

BOOK REVIEW

Seneca: Medea. By HELEN SLANEY. Bloomsbury Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy. London, UK and New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. vi + 198. Hardback, \$95.00. ISBN 978-1-47425861-6.

This volume is a recent addition to the Bloomsbury Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy series, designed as accessible introductions to ancient tragedies. The limited number of Roman plays featured, due to the relative lack of complete Latin tragedies, makes this study of Seneca's *Medea* a particularly welcome addition. Slaney has packed much into this concise volume, placing the play into context, while introducing readers to the various strands of this fascinating character's myth. The work is organised into six chapters, each containing further sub-sections, making the material digestible. The endnotes and bibliography, acting as useful guides to further reading on the tragedy and beyond, demonstrate the extensive research undertaken. An index helpful for navigating the book and a small selection of supplementary illustrations are also included. Points are fully supported throughout with well-selected quotations: longer ones are in English, with shorter Latin ones translated to aid understanding.

In Chapter 1 ("Seneca And Roman Drama") Slaney states her twofold aims of situating Seneca's *Medea* in ancient Rome, and considering pivotal moments in its reception history (1). This contextual chapter is divided into four areas: personal, offering a brief survey of Seneca's background and career; philosophical, exploring the relationship between Seneca's Stoicism and his plays; political, noting Seneca's use of the *Medea* to voice criticism of the Julio-Claudian empire; and performance, looking at performance context.

The neat synopsis of the play's action and structure opening Chapter 2 ("The Myth of Medea"), highlighting its important themes, serves as an introduction to exploring the influence of previous works on Seneca's tragedy: Ovid's *Medea*, examining *Heroides* 12, *Metamorphoses* 7 and *Tristia* 3.9; epic and lyric, considering Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, Catullus' *Carmen* 64 and Horace's *Carmen* 1.3; *Medea* in tragedy, discussing the fragmentary Roman Republican tragedies of Ennius and Accius, and the most obvious predecessor, Euripides' *Medea*; and

finally, demonstrating her comprehensive approach, Slaney considers representations of Medea in visual art.

Chapter 3 (“Themes”) traces three motifs which, through their prominent treatment, distinguish Seneca’s Medea from her Greek counterpart. Slaney views these as “interrelated, intersecting at the play’s motivational heart, namely revenge” (61). These key themes are: return and repetition; Medea’s identification with the natural world; and her role as both author and actor. Slaney includes observations fundamental for understanding the protagonist, such as her role as the gods’ agent of retribution, and her need to exceed previous crimes, neatly summarised as “a form of perverted *aemulatio*,” since “she is her own *exemplum*” (81). Considerable space is devoted to metatheatricality, revealing the author’s particular scholarly interest.

In Chapter 4 (“Language and Style”), Slaney defends Seneca’s work from some common prevailing criticisms, analysing lines 41-50 to demonstrate features accused of bombastic style (93-95). While not denying his hyperbolic language and melodramatic dramaturgy, she successfully argues that these are not necessarily derogatory terms, noting that every Senecan line contains “some substance indispensable to the whole” (91). Slaney examines Medea’s role as persuasive performer, illustrated by the analysis of three passages: Medea’s appeal to Creon, which the heroine dominates; her address to Jason, similarly presented as a series of manipulative techniques; and her struggle against her own conscience, described as a “climactic *tour-de-force*” (99). Slaney’s discussion of John Studley’s *Medea*, the first English translation, begins the focus on reception studies that largely dominates the second half of this book. Slaney notes the importance of Studley’s work, which “laid the foundations for how Seneca came to be perceived by generations of English readers” (109), demonstrating how his style of translation embellished Seneca’s Latin, leaving the false impression that the tragedian wrote in an extremely overblown style.

Chapter 5 (“Witchcraft and Stagecraft”) analyses Seneca’s witchcraft scene in the context of Julio-Claudian Rome and 17th-century France via Corneille’s *Médée*. Placing it into its historical context, Slaney considers material evidence for the perception of magic in the Roman world, and literary representations of witches such as Canidia and Erichtho, before examining the structure of the Senecan scene. Offering a fairly detailed comparison and contrast of Corneille’s version, Slaney notes that his adaptation has “extracted and magnified the Senecan (Ovidian) witch” (139).

Continuing the theme of the play’s reception, in Chapter 6 (“Becoming

Medea”) Slaney surveys various versions of Medea in performance ranging from the 18th to the 21st century. As well as plays, she discusses different formats such as ballet, opera and film, and through these continues to explore and revisit important Senecan themes, considering how these elements were adapted to their particular age and media. She importantly emphasises throughout the presence of Senecan attributes, which she notes were often overlooked in favour of the Euripidean.

While this work cannot, by its nature, be a comprehensive analysis of Seneca’s *Medea*, it serves well as both an introduction to, and summary of, the tragedy, exploring an impressively wide range of relevant ideas. Slaney skilfully organises her material, selecting examples suitable for illustrating the principal themes. She summarises and surveys without digressing too far from the book’s aim, as well as occasionally choosing to examine certain areas in more detail. The aspects of theatricality and staging are notably prominent, revealing her particular scholarly interest. While the play’s reception takes up more space than may be expected for an introductory volume, Slaney remains focused on Senecan themes, always keeping her discussion valid and successfully meeting her aims expressed at the outset. She cites a suitable breadth of secondary literature to support her points, demonstrating the considerable research undertaken. The broad approach, derived from the author’s evident thorough knowledge, means that this concise study acts as a valuable addition to the field, particularly useful for students and those seeking a guide to launch further studies into Seneca’s powerful tragedy.

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