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Critical Analysis of Cicero's 'On Divination'

When analysing a piece of ancient text whether in its original form or translation, it is crucial that we examine its importance within society and culture both in the contemporary and modern world. Cicero's 'De Divinatione' or 'On Divination' is a philosophical discourse that explores the ancient beliefs and legitimacies of divination. Split into two books, De Divinatione follows the conversation of Cicero and his brother Quintus. Shultz adds that De Divinatione is not only a powerful discourse between contrasting attitudes, but also 'a text important for the study of Roman Religion, as well as Roman political and intellectual history'¹. I agree with Shultz and I also argue that the attitudes within the dialogue in De Divinatione can still be seen in debates over belief and scepticism in our modern lives. This critical analysis aims to explore De Divinatione as a literary medium that allows us detailed insight into contemporary Roman beliefs and attitudes. I will be focusing primarily on context, authorship, literary technique and the impact of De Divinatione when we relate it to modern ideas and discussions about divination and spirituality.

If we are to fully understand Cicero's De Divinatione, we must first examine its place within contemporary Roman beliefs and its historical context. One of the key factors of De Divinatione is how Cicero is able to preserve the voices of other stoic's and philosopher's within his own writing. It is through this that we are introduced to further ideas surrounding contemporary religious beliefs, as Shultz goes further; 'De Divinatione also preserves many fragments of otherwise lost masterpieces of Roman Republican literature'². De Divinatione was written in approximately 44BC, the year of which Julius Caesar was assassinated by Roman Senators³. This political event is also referenced by Quintus as part of his argument within Book 1; 'These portents were sent by the immortal gods to Caesar that he might foresee his death, not that he might prevent it'⁴. The high political tensions within 44BC could suggest the reasoning for Cicero to produce a work focused on events and circumstances out of human control and the ideas surrounding chance and fated experiences. Similarly, Cicero provides readers with an engaging and more positive discourse amid the political tensions within Rome at the

¹ Shultz, Celia E. A Commentary on Cicero, De Divinatione. Bk 1.

² Shultz, Celia E. A Commentary on Cicero, De Divinatione. Bk 1.

³ Glass, Andrew. Julius Caesar is assassinated by Roman Senators: 15 March 44BC.

⁴ Cicero, Trans. Falconer. De Divinatione. Loeb Library. 353.

time. With this in mind, we can begin to look at the content within *De Divinatione* for a broader understanding. The opening line; 'here is an ancient belief, handed down to us even from mythical times and firmly established by the general agreement of the Roman people and of all nations'⁵ already indicates the importance of the text in regard to contemporary attitudes. Cicero confirms that the belief in such a power is established by 'the agreement of the Roman people and of all nations'. We are reminded that divination was a key factor in many of the lives of Roman citizens, he even goes further to exclaim; 'Nor is it only one single mode of divination that has been employed in public and in private. For, to say nothing of other nations, how many our own people have embraced!'⁶. With such exclamative interjections from Cicero before he goes on to introduce his brother Quintus, we can strongly gather the heavy importance of belief and divination in the lives of contemporary Romans. Cicero's authorial tone stays present throughout the introduction of *De Divinatione*, as though he is constantly reminding the reader of his authorship and personal opinion throughout the narrative. This shifts as soon as the narrative voice is switched to Cicero's brother, Quintus, as he states; 'I, at any rate, find sufficient proof to satisfy me of the existence of the gods and of their concern in human affairs in my conviction that there are some kinds of divination which are clear and manifest. With your permission I will set forth my views on this subject'⁷. Thus begins Quintus' argument in favour of divination. The importance of *De Divinatione* in contemporary Roman literature is further highlighted by the sheer number of anecdotal stories and examples from other characters and authors woven into the text. Quintus in Book 1 uses these anecdotes to not only enhance his argument, but to structure a strong foundation of divinatory belief within others that matches his own to strengthen the brevity of his words. Examples of this include; 'What, pray, do you say of that well-known incident of Tiberius Gracchus, the son of Publius? He was censor and consul twice; beside that he was a most competent augur, a wise man and a pre-eminent citizen', 'We see what happened to Marcus Crassus when he ignored the announcement of unfavourable omens' and 'Coelius writes that Hannibal wished to carry off a golden column from Juno's temple'⁸. Quintus' inclusion of such an extensive sum of anecdotes and secondary voices provides a rather secondary criticism alongside his argument. His consistency in backing up his belief system with real life examples of those high up

⁵ Cicero, Trans. Falconer. *De Divinatione*. Loeb Library.

⁶ Cicero, Trans. Falconer. *De Divinatione*. Loeb Library.

⁷ Quintus in Cicero's *De Divinatione*. Bk 1. 235.

⁸ Quintus in Cicero's *De Divinatione*. Bk 1. 279.

in divinatory hierarchy, 'he was a most competent augur, a wise man and a pre-eminent citizen' increase the value and respect within his argument. Contextually, *De Divinatione* allows the literary preservation of many forgotten names and stories through the rich and developed narrative.

There are many fascinating literary techniques used within Cicero's *De Divinatione*, that further emphasise the discourse between both arguments. One of the key features of *De Divinatione* is the personal authorial voice that is maintained throughout the duration of both Book 1 and 2. The verbatim account of conversation emphasises the present and engaging tone within the text, paired with the direct speech that encourages the reader to visualise and characterise the rich text. Mary Beard comments that following this exciting verbatim argument; 'the reader is left to make up his own mind on the most convincing case'⁹. This is seen in examples such as Quintus in Book 1; 'I seem to be relying for illustrations on myths drawn from tragic poets. But you yourself are my authority for an instance of the same nature, and yet it is not fiction but a real occurrence'. The direct speech he uses along with the direct second person pronoun 'you', highlights a very actively engaging and enthralling conversation that is exciting for the reader. In traditional Greek and Roman Epic poetry such as *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad* or the *Aeneid*, the majority of the text is told through long narrative paragraphs. *De Divinatione* is a direct contrast to this style, and therefore feels more unpredictable in tone and natural in delivery. The unpredictability of this account is what makes the discourse so believable and compelling to the reader. We feel as though we are watching the conversation play out before us, a clever technique that keeps the reader on their toes and involved in the ebb and flow of each new point and anecdote. Beard writes that 'The earliest Latin literature often shows clear influence of the Greek philosophical tradition and contains precise references to Greek philosophers'¹⁰. This could indicate the differences and similarities within *De Divinatione* in relation to popular Greek and Roman epic poetry. We see the same technique used in Book 2 through Cicero's first-person account, however there is a stronger sense of authorial voice through Cicero's philosophical and logical approach to each argument put forward by his brother. An example of clear authorial tone in Book 2 that I would like to examine is this;

⁹ Beard, Mary. *Cicero and Divination: The Formation of a Latin Discourse*. 34.

¹⁰ Beard, Mary. *Cicero and Divination: The Formation of a Latin Discourse*. 37.

‘Upon my word you Stoics surrender the very city of philosophy while defending its outworks! For, by your insistence on the truth of soothsaying, you utterly overthrow physiology. There is a head to the liver and a heart in the entrails, presto! they will vanish the very second you have sprinkled them with meal and wine! Aye, some god will snatch them away! Some invisible power will destroy them or eat them up’¹¹

Cicero has an extremely pointed and driven tone in this excerpt from Book 2, that encompasses his authorial voice throughout the entirety of *De Divinatione*. The main points of Cicero’s counter argument are rooted in the belief of science and physiology over the belief in the Stoic divination. This can be seen through his exclamation; ‘you utterly overthrow physiology’. The use of the verb ‘overthrow’ anchors the debate into a more political affair, heightening the tension within the direct speech. The comedic exclamation ‘presto!’ allows a further insight into Cicero’s idiomatic speaking style and personality, while also lifting the tone through the comedic interjection. Cicero has a very cynical and imperative speech style, that pairs well with his arguments and brings the reader closer to him, therefore highlighting the personal experience between the speaker and audience. Fott writes that his ‘eloquence is entirely grand, entirely majestic, entirely heroic’¹² and without this style of personal writing, these are qualities of which we would not know of. Another reason for this specific style of narrative could be in line with the traditional modes of performance and poetry in antiquity. Bards, or poet-singers, were extremely popular at Roman dinner parties, and the spoken style of poetry allowed for an easy and entertaining listen. With this in mind, Cicero writing the majority of *De Divinatione* in direct speech aside from his own first-person narration makes this piece of work accessible to retell and perform to future generations while also being an incredibly present and fast paced piece of text. Beard writes because of the constant introduction of new anecdotes and people, there is never a consistent train of thought within the narrative, further emphasising the feeling of spontaneity within the text. ‘Likewise, the dialogue form, with the possibility of continuity (or discontinuity) of character from one fictional discussion to the next, allows a more sustained undercutting of a directed thread of thought’¹³.

Alongside this, we see a consistent use of metaphors, similes and heavily descriptive language to aid the arguments between Quintus and Cicero. Most of these examples

¹¹ Cicero, *De Divinatione*. 413.

¹² Fott, David. *Discourse on Cicero*. 733.

¹³ Beard, Mary. *Cicero and Divination: The formation of Latin Discourse*. 44.

occur within quoted speech from other characters in anecdotal passages throughout the text, for example Quintus recounts the story of Hecuba and Cassandra when speaking of the links between frenzy and prophecy;

‘However, the point which I wish to press, that true prophecies are made during frenzy, has found expression in the following lines:

It comes! it comes! that bloody torch, in fire

Enwrapped, though hid from sight these many years!

Bring aid, my countrymen, and quench its flames!’¹⁴

The quote, ‘that bloody torch, in fire enwrapped, though hid from sight these many years’ is figuratively a very descriptive sentence and presents a strong image to the reader that helps us to clearly envision the frenzy and panic within the moment being recounted. The metaphor ‘enwrapped in flames’ evokes a powerful scene alongside the repeated exclamative ‘it comes! It comes!’. The language here used is evocative, powerful and accurately used to enhance the argument of frenzy being the best state for prophetic messages to be channelled. The use of the adverb ‘bloody’ adds a gruesome and unsettling tone to the image, heightening the intensity of the description. ‘Though hid from sight these many years’ refers to Quintus’ argument about prophecy that some things do not require literal eyesight to be seen. Fott writes that ‘reading his [Cicero’s] works elevates the heart no less than the mind’¹⁵ and I agree, there is something incredibly captivating about the narrative detail within Cicero’s work, whether evoking a positive or negative feeling.

A little bit further down in this section of *De Divinatione*, Quintus quotes Cratippus; ‘The human soul is in some degree derived and drawn from a source exterior to itself. Hence we understand that outside the human soul there is a divine soul from which the human soul is sprung’. This same mentality can be attributed to what some would these days call ones ‘higher self’. The idea that the soul is both within and without the human body is an increasingly popular belief in mainstream spirituality and spiritual education. It is interesting to see the same beliefs were held in antiquity, and this in itself holds a lot of

¹⁴ Cicero, *De Divinatione*. Bk1. 79.

¹⁵ Fott, David. *Discourse on Cicero*. 733.

power if we are to talk about the history of astrology and divination in the spiritual sense. Phylameana Desy writes that the higher self 'is your connection to your unconscious. The higher self is the part of you that has not been wounded by judgements or prejudices'¹⁶. She continues, 'The higher self is YOU, the best part of you, it is yourself at the purest level'. It is fascinating to see the parallels between divination in antiquity and modern-day divination. A large focus in Book 1 is the idea of divination through the natural world. Quintus uses examples of augury and animal sacrifices to further argue his point; 'the Divine Will accomplishes like results in the case of birds, and causes those known as alites, which give omens by their flight' and when speaking upon the death of Caesar, 'while he was offering sacrifices on the day when he sat for the first time on a golden throne and first appeared in public in a purple robe, no heart was found in the vitals of the votive ox'. Once again the importance of divination in antiquity is highlighted, with this omen being indicative of Julius Caesar's death. Though in most modern societies spiritual practices such as these are not used anymore, the prediction of large global events through astrology is done consistently via social media outlets such as Tiktok, by studying astrologers and professional diviners alike. Mia Gallo writes; 'Astrology is not new to society, as people have been observing the stars since the dawn of time, and began naming the zodiac constellations in the Mesopotamian age, around 3000 BC'¹⁷. She continues; 'many other generations are incredibly sceptical about the truth to astrology, but Generation Z has embraced it tighter than any before them'. I argue that it is this constant discourse of belief versus scepticism that connects us so universally to the divine practitioners, philosophers and prophets throughout time. This is what irrevocably highlights a very important link between divination and magic that has been consistent over more than 2000 years.

De Divinatione ends on a poignant and peaceful plateau of discussion. Cicero refers to the Academy of philosophy; 'Moreover, it is characteristic of the Academy to put forward no conclusions of its own, but to approve those which seem to approach nearest to the truth [...] without asserting any authority of its own, to leave the judgement of the inquirer wholly free'¹⁸. Mary Beard highlights that Cicero himself is a member of the augural college, which does not correlate to the role within De Divinatione. She writes; 'He attempts to negotiate this incongruity by separating his rational scepticism on the

¹⁶ Desy, Phylameana. Who is My Higher Self?. Learn religions.

¹⁷ Gallo, Mia. Astrology's rise to popularity in the new era of Tiktok.

¹⁸ Cicero, De Divinatione. Bk 2. 539.

theoretical validity of divination¹⁹. She notes that Cicero is willing to use such means of divination out of 'respect for the masses' and 'for it's great service to the state'. Beard terms this as his 'suspension of judgement'. Goar states that he; 'was far too aware of the political usefulness of augury and haruspicine to wish the masses be enlightened on the subject'²⁰. Even though 'augury, according to Cicero is nothing but a mixture of error, superstition, and fraud – mostly the latter'²¹. It is this thought-provoking and unique authorship within *De Divinatione* that I argue makes the text so enthralling and interesting to read.

To conclude, Cicero's *De Divinatione* is a rich, complex, yet balanced discourse between belief in higher powers and the belief of physiology and science. It is incredibly entertaining to read, as it contains a multitude of literary and figurative language that awakens the reader and evokes many emotions. The anecdotes told within both Books 1 and 2 are fantastical, thought provoking and engaging. I believe however, that the outcome of reading *De Divinatione* depends solely on the reader and the reader's beliefs. Both arguments are compelling, interesting and at some points comedic. Depending on the belief standpoint of the reader, both opinions are incredibly well supported and leave the reader questioning the material and spiritual world around them. Though this text is over 2000 years old, it is still somewhat comforting to understand that there were a large number of people who believed in divination and faced the same scepticism that many of us in today's society face when we partake in practices of divination such as tarot or astrology. Cicero with the help of his brother Quintus, unknowingly (or knowingly) created a powerful discourse that provides incredible insight into Roman belief systems and inevitable comfort for either belief or disbelief in the divine realms for thousands of years to come, and as Gallo writes; 'there doesn't need to be any scientific proof for something to ring true to a large group of people'²².

Word Count: 2802

¹⁹ Beard, Mary. *Cicero and Divination*. 43.

²⁰ Goar, R. *The Purpose of De Divinatione*. 248.

²¹ Goar, R. *The Purpose of De Divinatione*. 245.

²² Gallo, Mia. *Astrology's rise to popularity in the new era of Tiktok*.

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