

BRAUND (S.) *Seneca: Oedipus*. Pp. viii + 163. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Paper, £16.99 (Cased, £50). ISBN: 978-1- 4742-3478-8 (978-1-4722-3479-5 hbk).

Seneca's *Oedipus* is a highly original piece of theatre known – if not exactly celebrated – for its macabre content and its willingness to test the boundaries of classical dramaturgy.

Although often overshadowed by Sophocles' more famous version, Seneca's tragedy can and should be judged on its own merits, which is precisely what B. sets out to do in her introduction to the play. This volume, one of the latest instalments in Bloomsbury's *Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy*, offers a lucid overview of the text and its context. Material is divided into four chapters that deal with: the *Oedipus* myth (Chapter 1); Seneca and his time (Chapter 2); the play's structure, themes and issues (Chapter 3); and its reception and influence (Chapter 4). The target audience for this series is non-specialist readers and undergraduate students: all Latin and Greek is translated, technical terms clearly explained and a guide to further reading provided at the end.

By way of introduction, Chapter 1 charts the variations in *Oedipus*' story, focusing mainly on Greco-Roman literary traditions, but also acknowledging folklorist approaches and Freudian theory. B. uses this summary to caution first-time readers against bringing undue 'baggage' to their interpretation of Seneca (p. 2). Likewise, by stressing the adaptability and malleability of the *Oedipus* myth, B. points out that it would be a mistake to treat Seneca's version merely as a 'secondary' or 'belated' response to Sophocles. This is a salutary warning that applies equally well to established scholars and to new readers, most of whom encounter Seneca when they have already explored the major works of Greek tragedy.

Narrowing the focus, Chapter 2 surveys Seneca's life and works, his writing style and his place within the broader tradition of Roman drama. B. adopts a measured approach to the perennial issue of performance, summarising arguments for and against while also expressing her own marked preference for the idea that Seneca's plays could and may have been staged in antiquity. She treats questions about Stoic philosophy in a similarly careful manner, and wisely avers that to expect 'a neatly packaged Stoic lesson' from the plays is to misunderstand the role of poetry and drama (p. 32).

While the content of these two chapters fits the series' aims, B.'s written expression and her structuring of material occasionally leave something to be desired. By beginning with Freud and ending with folklorists, Chapter 1 shifts too much attention away from the core topic of classical literature. In addition, B.'s writing is plagued by meta-discourse (p. 3: 'I will now offer a synopsis', 'I now offer an outline'; p. 35: 'In this chapter I will discuss'; p. 39: 'I conclude this chapter with'), that occurs so frequently that it begins to feel like padding and/or to suggest that B. is not comfortable with the light and sweeping tone required by this kind of introductory volume. In the case of Chapter 3, meta-discourse results from the poor organisation of material in the first few pages, where discussion of Oedipus' opening speech doubles up with topics explored later in the same chapter. Another flaw is B.'s habit of rounding off her analysis with a bland statement that belies the otherwise apparent sophistication of her thought: 'this is a powerful argument' (p. 30); 'this is very strong language' (p. 49). Not only do such empty declarations fail to bolster B.'s claims, but they also trivialise the discussion in a manner unworthy of B.'s considerable expertise.

Chapters 3 and 4 are decidedly stronger than the first two. Discussion of the play's major themes and issues is engaging and insightful, with highlights including B.'s treatment of monstrosity (pp. 46–51); riddles (pp. 59–62); and Senecan rhetoric (pp. 71–81).

This last topic displays B. at her best, evaluating Seneca's distinctive style with fairness and rigour, and maintaining a delicate balance between accessibility and scholarly depth. Though not necessary for this kind of monograph, it is still commendable that B. introduces some original ideas, such as her suggestion that Oedipus regards his self-punishment as yet another riddle requiring his solution. Occasionally, extra endnotes are needed to flag more complex points of interpretation: B. should acknowledge that scholars debate the play's structure (five Acts or six?), and that the actual content of the Sphinx's riddle is never mentioned in Sophocles' or Seneca's version, despite its obvious bearing on Oedipus' fate.

B.'s noble refusal to treat Seneca's Oedipus as a belated text generates some unfortunate (and presumably unforeseen) consequences in Chapter 3, where minimising questions of allusion and influence prevents B. from examining the ironic, self-conscious style that characterises so much of Senecan drama. For instance, B. analyses Oedipus' fear (pp. 39–43), but does not discuss how this emotion evokes the character's literary past, and thus, how it anticipates in a self-reflexive manner his already famous story (as J. Seo, *Exemplary*

Traits. Reading Characterization in Roman Poetry [2013], has shown). Similarly, the curse Oedipus utters against Laius' murderer (which B. examines on p. 63) is ironic not just because Oedipus is unwittingly cursing himself, but also because it consciously expands upon the irony already present in Sophocles' version. Such literary self-awareness has long been recognised as a defining trait of Senecan drama, and for this reason alone it really ought to be included in B.'s treatment of the play's main themes.

Chapter 4 is the most compelling section. B. traces the reception and influence of Seneca's Oedipus from antiquity to the twenty-first century, devoting particular attention to the early Renaissance (pp. 86–94); pre-Revolutionary France (pp. 94–108); and Restoration England (pp. 108–16). Her discussion of French adaptations, which focuses on Corneille and Voltaire, constitutes a truly fascinating case study of the various political connotations embedded in the Oedipus myth, and of the way in which Seneca's initial dramatic influence gradually lost ground to Sophocles'. B.'s treatment of metre in English translations (p. 91), is another one of the chapter's highlights, as is her persuasive argument that Daniélou drew on Seneca's Oedipus when writing the libretto for Stravinsky's opera. It is a relief to see that Freud receives short shrift in comparison with these masterful studies. Presentation is almost immaculate; this reviewer found only one typographical error: *patrem* instead of *partem* on p. 80. The volume provides a serviceable and at times thought-provoking introduction to Seneca's Oedipus. B. has made a valuable contribution towards raising the profile of this unconventional tragedy.

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