

Aygon, Jean-Pierre. *Ut scaena, sic vita: mise en scène et dévoilement dans les oeuvres philosophiques et dramatiques de Sénèque*. Chorégie: études, 1. Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2016. 395 p. € 59.00 (pb). ISBN 9782701804255.

Dr Erica M. Bexley, Swansea University
e.m.bexley@swansea.ac.uk

Like ill-fitting puzzle pieces, Seneca's philosophical and dramatic works have long and stubbornly resisted amalgamation, while Senecan scholarship has returned perennially – and just as stubbornly – to the task of joining them together. Aygon's monograph, the latest contribution to this on-going debate, adopts a fairly conventional stance inasmuch as it measures the tragedies against the Stoic lessons gleaned from Seneca's prose, and maintains that Seneca's dramatic characters represent apotropaic examples of the passions. At the same time, though, Aygon proposes that pervasive themes of revelation and pretence constitute a new and potentially exciting way for readers to bridge the (apparent?) gap between Senecan philosophy and drama.

The book comprises two halves: the first examines what may broadly be defined as the 'theatrical aspects' of Seneca's Stoic writings; the second concentrates on the tragedies: their dramaturgy, visual qualities, and finally, their moral 'message'. Aygon declares in the Introduction his decidedly positivist aim of ascertaining Seneca's personal attitude towards the theatre and consequently, what the author intended to achieve with his dramatic compositions. The volume's arrangement – prose first, poetry second – indicates a common, but in this case likely unconscious, assumption that Seneca's works form a hermeneutical hierarchy, in which philosophical texts are understood to be more rational than, and therefore capable of elucidating their unruly siblings, the plays.[[1]]

Chapter 1 collates and evaluates Seneca's explicit judgements on the theatre, which, according to Aygon, divide into three main groups: negative opinions of pantomime; guarded approval of scripted mime (principally, its moral *sententiae*); and respect for tragedy. There emerges from this survey the simple yet crucial point that Seneca's attitude towards theatrical performance is far from uniform: his verdicts often serve a broader purpose (e.g. to critique people's moral priorities in *Ep.* 76.4) and so cannot always be taken at face value.

This ambivalence toward theatre is explored further in Chapter 2, "Les images empruntées au théâtre", where Aygon traces the theatrical metaphors appearing in Seneca's prose, and studies their various, occasionally conflicting, application to questions of human ethics and social conduct. Following in the footsteps of Armisen-Marchetti (1989) and Bartsch (2006), Aygon concentrates on Seneca's fascination for masks and role-play, which the philosopher uses alternately to symbolize false or assumed behaviour (e.g. *Tranq.* 17.1) and the genuine performance of one's own part in life (e.g. *Ep.* 120.22). In his attempt to resolve this contradiction, Aygon draws on Cicero *De Officiis* 1.107-21, and thereby adds his voice to the swelling chorus of scholars currently interested in Stoic *persona*-theory.[[2]] More intriguing and original, however, is Aygon's suggestion that the face and the

mask merge in Seneca's imagery, so that deciphering a person's emotional state or internal disposition is equivalent to interpreting a stage character's *persona*.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the weakest in the monograph, dealing respectively with the dramatic texture of Seneca's prose, and with self-performance as a medium for moral instruction. The main problem here is that Aygon stretches the concept of "théâtralité" to an unconvincing extreme. He argues in Chapter 3 that Seneca's prose exhibits a polyphonic quality – comprising *prosopopoeia*; imagined interlocutors; and addressees – that evokes, or even approximates, dramatic dialogue. But the assertion quickly founders, because Seneca's philosophical writings scarcely merit the title of dialogues, especially in contrast to prominent predecessors like Plato. Equally unconvincing is the suggestion that Seneca narrates exemplary anecdotes in quasi-theatrical ways; the vividness of these descriptions does not qualify them as dramatic in any fundamental sense of the term, and Aygon's analysis is sometimes misled by his own application of theatrical metaphors. The strongest part of the chapter deals with personification and portraiture, a topic that expands upon Aygon's earlier discussion of mask/face imagery.

The uneven quality of Aygon's argument extends into Chapter 4, "Le théâtre de la conscience", which covers such diverse topics as: Seneca's employment of first-personal narratives; his penchant for self-analysis and metaphors of spectatorship; and the effect his writings anticipate having on their addressees/audience. Once again, Aygon traverses well-trodden ground when he argues that Seneca's descriptions of self-monitoring (e.g. *Ep.* 11.8) assimilate individuals to quasi-dramatic spectacles.[[3]] Despite the promising claim that "la matrice théâtrale...fournit le cadre où se dévoile la vérité du sujet" (p.137), discussion in this chapter is decidedly thin and scattered, an outcome that demonstrates the difficulty many scholars encounter when undertaking to define the role of drama in Seneca's prose works. Scouring Senecan philosophy for references to theatre is a substantial scholarly industry, but the undeniable gap between Aygon's aims and outcomes left this reviewer wondering whether the same amount of scholarly energy would have been devoted to the topic had Seneca never written tragedies. For the unpalatable truth is that Seneca's prose seems no more inherently 'theatrical' than, say, Cicero's; arguably, it is a good deal less so. But the existence of Seneca's plays impels us (and I include myself in this category) to uncover the dramatic properties that, we assume, form the substructure of Seneca's thought. Rarely is the enterprise as successful as we would like it to be.

Part 2 of Aygon's monograph turns to the tragedies themselves. By way of a prelude to the main argument, Chapter 5 reviews the long-standing debate over whether or not Seneca intended his plays for the stage, and whether the tragedies' more extreme dramaturgical features could be accommodated by the technical facilities of 1st-century A.D. Roman theatres. Aygon replies to both questions with a strong affirmative, and the chapter ends with his describing a selection of visual and aural effects that, he believes, are implicit in Seneca's dramaturgy.

Chapter 6 continues this analysis of stage action by surveying and tabulating the relative frequency of on-stage versus off-stage events in Senecan drama. Aygon reaches the reasonable but far from impressive conclusion that Seneca prefers as much as possible to have his characters enact their moments of psychic and physical

distress directly in front of an audience, regardless of the challenges this poses for performance. Discussion is mostly pedestrian here, though Aygon does present an appealing case for the *extispicium* scene in Seneca's *Oedipus* (299-402) – one of the most intractable problems of Senecan dramaturgy – taking place in two locations, first before and then partially behind the *scaena*. Less cogent is his method of categorizing off-stage events as regards their proximity to the story unfolding on stage: it is not clear, for instance, why the report of Hippolytus' death belongs to the category "hors-scène" while Oedipus' blinding is classified "hors-scène mais proche". Surely both characters can be said to return to the stage following these events, even though Hippolytus returns in pieces?

Much of the volume's second half feels like padding. Although Chapters 5-7 are meant to form the groundwork for Aygon's final argument in Chapter 8, they linger too long on topics peripheral to the author's essential focus. Chapter 7, "Renversement tragique de la grandeur épique", is a particularly stark example: Aygon investigates the purpose and effects (especially the visual effects) of those long ephrastic/narrative monologues that typify Seneca's style. Contesting the label 'epic theatre', which is sometimes applied to Senecan tragedy (e.g. by Tietze Larson 1989 and 1994), Aygon claims that Seneca's ephrastic passages cohere within the plays' overall structure, and that Seneca borrows from Latin epic chiefly in order to show how the world of tragedy subverts or reworks the former genre's heroic ideals. While this approach leads to some subtle – and compelling – intertextual analysis, it is also marred by a confusion of terminology: 'epic theatre' in the Brechtian sense is a technique designed to dispel the audience's passive acquiescence to theatrical illusion; it is about narrative as opposed to dramatic *form*. But Aygon, while fully aware of this Brechtian definition, applies the idea to *content* instead, arguing that Seneca's epic borrowings are always subordinated to a fundamentally tragic purpose. The two propositions run on parallel tracks; Aygon never quite succeeds in uniting them.

The final chapter interprets the tragedies in light of Seneca's philosophical views on false behaviour, role-play, and revelation. Aygon contends that the visual qualities of Senecan drama serve to unmask the play's more deceitful characters, stripping away their layers of pretence and self-deception until their true (im)morality is revealed, both to internal and to external audiences. Most of the discussion is devoted to explaining ambiguous or opaque behaviour (e.g. Clytemnestra's much-disputed volte-face in Act 2 of the *Agamemnon*), and to expounding the methods by which characters in the dramas decode each other's conduct (e.g. Ulysses' tactics for exposing Andromache's lies in Act 3 of the *Troades*). Aygon redeploys to good effect his earlier claims about *indicia corporis*, the bodily and facial clues that, according to Seneca's Stoic writings, reveal an individual's inner state. Detailed discussion of gesture is one of this chapter's particular strengths. On the other hand, Aygon's determination to define Seneca's characters as apotropaic moral paradigms leads him to eschew ambiguity in favour of absolute classifications, even in the case of avowedly enigmatic figures such as Phaedra or Jason.

The ultimate point to emerge both from this last chapter and from the monograph overall, is that Seneca invites his audience to witness and thereby comprehend the physical and moral devastation wrought by the passions. It is Seneca's fascination for the visual that, Aygon maintains, binds together the author's philosophical and

dramatic works, chiefly by encouraging individuals to display their selfhood correctly, and decipher their own, or others' potentially veiled intentions. The volume is generally well presented, with only a few, minor typographical errors (e.g. 'ultimely' for 'ultimately' on p.38 n.4); bibliography and indices are extensive, and Aygon includes in an appendix (pp.309-29) the text and translation for each of the specific scenes discussed in Chapter 8. The study certainly has its merits, and Aygon must be commended for his formidable effort in culling from Seneca's vast oeuvre such a range of allusions to theatrical activity. But his subsequent treatment of those passages tends to have disappointing results, as Aygon prefers compiling and reviewing information to tackling complex or difficult interpretative issues.

[[1]] The limitations of this approach have been wisely noted by Schiesaro (2009) 222.

[[2]] Bartsch (2006) 216-29; Gibson (2007) 122-6; Seo (2013) 13-4; Bexley (2016). Gill (1988) has been extremely influential in this regard.

[[3]] Bartsch (2001) and (2006) 191-208.