

BOOK REVIEW

Seneca: Oedipus. By SUSANNA BRAUND. Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. vii + 163. Paperback, £16.99. ISBN 978-1-47423-478-8.

This volume is the third of the *Companions to Greek and Roman tragedy* to deal with Senecan tragedy. Susanna Braund has previously published on Seneca, notably her edition of *De Clementia* in 2009, and she draws on her deep knowledge of his philosophical works as well as his tragedies in her illuminating analysis and discussion of Seneca's *Oedipus* and its reception.

The book has four chapters: the first two are quite short and provide background and context for the myth and for Seneca as an author in early imperial Rome, while the substantial third and fourth chapters deal respectively with "Structure, Themes and Issues" (35–81) and "Reception and Influence of Seneca's *Oedipus*" (83–128).

Braund makes two important points in her account of the Oedipus myth: that readers of Seneca should be mindful that the Freudian interpretation is irrelevant to this tragedy and that the Roman tragedy should be interpreted on its own terms and not solely against Sophocles' famous play. It is one of the strengths of Braund's work that she provides the tools for such an evaluation. She offers details of the different variants of the myth in Greek and Latin literature available to Seneca. Her discussion of Seneca's literary style and overview of the question of whether his tragedies were written for performance is balanced and informative. She approaches the other perpetual question about Senecan tragedy, to what extent his tragedies were intended to promote Stoicism, in an equally open-minded way: "it is not unreasonable to ask what a play such as *Oedipus* has to contribute to the Stoic world-view" (33). In her analysis of the play she then highlights Stoic elements, such as the way Jocasta performs her suicide, the theme of accordance with nature, the exploitation of emotions such as fear and rage, as well as the power of fate and the futility of resistance to fate.

Braund manages to explain features of Seneca's style in such a way that it makes sense to modern readers who may find it unusual and difficult. She frequently comments on the power of his language and notes the similarities Seneca has with his nephew Lucan who in his epic poem *Civil War* rivals his descriptions of blood, gore and cruelty in extreme terms. Her analysis of the Roman elements

in Seneca's tragedy, for instance the obligations of *pietas* and the preoccupation with the nature of kingship, sheds further light on the depiction of this Oedipus. Braund makes use of her own translations in her frequent quotations from the text to illustrate her points.

Other aspects of the play discussed in detail are "unnatural monstrosities," 'graphic physiological detail', "the search for knowledge," "riddles" and "monochromicity." She provides a clear and compelling argument indicating all the features that make Seneca's *Oedipus* a distinctively Roman version of the myth. Because she accepts Fitch's¹ dating of the tragedy to a period preceding Nero's accession (18), she does not refer to Lefèvre's reading of the play as a specific attack on Nero with the emperor as Oedipus, and Jocasta, especially in the manner of her death, as Agrippina.²

Braund's account of the reception and influence of Seneca's *Oedipus* is wide-reaching and thorough. She traces that influence from antiquity through the Renaissance to modern versions such as Ted Hughes' 1969 adaptation and the modern Canadian film *Incendies* of 2010, based on a play by Wajdi Mouawad in which she finds a parallel to "Seneca's evocation of fear and horror" (126). In antiquity she singles out Statius' *Thebaid*, which, although it is not a play, she sees as being inspired by Seneca's *Oedipus* in many respects.

In her section dealing with Senecan influence during the Renaissance, Braund details the role played by his tragedies in early modern drama in Italy, Spain, France and England. For England she notes the importance of the first translations published in one volume by Thomas Newton in 1581. She discusses Alexander Neville's translation of the *Oedipus* in that collection and shows that for the Englishman the play carried a moral message and could be applied to the political situation of his own time.

I found her discussion on 'Oedipus in France' (94–108) valuable in its emphasis on the distinct role played by the Senecan interpretation on the way French playwrights such as Garnier, Corneille and Voltaire shaped their plays. Braund usefully also points out the interrelationships between the treatment of Corneille and that of Dryden and Lee in England.

Among her discussions of twentieth-century adaptations under Senecan influence, the exploration of how Daniélou's Latin libretto for Stravinsky's 1927

¹ Fitch, J. G. "Sense-pause and relative dating in Seneca, Sophocles and Shakespeare," *AJPh* 102 (1981) 289–307.

² Lefèvre, E. "Die politische Bedeutung der römischen Tragödie und Senecas Oedipus" *ANRW* I.32.2 (1985) 1242–62.

opera *Oedipus Rex* draws on the wording of Seneca's *Oedipus* is particularly helpful as this is a version which has not previously received serious attention. Braund rightly compares Daniélou's "forceful repetition of key words within scenes and between scenes" (121) to the way in which Ted Hughes rendered the Latin into English.

In this short study of Seneca's *Oedipus* Susanna Braund has made a significant contribution to the steadily growing study of Senecan tragedy and its reception.

The book has a short bibliography, an index and a useful 'Guide to Further Reading'.

BETINE VAN ZYL SMIT

University of Nottingham, Betine.Van_Zyl_Smit@nottingham.ac.uk