

BOOK REVIEW

Lucius Annaeus Seneca: The Complete Tragedies Vol I. Edited by, SUSANNA BRAUND, ALEX DRESSLER, and ELAINE FANTHAM. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp.xxix + 274. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-226-74823-8.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca: The Complete Tragedies Vol II. Edited by SHADI BARTSCH and SUSANNA BRAUND, and DAVID KONSTAN. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp.xxvii + 322. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-226-01360-2.

The publication in February 2017 of the two volumes *Lucius Annaeus Seneca: The Complete Tragedies* concludes the University of Chicago Press's project to "publish the complete works of the Stoic philosopher and playwright Lucius Annaeus Seneca ("Seneca the Younger") in authoritative, modern English translations."¹ The appearance of a complete edition of the plays in English thus invites comparison with the press's famous and enduring *Complete Greek Tragedies* series. Since Seneca's tragedies have received renewed attention in recent years both from scholars and theater practitioners, new translations of the plays would seem to be welcome. However, while there are a number of elements deserving praise in these two volumes, there are also reasons to wish the press and its editors had slowed down and thought further about their project before rushing to publish. There are a shocking number of errors in these volumes that betray hasty production and a poor copy-editing process; and while this reviewer recognizes that if there is going to be a "complete" edition of Seneca's tragedies, then all the extant plays need to be translated, it is still worth asking whether new translations of Seneca's plays are needed, if it means producing versions that are only the same as or inferior to already available translations.

The overall set-up of the two volumes is admirable. Each volume begins with the introductory essay, "Seneca and His World," which means in practical terms that instructors and the interested general reader can pick up either volume and have a handy overview of Seneca's biography, followed by a series of short sections that survey essential aspects of Seneca's philosophical, poetic, rhetorical, and artis-

¹ <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/series/CWLAS.html>

tic background, as well as glancing at the *Nachleben* of Senecan tragedy. The section entitled “A Short Introduction to Stoicism” examines the origins of Stoicism in Greece and the adoption of Stoicism by Roman thinkers before launching into a summary of key beliefs of the Stoics in physics and ethics. The editors explain key Stoic concepts such as *apatheia* (“freedom from passions”) and virtue, emphasizing their importance in the writings of Roman authors such as Cicero. The long-lasting influence of Stoicism in Western civilization is also noted.

The next section, “Seneca’s Stoicism,” explains Seneca’s self-identification as a Stoic and his special attention to applying Stoic ethics to his life and those of his fellow Romans. Seneca’s dialectic and rhetoric, his physics, and his references to the figure of the “Stoic sage” all are mentioned. Here the editors also note the problematic character of Seneca who, on one hand, professed Stoic ideals and yet, on the other, lived as a wealthy aristocrat.

A section on “Senecan Tragedy” follows in which the editors acknowledge the relatively recent major change in critical reception of the tragedies which are no longer seen merely as ancillary to Seneca’s philosophy or useful for reconstructing lost Greek tragedy, but which are now read, studied, and indeed staged for their own merits. The editors survey the questions about dating the plays, authorship and authenticity, and whether the plays were written for performance. A section on “Senecan Drama after the Classical Period” follows. Seneca’s influence on continental European authors of the Renaissance as well as on Elizabethan playwrights is noted before a breathless, one-paragraph survey of Seneca’s influence from the seventeenth century to a 2007 production in Chicago by Joanne Akalaitis of *Thyestes*. A note on the translations is included in this paragraph, somewhat out of place, since a longer explanation of editorial matters in the volumes appears after a section labeled “Further Reading.”

The ten plays are divided equally between the two volumes and appear after the overview of Seneca. The format for the translations seems to be planned with the student in mind. A plot summary of each play precedes a short, introductory essay by the translator in which the play’s problems or notable features are highlighted. This introductory material is perhaps the most useful aspect of *The Complete Tragedies*. Volume I includes *Medea*, *The Phoenician Women*, *Phaedra*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Octavia*. Shadi Bartsch introduces her translation of *Medea* with the observation that while in any version of the *Medea* myth the interest comes in watching *Medea*’s internal struggle with the problem of whether to kill her children, in Seneca’s play *Medea* debates with herself like a Stoic philosopher (1.3). In fact, Bartsch calls this *Medea* “the perfect mirror to the Stoic sage, but one whose

final goals wreak havoc with the idea that such self-transformation and self-control is automatically good" (1.8).

Susanna Braund begins her essay on *The Phoenician Woman* with the declaration that the play "is an oddity," since the text is fragmentary without the appearance of the chorus that gives the play its name and, indeed, without any surviving choral ode (1.53). However, Braund argues that the play deserves further consideration as another version of the Oedipus myth and because of its influence on subsequent literature.

Bartsch's introduction to *Phaedra* draws attention to the familiarity of the ancients with the plot and the occurrence of similar stories elsewhere in ancient literature, noting especially Euripides's *Hippolytus*. She notes contrasts between the Euripidean and Senecan versions of the play, highlighting Seneca's emphasis on images dealing with nature, civilization, the golden age, and women. Bartsch argues that although Pasiphae, Phaedra's mother, does not appear in the play, she nonetheless serves as a negative exemplum for her daughter. She contrasts these two women and "Hippolytus ... utterly without passion, and literally unyokeable in the yoke of love" (1.91). This leads to her final point regarding the word *iugum* in the play to mean both "yoke" and "crest of a mountain" and the ways Seneca deploys the word in connection with Hippolytus, who hunts on mountain ridges (*iuga*), who is unable to bear the yoke of love, and who ultimately dies when he is caught in the yoke of his horses who are fleeing a monstrous bull.

Alex Dressler introduces *The Trojan Women* with the observation that the play "is a study in the experience of women and children in the aftermath of war" (1.141). Remarkably, he writes nothing about Euripides's version of the play as either a model or point of contrast for Seneca. Instead, he considers the possibility that Seneca wrote *The Trojan Women* in response to events and the environment in the Rome of Claudius or Nero. He argues that "the tension between the drama's self-conscious references to the world outside the play and the apparent sincerity and suffering of so many of its characters provides much of the interpretive interest of this play" (1.143).

Elaine Fantham's introduction to *Octavia* is unlike the other introductions in its detail. However this extra attention is warranted, since *Octavia*'s survival in the Senecan tragic corpus is an anomaly (it is a *fabula praetexta* or Roman historical play) and it was probably not written by Seneca, who appears as a character in the play who lectures Nero on ethics. Fantham surveys this play under the headings

“*Octavia* and Senecan Tragedy,” “*Octavia* and History,” and “Mythological, Literary, and Theatrical Motifs.”

The plays in Volume II are *Oedipus*, *Hercules Mad*, *Hercules on Oeta*, *Thyestes*, and *Agamemnon*. Braund’s introduction to *Oedipus* emphasizes the enormity of *Oedipus* as a mythic character. She sets out to distinguish Seneca’s treatment of the myth in which the quest for knowledge is paramount, discerning in Seneca’s tragedy additions such as an enhanced report of the Delphic oracle, a scene of divination, and a scene of necromancy, all of which, she explains, would have been popular with readers and audiences in the age of Nero (2.3–4).

David Konstan translates both of Seneca’s *Hercules* plays. In his introduction to *Hercules Mad*, Konstan begins by considering Euripides’s similar *Hercules* tragedy before turning to Seneca’s version. Konstan is aware that Seneca’s heated rhetoric may alienate spectators or readers, but reminds us that “it is clearly a mistake to judge Senecan drama by the criteria of Aristotle or Greek tragedy” (2.53). Konstan notes that the Stoics saw in *Hercules* a “model of virtue” (2.54) and then considers a range of ancient and modern perceptions of this hero. Konstan’s solution to the debate over interpretation of Seneca’s *Hercules* is to postulate “a kind of modernism in Seneca’s plays, akin to that of Lucan’s epic on the civil war: an effort to capture the strangeness of the new world in which he lived rather than to normalize it through the use of classical diction and restraint” (2.56).

Konstan’s introduction to *Hercules on Oeta* begins with questions about the play’s authenticity: its authorship is contested on grounds of length, repetitiveness, and rhetoric (“exaggerated even by Senecan standards” [2.107]). However, Konstan argues that the play could be authentic. He devotes much of this introduction to a comparison of *Hercules on Oeta* with Sophocles’s *Women of Trachis*. Konstan argues that the Senecan character *Deanira* “is more like Euripides’ *Medea*, dangerously passionate, wholly unafraid despite her nurse’s warnings of *Hercules*’ unconquerable might” (2.109). Finally, Konstan contends that the depiction of *Hercules* in this play comes closest “to dramatizing what a Stoic hero might be like” (2.110).

Bartsch prefaces her translation of *Thyestes* with comments on the recurring pattern of violence in the house of *Atreus*. She argues that an interpreter’s interest in this play comes in discerning “individual characters’ rationale for their actions” and that *Thyestes* is the Senecan play most fit for reading in light of Senecan Stoicism (2.185). For Bartsch the choral ode at lines 344–51 and *Thyestes*’s speech on his poverty (especially lines 449–64) make clear this Stoic influence. A major

problem in the play concerns understanding Thyestes's reason for returning to Argos; Bartsch suggests that the answer lies in Thyestes's reliance on emotion rather than logic and his failure to understand his own emotions (2.187–88).

Braund introduces her translation of *Agamemnon* by arguing that comparison with Aeschylus's play is inappropriate and that the play is really not about Agamemnon but rather the "significance of Agamemnon's death for multiple interested parties, both Argive and Trojan" (2.241). She writes that "Seneca's play offers no single authoritative version of events but opens up numerous perspectives in what appears to be a deliberative deheroization of the story of the House of Atreus" (2.238). In her enthusiasm for the play, Braund goes as far as to proclaim Seneca's Clytemnestra "the most fascinating Clytemnestra in ancient literature" (2.238).

A short, basic bibliography concludes each introduction which should be useful for students or scholars looking for an entrance to the scholarship on each play. Each play text includes a list of *dramatis personae* with brief character descriptions and a short note on setting. Stage directions are minimal: only exits and entrances are indicated.

Since this is a collection of translated plays, since these plays have all been translated before, and since the complete Loeb Seneca was published as recently as 2004, it is worth asking whether the translators of the Chicago Seneca have anything new to contribute. While there should always be room for new voices in translation, I would argue that these translations do not represent a groundbreaking achievement. In fact, at best they offer a versification of Fitch's Loeb which they often reference in the notes. For example, one might look at the first five lines of Thyestes's previously-mentioned speech on the freedom that comes with a life lived outside the palace. First I cite Seneca's Latin from the Loeb, then Fitch's translation, and finally Bartsch's translation:

Seneca, *Thyestes*

o quantum bonum est
450obstare nulli, capere securas dapes
humi iacentem! scelera non intrant casas,
tutusque mensa capitur angusta scyphus;
venenum in auro bibitur. expertus loquor:
malam bonae praeferre fortunam licet.

John G. Fitch, Loeb edition (2004)

Oh, what a blessing it is to stand in no one's way, to take carefree meals lying on the ground! Crimes do not enter huts, and one takes a cup safely at a humble table; poison is drunk in gold. I speak from experience: one may legitimately prefer "bad" fortune to "good."

Shadi Bartsch (2017)

It's a blessing
to stand in no one's way, to eat your meal safely
while sitting on the ground. Crimes don't enter hovels,
the fare upon a humble table's safe to eat;
poison comes in cups of gold. I speak of what I know:
it's possible to choose bad fortune over good.

Generally, the Chicago translations preserve the dignity and elegance that one associates with Senecan diction, although Bartsch can slip into distracting colloquialisms ("proud Niobe's throng of kids," in *Medea* [1.46 line 954] or in *Thyestes* line 144, "Next, the little boy who ran to daddy's kiss" [2.196]). Overall, the translations are fine. However, the larger issue is that there is not an urgent need for new translations of Senecan drama: Fitch's two-volume bilingual Loeb edition (2004), cited often by the very translators of the Chicago Seneca, offers good prose renderings of all ten plays; E.F. Watling's versions in *Four Tragedies and Octavia* (Penguin, 1965) as well as Emily Wilson's *Six Tragedies* (Oxford, 2010), both verse renditions of selected plays, are still serviceable in courses on Seneca or Roman drama. However, the Chicago Seneca does offer all the tragedies and *Octavia* in a two-volume, English-language edition, and convenience may make this set the choice for classroom use.

Unfortunately, the volumes have not been carefully proofread. Both volumes are full of errors, and the full list would be too long to print in this already long review. Leaving aside omission of words, incorrect punctuation (such as a question mark when sense calls for a period), misspelling of common words, running together of text, and so on, there are a number of other errors that someone at the press should have caught. One can forgive a few typos; but when the introduction refers to "Seneca's great antiheroes...Medea and Thyestes" as ones who "triumph," (xxiii – xxiv), surely "Medea and Atreus" must have been intended? In the notes to *Phoenician Women*, an allusion to a vulture eating someone's liver is explained as referring to Prometheus, rather than Tityos (1.71n42). Pasiphae, not Phaedra, is

given as the name of Hippolytus's stepmother (1.91), and three lines from the stage directions of *Medea* end up in the stage directions for *Phaedra* (1.95). In Agamemnon the cast list calls Orestes the "young son of Agamemnon and Cassandra" (2.243). Later in the play Clytemnestra refers to the "Zminthean [sic] spoils of Phoebus' priest" (2.249), and the notes continue the misspelling (2.249n27).

As educators we try to instill in our students, if not perfection, at least attention to detail. We remind them that proofreading is important and that a sloppy, careless presentation can bias a reader against a project. We talk about the importance of "professionalism." The present two-volume *Complete Tragedies* has merits: good translations, helpful introductions, important basic bibliography and notes. One would like to imagine it as a companion to the *Complete Greek Tragedies*. Yet, the lack of polish from any press, but especially from a major university press, leaves this reviewer less than enthusiastic.

TIMOTHY WUTRICH

Case Western Reserve University, trw14@cwru.edu