

## Citation style

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SHADI BARTSCH, SUSANNA BRAUND, ALEX DRESSLER AND ELAINE FANTHAM (trans.). *Lucius Annaeus Seneca. The complete tragedies, volume 1: Medea, The Phoenician Women, Phaedra, The Trojan Women, Octavia*. The complete works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017, xxix+274 pp., \$45.00, ISBN 978-0-226-74823-8.

SHADI BARTSCH, SUSANNA BRAUND AND DAVID KONSTAN (trans.). *Lucius Annaeus Seneca. The complete tragedies, volume 2: Oedipus, Hercules mad, Hercules on Oeta, Thyestes, Agamemnon*. The complete works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017, xxviii+320 pp. \$45.00, ISBN 978-0-226-01360-2.

There has been a steady stream of English translations of Seneca's tragedies in the last decade. Emily Wilson translated the majority of Seneca's plays (*Six Tragedies*, Oxford University Press, 2010) and R. Scott Smith's included the Pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* in his collection (*Phaedra and Other Plays*, Penguin Classics, 2011). While neither was complete (both avoided *Agamemnon*, *Phoenissae*, and the dubious *Hercules Oetaeus*), each translator offered polished translations of the plays, which stressed their poetic form, rhetorical tendencies, and Stoic overtones. The University of Chicago's translations of the complete works of Seneca offer another compelling collection and will be useful for students and teachers of Seneca *tragicus*. These volumes unite all of the plays transmitted as the work of Seneca translated by some of the most prominent scholars of Seneca (Bartsch translates three plays, Braund, and Konstan each translate two, while Dressler and Fantham translate the *Troades* and *Octavia*, respectively).

Each volume begins with the "Seneca and His World" intro that begins all of the University of Chicago Seneca volumes. This general introduction offers a panorama of Seneca's life and times, his relationship with Nero, Stoicism, and a helpful section on Seneca's own brand of Stoicism. This overview gives a bare-bones view of Senecan tragedy and, while certain issues such as metatheatre, *sympatheia*, performance, and the failure of Stoicism are touched upon, there could be more done with most of these issues (as well as a general sense of his poetics in the tragedies). Some of the scholars rectify these sparse details, but it would have been helpful to learn more about specific issues, e.g. performance and the degree to which these translators are viewing Seneca's texts as performance scripts. That being said, the scholars uniformly provide accessible and effective introductions to the

plays. These often transcend the basic nuts-and-bolts of typical introductory material and become persuasive readings of the play's dynamics (Dressler on *Troades* and Bartsch on *Medea* are particularly enthralling). In addition, Fantham's summary of the historical and generic background of the *Octavia* is captivating even as she admits that the author "fails ... as a poet or versifier, with too poor a vocabulary and too limited a command of syntax" (200). Editorial choices such as the placement of *Hercules Mad* adjacent to *Hercules on Oeta* help the reader see connections between these two plays and their characterization of Hercules. A reader who makes his way through both volumes will find much to like about these translations, their notes and supplementary material, and will discover in Seneca's tragedies a bracing genre full of poetic charm that is uniquely Senecan.<sup>1</sup>

To give a better sense of the translation, I will compare moments from Braund's *Oedipus* against Wilson's and Konstan's *Hercules Mad* against Smith's version. When chorus of Seneca's *Oedipus* muse on the golden mean through a rendition of the Daedalus and Icarus myth, Braund writes:

Older and cannier, Daedalus  
balanced a middling path,  
hovering midway beneath the cloud,  
awaiting his fledgling –  
as the bird who's escaped  
from the threat of the hawk assembles  
her brood all scattered by fear –  
till the boy moved his hands in the sea,  
hands all entwined in the fetters  
from his audacious journey.  
To exceed the mean  
Is to teeter precarious.

Wilson's version is similar:

But the clever old man  
Daedalus, kept a middle course,  
and stopped in the middle of the clouds,  
waiting for his winged child  
(as a bird flees from the threat  
of the hawk, then gathers together  
her brood, scattered by fear)  
until the boy, in the sea,  
waved his drowning arms

<sup>1</sup> As Konstan mentions in his introduction about Hercules, "If we accept that speechifying and over-the-topic rhetoric, laced with recondite and sometimes enigmatic allusions to earlier texts and traditions, are part of the fabric *and indeed the fun of Senecan tragedy*, we can still recognize that a purely virtuous protagonist would have made for a dull drama" (p. 55, my emphasis).

tangled by the ropes of his bold flight.  
 All excess hangs  
 In doubt.

Both render the simile in fine language that stresses Daedalus' parental anxiety, and do an admirable job with the closing *sententia*. While Wilson's vision of Icarus waving "his drowning arms" makes clear his final death struggles, Braund's use of "entwined in the fetters" draws out linguistic connections between Icarus and Oedipus. In her introduction to the play Braund mentions the theme of *pietas* and how Seneca questions its contemporary meaning through the figure of Oedipus. The image of Daedalus, unable to truly help his audacious child, becomes emblematic of the failure of *pietas* in the play and possibly evokes the relationship between Seneca and Nero. Konstan's catchy cadences render Juno's initial rage at Hercules' exploits as follows:

But I complain too much at  
 trivia: I should fear for heaven, lest he who  
 beat the depths attack the heights; he'll snatch his  
 father's scepter. He'll not, like Bacchus, come  
 slowly to the stars: he'll seek a route of ruin, want  
 to rule an empty sky.

Compare Smith's prose translation:

But these complaints are trivial. We must now turn our worries toward heaven, for fear that the man who conquered the kingdom of hell may seize hold of the kingdom of heaven. He will snatch the scepter from his own father's hands! His ascent to heaven will not be gentle like Bacchus'. He will demolish all that stands in his way – he is willing to rule over heaven even if it lies in ruins!

Konstan relishes the antitheses of Seneca's rhetoric and underscores the alliterative pulse of Seneca's trimeters ("route of ruin"). Smith's heightened prose works well in contrast with his metrical choral verses (and he is more circumspect about stage directions), but we lose a bit of the direct punch of Seneca's Latin. While accurately rendering Juno's *levia sed nimium queror* (*Herc. F.* 63), Konstan here also nods to the glut of mythological allusions ("trivia") that Seneca assembles for his learned readers and finds a way to point out the metapoetics at play.

It is a bold decision (and one that the University of Chicago has pursued elsewhere in this series, cf. *Hardship and Happiness*, 2014) to collect the translations of multiple scholars. The danger is that the tone, diction, and quality of the translations may jumble Seneca's tragic style into a grotesque caricature. But that does not happen here. While some may prefer the

translation style of Bartsch or Dressler, the view of Seneca that emerges is clear and focused, and, by the inclusion of the various scholarly viewpoints, possibly more emblematic of his own sophisticated literary design.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Here I think of Seneca's own view that great literature will offer sustenance of different kinds to different scholars (*Ep.* 108.29).