindsight, has greater access to knowledge than do the characters, despite their political status.

Prophecy fails in the Octavia for many of the same reasons it does in Senecan tragedy; what is more, the failure of prophecy also provides an inset commentary on the workings of the imperial household. In the Neronian \textit{domus}, which functions like a tragic
house, it seems that an actual prophet would be superfluous. There is no linear progress in the Neronian household; rather, it is subject to similar processes of iteration, regression, and recursion that characterize other mytho-tragic families—for example, the house of Atreus and of Labdacus—and indeed, gestures toward the myth of decline that the character Seneca proposes. Those within the dramas, as well as those without, should be able to predict the degree, and type, of nefas in which Nero and those close to him would engage. But the limitations of subjective experience, especially when combined with close involvement in a situation, produce slippage between one’s interpretation and what is actually the case. The Octavia shows that the patterns of historical and mythic exempla, and knowledge of human psychology, form a valid alternative to prophecy—indeed, can prove more reliable than traditional prophetic endeavors. Rosenmeyer’s words on perspective encapsulates the limited foresight, and the limitations of interpretation more generally, in apprehending a piece of drama as spectator, reader, or scholar: ‘It is only by hindsight, via the structured retrospective glance enjoyed by audiences in the theater, but rarely by anyone else, that a complex of actions and events and responsibilities can appear to be perfectly determined.’\textsuperscript{593} The space between ‘rarely’ and ‘never’, however, offers a tantalizing promise—even a challenge—for us all as potential interpreters.

\textsuperscript{593} Rosenmeyer (1989, p. 74).
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