AN INTRODUCTION TO SENECA'S *HERCULES FURENS*

BERNSTEIN (N.W.) *Seneca*: Hercules Furens. Pp. xvi + 151, ills. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Cased, £65, US$88. ISBN: 978-1-4742-5492-2.

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The Bloomsbury series *Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy*, under the general editorship of T. Harrison, has produced a number of useful short introductions to well-known plays (Sophocles' *Antigone* by D. Cairns [2016]) and lesser-known texts (Euripides' *Cyclops* by C. Shaw [2018]). The majority of volumes, predictably, have dealt with Athenian tragedy, but S. Braund produced an excellent introduction to Seneca's *Oedipus* in 2015, and now we have B.'s equally strong contribution, on Seneca's *Hercules Furens* (*HF*).

The series aims to provide accessible guides to plays that may be studied by undergraduates, although many contributions also offer original insights of interest to specialists. The *HF* of Seneca might seem initially like an unpromising text for an undergraduate class. The play is based on a depressing and relatively unfamiliar element of the Hercules myth (his slaughter of his family), and it is composed in Seneca's usual, highly rhetorical idiom (which I try to mirror in my translation, recommended by B.). A full appreciation of the *HF* requires knowledge of a fairly large number of contexts, from literary antecedents (such as Euripides' *Heracles* and the *Aeneid*) to the conceptualisation of *virtus* in imperial Roman culture and in Roman Stoicism. B. succeeds in providing this context and demonstrating that this great and moving tragedy can provide a surprisingly rich and varied introduction to Seneca, and to Roman culture more broadly. He covers an impressive amount of ground in a book that is, as he says, Herculean in subject but not on 'a Herculean scale'.

B. divides his study into five chapters: an introductory plot summary, a chapter on 'major themes', a third chapter on the Greco-Roman literary and artistic antecedents of the play, a fourth on Seneca's career, and a fifth on performance and reception. These chapter headings are a little hard to negotiate, and the individuation of topics is not perfectly smooth. I was surprised to find that the discussion of Stoicism did not appear until Chapter 4 – although there is already an extensive discussion of *virtus* in Chapter 2. The analysis in Chapter 2 would have benefited from a more complete analysis of how the philosophical version of *virtus* might differ from the ordinary, social meanings of the word or overlap with it.

Chapter 2 includes some excellent discussion of the problem of biological ancestry in imperial Roman culture; B. suggests persuasively that Seneca's depiction of Hercules as the man with a double parentage, mortal and divine, engages with the contemporary Roman elite interest in adoption as a way to carry on the family line. At the end of the play, as B. notes, 'ancestry has been interpreted . . . as a combination of blood and intention' (p. 34). The discussion of 'moralized landscapes' would have benefited from a similar social and historical contextualisation; there is, surprisingly, nothing about the expansion and proper policing of the boundaries of empire. The account of 'madness and the passions' and of 'courage, violence and suicide' in the same chapter are good as far as they go, but a crucial analytical term is missing: gender. B. comments on the entirely negative depiction of Juno, the 'gloating villain', and shows that Hercules' 'manly courage' (*virtus*) is defined as resistance to Juno – but he says nothing to underline the fact that the conflict between 'madness' and 'courage' is framed in terms of the opposition of male and female power. It also seems a little over-optimistic to imagine that all 'modern audiences' will be repulsed by the idea of the 'Wicked Witch', as he calls Juno, when the misogynistic idea of the

Wicked Witch is surely just as much an element in modern as in ancient culture (as one can see from watching almost any Disney princess movie – although in *Hercules* the part of the scheming villain is occupied by Hades rather than Hera).

Historicism is a wonderful thing, but it can lead to some dangerous waters: modern readers, especially young modern readers, are often told that their feelings in response to a close reading of ancient literature are illegitimate, because ancient people had different norms. B.'s attempt to put the play into a historical context sometimes falls into this trap. He tells us, for example, that the Chorus' indifference to the killing of Hercules' wife Megara 'reflects the macho, misogynistic culture in which they and the contemporary Roman audience lived' (p. 13). As far as this goes, it may be true, but it invites an intellectually unjustifiable vicious circle, in which the play is used to investigate the culture, and the assumed facts about the culture are used to illuminate the play. We need to do a little more work before we can confidently assert that nobody in Seneca's original audience could possibly have been struck by this detail; killing or abusing one's wife while in a flaming temper was not, in fact, an entirely acceptable and unremarkable action in Roman culture or Roman law – as the later pseudo-Senecan play *Octavia* clearly shows.

Chapter 3 includes a brief but useful comparison between Euripides' and Seneca's versions of the myth, and also a valuable summary of the depiction of the hero as comic glutton in ancient comedy. The second half of the chapter offers a persuasive account of the ways in which Seneca plays Virgilian and Ovidian models off against one another. Seneca's Hercules, B. argues, is like Virgil's Aeneas in his 'endurance of persecution by Juno' (p. 61); but he is defined by the self-aggrandising virtue of *virtus* rather than by the more other-directed *pietas*. On B.'s reading, the final act of the *HF* shows the hero moving towards a more Virgilian mode of heroism, by his willingness to 'remain alive and employ his strength for the benefit of others' (p. 63).

Chapter 4 covers a lot of material that is placed surprisingly late in the volume. There is a very brief introduction to Seneca's biography. This is followed by an overview of the genre of Senecan tragedy that focuses on a few common tropes: the figure of the ambitious revenger, the passion-restraint type scene, and the 'non-naturalistic', declamatory mode of speech and characterisation. We then come to a survey of Seneca's philosophical work, followed by an excursus back into the philosophical uses of Hercules (by Stoics and others), followed by an account of rage, ambition and fortune in the play and in a few short passages from Seneca's other works. It would surely have been worthwhile to include a brief section outlining the main tenets of Stoicism here, which are nowhere explicitly revealed, and which student or general readers cannot be expected to know. Beyond that, B.'s account is thoughtful and engaging. He focuses especially on the Stoic doctrine that one must resist the false passions (*affectus*), and argues that the play on one level seems to conform to the position Seneca takes in *On Anger* – because Hercules' rage results in destruction and collapse. On the other hand, B. also notes that Hercules does not 'assent' to his anger – a possibility that seems importantly out of line with the Stoic notion that we always have the power to choose or resist the grand emotions. B. hints at the possible connections between Stoic preoccupations and contemporary socio-political contexts, noting, for example, that 'expressions of anger are implicit comments on social status' (p. 85); it would have been interesting to read a much more sustained account of what Hercules' disastrous rage, ambition and misfortune might say about the imperial Roman court. But B. carefully keeps the play's political dimensions at a long distance.

The final chapter, 'Performance and Reception', begins with a useful brief overview of the scholarly debate about how Seneca's tragedies were performed. B. then zooms through a very short but illuminating discussion of the play's importance for Marlowe and Shakespeare, before ending with modern reception. Recent adaptations for adults, both

for stage and film and graphic novel versions, have viewed Hercules as a war veteran suffering from PTSD – in contrast to the Disney film (*Hercules* 1997), which eliminated all the scary and too-relevant themes of domestic violence and devastating rage. B.'s fine introduction will be an excellent guide to students and their instructors who may have been raised on the Disney cartoon and are ready for something more.

University of Pennsylvania EMILY WILSON
emilyw@sas.upenn.edu

VIEWS OF THE FAMILY IN SENECA THE YOUNGER

GLOYN (L.) *The Ethics of the Family in Seneca*. Pp. xii + 249, fig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Cased, £75, US$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-107-14547-4.
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This book develops a new area of focus for the study of Senecan philosophy and for Stoicism more generally. As G. notes, the family is not an area that has received much attention from a philosophical perspective. Indeed, it might seem to be a topic of little interest for the Stoics. According to Stoic theory, like good health or reputation, the family was a preferred indifferent. Epictetus puts its value in stark perspective. Because parents and children are externals, they are not within our power to control and hence are not part of the good (*Diss*. 1.22.11–12). This degree of detachment is absent in much of Seneca's philosophy. Although the Latin *familia* could have a considerably wider range of meanings and members than our contemporary understanding of family, G. bases her analyses on Seneca's 'simple' notion of the family as comprising relationships between parents, children, brothers, and husbands and wives (pp. 3–4).

Building on an important trend in Senecan scholarship, G. notes that Seneca's philosophical texts mediate between traditional Roman values and Stoicism. G. argues that in the works under investigation, Seneca primarily uses the Stoic theory of *oikeiôsis* ('appropriation') and, to a lesser extent, '*cosmopolis* theory', to redefine familial relationships. Aside from a brief discussion of how animals and humans are naturally aware of their constitution (*Ep.* 121), Seneca does not provide an elaborate explanation of *oikeiôsis* in his philosophy. Thus, G. bases her discussion of it on Hierocles' metaphor of concentric circles that expand from the smallest around the individual to ever increasing ones encircling family members, fellow citizens and ultimately the entire human race (pp. 28–9). Her hypothesis is that this theory is central to Seneca's ethics of the family because it 'describes the process which gives the individual the ability to care for others' (p. 17).

Seneca's texts are investigated in chronological order, moving from the early consolations to the late epistles, but G. does not argue 'for a chronological development of Seneca's thought' (p. 9). Rather, her exploration is thematic. Each of the first four chapters treats a discrete element of the family unit, moving from mothers, to brothers, to husbands and wives, to fathers and sons. G. first outlines how the particular familial relationship under investigation was typically viewed in Roman society and then shows how Seneca seeks to redefine it. One method is by moving family members around within the concentric circles of *oikeiôsis*. In the first two chapters, which treat Seneca's three consolations, G. demonstrates how relationships with dead sons can be appropriated to relationships with dead fathers, as Seneca advises Marcia. Mothers can have closer relationships with their