

BOOK REVIEW

Seneca's Characters: Fictional Identities and Implied Human Selves. By ERICA M. BEXLEY. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 381. Paperback, \$52.99. ISBN: 9781108725774.

Erica Bexley has produced a complex book about a complex subject: character in Senecan tragedy. She begins her “Introduction,” quite sensibly, by asking in general “what is fictional character?” and continuing, “the question is not straightforward, and the longer one contemplates it, the more troublesome it becomes” (1). Nevertheless, throughout the monograph, she deftly negotiates a path through modern identity theory, Stoic philosophy – relying heavily, but not exclusively, on Seneca *philosophus* and Cicero – and extant 1st-century Roman drama to demonstrate that fictional identity is “a balance between characters as textual constructs and as implied humans” (4); specifically, Bexley maintains that in the works of Seneca *tragicus*, this dynamic “highlights [his] considerable power as poet and dramatist” (22).

Each of the subsequent chapters examines a particular element of identity, focusing on exemplary characters from two of Seneca’s plays. Chapter 1 uses the *Medea* and the *Thyestes* to explore the idea of “Coherence.” This refers to “behavioral continuity” (23) and involves not only acting in a self-consistent manner within the play itself, but also intertextually within the greater context of Greek and Roman literature. When *Medea* says *sic fugere soleo* (*Med* 1021-1022), she means, in part, that her actions are consistent with her literary tradition: at this point in the story, she usually is depicted flying away in the chariot of the sun. But it also refers to internal consistency. *Medea* reminds us that when she escaped from Colchis, she murdered her brother; when she fled from Iolcus, she killed Pelias. It is predictable, then, that she leaves at least one body behind when she departs Corinth, even if Jason fails to put two and two together. Similarly, *Atreus* asks himself *agis iratus Atreus?* (*Thy* 179-80), indicating not only coherence with tradition, but also his intention to take on a role, like an actor, in order to hide his real self from *Thyestes*. Both plays end as the true nature of the protagonist is finally recognized. But this *anagnorisis* leads not to an Aristotelian revelation of

family connections; instead, a confirmation of identity leads to the destruction of those ties.

“Exemplarity” is the topic of Chapter 2, with the *Troades* and the *Hercules Furens* providing examples. Besides behaving in a consistent manner, identity should reflect familial consistency. A character both follows the example of their ancestors and also serves as a role model for their descendants. This consistency stretches across time and proves somewhat circular. One’s lineage demands certain behavior, just as certain behavior provides proof of one’s lineage. Thus, both Pyrrhus and Astyanax strive to imitate their respective fathers, asserting their own identities by whom they choose to emulate. On the other hand, Hercules, although possessing two fathers, models himself on neither. Instead, he chooses to follow his own example, becoming more like the tyrant Lycus and alienating himself from his family.

“Appearance” takes center stage in Chapter 3, along with the *Phaedra* and the *Oedipus*. Here Bexley discusses the consistency between the internal and external. The physical body reflects one’s inner identity, making it a sort of book which must be properly “read.” *Phaedra* is the subject of Seneca’s longest physical description, providing key insights into her identity, despite her attempts at self-concealment. Likewise, the body of *Oedipus*, specifically his feet and face, provides the signs necessary for recognition.

Finally, in a departure from the various kinds of consistency seen in the previous chapters, Chapter 4 focuses on “Autonomy,” returning to previously considered tragedies. Self-rule encompasses the freedom to control one’s identity along with the ability to influence those of others. Two key ways of showing autonomy are exacting revenge on others and harming oneself. *Medea* and *Thyestes* are examples of the former. But Bexley’s discussion of the latter, while touching on *Astyanax* and *Jocasta*, spends more time on those who consider suicide but decide against it: *Atreus*, *Hercules* and *Oedipus*. These individuals seem to be locked into an unchangeable literary tradition which would preclude this ultimate expression of self-determination.

The book comes full-circle with an insightful “Afterward,” in which Bexley explicates the photo on the front cover, showing that the “image of a face carved from an old volume” (347) is a perfect metaphor for her project.

The preceding summary hardly does Bexley’s monograph justice. While labeling her exploration of character and fictional identity as “stream of consciousness” is neither fair nor entirely accurate, the discussion does flow somewhat

organically. Bexley helps the reader with signposts and section headings, although some of these betray the loose structure. Two chapter subsections are labeled as a "Bridge." One frequently encounters such statements as "I return from this lengthy but necessary digression" (78) or "[m]y reason for dwelling at such length on this issue . . ." (114). This is not meant to detract or discourage. As mentioned above, this is a complex subject, requiring a more relaxed style of inquiry.

Also of note is Bexley's fairly balanced treatment of the performance question. She declares herself "agnostic to the question of staging" (19); but she frequently uses aspects of theatrical performance to reinforce her ideas about character and identity. As such, it is an odd quirk that she somewhat disregards an important category of interpreter: the actor. Bexley dismisses "unwarranted speculation about a character's motives, or equally unwarranted enquiry into the details of his or her 'life story'" (3, note 8). Granted, to the scholar such exercises may seem pure fantasy. This is, however, well within the *modus operandi* of the modern stage or film actor. A performer, preparing to take on a specific role, may ask such things as "what did this person have for breakfast?" The answer is not necessarily sheer speculation pulled out of thin air, but rather should derive from the words of the playwright. This will be reflected in performance, and in turn will affect how the audience understands the character. In other passages, Bexley seems to regard actors as passive receptacles, empty vessels which a director or stage manager can manipulate however they wish. This may be true of Seneca's Astyanax and Thyestes whose actions at times are dictated by others. But, while a real-life director can certainly point a performer in a certain direction, the interpretation received by the audience is ultimately that of the actor. Taken all together, Bexley's otherwise inclusive examination of character takes a slight hit.

Nevertheless, Bexley presents a thought-provoking journey through Senecan tragedy, with a plethora of guides, including identity theory, Stoic philosophy, scholarship on both Seneca *tragicus* and *philosophus* and much more.

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