

Chris Mowat

# Engendering the Future

Divination and the Construction  
of Gender in the Late Roman Republic

Classics

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Sheffield, October 2020.

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## Note on the texts

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For ease of reading, I have used the standard Anglicised versions of Roman, and particularly Greek names, so Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, not Titus Livius and Dionysios of Halikarnassos. Where relevant the titles of works are given in their standard Latin derivation, as they are given in the Oxford Classical Dictionary (with an English translation in brackets when necessary); similarly, abbreviations follow the Oxford Classical Dictionary. All Greek and Latin texts, unless otherwise stated, are derived from the Loeb Classical Library series editions. Finally, all translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.



# Chapter One

## Introduction

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### 1.1 Engendering the Future

Cassandra. Pythia. Sibyl(s). Tiresias (and, by extension, Manto). When one thinks of individual diviners in the ancient Mediterranean, there is a heavy Greek bent to the answers. Examples can be found in Rome's mythic past – Tanaquil, for one – but even these often have a foreign flavour to them: in Tanaquil's case she is explicitly portrayed as an Etruscan who comes to Rome.<sup>1</sup> One line of reasoning for this is that, as John North once noted, there appears to be a lack of named individuals in Roman divination: though the Romans had extensive and, to some extent, embedded divinatory traditions underpinning their political and religious systems, emphasis was placed on collegial positions and offices, rather than on any particular person.<sup>2</sup> But these traditions, positions and offices, as impersonal as they seem, had specific (though often implicit) identity-based rules signalling who was “allowed” to practise, and to be successful at, divination. It is these identity markers that make up the individuals we can and do find in Roman divination.

But with these diviners, what is also unusual for listing individuals (real or mythical) in the ancient world is that one also finds a bent towards women. This is not exclusive, and of course a number of men can be found in the surviving traditions: Calchas and Mopsus on the Greek side; Tages and even Romulus, as augur, on the Italic. But despite the fact that this is not (on the surface) a gender exclusive area – and indeed perhaps because of this fact – there are very specifically gendered rules that form divinatory traditions.

In this book, then, I am aiming to demonstrate the ways in which those rules of gender stood in the late Roman Republic: who was *allowed* to divine? how did their

1 Cf. e.g. Liv. 1.34.4–6 for her marriage to Lucumo, a fellow native of the Tarquinii, and her plan for them to migrate from their homeland.

2 North 2000a, 93; cf. also Scheid 1993; 2013; Rüpke 2011. This is not to say that individuals cannot be found, but the political and religious systems hindered those individuals from acting completely in their own name: Davies 2004, 65–7; Belayche 2013; Rüpke 2013a; 2013b esp. 16. For the idea of embedded religion, see Kindt 2012.

gender role play into their presumed ability as well as the sanctioning of their practice? in what ways did gender play an implicit, if important part in the construction and performance of the divinatory traditions of the period?

Before we can start to answer some of these questions, there are a number of concepts that, though fluid, must be given at least a working definition. The following three sections will each develop the two areas that are the themes of this book, divination and gender, culminating in a discussion of the theory of performativity and its use for understanding the role of both these topics in the ancient world. The final two sections of the introduction will turn to the themes of the chapters that make up this book and to an opening case study of Fabia, the Vestal Virgin, who will provide us with some initial thoughts on the interaction of gender and divinatory practice in the late Roman Republic, and become a touchstone for the other case studies we meet in these pages.

## 1.2 Divining Definitions

Both divination and gender are subject areas rife with the idea of binaries. These come out in various forms, from feminine/masculine and sex/gender to religion/magic and truth/deception.<sup>3</sup> These can be useful to understand the different ways people and actions were seen and the responses they garnered in the ancient world (as much as the modern). The problem with binaries, however, is that their imposition hides the fact that there is always a lot of grey in the middle, and things can often include elements of both sides – or be party to neither. In this introduction, I will be addressing some of the issues that surround these; I am not proposing that we do away with categorisation completely – that would only serve to create even more issues – but that we understand binaries as much more open. By this I mean understanding that, no matter how strongly set a binary may appear, either in contemporary understanding and scholarship or in the ancient sources themselves, there are always points between and outside of the apparent integers, and even (sometimes) fluid movement across them is possible. Definitions and categories are only useful as far as they define that which fits within them, with the understanding that things can and do go beyond.

The first, and perhaps most accessible fluid concept to approach is the temporal boundaries I have placed on this work. “The late Roman Republic” as a periodisation is deliberately vague: it is a time when most of our literature from the (still broadly defined) Republican period comes, and a time on which the study of intellectual history, and, by extension, religious history, is often focused, partly thanks to the extensive

3 Lyons 1997 has highlighted male/female and mortal/divine as being two of the most important distinctions, at least for the Greeks. See also Bremmer 1998, esp. 24–31, for a history of the opposition of “sacred” and “profane” in the history of religion.

survival of Cicero's writing.<sup>4</sup> But the divisions become less stable when we consider the extent to which the developments of that age are informed by the earlier Republican period, and in turn, as Harriet Flower has demonstrated, the "late Republic" as a periodisation is defined and shaped by the preoccupations and biases of Imperial authors such as Livy and Appian looking at a political structure defined by the fact that it ended.<sup>5</sup> I focus on the period broadly comprising the latter half of the second century BCE to the first half of the first century BCE, understood as "the late Republic", then, but with the understanding that texts of and informed by both earlier and later periods are central to my arguments, and our understanding of this period.

As Greg Woolf has commented, the Republic (and particularly the late Republic) is also a central period for the study of ancient religion due to the way the centrality of the city has been the focus of scholarship on "*polis*-religion".<sup>6</sup> Although the city of Rome as an institution in and of itself does play a role in much of the divinatory traditions discussed through this book, it is important to remember that it is still possible to look beyond this framework, to see the diviners and other social actors affecting and affected by the divinatory traditions.

This leads us to the question of what precisely divination is. Cicero opens his treatise *De Divinatione* ("On Divination", henceforth *Div.*) by defining the practice as "fore-knowledge and the practice of discovering future events".<sup>7</sup> There is an echo of this in contemporary popular understanding, which focuses on the idea of divination being about revealing the future. Yet, whilst this is unquestionably an aspect of the subject, this is a very narrow classification that does not fully encompass divination in either Roman or comparative practices. Taking into account Cicero's definition, but also encompassing popular understandings, both ancient and contemporary (as will be seen throughout this book) my own working definition of divination is that, broadly put, it is a *standardised process of understanding signs and their interpretation, by which a person – or society – is or appears to be able to gain access to knowledge otherwise unattainable, concerning matters or events in the past, the present and/or the future.*<sup>8</sup> This definition

4 Cicero's centrality to the world of the late Republic, despite his atypicality, is, unfortunately, inescapable. As Elizabeth Rawson once wrote: "Above all, [the study of] intellectual life in the Ciceronian Age without Cicero himself must be Hamlet without the Prince" (1985, vii).

5 Flower 2010, esp. 3–17.

6 Woolf 2009, esp. 239–241. The *polis*-religion model was first outlined by Sourvinou-Inwood in 1990, reprinted as Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a; cf. also Sourvinou-Inwood 2000b. For criticisms of this model, in the study of both Greek and Roman religious practice, see Woolf 2003; Kindt 2009; Eidinow 2011.

7 Cic. *Div.* 1.1: *praesensionem et scientiam rerum futurarum*. For a thorough discussion of this text and its author's place in the construction of divination in the late Roman Republic, see chapter 2: **Marcus**.

8 There have been many attempts to provide definitions and comparative models for both classical and contemporary divination: cf. e.g. Blacker and Loewe 1980, 1; Peek 1991, 2; Nissinen 2010, 341; Raphals 2013, 1; Trampedach 2015, 13; Volk 2017, 331–2; Ogden 2017, 1. For an in-depth definition, and discussion of the constituting elements of comparative divinatory traditions, see Rüpke 2013b.

deliberately sees divination as a human activity. The “signs” may be actively sought, such as in the practice of extispicy, or they may passively come to a person, such as with prophetic dreams, but it still must be a human agent who follows the process of interpreting and understanding the sign and the knowledge it provides.<sup>9</sup> Thus, even with North’s proviso that there was no place for individuals (or even objects as agents) in ancient accounts of Roman divination, personhood and identity must remain central to our understanding.

It is frequently noted, with another echo from Cicero, that almost all cultures, ancient and modern, practise some form of divination.<sup>10</sup> This is often placed on one side or the other of the binary of “religion” and “magic”, a binary even more problematic than some of the others we will encounter.<sup>11</sup> The use of both of these terms within the historical context of the Greco-Roman world has come under fire recently, as well as the idea of there being a hard and fast dividing line between them.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, one only has to look as far as economic projections and weather forecasts on a contemporary Western news programme to realise that “divination” does not have to come under either label.<sup>13</sup>

The parallel of a contemporary weather forecast is worth lingering on for a moment, as it can provide us with some food for thought, particularly in the areas of identity, authority and divinatory competition. The person that we see on a television programme commands our attention, and we generally assume what they say to be accurate (even if it does not always turn out to be correct). This assumption comes from the constructed identity of that person: we understand from the way they are presented and from the fact that the news corporation has hired them to provide the viewers with that information that they must be a qualified meteorologist (or at least the public face of a team of qualified meteorologists), someone who has learned the skill of interpreting weather patterns and predicting what will happen based on methods we as viewers do not necessarily understand. News programmes do not, however, have a monopoly on the future, and the weather highlights for us another angle in divinatory practices: the

9 Contra Hunt 2016, 199–223, who considers trees as active agents in arboreal prodigies. Whilst it is true that trees can, in this sense, be seen as actors, this argument ignores the role that, first and foremost, the Senate plays in dictating whether an event really counts as a prodigy or not. For more on prodigies and actors, see chapter 4: **Callo/n**.

10 Cic. *Div.* 1.2: “I know of no people, neither so humane and learned, nor so savage and barbarous, who do not hold that the future is indicated, and that those indications can be perceived and foretold by certain people (*gentem quidem nullam uideo neque tam humanam atque doctam neque immanem atque barbaram, quae non significari futura et a quibusdam intellegi praedicique posse censeat*). For modern renderings of this refrain, cf. e.g. Blacker and Loewe 1980, 1; Johnston 2008, 2; Rüpke 2014, 9.

11 Cf. e.g. Graf 1999, 297; Johnston 2005, 7–8; 2008, 113.

12 Smith 2004, 13–27 (who also includes “science” in the firing line); Gordon and Marco Simón 2011, 5–14; Nongbri 2008; 2013.

13 A meteorologist may not consider themselves a “diviner” *in sensu stricto*, but nevertheless uses a standardised process of interpreting weather patterns in order to know (or guess) the weather of the future; see Fine 2007 for a discussion of meteorology as a “public science” that deals in futures.

place of superstition. In the UK, at least, there is an “old wives’ tale” that cows lie down in the field before it rains.<sup>14</sup> No scientific basis, or even observational data corroborates it, yet it still captures imagination, and this old wives’ tale has yet to be dispelled.<sup>15</sup> For example, when I was growing up, the kitchen window of my parents’ house overlooked a farmer’s field. If anyone noticed the cows in that field all suddenly lying down, a joke might be made, but a half-serious second thought would be given to any washing out on the line. We might, on the surface, think that there is just one channel open to us for attempting to navigate the weather of the day ahead, but in fact a range of divinatory options present themselves to us as authorities in which we place our trust.

Returning to the late Roman Republic, though the weather does indeed still play a role, divination is more specifically seen as relating to the gods, and thus the whole process can be viewed as a form of communication.<sup>16</sup> This is either in the sense of an appeal to the gods to send a message confirming their approval or consent to an action, or the reception – and interpretation – of a symbol or message of divine origin that had importance for an individual or the state. In the first way, the communication could, for example take the form of inspection of entrails (extispicy) or the flight of birds (ornithomancy or augury), or the seeking of oracular messages. The second, spontaneous form of divination might be a vision experienced in a dream, or the witnessing of an unnatural portent, such as a bleeding statue or a talking cow.

Another way this subject is dichotomised, over which much scholarly ink has been spilled, is the practice of “technical” divination, as opposed to “natural” divination. Deriving from the Greek divisions of *μαντική τεχνική* and *μαντική ἀτεχνος* respectively, these have been variously translated into English as “technical”, “inductive” or “artificial” for the former, and “natural”, “intuitive” or “inspired” for the latter, with a host of similar synonyms in other modern languages.<sup>17</sup> Simply put, technical divination can be understood as following established and widely accepted methods of interpretation in order to reveal the message of a sign in a skilled way that can be taught; an example might be the interpretation of livers in sacrificial divination.<sup>18</sup> This is contrasted with natural divination, whereby the sign comes to the diviner, often in an altered state such as a frenzy or sleep, which cannot necessarily be validated or understood by another person; by way of example we might think of prophetic dreaming.<sup>19</sup> This is a dichoto-

14 The phrase “old wives’ tale”, in both contemporary and Roman constructions, and the construction of superstition more generally, see chapter 2.6 **Nothing but an Old Wives’ Tale?**

15 Even the Royal Meteorological Society, though doubtful, does not dismiss the theory wholesale: theWeather Club 2010, <https://theweatherclub.org.uk/node/150> [accessed October 2020].

16 Rüpke 2015, esp. 355–7. For religion as communication more broadly, see also Rüpke 2007a; 2007b, 2014, 118–119.

17 For ease of reference, throughout this book I will consistently apply the terminology and translation of “technical” and “natural” respectively.

18 For a discussion of a sacrificial diviner, see chapter 5: **Martha**.

19 For a discussion of prophetic dreaming, see chapter 6: **Calpurnia**.

my that goes back as far as Plato, and his discussion of the concept of madness in the *Phaedrus*. Here, Plato distinguishes between the divination practices of the priestesses at Delphi and Dodona, who “whilst mad, have performed many splendid rites for Greece, both privately and publicly”<sup>20</sup> from the practice of ornithomancers, conducted by presumably rational actors. The former of these, he claims, is superior.<sup>21</sup> Of course, it must be remembered that this was a facet of Plato’s broader endeavour to place the rational, reflective philosopher as superior to all others, in this case both the prophet, who is not in their own mind, and the ornithomancer, inferior too to their inspired counterpart.<sup>22</sup> This distinction, though not the judgement, is brought out explicitly by Cicero in *Div.*, or, more precisely, by the character of Quintus. This text takes the form of a theological dialogue, with the characters ultimately seeming to debate the validity of divination, with Quintus arguing for and his brother Marcus against. The binary of “natural” and “technical” is one of the few elements of Quintus’ argument that can be said to have been straightaway accepted by Marcus.<sup>23</sup> From there, each brother uses this to structure the argument differently: Quintus frequently shifts his attention between the two, albeit placing a much heavier emphasis on natural divination, whereas Marcus neatly contests technical divination for the majority of his argument, before a short digression, and ending with a much briefer attack on the natural.

The distinction, however, is not necessarily as simple as that, and many divinatory activities do not simply fit into one category or the other. Michael A. Flower has commented that “we should rather think in terms of a spectrum or a range of activities”<sup>24</sup>. But, even a spectrum, by its very nature, reasserts the opposition between the integers at either end. In fact, even these two seemingly opposite categories are not mutually exclusive. Let us take the example of Artemidorus, a professional dream-interpreter of the second century CE. His *Oneirocritica* (“*Interpretation of Dreams*”) is an attempt to provide an encyclopaedia of tried and tested interpretations of the symbols in prophetic dreams. If you can learn the skill of dream-interpretation from such a book, surely it should be considered technical rather than, as it usually is considered, natural? This question is in fact what drives Artemidorus’ intellectual project, regardless of how successful he actually is in facilitating a perspective shift: his work demonstrates that, whether it is a binary or a spectrum, a tradition does not necessarily have to occupy a

20 Plat. *Phdr.* 244a-b: ἡ τε γὰρ δὴ ἐν Δελφοῖς προφητὶς αἱ τ’ ἐν Δωδώνῃ ἰέρειαι μανεῖσαι μὲν πολλὰ δὴ καὶ καλὰ ἰδίᾳ τε καὶ δημοσίᾳ τὴν Ἑλλάδα εἰργάσαντο ...

21 This distinction, and the superiority of madness, is drawn upon again in other aspects of Plato’s works, for example: *Ti.* 71e-72b; *Resp.* IX 571c-572c. Cf. Dodds 1951, 64–101; Trampedach 2003, 59–60; Morgan 2010.

22 Raphals 2013, 61.

23 Quintus: 1.11; Marcus: 2.26; This text, and its ramifications for understanding Roman divinatory practice will be analysed in detail in chapter 2: **Marcus**.

24 2008, 90.

single position.<sup>25</sup> Overall, then, these categories are perhaps useful as far as individual sources suggest and utilise them, but we should not devote too much time to finding their boundaries and placing each tradition into one side or the other.

It is important to remember, as Jörg Rüpke and Federico Santangelo point out, that “neither during the Republic nor during the imperial period did ‘public priests’ enjoy a monopoly on religious knowledge and innovation.”<sup>26</sup> Like the contemporary weather forecasts, there was a broad range of options available to individuals in search of religious and particularly divinatory knowledge. The plurality of religious and divinatory options can also be understood through the theoretical structure usually referred to as the “marketplace” model.<sup>27</sup> Under this model, different divinatory traditions can be seen to be competing for an individual’s custom, served by a range of cult, temple and freelance diviners. Artemidorus provides an intriguing list of diviners and their methods that could be found in the marketplace, such as physiognomists, dice-diviners and cheese-diviners.<sup>28</sup> As this model suggests, a person could choose which of these to visit, perhaps based on particular needs, recommendations or the diviner’s skill at hawking their wares. Esther Eidinow has criticised this model’s focus on competition, demonstrating how, in the Greek world at least, different sanctuaries and individual seers can be seen to support one another in mutually validating others’ divinatory authority.<sup>29</sup> The model is also reductive in thinking about official, or public divination at Rome, where the system, though mutable over time, had set procedures and responses to signs. The augural college would not have seen themselves “in competition”, or even in the same profession as Artemidorus’ cheese-diviners.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, even Quintus Cicero, at the end of *Div.*, though he argues positively for divination, does not consider “*sortilegi*, those who prophesy for profit nor necromancers” to fall within his definition.<sup>31</sup>

But despite these criticisms, the marketplace model can be helpful in thinking about one particular aspect of divination and divinatory options that is particularly relevant to this book: the game of identity construction. As noted above, Eidinow has demonstrated how the Greek seers and sanctuaries were able to confirm and validate one another’s divinatory authority. The identity of a diviner, in whatever direction their practice extends, plays a key role in the construction of that authority. Susanne Wil-

25 Artemidorus, his works and his intellectual project will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.2 **Interpreting Structures.**

26 2017, 17.

27 Its classic illustration is Bendlin 2000, esp. 134–135.

28 2.69.

29 Eidinow 2014, esp. 77–89.

30 Of course, whether they viewed themselves as in competition with the pontiffs, the haruspices and the (quin)decemviri – i. e. the other collegial divinatory actors with whom the Senate consulted – is a different matter, but that keeps us within the narrow confines of a definition of “official divination”.

31 Cic. *Div.* 1.132: *testabor non me sortilegos neque eos, qui quaestus causa harioleantur, ne psychomantia quidem [...] agnoscere.*