Susanna Braund, *Seneca: Oedipus. Companions to Greek and Roman tragedy,* London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, vii + 163 pp. ISBN 978-1-4742-3478-8.

As part of Bloomsbury's *Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy,* Braund's concise introduction to Seneca's *Oedipus* does much of what you would expect - offer a précis of Seneca's life and times, discuss the Oedipus myth, and touch upon its major literary features. What makes Braund's *Companion* stand out is the depth of her interpretation, the powerful section on the reception of this play, and her sure guidance through aspects of the play that are puzzling or difficult to explain. If her goal was "to situate Seneca's handling of the myth … in its original context as fully and accurately as possible and to indicate the importance of Seneca's role in the perpetuation and development of the Oedipus tradition in later literature" (p. 1), she has succeeded admirably.

Braund opens with a consideration of the myth of Oedipus and adumbrates the variations of the myth in antiquity. She believes one should not view Seneca's version against Sophocles' play, because there were many different renditions in antiquity (the Oedipus story is not monolithic), and those of early Roman tragedians would be "much more likely to have influenced Seneca" (p. 7). Braund stresses how this version resonates in Seneca's historical, literary, and cultural setting. While she recognizes the important literary antecedents in the Augustan poets, she could do more to highlight the way that Seneca is filling a gap in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (whose account of Thebes ignores Oedipus), by emphatically placing his Oedipus in a post-Ovidian Thebes[1].

The second chapter features a quick tour of subjects such as Seneca's political ambitions (humorously entitled "Rise and Fall and Rise and Fall"), the characteristics of Seneca's writing, and his relationship to Roman drama. This is the sort of chapter that could be given to college or university students as an overview of the various contexts that shaped Seneca's life and writings, and it is particularly enlightening when Braund muses on the connections between drama and Stoicism.

The third chapter covers the structure, themes, and "issues" of the *Oedipus*. This is the heart of the book and delves into the play with gusto and insight. Braund begins with a succinct summary of the play, before exploring the ways that Seneca's opening speech introduces the play's major themes (kingship, monstrosity, fate) and emotions (fear, rage, and guilt). Braund

[1] Cf. S. Hinds "Seneca's Ovidian *Loci*", *SIFC* 9, 2011, 5-63.

helpfully finds connections between these matters both within the play and among Seneca's philosophical works. For example, the dialogue between Oedipus and Creon at *Oed.* 699-706 illustrates how fear and hatred are entangled in kingship, and the anger that Oedipus expresses parallels descriptions in *De Ira*. In her discussion of monstrosity, Braund connects the extispicy scene to his larger concern with "unnaturalness" and Seneca's poetic impulse to express verbally and figuratively that which is "unspeakable" (*infandus/nefandus*). If Oedipus needs to use his "wits" (*ingenium*, 947) to find a novel form of punishment, so Seneca employs his own *ingenium* in the creation of a tragedy that can explore how these themes can be expressed in an artful manner[2]. The language of fate and the personification of *Natura* echo what Seneca says elsewhere in his Stoic writings, which leads Braund to muse upon the Stoic ramifications for certain scenes and choral odes, "If we are seeking a Stoic message in this play, it exists only in silhouette, or by its absence. Oedipus is clearly not presented as a role model for disciples of Stoicism" (p. 52). The graphic physiological descriptions and interest in Roman rituals such as *extispicium* and necromancy in *Oedipus* allow Braund to compare Lucan and Seneca and demonstrate that both authors clearly are giving the Neronian reading public what they want. However, more analysis of these parallels would have been welcomed. She continues by establishing the specific Roman undertones of Seneca's version by focusing on the role of kinship and *pietas* in the play (p. 63-5) and his interest in spectacles such as Jocasta's suicide. The final section on the power of Seneca's language draws attention to what is lost in translation (meter, recondite mythological allusions, intertexts) and does a fantastic job pointing out how the original audience would relish Seneca's erudite catalogues, *sententiae,* and lengthy speeches, even if such features inspire shrugs and yawns in modern audiences.

Braund's interest in reception comes through clearly in her long final chapter on the reception and influence of *Oedipus* in antiquity to modernity (her final example is the 2010 movie *Incendies*). Statius' *Thebaid* proves to be an important conduit for the reception of the Oedipus myth in the Middle Ages and Braund carefully delineates how Statius wields allusions to Seneca's *Oedipus*. When the humanist Lovato Lovati (1241-1309) discovers a manuscript of Seneca's tragedies in the library of Pomposa, interest in Senecan dramaturgy explodes. In the early Renaissance, it is Seneca who defines Classical tragedy, and Braund demarcates Seneca's influence on neo-Latin tragedies such as Mussato's *Ecerinis* and on Boccaccio. Braund examines the first English translation of *Oedipus* by Alexander Neville and points out imitations, such as Cinthio's *Orbecche* (1541), which clearly show how

[2] M. Graver persuasively argues that ingenium in Seneca is a type of "literary talent" or "a kind of self" in "Honeybee Reading and Self-Scripting: *Epistuale Morales* 84", in J. Wildberger, M. L. Colish, eds., *Seneca Philosophus*, Berlin-Boston, 2014, 269-94.

Seneca not only reflected the tastes of the time, but defined what that taste should be. Because of the importance of the Oedipus legend in French drama, Braund examines how authors such as Garnier, Corneille, and Voltaire interpret and manipulate the Oedipus myth. Braund's examination of the paratextual material of Voltaire and Corneille as well as Dryden and Lee reveals how these authors position their plays in relation to Sophocles and Seneca. It is shown that Dryden and Lee, in spite of their professed disgust for Seneca, follow Seneca's version frequently and strive to outdo the spectacles of his version. I was surprised that Braund does not mention the influence of Seneca on Artaud in her survey of Seneca's influence in the twentieth century, but was enthralled by her discussion of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and its Latin libretto by Jean Daniélou. Most performances of Seneca's *Oedipus* in English rely on Ted Hughes' version from 1968, and Braund investigates how his simplified poetic vocabulary magnifies the raw emotional power of Seneca's play.

In conclusion, this is a fine introduction to Seneca's play and will benefit students and scholars alike. Braund draws attention to numerous issues that will inspire further thought and comment. From the frequent parallels with Lucan to the adaptations of the play by poets such as Statius and Ted Hughes, it is a testament to Braund's work that readers will be encouraged to continue to explore and investigate Seneca's *Oedipus* after reading this companion.

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