

BOOK REVIEW

Ahl, Frederick, tr. *Two Faces of Oedipus: Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus and Seneca's Oedipus*. With an Introduction. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. 280. Paper, \$16.95. ISBN 978-0-8014-7397-5.

Frederick Ahl is not the first to include the Oedipus plays by Sophocles and Seneca in a single volume. [n. 1] But in this new offering, he presents highly readable and highly enjoyable translations of these two ancient dramatic masterpieces, as well as an essay that will provoke thought and further discussion. The book ends with an indexed glossary of names found in the plays.

The translations themselves display the outstanding quality we have come to expect from Ahl. The Sophoclean dialogue flows and crackles; and the choral odes are clear, yet lose none of their poetry. The Seneca is similarly powerful and poetic. In Ahl's English, the Hymn to Bacchus (ll. 409-507) is both alluring and terrifying. And his stage directions, suggesting that the cattle sacrificed in the *extispicium* should be portrayed by attendants carrying the heads of a bull and a cow (pp. 212, 213), are a brilliant solution to a problem that has vexed scholars. [n. 2]

Almost more remarkable is Ahl's Introductory Essay. This is, rather, a collection of essays, commenting on aspects of the two plays that readers new to the dramas should know, and of which the more experienced should be reminded. Topics include biographical information about the playwrights; cultural contexts for the tragedies; and the myth of Oedipus in various time periods. Throughout, Ahl strives to leave room for interpretation, showing, for example, that the Oedipus we know from Freud is not necessarily the one we get from Sophocles (pp. 22-30), and allowing the possibility that Seneca *philosophus* may not be the author of the play (pp. 14-15). He also stresses that "[t]he views expressed in this introductory essay ... are the by-product of the translation process" (p. 3). That is, the essay contains ideas with which Ahl dealt while rendering the plays into English, and he continually reminds the reader that his thoughts have practical implications.

In Section 9 ("Questions and Answers," pp. 42-55), Ahl shows that in the original Greek of the *OT*, when characters are asked questions, they do not always actually answer them, and throughout the drama they contradict one other. Ahl then provides previous English renditions, to show that other translators have made choices that smoothed away these inconsistencies. Ahl is adamant that such tampering detracts from our ability to appreciate Sophocles' artistry. He truthfully boasts that "I have made my translation conform as closely as I could to the Greek text, pretty well line for line" (p. 54).

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This is a fine sentiment, and Ahl is to be commended achieving both accuracy and a readable text. But I question why such an effort is required for Sophocles, but not for Seneca.

Ahl has altered the Roman play at many points. For example, he has reassigned lines from one character to another [n. 3]. He has altered *carmen poposci* at line 98 to "'Sing me your riddling song,' I said," creating *oratio recta* where none exists in the Latin. At line 708, even though Oedipus clearly states that he exits the stage into the palace, Ahl's stage directions indicate that the king "sits down, brooding" (p. 230). Throughout, Ahl plays fast and furious with the Latin lines. At the very start of the drama, it takes him seven lines of English to render the first five in Latin. And he often alters Seneca's effects of having characters interrupt each other mid-line. These are all interpretative decisions that a translator is entitled to make. But I find it troubling that Ahl faults other translators of Sophocles for altering the text, when he does the same with Seneca.

My quibbles should not, however, detract from well-deserved praise of this book. Ahl's translations will provide excellent access to the plays of Sophocles and Seneca for students without Greek and Latin, and the Introductory Essay raises important and interesting issues. I would happily use this volume for a course on comparative Attic and Roman theatre, as well as a mythology course dealing with different renditions of the same story. Ahl is to be commended for providing a text that is useful and thought-provoking, but also poetic and dramatic.

[n. 1] See, for example, Clarence W. Mendell, *Our Seneca* (New Haven, 1941); and James L. Sanderson and Everett Zimmerman, eds., *Oedipus: Myth and Dramatic Form* (Boston, 1968).

[n. 2] Among the scholars who have commented on the issue, Otto Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1966) 24–5 and 31–2, finds the whole episode unstageable, a view seconded by John G. Fitch, "Playing Seneca," in George W.M. Harrison, ed., *Seneca in Performance* (London, 2000) 1–12. Dana Sutton, *Seneca on the Stage* (Leiden, 1986) 23, posits the drugged cattle could be brought on stage and hidden behind mute Actors when the time comes to kill them. T.G. Rosenmeyer, "Seneca's *Oedipus* and Performance: The Manto Scene," in Ruth Scodel, ed., *Theater and Society in the Classical World* (Ann Arbor, 1993) 242–3, backs the notion that the sacrifice occurs off-stage and that Manto narrates what she "sees" to her father and the audience. I myself think that dancers portrayed the animals. And recently, I saw a performance of

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the *Oedipus* at Grand Valley State University (April 14, 2007 in Grand Rapids, MI), where no attempt was made to represent the sacrificial victims; instead, the actors mimed (in a modern sense) the rite, and were able to make the audience believe that the beasts were there.

[n. 3] Lines 18 and 103–5 are moved from Oedipus to Jocasta. Lines 202–4 are given to Oedipus instead of the Chorus. Lines 288–90 go to the Chorus Leader instead of Creon. Various lines in 825–36 are given to Jocasta instead of the Old Corinthian. All of these changes are identified in footnotes, except for lines 202–4. Some of these moves have textual support, but not all of them.

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