

It sounds like a good idea. Why not bring to bear the insights of those experienced in theatrical productions upon the traditional scholarly problem of how suitable Seneca’s plays are for stage performance? Trying out these tragedies on the stage, as has been happening more and more often, can enhance our understanding of their theatricality. This new approach to an old academic problem has been termed ‘experimental philology’ (Harrison ix, 206). Most of the essays in Harrison’s book originated in a conference held at Xavier University, Cincinnati, in 1998 in conjunction with a production of *The Trojan Women*, directed by Gyllian Raby. Rutenberg’s version of the *Oedipus* was staged successfully at Manhattan’s Loewe Theatre. A third production, discussed in some detail in Harrison’s volume, was again of *The Trojan Women*, directed by Wilfried Stroh in Munich in 1993.

Of these, the Munich production seems to have been the most interesting. This is described by Katharina Volk (Harrison 197-208), who acted the part of Andromache. Two things distinguish the German from the American productions. First, it was performed in Latin rather than in a modern translation. Secondly, the director and many of the performers were themselves classical scholars. Retaining the original language had, no doubt, its drawbacks in terms of audience response, but Volk claims it also had unexpected advantages for the performers: ‘I would say that the use of a “doubly foreign” language actually “liberated” the non-professional actors and allowed them to reach a level of emotional expressiveness that they might not have attained in their own, all-too-familiar, tongue,’ (Harrison 198). Importantly, it also meant that the temptation to rewrite the play was curtailed. Unlike the other versions, this production does seem to have inspired a rethinking of some interpretative arguments, especially concerning whether the correct title of the play is *Troades* or *Troas* (an alternative title in the manuscript tradition), and how Seneca understands the relationship of parent and child.
The other two productions appear to have suffered severely from their directors’ very limited understanding of Senecan drama. Both Raby and Rutenberg show little knowledge of the modern scholarship on Seneca; they assume the right to take extreme liberties not just with the text but with the whole dramatic structure of the tragedy; and in an apparent effort to make their productions ‘relevant’, they try to impose on the plays their own rather unsophisticated, if not shallow, thematic ideas. Raby is the worse offender. Not only does she cut entire scenes, she reassigns speeches, imports material from another play, Seneca’s *Agamemnon*, and proudly claims to have excised ‘any rhetorical “mythologising”’, (Harrison 174). She interprets the play reductively as being all about the experience of war, describing Helen, for instance, as ‘a confused and dysfunctional abuse-survivor’ (Harrison 185). She does not seem to be able to think of the play as anything other than an ancient version of Brecht’s *Mother Courage*.

Rutenberg’s approach is a little less cavalier, and he does have a better feel for Seneca’s historical milieu; nevertheless he is unable to refrain from reconstructing the *Oedipus* in ways that have less to do with making it more performable and more to do with his own blindness to the qualities of the original. His most radical change is to replace all the choral odes with lengthy passages drawn from Seneca’s philosophical prose. This alters fundamentally the nature of the play, turning it into something far more didactic and confrontationally Stoic (an impression Seneca had carefully avoided), removing the chorus out of the mythical world of Troy and transforming it into a philosopher speaking directly to the audience.

Other notable interferences include extending the speaking role of Jocasta into scenes where she is absent in the original; putting Manto’s account of the examination of entrails into the past tense so it becomes more of a messenger speech than a dramatised event; and contaminating Seneca’s play with whole scenes borrowed from Sophocles’ version. It is questionable whether the play that results can be legitimately described as Seneca’s *Oedipus*, so thoroughly has Rutenberg amputated and then rebuilt it. In his own staging, Rutenberg attempted to evoke ‘a post-holocaust future’, setting the action in ‘an underground royal bunker complete with decontamination chamber... like a futuristic bomb shelter’, (26-7). He explains this as justified by the fact that audiences are used to
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seeing ‘post-apocalyptic films’ and so would ‘relate to the plague as reflective of our own time’, (27). My guess is that the average audience reaction would be to think: ‘Oh no! Not another attempt at post-holocaust futuristic melodrama. Not a patch on Terminator 2.’

Harrison’s book is much more than a review of recent stage productions. It includes many academic articles on Senecan tragedy, especially with respect to its theatrical potential. The approaches taken vary widely. Jo-Ann Shelton bases her reading of The Trojan Women on recent research into public spectacles of death in the Roman arena, pointing out that ‘in his portrayal of the executions of Astyanax and Polyxena, Seneca presented to his Roman audience a situation which was similar to the events of the amphitheatre’ (Harrison 112). Her article expands in great detail an analogy that has been noted by others. Some may feel she goes too far. Would a Roman audience of a tragedy readily identify with the Greeks who make up the spectators in the play? And would they see the human sacrifice of a Trojan prince and princess as equivalent to the punishment of criminals? In effect, Shelton collapses the distinctions between tragedy and execution, between the theatre and the amphitheatre, between heroic death scenes and the grim realities of capital punishment. So too does Eric Varner in his paper which extends Shelton’s approach by attempting to relate it more closely to Neronian art and architecture.

Some of the articles in Harrison’s book return to traditional Senecan questions. Roisman compares Seneca’s Phaedra with Euripides’ Hippolytus, and finds much evidence of originality in the Roman play. The observations that she makes are generally correct, but, from the point of view of Senecan scholars, they are far from new. Ahl tackles the question of translation. In an interesting piece, he analyses versions in modern English of Chaucer as well as of Classical literature, in order to defend his own use of puns and anagrams in his translations of Seneca. Translation involves compromise. Other translators are usually willing to sacrifice a certain amount of sound and wordplay so as to capture more perfectly the sense of the original. For Ahl, sound and wordplay are undervalued by most translators as essential ingredients of the experience of reading or hearing the original. But, one might ask, which aspects of sound and wordplay? Why, for instance, is preserving puns and anagrams more material than preserving metrical rhythms?
Also provocative is Goldberg's attempt to argue against T.S. Eliot's celebrated statement that 'no author exercised a wider or deeper influence upon the Elizabethan mind or upon the Elizabethan form of tragedy than did Seneca'. Goldberg points out that other Classical sources, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, were often more directly influential. He contextualises the Senecan plays within the culture of Roman declamation where words and description substituted for physical dramatisation, concluding that 'Seneca is creating actions for the "eyes of the mind"'. In this, Goldberg is at odds with most of the other contributors (and Rutenberg) who are persuaded that Seneca wrote with stage performance in mind. On the matter of the Senecan influence on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, Goldberg's case is mostly concerned with a single feature, the representation of extreme violence. There are many other common elements that need to be weighed (the use of ghosts; five Act structure; and the revenge theme; to name but three), and the Senecan influence is not only to be gauged in relation to his tragedies but also to his prose writings which are frequently echoed in the speeches of characters not only in plays but also in much other literature during that period of English literary history.

Another old question is revived by Hook, in the weakest of the academic papers in the book: whether Seneca’s characters may be said to lack interiority because of the rhetorical character of their speech. The model against which he measures Seneca’s characters is Hamlet, who I would have thought represents something of an extreme of self-absorbed interiority even in English literature. Much of the paper outlines well-known features of Roman declamation and it concludes with a rather impressionistic comparison of Seneca with David Mamet. Hook’s position is not only out of date but weakened by his failure to take into account recent work on the conception of the self in Roman and Stoic thought and, above all, the implications of Seneca’s other works. No-one who has read Seneca’s epistles could possibly hold the opinion about Seneca’s conception of personhood that Hook seeks to defend.

Harrison’s book captures an intriguing moment in the history of thought about the ancient performance of Senecan tragedy. A paradigm shift is underway. The old paradigm was to associate the plays with declamation, to emphasise their rhetorical language, to deny their suitability to full stage production and to define them as ‘recitation-drama’, a kind of sub-branch of declamation. This position has been
undermined by the demonstration that a considerable number of scenes require revelatory actions for the words and the scene as a whole to make sense, as when Atreus reveals the heads of Thyestes’ sons to their father, which, while not verbalised in the text, is the critical moment in the play. The recitation theory creates many more problems than it solves. The new paradigm, I would suggest, is to associate the plays with Roman spectacle. As mentioned above, this lies behind the contributions of Shelton and Varner. It also informs the articles by Marshall and Harrison himself who explore in different but complementary ways the function of scene-setting in relation to the sorts of spaces in which the plays may have been performed. Marshall tries to work this out for *The Trojan Women* in over-precise detail, but it is a productive exercise. Harrison too pays especial attention to *The Trojan Women* (or *Troas* as he prefers to call the play, a title that puts the emphasis on locality—and therefore the set—rather than the *dramatis personae*), in considering the possible Roman performance venues to which the plays seem best adapted. Caught in the middle of this paradigm shift is Fantham who accepted the ‘recitation-drama’ theory in her commentary on *The Trojan Women* published in 1982, but in this volume steps back from that extreme position to offer a ‘partial recantation’ (13). Also caught is Fitch, though he tries valiantly to achieve a compromise position between the two approaches.

Fitch, whose commentary on the *Hercules Furens* and studies on the relative dating of the plays are widely respected, was not a participant in the Cincinnati conference, but his new hypothesis about the performability of the plays was considered so significant that he was invited to contribute a paper outlining his ideas. His argument is that the tragedies were in a sense ‘modular’, in that some scenes were written for full public performance and others were written for recitation. He ‘does not see recitation and staging as mutually exclusive but considers that they co­existed side by side,’ (Harrison viii). This procrustean solution sacrifices the plays as coherent works in order to find an escape route out of a modern academic dilemma. It is, in fact, not a compromise between the two camps but a near-total capitulation of the ‘recitation-drama’ supporters under the weight of contrary evidence; but one which tries as a last resort to hang on to one or two shreds of their theory at the cost of sacrificing something more important, namely, the integrity of the texts they are trying to explain. In fact, Fitch is really only able to claim one scene in all of Senecan drama to be unperformable, the extispicy scene in the *Oedipus*. Yet the *Oedipus* is the most performed of all the Senecan
plays in modern times. It is easy to demonstrate that those scenes that Fitch would rip from their dramatic context and reserve for recitation depend for much of their effect (and even comprehension) on earlier sections of the same play. No doubt, in a conference situation, or in a book bringing together a range of scholarly opinions, a proposed compromise that seems to hold out a means of reconciliation between strongly held divergent views is likely to have some appeal, and several contributors to the book endorse Fitch’s suggestion with varying degrees of warmth. Fantham is most enthusiastic, describing his position as ‘judicious’ and ‘wise’ (13). It is, however, the most unsatisfactory position ever advanced on this issue, a desperate remedy that threatens to kill the patient.

Two final points should be made about these publications. As an edited collection Harrison’s book suffers from a sort of academic parochialism. All the contributors (even Volk who gives the account of the Munich production of The Trojan Women) are from North American universities. In these days of electronic communication it is not all that hard to involve scholars from other parts of the world in a collaborative project of this type; and in the movement toward reviving the performance of Seneca’s tragedies North America has been more of a follower than a leader. The contributors, unfortunately, are not representative of the best-informed thinking on the subject of Seneca in Performance. Secondly, it is curious that neither of these books discusses or even recognises the existence of the most frequently performed and most influential modern version of a Senecan play, Ted Hughes’ Oedipus (nor, for that matter, do they refer to Caryl Churchill’s Thyestes). In fact, the publisher’s description of Rutenberg’s version of the Oedipus mistakenly claims that it is ‘the only translation created for performance on the modern stage’.

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