

Calabrese (E.) *Aspetti dell'identità relazionale nelle tragedie di Seneca*. (Tesi e Manuali per l'Insegnamento Universitario del Latino 137.) Pp.190. Bologna: Pàtron Editore, 2017. Paper, € 23. ISBN: 978-88-555-3386-7.

The give-and-take of conversation is hardly an acknowledged feature of Senecan drama.

When characters in these plays interact, in the words of Gordon Braden (1970: 19), they “bounce off each other like billiard balls”. From gnomic stichomythia to incessant rhetorical rants, Seneca’s *dramatis personae* seem overwhelmingly to speak *at* rather than *to* each other, and it follows that when they construct their identities, they do so solipsistically, in a vacuum of their own making.

Evita Calabrese’s compact new study seeks to overturn this popular scholarly view. Focusing chiefly on Seneca’s *Troades* and even more specifically on the interaction of its female characters, C. argues that identity is a ‘relational’ phenomenon created and sustained through communication with others. Her methodological framework combines Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson’s constructivist work on the pragmatics of human communication (1967) with Duranti’s anthropological studies of language use (1996; 2000; 2007), through careful application of which, C. maintains, we can begin to appreciate the bi- or multi-directional modes of identity formation in Seneca’s tragedies. Her study comprises three chapters: the first examines how the play’s characters, and Hecuba in particular, reformulate their Trojan identity after the city’s fall; the second charts Andromache’s psychological division and the gradual, painful recomposition of herself over the course of Act 3; the third chapter summarises concepts of relational identity through the examples of Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen.

In C.’s favour, it has to be said that this is a new approach. When so much Anglophone scholarship on Senecan tragedy appears to have become stuck in orbit around the same tired themes – intertext and metatheatre – it is refreshing to see continental scholars pursuing very different lines of enquiry. And in C.’s case, this enquiry has yielded some

fruitful results. One of the book's major strengths is its close reading of various characters' communication strategies, such as Helen's attempt to integrate herself within the hostile group of captive Trojan women. According to C., when Seneca's Helen stresses the uniqueness of her misfortune – her need to grieve for Paris in secret (*Tro.* 908-9); her decade-long status as a captive in Troy (*Tro.* 910-11); her reassignment to Menelaus (*Tro.* 916-17) – she does so in order to convince the Trojan women not to exclude her from their collective identity. Helen's strategy proceeds according to an intriguing paradox: the more she proclaims her uniqueness, the more she hopes the Trojan women will accept her as one of them. C. offers similarly subtle interpretations of Hecuba's interaction with the chorus in Act 1, and of the communicative power of Polyxena's silence in Act 5. I particularly enjoyed the analysis of Andromache's dream (*Tro.* 435-60) and memories of Hector (*Tro.* 412-20). Through careful comparisons with Aeneas' dream of Hector in the *Aeneid* (2.268-97), C. demonstrates the truly hallucinatory quality of Andromache's experience, the heroine's detachment from the reality that surrounds her. Troy's aftermath requires that the victims' identities be recalibrated, and Andromache must reconceive the meaning and obligations of her role as Hector's wife.

Not all of C.'s discussion deals directly with issues of identity, however, and her use of the concept can be remarkably loose, ranging from personal qualities to social status to the identity of Troy itself. Such weak definition sometimes muddles the argument's structure and direction, as, for instance, when C. proposes that Seneca's Hecuba subsumes within her conduct the role of Cassandra from Euripides' version (pp. 30-44). Although a neat point and nicely made, it does not seem directly relevant to Hecuba's self-construction in Seneca's play. If anything, it relates to *Seneca's* construction of Hecuba *as a character*. Similar difficulties beset the discussion of Polyxena's defiantly silent death: while C. is right in claiming that the girl's maidenly reticence enables her to assert momentary power over the

Greek host, it is not clear how this alters or affects Polyxena's identity, unless it does so in the most general sense of diminishing her status as a victim. In other instances, C. uses the concept of identity to cover ground already well known to Senecan scholars: social and familial roles. Drawing on Fitch and McElduff's excellent 2002 article, C. discusses how Andromache negotiates between her conflicting status as Hector's wife and Astyanax's mother (pp. 155-60). More promising treatment of family relationships occurs in Chapter 2, where C. argues that Andromache regards Astyanax only as a reflection of Hector. The topic is not entirely new – see, e.g. Fantham (1986) and Volk (2000) – but C. innovates by situating her discussion against the background of agnatic descent in Roman society. On the Roman model, Astyanax's affinity to his father should be praiseworthy, but it becomes in this play a source of danger instead: the more closely Astyanax resembles Hector, the more his own identity is imperilled. This is exciting territory; it deserves further exploration.

Besides a tighter definition of identity, C.'s study would also benefit from closer application of theory to text. Much of the discussion relies on traditional philological analysis – as C. herself admits in the Introduction (p. 10) – and while this often proves profitable, it does detract somewhat from the author's insistence on originality. More problematic still, the text of Seneca's *Troades* sometimes appears to contradict C.'s claims about relational identity, such as when Hecuba opens the play by singling herself out as a *documentum* of Troy's fall (*Tro.* 1-6), or when Helen declares her own uniqueness in comparison to the Trojan prisoners (*Tro.* 903-24). While C., to her credit, acknowledges these difficulties and works her way around them, the fact remains that identity in Senecan tragedy still feels *very* solipsistic. C. notes in Chapter 3 the (much-discussed) importance of mythological-literary precedent in the self-formation of Seneca's characters: this is far more a self-reflexive than a relational attribute. When Helen or Hecuba cite their own names, they imply, like the famous example of Seneca's *Medea*, a pre-established set of traits that remains immutable despite

human interaction or opposition. If relational identity can be found anywhere in Senecan tragedy, it is precisely in the *Troades*, a play that features no singular protagonist, where most speaking parts are more or less equal, and with a title that refers to the chorus. C.'s approach is far less likely to work for Atreus, Medea, or Hercules. This is not a problem in itself, but it does make the book's title slightly misleading, since what C. really addresses are 'aspects of relational identity in the *Troades*', not in Senecan tragedy overall.

In sum, this is an innovative study that has the potential to generate exciting new perspectives on Seneca's work but, at the same time, does not always capitalize on that potential. The book is well presented, written in a lucid, accessible style, and displays admirable sensitivity to the nuances of Seneca's text. If, in this reviewer's opinion, it has not entirely succeeded in dispelling dominant views about solipsism in the tragedies, it nonetheless makes a very admirable attempt and should be celebrated accordingly.

*Durham University*

DR ERICA BEXLEY