

BOOK REVIEW

Senecan Tragedy and the Reception of Augustan Poetry. By CHRISTOPHER V. TRINACTY. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. vi + 266. Hardcover, \$78.00. ISBN 978-0-19-935656-0.

We all know that Senecan tragedy resounds with echoes of earlier Roman poetry, especially of the Augustan period. But these echoes have not been given the systematic attention they deserve. They have often been lumped together as markers of Seneca's belatedness, or treated only in piecemeal fashion. Christopher Trinacty's fine new study of the uses of Augustan poetry in Seneca's tragedies makes a strong case for the central importance of these allusions for any thorough understanding of the plays' poetic mode. Trinacty has a keen ear for verbal allusion, and his close readings are detailed and persuasive, though one longs for a more substantial overall argument.

The first chapter, the strongest, juxtaposes quotations from the Augustan poets in Seneca's prose works with references to those same passages in the drama. Trinacty is rightly sceptical of the idea (expressed long ago by Gian Biagio Conte, though he later thought better of it), that quotation is necessarily less "multivocal" than poetic intertextuality. Quotation in prose, no less than allusion in poetry, can involve expropriation, reshaping or transformation of the original lines of Ovid or Vergil. A nice example is the moment in Epistle 73 where Seneca quotes from Vergil's first Eclogue, the lines in which the poet-shepherd Tityrus praises the godlike man who has given him leisure, *otium*. Seneca uses the passage to distinguish the leisure of the philosopher from that of the poet, and to differentiate the leisure enjoyed by poets under Octavian/Augustus from that "eked out" by Seneca himself under Nero. We find the same passage cited in *De Beneficiis* (4.6.4–5), where the "god" who grants philosophical leisure is now not Octavian, but the Stoic principle of Nature. The passage comes up yet again in the *Thyestes*, where Trinacty hints that Seneca may be not only correcting Virgil's failure to adhere to Stoicism, but also pointing to the "gulf" between the Golden Age of Augustan Rome, and the court of Nero. The chapter's main strength is in Trinacty's sensitivity to the ways that a quotation or intertext can be twisted away from its original context, sometimes quite radically. The conclusion is disap-

pointingly less than the sum of its parts: “intertextuality grants his language additional resonance”.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are each labelled “Intertextuality And ...” (with ‘Character’, ‘Plot’ and ‘Writers and Readers’ serving as the other term in each case). But the titles are somewhat misleading. Chapters Two and Three are really about Senecan tragedy in relation to other genres, especially elegy and epic. The second chapter focuses primarily on Senecan drama’s relationship to Ovidian love elegy, as well as to the *Metamorphoses*. Trinacty suggests that the argument between Seneca’s Phaedra and his Hippolytus hinges on their different generic perspectives: Phaedra speaks as an elegiac lover, but Hippolytus is living in the world of pastoral or didactic poetry. Phaedra, on Trinacty’s analysis, is a fusion of the elegiac character from Ovid’s *Heroides* 4, with various characters from the *Metamorphoses* who are gripped by monstrous or incestuous kinds of love: Myrrha and Byblis as well as Phaedra herself in her guise in the long poem. He suggests that Seneca uses this mix of Ovidian allusions to present love as a passion “both greater and worse” than its Augustan antecedents, and to present tragedy, rather than Ovidian epic or elegy, as the genre capable of plumbing these depths.

Similarly, Seneca’s Medea is interpreted as an amalgam of Ovid’s own entirely distinct Medeas, in the *Met.* and in the *Heroides*; the effect of the fusion, Trinacty argues, is to present the tragic character as both more turbulent and more terrifying than any of Ovid’s versions. This is all quite convincing, although it would have been good to see the argument pushed further. For instance, Trinacty does not discuss the obvious question of whether there is a Stoic dimension to the representation of passion as something overwhelmingly destructive.

The third chapter is about the relationship of some key features of Senecan tragedy—prologues, choral songs and messenger speeches—to Virgilian and Ovidian epic and Horatian lyric. In this chapter, Trinacty’s reluctance to engage with socio-political issues directly is a disappointment. He acknowledges that many of the Augustan passages he discusses are “focused on the power of Rome”, and shows that the tragic Seneca seems to have a particular interest in expanding, echoing and trumping the Augustan imperial project. But Trinacty says nothing about the political or ideological implications of this interest for Seneca.

The fourth and final chapter makes a somewhat more substantial claim, that Seneca is engaged in an “intertextual dialogue” with his Augustan predecessors, and often “rebrands” earlier material, with “tragic repercussions” (186). He provides a compelling reading of echoes of Augustan poets in the figure of Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, and argues that Seneca is here challenging the optimism of

Anchises' parade of Roman history in the *Aeneid*, and also suggesting, *pace* Horace, that poetic language itself may be more powerful than any visual spectacle. The final play studied is the *Oedipus*, which Trinacty reads as again challenging Virgilian optimism and magnifying various passages of Ovid to suggest the impossibility of creating a "correct" interpretation of evidence. Trinacty could have explored incest and monstrosity more deeply here: might intertextuality itself be figured in Seneca as a return to the mother's womb? Trinacty is right to praise Seneca's complexity and poetic talent, but it is a pity not also to recognize how disturbing they can be.

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