

## BOOK REVIEW

*Seneca's Tragedies and the Aesthetics of Pantomime*. By ALESSANDRA ZANOBI. London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. xi + 296. Hardcover, \$112.00. ISBN 9781472511881.

Richard Tarrant proposed that the tragedies of Seneca were influenced more by later Greek and Roman dramatic forms than by the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.<sup>1</sup> Elaine Fantham suggested that mime had a pervasive influence on Roman literature from its very beginnings.<sup>2</sup> Although she does not name these scholars as her primary inspirations, Alessandra Zanobi combines these two threads in her monograph, which began its life as a 2008 Durham University Thesis. Her stated goals are to “focus on the relationship between Seneca’s dramas and pantomime” (xi)—Zanobi uses “mime” and “pantomime” interchangeably, asserting that “these two theatrical genres were closely related and ancient writers make no sharp distinction between the two of them” (1)—and in so doing explain and understand “some of the controversial features of the plays, which do not have a parallel in fifth-century Greek tragic conventions” (xi).

The first chapter, “Pantomime in the Ancient World”, begins by exploring various features of pantomime and mime, with discussions of the origins and founders of pantomime and various performance features, as well as the baffling question of “what a pantomimic libretto looked like” (14). The chapter then moves on to the connections between pantomime and rhetoric, before exploring the influence of pantomime on the works of specific Roman authors. Among other possible connections, Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 10.2-12), Cicero (*Pro Caecilio*) and the elegiac poets all may have adopted themes from the adultery-mime; and Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* could show mimic influence through its emphasis on physical and mental deformities, role-reversal, the depiction of a trial and a descent to the Underworld, and references to beating and slapping runaway slaves.

<sup>1</sup> R.J. Tarrant (1978), “Senecan Drama and Its Antecedents,” *HSCP* 82: 213-63.

<sup>2</sup> R. Elaine Fantham (1988-89), “Mime: the Missing Link in Roman Literary History,” *CW* 82: 153-63.

After an act-by-act summary of Seneca's dramas, Chapter 2, "Pantomime and the Structure of Seneca's Tragedies", looks at a number of features of the plays which scholars have deemed divergent from 5<sup>th</sup> Century Attic practice. Zanobi posits that loose dramatic structure, detached episodes, diversity of the episodes and doubling of themes, un-cued transitions, fluidity of setting, prominence of monologues and the non-integration of the chorus may have roots in pantomime.

In each of the final three chapters Zanobi focuses on one particular element of Senecan dramaturgy whose presence might be explained through the aesthetics of pantomime, with specific examples of each from the tragedies examined in some detail. Zanobi contends that pantomime features the combination of elements from tragedy and epic (89–90). Thus, Seneca's descriptive running commentaries (chapter 3), with their epic style (3<sup>rd</sup> person narration, a preponderance of epic similes and staccato syntax), focus on emotions and abundance of corporeal language, may betray a pantomimic influence. This generic hybridization may similarly be behind monologues of self-analysis (chapter 4) and descriptive narrative set-pieces (chapter 5).

A brief Conclusion summarizes the previous chapters, and ends with the *de rigueur* disclaimer: the author is not suggesting that the influence of pantomime means that the plays were meant for performance. She only wishes to show that they were written "with pantomime in mind" (203).

There is certainly a great deal of research and thought involved in this book. The assemblage of ancient sources on mime and pantomime is impressive. The suggestions that pantomime had a conventional vocabulary of standard gestures and dance steps (throughout chapter 1) are intriguing, and invite further comparisons with other genres, such as classical Japanese and Sanskrit dramas. And the links to pantomime offer useful insights into non-dramatic Roman literature.

But there are also problems. The "aesthetics" of pantomime turn out to be rather vague and uncertain. The work teems with "mays" and "coulds". There is no comprehensive listing of the features of this aesthetic. And while this is to be expected concerning a genre about which much is unknown, the features which gain prominence in the final three chapters are not the same as those stressed in the first.

Further, while Zanobi's knowledge of the scholarship on pantomime is reasonably up-to-date—although the monograph was published in 2013, there are no references after 2008—she glides over some unsettled issues concerning the

tragedies, such as when she assumes throughout that the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are Seneca's direct models (for example on pages 70, 119, 148, 162), an idea which Tarrant (1978) 215—217 argues against. On the other hand, Zanobi accepts Tarrant's view that the *Phoenissae* is complete, only briefly touching on the controversy in a footnote (note 19 on page 229).

Finally, while I know that my job here is to review the book I have, not the one I want, I was disappointed that Zanobi declines to comment on several places where a link to pantomime could aid in our understanding of Senecan dramaturgy. For example, there is much controversy surrounding the potential staging of the *extispicium* in the *Oedipus*. Some scholars have suggested that the sacrificial animals were portrayed by dancers.<sup>3</sup> I would have welcomed Zanobi's insights into this issue.

In short, Zanobi presents a lot of material and raises a lot of questions. This book should serve as inspiration for others who want to explore the connections between tragedy and other genres, performance or otherwise, in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome.

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<sup>3</sup> Among them are Eric Dodson-Robinson (2011), "Performing the 'Unperformable' Extispicy Scene in Seneca's *Oedipus*", *Didaskalia* 8, 179-84, and Thomas D. Kohn (2013), *The Dramaturgy of Senecan Tragedy*, Ann Arbor, 37-8.