

Vulnerability and Transcendence: Scaeva and Oedipus as Failed Stoic *Sapientes*

Dangerous women in Neronian literature possess a dynamic and unique power to control the abject and the chaos of biological processes precisely because they have such intimate familiarity with those substances and processes. That which makes women weak and vulnerable, the porosity of their bodies and the loss of vital fluids, when controlled and staunched, makes them ever so much more powerful than their husbands, fathers and brothers. On the other hand, when husbands', fathers' and brothers' bodies are invaded and made porous through physical injury or sexual subservience, because they are less familiar with the loss of vital fluids, these men are at a distinct disadvantage to women. Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Seneca's tragedies illustrate that human men ultimately are incapable of being impervious to desires, appetites and physical pleasure and pain, and, therefore, struggle continuously to achieve the enlightenment of the Stoic Sapiens. The only women who can achieve that coveted status, on the other hand, are aberrations, such as witches or perpetual virgins, who both are considered women at odds with cultural and societal expectations as well as dangerous members of society. In this paper, I examine two case studies, Seneca's Oedipus and Lucan's Scaeva as exempla of men's inability to achieve enlightenment.

The aspirant to becoming the Stoic Sapiens seeks the enlightenment that detachment from emotions and sensation brings but struggles with succumbing to his body's desires and becoming a victim to those more powerful and aggressive than he. Because he is still somewhat enslaved by his emotions, urges and fears, he makes himself vulnerable physically, mentally and intellectually to outside forces and influence. And so, as 'everymen' who are unable to control their own vital fluids, Scaeva and Oedipus become similar to women, whose bodies are porous

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and lose vital fluids. They pathologically vacillate between experiencing the debasement of women and the intellectual and emotional clarity of the Stoic Sapiens.

Seneca's Oedipus represents the 'everyman', who, although doing his best for his family and the state, nevertheless, for the most part, lives his life blindly, unable to see how he might escape the influence of his appetites and desires. This blindness is realized in the last act of the tragedy, when Oedipus violently tears out his eyes, and, by doing so, attempts to take control of his own body, which, up to this point, had been variously subject to his urges towards violence, tyranny and incest. As a person's face is a primary means of expressing individuality, Oedipus becomes a representation of the abject himself: the empty eye sockets and the gore that flows from them function contradictorily as a theatrical mask (his original appearance has been obscured and refashioned) and a means of exposing Oedipus' inherent vulnerable nature. In this last desperate attempt to master his desires and urges, Oedipus achieves merely fleeting happiness and contentment, only to realize that he is the reason Iocasta kills herself in his presence. The extrusion of the eyes, which, in Sophocles' tragedy, functions as a symbol of enlightenment, serves in Seneca's tragedy as the opposite: it forces Oedipus to confront his inability to see, understand and thus control any aspect of his life at all.

Scaeva, a Caesarean soldier in book six of the *Bellum Civile*, masters his reaction to extreme sensation, fatal injury and loss of abject vital fluids. At the same time, however, he cannot contain his urges to destroy and maim other Romans, and, all the while, he blindly obeys Caesar regardless of the moral implications of doing so. Following the initial description of Scaeva and several astonishing feats of war-time behavior, we see perhaps the most astounding: Scaeva, despite being mortally wounded and pierced through the eye with an arrow, fights even more violently and successfully than he did prior to receiving these grievous wounds (6.214-25).

Scaeva rips out his eye himself and is consequently both the object of injury from a foreign missile and the agent of his own deoculation. By occupying these two roles, victim and enactor of his own dismemberment, he, like Oedipus, represents 'everyman', partially blinded by his inability to control himself but striving for some kind of virtus in impossible times. That he destroys only one eye testifies to the presence of a dual identity. One identity, the one with sight, represents the aggressor, while the blind identity represents the victim. Lucan seems to portray Scaeva as Caesar's ideal soldier for this very reason: he willingly victimizes himself through self-deoculation while simultaneously victimizing his fellow Romans. In this way, he fulfills the role of the flawed human half blind to what is happening around him, fighting for what he thinks is virtuous, but failing horribly in reaching that goal.