

A. J. BOYLE, *Seneca Oedipus*, Oxford: OUP, 2011, cxxvi + 437 pp. ISBN 978-01-9954-771-5.

A. J. Boyle has for the past twenty plus years made something of an industry in publishing commentaries on Seneca's tragedies. The volume under review, an edition, translation and commentary on *Oedipus*, follows his earlier *Phaedra* (Leeds 1992²), *Seneca's Troades* (Leeds 1994), *Octavia* (Oxford 2008), and as the reviewer was writing this review, one on *Medea* appeared as well. The appearance of this book is welcome since it fills a great need in Senecan studies. It is the first full-scale commentary on the play in English, and will no doubt serve as a complement and counterweight to Töchterle's philological 1997 German *Habilitationsschrift*, to which Boyle is indebted. The book is consistently of high quality; scholars of Seneca and of drama will want the book at hand, and it is a must for all research libraries.

Boyle's goals for the book are ambitious. As stated in the preface, his primary aims are "to elucidate the text both dramatically as well as philologically, and to locate the play firmly in its contemporary historical and theatrical tradition." As such, Boyle's professed audience consists of drama students, Latin students of every level, and professional scholars of classics, drama, and literature. Yet, an edition and commentary that attempts to be everything to everyone often disappoints, failing to satisfy fully any of the groups it wishes to reach. The book under review, however, does an admirable job of blending together commentary that does justice to both the philological and the dramatic issues that the play presents. Scholars of Seneca will indeed find much of importance in the volume, and students of drama will benefit from Boyle's acute and judicious exegesis of the theatrical elements of the play and its place in the history of theater—though the latter will often have to wade through a forest of philological exegesis to find what they are looking for. Students of Latin, on the other hand, especially those meeting Seneca for the first time, will find the edition somewhat less useful than the editor believes.

The introduction, occupying over a hundred pages, offers a wealth of information, a function of the author's long engagement with Seneca's plays and Roman Theater in general. It offers full discussion of: Seneca's life and his works; the Republican and Imperial theater; the performance issue (short; see below); Seneca's style and language; the myth before Seneca (noting how rarely the myth was treated in Rome); a full 30-page analysis of the play itself; an exhaustive survey of the reception of Seneca's play from antiquity to the present; and finally a short survey of meter and colometry.

As might be expected, Boyle reuses a great deal of material from his earlier works, especially the *Octavia* (2008), *Tragic Seneca* (1997), and *Roman Tragedy* (2006), though he rewrites it to fit the context and to take in recent scholarship. For instance, the section on *The Roman Theater* (xxvi–xliii) is taken nearly word for word from that in *Octavia* (xxv–xlii, itself a rewriting of the introduction of *Tragic Seneca*), though he more fully considers the possibility that pantomime could have influenced the tragedies (see p. xli, n. 56), taking into account the recent work by Zimmerman (2008). Likewise, the section of the Introduction entitled “The Declamatory Style” is a hybrid of the chapters by the same name in *Tragic Seneca* and *Roman Tragedy*, but recast for the present book.

As he has articulated in his other work on Seneca tragedy, Boyle stands firmly in favor that Seneca’s tragedies were written with performance in mind. While I wholeheartedly agree, *Oedipus* contains the scene—the extispicy conducted by Manto (303–86)—that is the most difficult to stage. Yet, it is found nowhere in the introduction and remains relegated to the commentary, where it is treated thoroughly. Given its importance to the question, it would have been preferable to alert the reader early on that there is a significant issue in staging the extispicy. It is a troublesome passage; to solve it, Boyle adopts the solution of Ahl, *Two Faces of Oedipus: Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus and Seneca’s Oedipus* (2008), who suggests that the animals are represented by props, while Manto and the attendants act symbolically with gestures. Hence Boyle’s stage directions, “Enter Tiresias and Manto with Attendants from stage left. The Attendants carry sculpted heads of a bull and a heifer, each with gilded horns.”

Boyle provides a new Latin text and a facing English translation. He differs from Zweirlein’s *OCT* in 36 places (conveniently listed on pp. 91–92), and proves to be a more conservative textual critic than Zweirlein, preferring manuscript readings over conjectures, even where the text is in doubt. He adopts the surely correct emendation of Fitch at 1052–53. At 560, however, he rejects Heinsius’ emendation (*claustra Lethaei lacus*) for the mss. *claustra letalis lacus* as “unnecessary” (*ad loc.*), although comparison of phrases involving *claustra* and a genitive in the Senecan corpus reveals that it is always paired with a proper noun (*Oed.* 160, 401, *Tro.* 430, *HO* 1311). Also, at 822–24, Boyle defends the mss. reading *penes quos* instead of Zweirlein’s emendation *penes quem*; the mss. reading is, *pace* Boyle, not supported by his interpretation of line 837, which does not indicate more than one herdsman.

To keep the text as clean as possible, Boyle provides the (selective) critical apparatus in a separate section that follows the text (pp. 80–90).

Boyle’s translation is “meant to convey to the Latinless reader as much as it is possible to convey in English and without violation of English idiom about the form and meaning of the play (cxxiv).” The translation is vigorous

and readable, and aptly represents the Latin in idiomatic English. In an attempt to help Latin students, Boyle frequently offers the literal translation of the Latin in the commentary; presumably he recognizes that students will use the translation as a guide to the Latin. At times, the translation drifts a bit far from the original: line 26: “You think the impossible and dread it,” does not really represent *quod posse fieri non putes metuas tamen*. At line 70: the translation “Help itself becomes diseased” lacks the point of *morbus auxilium trahit*, which reiterates the “falling” healers (*cadunt medentes*) of the first part of the line by emphasizing how the disease “drags down” help. At line 138: in the description of the plague, *taurus...labitur segnis* does not mean “the bull...slowly sank,” but that the “the bull collapsed in lethargy” In line 162: *sua motam ripa* is omitted, which emphasizes the inversion of normalcy (a point Boyle emphasizes at every point). At line 232 (*emicat vasto fragore maior humano sonus*), the translation “A loud crack lights the air, a sound beyond human” does not really capture the effect of a booming, other-worldly *voice* emanating and thundering from the chasm; “lights” seems too literal for *emicat* since it is the suddenness that is being described. At line 289, Tiresias arrives, *Tiresia tremulo tardus accelerat genu*; in an attempt, presumably, to keep the alliteration, Boyle translates “Here.../ Rushes tardy Tiresias—his knees tremble,” but surely “tardy” will be taken to mean something different than Boyle intends, “late in coming” rather than “slowed by age” (as Boyle suggests in the commentary). For another place where alliteration affects the translation see line 106 *ille, ille dirus callidi monstri cinis* (the Sphinx), where *dirus...cinis* is rendered “that dire dust.”

The outstanding commentary consists of a combination of philological, analytic, and interpretative notes, along with occasional remarks about the grammar to help the student of Latin (with references to Woodcock’s *New Latin Syntax*). The notes are keyed to both the Latin text and the English translation when the exegesis is helpful to both scholars and those who do not control Latin. Yet, Boyle is not always consistent. To take a few random examples: at 80–81, the lemma is “*iamdudum*/It’s late, but:” even though the note is only understandable to Latin readers. At 240–41 the lemma is “*functi*/dead,” but the note will not be understandable to English-only readers: “for *functus* = *defunctus*, see also 579 below, *Med.* 999, *Thy.* 14.” All Latin in the book is duly translated, but other modern languages, especially the number of French quotations, remain untranslated.

The exegetical notes cover a wide range of subjects, including technical points such as metrical features and lexical parallels, matters of dramaturgy, reception of Seneca’s works (esp. by Corneille, Voltaire, Dryden, and Lee), parallels in other Senecan plays, and exploration of possible intertexts with Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, and Ovid. In some cases the intertexts are obvious from verbal parallels, such as *ad* 166–70 (part of the plague scene) where the

reference to Charon is indebted to Vergil (p. 154; more below), but others are more suggestive. One wonders, for example, if the geographical echoes of Catullus 11 actually would bring to mind in “some members of his audience” the “personal devastation wrought by sex” (p. 145 *ad* 110–23) found in the latter part of Catullus’ poem. Other texts to which Seneca is supposed to have alluded are improbable—especially in the absence of lexical connections. For instance, at 160–65 (the plague scene), Boyle states that “Seneca takes his cue from Virgil’s plague, esp. *Geo.* 3.551–3,” but there is no reason to suspect that Seneca had Vergil in mind here: in the latter, Tisiphone (named specifically) is sent forth from the shadows into the light, whereas in Seneca it is the “throng of sisters” that have “burst forth” from hell; again, in Vergil Tisiphone drives Diseases and Fear before her as she emerges, but in Seneca black Death itself “opens its maw and unfurls its wings.” At other times, the desire to offer an intertext comes at the expense of analyzing the differences. In the scene describing Charon mentioned above, Boyle notes the lexical similarities, but omits describing how Seneca has made Charon, an old but vigorous god in Vergil, into an exhausted and worn-out figure.

After over twenty-five years of producing commentaries, Boyle intimately knows Seneca’s tragedies, and the commentary really shines in its explication of how *Oedipus* relates to the other plays in the Senecan corpus. He is equally good at providing philological parallels and at explicating how *Oedipus*’ dramaturgy fits in with or diverges from practices in the other plays. See, e.g., his comments on asides in Seneca *ad* 103–5, p. 139. Only by chance did I catch a place where a crucial parallel in another play was unexplored: at *Oed.* 142–44 (*dominum...prodidit* p. 150), Boyle notes that the use of *dominum* (here “master of the horse,” “rider”) is interesting because of “Oedipus’ status as *dominus*,” but he does not provide parallels from *Phaedra* where *dominus* means “rider” (lines 1089, 1100, 1102). Thus, his claim that the phrase *dominum...prodidit* foreshadows “another Theban *dominus* betrayed by his own animals, Actaeon (751–63)” seems particularly far-fetched. Here it just means “rider.”

There is, to my mind, an oversized emphasis on Stoicism, despite the overall claim (lxxx) “this is no Stoic world, but one irremediably diseased.” In some cases, explanation of a Stoic concept seems warranted (e.g. *fatum ad* 18–19, p. 115), but frequently there is a discussion of Stoicism even though it cannot possibly be relevant to understanding the text at hand. Perhaps the most egregious example of this is *ad* 187–88 (*sacer ignis pascitur artus*, the plague scene again). *Sacer ignis* is clearly *erysipelas*, as Boyle informs us, but for some reason there is appended at the end of this note the following: “Fire’, *ignis*, had a particular charge for the Stoics, who saw fire either as nature itself (so Zeno: Cic. *ND* 2.57) or as its prime element, which persisted forever and into which all else is dissolved (Von Arnim, 1903–24: II.413; Sen. *NQ* 3.13.1).” There is nothing objectionable to the content, but it lures the

reader into trying to figure out how Stoic fire is to be mapped onto what is simply a medical condition. Is it not time for us to stop seeking Stoic influences in every nook and cranny in the Senecan tragedies?

Despite the minor points raised here, Boyle is to be commended for lending his deft touch to Seneca's *Oedipus*. I use the word "touch" (*ars*) purposefully, because what Boyle brings to this and other plays is an artist's sensibility, one that does not take away from his considerable philological acumen. It is in this respect that his book differs from Töchterle's deeply philological, almost scientific, work, and this is what makes Boyle's book so valuable and timely.

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