

BOOK REVIEW

Die innere Vergegenwärtigung des Bühnenspiels in Senecas Tragödien.
By CHRISTOPH KUGELMEIER. Zetemata 129. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007. Pp. 301. Paper, €64.00. ISBN 978-3-406-56484-0.

Generally speaking, researchers have identified two distinct possibilities for the kind of production for which Seneca's tragedies were intended. Despite claims that the dispute is settled, [n. 1] the debate continues. The view of those who believe that Seneca's tragedies were intended for the stage is no less firmly met with resistance from those who are of the opinion that they were instead intended for production within our imagination only. Kugelmeier (K.) does a wonderful job in describing the history of this debate in his *Einleitung* on pp. 9–24 and in the beginning of chapter III of this book, an expanded version of his 2002 *Habilitationsschrift*.

In his own words, K. does not intend to offer a simple "confession of faith" (p. 22) that one side or the other in this debate is correct. Rather, he proposes to review the entire case and look for new evidence for the claim that Seneca's tragedies were better suited for recitation. He arrives at the firm conviction that the plays were not suitable for the stage, and were intended only for recitation (p. 233). The question of whether Seneca's plays were meant for production onstage or for recitation, however, is not the same as the question of whether they were fit for only one of these two purposes.

Even if K. fails to fully discriminate between what Seneca intended to write and what he wrote, he succeeds insofar as his book is a comprehensive overview of the state of contemporary discussion of the question. Proponents of the view that Seneca's dramatic works were suitable for onstage production will naturally disagree with most of K.'s findings and conclusions, and his book will therefore almost certainly be highly controversial. In what follows, I limit my comments to a few general points.

K.'s first chapter discusses the history of scholarship on the issue and sets the stage (if I may) for what is to come. As in all his chapters, K. displays a thorough knowledge of previous scholarship, even if at times he does not give others quite their due. For example, on p. 51 K. quotes Tarrant [n. 2] and his view that Seneca's extended entry monologues have their origin in Euripides. The discussion that follows, however, brushes aside Tarrant's opinion in a way that fits K.'s argument, but disregards what Tarrant intended to say.

The center of the book is its second chapter, in which K. describes problems that may arise during a production of Seneca's tragedies onstage. K. structures this chapter under

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various headings: dealing with space onstage, asides, entering and exiting the stage, number of actors, prologues and entry monologues, reports, description of actions as they occur on stage, chorus, time, motivation and characterization of dramatic personae. A list of these problems as they occur within individual plays would have been helpful. In any case, it is important to acknowledge that only rarely can we refer to actual productions of Senecan tragedies on stage. [n. 3] This caveat is even more important when it comes to productions on stages comparable to ancient stages, and under conditions similar to those in which ancient actors, producers and authors worked, as K. repeatedly points out. Thus if we claim that a particular scene cannot or can only with difficulty be imagined onstage, we should not automatically assume that contemporary tastes and theater conventions are a valid means of understanding the views and situation of ancient Romans. Throughout his book, K. displays an awareness of this dilemma and its consequences for the poetics and aesthetics of ancient theater productions. Yet a fundamental problem remains: Does the fact that Seneca's tragedies can be staged exclude the possibility that, if an opportunity presented itself, they may also have been recited, and vice versa? Did Seneca's intention of writing tragedies for the stage forbid their recital? [n. 4]

With this caution in mind, we need to define what it means to say that a scene could not be produced onstage in antiquity. Since we lack evidence that Seneca explicitly did not intend for his tragedies to be staged, only if we conclude that under no circumstances could a scene be produced on an ancient stage in his time, are we entitled to claim that this tragedy was not intended to be staged. If passages in the tragedies provoke rejection for aesthetic reasons, we can only say that in our view Seneca was a bad author for the stage. Whether he would have been regarded as a bad poet in antiquity as well is a separate question. [n. 5]

Scholars have pointed out that some scenes of Seneca's tragedies cannot be produced on stage, and K. does not fail to discuss them. In the final scene of *Medea*, for example, K. denies that there is enough room onstage for the dragon chariot, and thinks that Medea cannot climb the wall of the stage. But given Seneca's letter 88.22—a letter which admittedly does not talk explicitly about tragedy, but also does not exclude it—I am puzzled as to why K. (pp. 28 and 40) rejects Hine's comments on *Med.* 1023f. [n. 6] In his letter, Seneca points out that in his time stages were equipped with quite sophisticated machinery. Hine is therefore right to point out that this scene from *Medea* could indeed be realized on the contemporary stage. There might have been a house on the Roman stage even if the stage itself was roofed. Indeed, this roof might have helped Roman stage mechanics

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come up with a solution for the dragon chariot, to make up for the lack of the Greek *mechane*. The case of the appearance of Cerberus at *Hercules furens* 592 is similar. K.'s argument against Eisgrub's proposal [n. 7] to have Cerberus played by several actors in one costume is weak (p. 75). Just because it was customary in antiquity for one actor to represent a single animal on stage at any one time, does not mean that Seneca could not have innovated. And even if he was not so innovative, one actor might have worn a single costume that featured three heads.

A particularly unconvincing part of K.'s book is his discussion of two scenes, beginning at *Thy.* 970 and *Med.* 893, that have been claimed as evidence that Seneca intended his plays to be staged. I concentrate here on *Thyestes*. K. argues (pp. 222f.) against Braun's [n. 8] opinion that scenes of this type are rare; that anyone who is familiar with the myth knows what to expect at this point in the play; that the inexplicit nature of Seneca's description of the scene stimulates the listener's imagination and heightens suspense; that to realize the scene onstage would entail very crude props; and that the question of how Thyestes recognizes his brother's crime is less important than the atrocity itself. The fact that comparable scenes are limited in number does not prove or disprove anything; how many Roman tragedies have survived? Second, it is true that these subjects of tragedies and myths were all known to everyone, regardless of whether they listened to a recitation or visited the theater. But this proves precisely that how an author dealt with a given myth was important. Third, who are we to judge whether certain stage-props were unusual in Seneca's times, given the limited number of extant plays from the period? And even if these props had never been seen before, who tells us that Seneca was a conventionalist? So too the claim that the inexplicit description of the scene heightens suspense and stimulates our imagination could lead instead to the question of why Seneca did not use this type of scene more often.

More promising is K.'s attempt to evaluate problems and possibilities of the recitation of Seneca's tragedies in Chapter 3. K. nicely shows that Seneca's plays might have been "produced" as a recital. But I found no argument that convinced me that Seneca intended his plays for recitation only. On the other hand, most of the problems that Seneca's plays may have caused on stage persist if they are acted out in our minds. Thus, for example, the question of how to explain *HF* 59 (p. 168) in the sequence of events still remains, whether the play was staged or not.

In sum, K.'s book largely confirms the conclusions Zwierlein arrived at roughly forty years ago. [p. 9] At the same time, it is

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unlikely that his work will settle the issue and end the debate over what Seneca intended to write and what he wrote.

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[n. 1] Cf. U. Pappalardo, *Antike Theater: Architektur, Kunst und Dichtung der Griechen und Römer* (Petersberg, 2007) 167 (German translation from the Italian original by E. Lein and S. König-Lein) (the tragedies are intended for recitation); A. Speyer, *Kommunikationsstrukturen in Senecas Dramen: Eine pragmatisch-linguistische Analyse mit statistischer Auswertung als Grundlage neuer Ansätze zur Interpretation* (Göttingen, 2003) 281 (the plays can be staged and were probably intended for the stage).

[n. 2] "Senecan Drama and Its Antecedents," *HSCP* 82 (1978) 213–63, at 235–6.

[n. 3] On past attempts to stage Seneca's plays in modern times, see K. on pp. 18–21 with n. 35; and the updated appendix by W. Stroh, "Staging Seneca: The Production of *Troas* as a Philological Experiment," in J.G. Fitch, ed., *Seneca. Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* (Oxford, 2008) 195–220.

[n. 4] See, e.g., P. Kragelund, "Senecan Tragedy: Back on Stage?" in Fitch (n. 3, above) 181–94, at 181–2 and n. 2.

[n. 5] Cf. Speyer (n. 1, above) 281.

[n. 6] H.M. Hine, *Seneca, Medea*, with an Introduction, Text, Translation and Commentary (Warminster, 2000) 208.

[n. 7] A. Eisgrub, *Seneca, Hercules furens. Handlung, Bühnengeschehen, Personen und Deutung*. Diss. (Würzburg, 2003) 125.

[n. 8] L. Braun, "Sind Senecas Tragödien Bühnenstücke oder Rezitationsdramen?" *Res publica litterarum* 5.1 (1982) 43–52.

[n. 9] O. Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas. Mit einem kritisch-epexegetischen Anhang* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1966).