

## BOOK REVIEW

*Seneca Thyestes*. Edited by A. J. BOYLE. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. cxlv + 561. Hardcover, £120.00. ISBN 978-0-19-874472-6.

This substantial tome is the latest of Professor Boyle's editions of Seneca's tragedies. As with his previous work on Roman drama, this is a welcome addition to recent scholarship. The volume is divided into three broad sections: an Introduction, the Text and Translation and the Commentary.

The detailed Introduction has ten subsections providing information on aspects such as the context and background of Seneca as author and philosopher as well as the "declamatory" style. Boyle's discussion of Roman theatre, and specifically of the "theatricalized world" of imperial and Neronian Rome, draws on some of his previously published work. Likewise, in his analysis of *Thyestes*, he makes use of some of the material in his insightful article, "*Hic Epulis Locis*" published as long ago as 1983.<sup>1</sup> A significant contribution is made in the concise overview of the reception history of Seneca's *Thyestes*; Boyle traces it from Statius' *Thebaid* to two twenty-first century operas. Importantly Boyle unambiguously treats this tragedy as a text intended for performance: "Senecan tragedy belongs, if anything does, to the category of Roman performance theatre" (xlii).

The text that Boyle uses has thirty-three different readings from Zwierlein's Oxford text of 1986. The differences are indicated in a section on the text following seven pages devoted to a "Selective Critical Apparatus." The text and translation on facing pages are thus kept free from annotations. Boyle intends his verse translation to be suitable for both serious study and performance. He acknowledges his debt to previous translators going as far back as Heywood in 1581 and up to that of Shadi Bartsch whose translation appeared, like this work of Boyle, in 2017.<sup>2</sup> The translation reads well and will be useful in courses on Senecan tragedy also for students who have little Latin as Boyle generally renders the Latin line-by-line into English. He makes use of ten-syllable iambic verse lines for dialogue. In spite of

<sup>1</sup> In *Seneca Tragicus*

<sup>2</sup> In Volume II of the University of Chicago Press's *Lucius Annaeus Seneca: The Complete Tragedies*.

these restrictions he succeeds in producing accurate, readable and speakable English. Boyle's translation manages to convey the nuances of the tyrannical and bestial Atreus in his description of his butchering of Thyestes' children and then the merciless taunting of Thyestes in the fifth Act:

NVNTIVS: Ipse est sacerdos, ipse funesta prece 691

letale carmen ore uiolento canit.

stat ipse ad aras, ipse deuotos neci

contrectat et componit et ferro apparat.

MESSENGER: He is the priest, he chants the death-chant

And funeral prayer with violent rhythm.

He stands at the altar, sets and settles

The sacral victims, readies them for the blade.

ATREUS: Hic esse natos crede in amplexu patris 976

hic sunt eruntque, nulla pars prolis tuae

tibi subtrahetur. ora quae exoptas dabo

totumque turba iam sua implebo patrem.

satiaberis, ne metue.

ATREUS: Your sons are here, believe it, in father's embrace.

Here they are and will be. You'll lack no part

Of your line, Those faces you long for – I'll give you,

And soon fill the whole father with his throng.

You'll be sated, don't fear.

For the lyric parts Boyle adapted his lines to similar lengths to the Latin and again succeeded in producing clear verse with a flavour of the original:

CHORUS: Quo terrarum superumque parens, 789

cuius ad ortus noctis opacae

decus omne fugit,

quo uertis iter medioque diem

perdis Olympo? cur, Phoebe, tuos

rapis aspectus?

CHORUS: Where, father of land and sky,

At whose rising dark night's

Full glory flees,

Where dost thou turn and destroy the day

In mid-Olympus? Why Phoebus, wrench

Thy face from view?

The commentary (93–455) comprises the bulk of the book. As can be expected, it is detailed in its explanations of the text, the myth and the way Seneca treats it. The commentary also offers linguistic help for those studying the Latin text. There are many references to the playwright's practice in his other tragedies and full commentary on stylistic devices. The commentary also contains plenty of

references to the way in which later playwrights dealt with Seneca's presentation, e.g. the discussion (on 452) of how Atreus' triumph proved unacceptable to many subsequent adapters and how they attempted to modify the stark ending.

Boyle's new edition of Seneca's *Thyestes* will be indispensable for anyone studying the play. The only factor preventing one prescribing it for every student is the price. However, it will have its place in every library supporting Classical studies.

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