

BOOK REVIEW

Seneca: Hercules Furens. By NEIL BERNSTEIN. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. Pp. xv + 151. Hardcover, \$88.00. ISBN 978-1-4742-5492-2.

Neil Bernstein's study of Seneca's tragedy, *Hercules Furens*, appears in a series whose goal is to provide "accessible introductions to ancient tragedies". The target audience is readers with limited knowledge of Classical literature and languages. Bernstein's slim volume -- about 120 pages of text and 30 pages of back matter -- admirably achieves this goal. It provides concise, but informative and engaging discussions of the themes of the play, stylistic and rhetorical elements, modern critical approaches, historical context, literary and philosophical traditions, and performance. Bernstein did not undertake an easy task. Although *Hercules Furens* is arguably Seneca's most satisfying play, in the sense that it ends with a comforting resolution, the central question of the cause of Hercules' madness continues to present a challenge.

Chapter 1 provides a synopsis of the events of the play, accompanied by brief comments about character portrayal, style, and themes, comments that are explored more fully in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 2, Bernstein explores several aspects of the tragedy. First he tackles the question of whether the origin of Hercules' madness is internal or external, that is, whether it arises from his obsession with violence and ambition, or whether it is introduced by Juno. Ascertaining the origin of the madness is critical to determining what responsibility Hercules bears for the murders of his wife and children. In support of the theory that the madness was introduced externally, Bernstein adduces depictions of Juno as a vindictive goddess in Seneca's literary predecessors. He states, however, that the goddess does not transform a non-violent man into a violent one, but rather "remove(s) a violent man's ability to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate objects of his violence" (20).

Bernstein next examines how the word *virtus* is defined by the characters of the play. He comments that, although suicide might be considered one manifestation of *virtus* in imperial Rome, when Hercules rejects suicide, he exhibits a different kind of *virtus*: he chooses not to yield to Juno's plan to destroy him. Turning from these oft-debated topics, Bernstein proposes that Seneca, in *Hercules Furens*,

was encouraging the Roman audience to reflect upon the declining importance of noble ancestry in Roman social and political life. In the final section of the chapter, he suggests that the main goal of Seneca's literary landscapes is to remind the audience of the mythological associations of the places described.

In Chapter 3, Bernstein discusses the diverse representations of Hercules by Greek and Roman writers, by vase painters, and in medical texts which identify epilepsy as the "Herculean disease". Bernstein notes especially the influence of the depictions of Juno by Seneca's Augustan predecessors, Virgil and Ovid. In addition, he contrasts the self-absorbed Senecan Hercules with the self-sacrificing Virgilian Aeneas, but contends that both ultimately present a new model of heroism.

In Chapter 4, Bernstein reviews the use by earlier philosophers of Hercules as an allegorical figure, examines some of the intersections between *Hercules Furens* and other works of Seneca, and discusses the oft-maligned rhetorical style of Seneca's tragedies. Bernstein discusses "passion-restraint" scenes in which a character of lesser standing unsuccessfully tries to persuade the main character to curb his/her anger. (He does not include comments on the effectiveness of Seneca's use of stichomythia.) It is notable, however, that, in *Hercules Furens*, the people entreating Hercules are his father and his friend, not social inferiors, their words of advice are not about controlling rage against others, but rage against oneself, and ultimately their entreaties are successful. Bernstein also addresses the appearance of self-exhortation in Seneca's tragedies, which he describes as the effort by a main character to remain consistent with an image or identity which was created by prior mythological tradition.

In his discussion of the intersection between the tragedies and Seneca's philosophic prose, Bernstein addresses the theory that the tragedies were created to instruct elite Romans, and especially Nero, whom Seneca served as tutor and then advisor, about the destructiveness of emotions. Bernstein summarizes Stoic theories of the emotions, particularly anger, and explains that the human mind can choose either to reject or to assent to an emotional impulse. He then argues, in support of the external theory of Hercules' madness, that, when Juno inflicted madness on Hercules, she removed his ability to perceive the world rationally and thus to withhold assent to the impulses provoked by his hallucinations. Nonetheless, when Hercules recovers from his slaughterous frenzy, he believes that, although his madness had been introduced by a hostile agent, he must accept responsibility for his actions. Bernstein's explanation of Hercules' responsibility may not persuade all readers, but it is a judicious and well-articulated response to a frustrating question.

In Chapter 5, Bernstein reviews theories about whether Seneca's tragedies were performed in ancient Rome. He then discusses Seneca's influence on English drama and portrayals of Hercules on the modern stage and screen. Particularly interesting are his comments about the interpretation of the tragedy as a depiction of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The back matter includes suggestions for further reading, a chronology, and a glossary of Greek and Latin terms.

In a book of this nature, it is inevitable that the author must limit his discussions. I wish that there had been more explanation of the role of the chorus and more attention to word motifs. Nonetheless the audience for whom Bernstein's book is designed will find it an excellent and welcome resource.

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