

James Ker and Jessica Winston, eds. *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies*. MHRA Tudor and Stuart Translations 8. London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012. ix + 340 pp. \$20. ISBN: 978-0-947623-98-2.

What did tragedy mean to early modern English writers, and how did they arrive at their conceptions of the genre? Approaching these questions requires reflecting on the whirlwind of interest sparked by Seneca in the sixteenth century, but his wavering critical fortunes have complicated our understanding of his legacy. Often viewed as bombastic melodrama, Seneca's plays have routinely irritated critics seeking the secret to the Elizabethan flourishing of tragedy. He has been condemned as declamatory, trite, and derivative, a poor shadow both of the Greek plays he imitated and of the Renaissance plays that imitated him. More damningly, influential twentieth-century critics such as G. K. Hunter derided accounts of his relevance for English drama, edging the study of classical imports toward the scholarly margins in order to emphasize the contributions of native literary traditions. Yet Seneca is enjoying a renaissance of sorts, prompting reevaluations of both his plays and their afterlives. This intelligently conceived and carefully edited volume offers a valuable opportunity to examine the evidence firsthand.

The jury is still out on a number of questions central to Seneca studies — were his plays closet dramas, or publicly performed, and do they reinforce the Stoicism of his philosophical writings or oppose it? — and Ker and Winston do not use this volume to take stances. They document the state of the debates, surveying the history of critical approaches, but their primary focus is on exploring the particular backgrounds and achievements of the translators they consider, with an emphasis on the literary, intellectual, and political contexts that gave rise to their influential work. The texts included are well chosen: Jasper Heywood's *Troas* (1559) was the first English translation of Seneca, by one of his most prolific and influential translators; John Studley's *Agamemnon* (1566) was the first contribution by another of his most notable translators; and Heywood's *Thyestes* (1560) has come to be seen as the most important Senecan translation of the period. As the editors note, the plays also fit together as a trio: *Agamemnon* portrays the outcomes of the family saga whose beginnings are dramatized in *Thyestes* and *Troas*. They also all share the fascination with the Trojan War that was especially pronounced in Elizabethan engagement with the classics.

This volume is clear, intelligent, and informed by current scholarship; it will be valuable for scholars with an interest in Seneca, Elizabethan translation, classical reception, academic drama, and/or the development of tragedy. Notes on the translation provide historic and mythological backgrounds, and indicate significant departures from Seneca's Latin, with more extended discussions of translation choices in the introduction; unfamiliar vocabulary is listed in a glossary at the end of the volume (paging back and forth can be distracting, but this is a minor quibble). Among the many pleasures of the translations themselves are the now unfamiliar rollicking fourteeners so influential to the construction of early tragedies. As the

volume emphasizes, these are early modern literary texts in their own right, rather than simply conduits for classical plays. In fact, the translators' own additions offer some of the moments that most fully embody what we now see as Senecan. In a spectacular speech added by Heywood to *Thyestes*, Thyestes rages in revulsion on realizing that he has eaten his own children: "Why gap'st thou not? Why do you not, O gates of hell, unfold? / Why do ye thus th'infernal fiends so long from hence withhold?" (203). At the end of *Agamemnon*, Studley adds a similarly agonized afterword from Eurybates: "Alas, ye hateful, hellish hags, ye Furies foul and fell, / Why cause ye rusty rancour's rage in noble hearts to dwell?" (275). These lines, with their incredulous horror and incantatory rhythm, are not by Seneca, but they are what early modern English readers, writers, and audiences encountered as Seneca. Ker and Winston show persuasively that Elizabethan Seneca constitutes a literary world of its own, and that it is a world well worth exploring.

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