BOOK REVIEW

The Dramaturgy of Senecan Tragedy. By THOMAS KOHN. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. Pp. 192. Hardcover, $65.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11857-1.

Were Seneca's tragedies written for performance? And if they were performed, how exactly was it done? These questions have been vigorously debated by scholars over the past fifty years and more, but Thomas Kohn's monograph is the first systematic study of how the plays' meanings might depend on their dramatic form.

Doubts were already being raised about the staging of Seneca tragedy in the nineteenth century. Otto Zwierlein argued in 1966 that they were designed for *recitatio* by a single speaker. This view became the norm for some years, but several scholars challenged Zwierlein's position. The most extensive case for theatrical performance was made by Dana Sutton in *Seneca and the Stage* (1986); in recent years, Sutton's views have become increasingly widely-accepted. The case for theatrical performance tends to get muddled up with the quite separate question of whether these plays are any good as literature, and this muddle is perpetuated by Kohn. He builds on Sutton to argue that we cannot fully appreciate these texts unless we consider them as staged dramas. He applies to Seneca the principle developed by Oliver Taplin for the dramaturgy of Greek tragedy: that "the significant stage instructions are implicit in the words" (3).

Taplin's principle is clearly highly debatable even for Greek tragedy: since we know that the Athenian tragedians worked directly with their actors and chorus members, there is no *a priori* reason to think that all relevant stage action would be revealed by the script alone. But it is even more debatable when applied to Seneca, whose plays may never have been performed at all. It therefore seems counter-intuitive to devote a whole book to the dramaturgy of Senecan drama. Still, Kohn is able to generate a number of useful insights by carefully examining how each of the eight plays "presume the use of a theater of the type described by Vitruvius," whether or not they actually used such a theater, and by assuming that each was staged with just three actors.

Kohn's account of the distribution of parts among the actors is particularly effective. It might well be significant if "the same actor plays the murderer and the victim in the *Hercules Furens* and the *Phaedra*" (22). The suggestion that Seneca's

Hippolytus and Theseus are played by the same person is also interesting, "explaining why they do not confront each other as they do in Euripides' play" (74). He makes the neat argument that "in a very real sense, Hercules is depriving Megara of life by taking the only available actor" (104).

Kohn's discussions often seem to violate the Taplin principle: common sense and the subjective category of "effectiveness," rather than the letter of the text, are the main criteria by which he decides what would happen in the theater. Sometimes he is fairly maximalist about the use of apparatus: he imagines that Hercules might have spattered fake gore not only over his father, the other actor, but also over the front rows of the audience. At the end of the *Phaedra,* he remarks that the mute actors "could bring on faux lumps of flesh" (21). Usually, however, he inclines to minimalism, suggesting that props apparently suggested by the text were not really used. There is an enjoyable discussion of whether Strophius in the *Agamemnon* would really appear riding on a horse-drawn chariot, as the text seems to suggest. Arguing that there were probably no real horses (too difficult to work with), he suggests that "there could be some kind of model horses, or perhaps mute dancers pretending to be horses" (62); Electra's comments on the chariot's rushing motion are thus, he suggests implausibly, "perhaps … an ironic metatheatrical comment, drawing attention to the fact that there are no actual horses … "

There are several unconvincing parts of the book. For instance, Kohn argues that in the *Hercules Furens,* Hercules is constantly hallucinating: when he asks why his wife and children are filthy and wearing mourning clothes, he is deluded, since the wife and children have already left the stage (101). This is very unlikely, since Theseus, who is not supposed to be crazy, also addresses Megara in this scene; Kohn explains that he "plays along with his friend." But there are at least two other possible explanations. One is that Seneca is not working with such a strict limit on the number of actors as Kohn assumes. Or this could be evidence that Senecan drama was not designed for full staging. Equally unpersuasive is Kohn's account of the *Trojan Women,* a play notorious for its staging difficulties: he suggests that the Chorus members seem to be entirely unaware of facts that have been discussed in front of them because they are traumatized by war. It seems a lot more likely that Seneca simply did not bother to make the dramatic action plausible on this level.

The major importance of this book is how clearly it shows how diverse the Senecan dramatic corpus is. This is brought out particularly well in the discussion of props and stage business. Some of the plays suggest a lot of props, including

knives, swords, blood, and so on, but Kohn nicely observes that in the *Agamemnon*—paradoxically, since it is all about murder—there are no weapons as props. The *Thyestes*, a relatively late play and often seen as Seneca's masterpiece, emerges as distinctive largely for its relative lack of stage business. This might well suggest—although Kohn does not draw this conclusion—that Seneca's best drama was created when he engaged least with the physical apparatus of the theater, but most with the abstract concepts of theatricality and spectatorship.

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