

Boyle (A.J.) (ed., trans.) *Seneca: Thyestes*. Pp cxlvi + 561. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Cased, £120, US\$150. ISBN: 978-0-19-874472-6.

Richard Tarrant's 1985 commentary on the *Thyestes* set the bar very high in terms of scholarly breadth and precision, and also in terms of accessibility and affordability. It was and remains a classic text for students and scholars alike. But the landscape of Senecan criticism has changed enough in the intervening 32 years to make, in Anthony Boyle's own words, 'the production of a new English edition desirable, even necessary' (*preface* vii). The result is a magisterial tome running to more than 600 pages and incorporating exegetical remarks on everything from grammar, syntax, textual tradition and literary themes, to the play's cultural and philosophical context, its reception, and its performance history. Enclosed within these covers is the cumulative expertise of Boyle's lifelong interest in, and championing of, Senecan drama. There is much to commend in this new commentary. Yet it must also be said, in all honesty, that Boyle fails to clear the bar previously set by Tarrant.

An obvious reason for this failure is the volume's sheer size and accordingly prohibitive cost, which must concern everyone in this current climate of spiralling academic book prices, but is especially problematic for any members of staff wishing to assign it as a textbook.

Although Boyle intends his *Thyestes* to cater to a full spectrum of students and scholars across the disciplines of Latin Literature, Classical Civilizations, Drama, Comparative Literature, and Theatre Studies, this otherwise noble aspiration becomes self-defeating when one considers the volume's consequent heft and welter of detail. Many undergraduates will justifiably find the book daunting, while students and scholars from disciplines such as Theatre Studies are unlikely in the first place to consult works belonging to this specifically classical tradition of textual exegesis. Boyle has of course succeeded – and more than simply succeeded - in the commentary's primary purpose of guiding a reader through a text. But the

reader in this instance is more likely to be an established Classics scholar pursuing a complex program of research than a student seeking to understand Seneca's *Thyestes* for the first time.

There are a number of occasions where Boyle's commentary could have benefitted from more rigorous editing. To cite a couple of randomly selected examples: the note on *pietas* at *Thy.* 216 (pp. 189-90) includes superfluous remarks on the temples and shrines dedicated to this virtue in Rome; the comment on Tantalus' self-naming at *Thy.* 3 (p. 103) opens into broader discussion of modes of character identification in Senecan tragedy, including a sizeable list of identification techniques that, Boyle himself admits, do not even occur in the *Thyestes*. In his quest to be comprehensive, Boyle sometimes strays beyond mere interpretation of the text at hand, bloating his commentary with peripheral information. On yet other occasions, he seems driven to compile material for its own sake, as for example on pp. lix-lxi and lxv-lxvii of the Introduction, where two lists of core propositions from the *De Ira* and the *De Clementia* are offered with minimal accompanying analysis. Only a select few of these propositions make a subsequent appearance in the commentary itself, which leaves the reader wondering about their purpose even when – and this is the frustrating part – their relevance to the *Thyestes* is indisputable.

The volume's Introduction is just as swollen as its commentary, although here the main problem is Boyle's (openly confessed) preference for adapting material he has already published elsewhere, namely in his 1983 article, '*Hic Epulis Locus*'; his 1994 *Troades* commentary; his 1997 monograph, *Tragic Seneca*; and his 2006 monograph, *Roman Tragedy*. While such recycling is to some degree admissible, especially in this kind of summative work produced at the tail end of a long career, nonetheless Boyle's Introduction takes the principle

too far. Readers of his earlier publications will find a lot of familiar material: analysis of the *Thyestes* according to a structuralist triad of beast, man, and god; emphasis on Senecan meta-theatre, and on Atreus' self-declared role as both actor and dramatist; arguments about the cyclical nature of evil in Senecan tragedy; defensive pronouncements on the sophisticated psychological interiority of Seneca's *dramatis personae*. Boyle even displays a tendency to cite his own work over and above other equally influential research; his treatment of theatricality and dissimulation in early imperial Roman politics, for example, features only one footnote to Bartsch and none to Rudich. In the face of such self-repetition, Boyle's opening claim to have produced an updated commentary loses a lot of traction. Senecan scholarship has indeed witnessed many and substantial changes since the mid-1980s, but Boyle himself remains *semper idem*.

On a more positive note, however, Boyle proves himself particularly alert to the nuances of Seneca's language, a skill that enables him not only to elucidate the subtle ambiguities of Atreus' and Thyestes' syntax, but also to pinpoint previously unremarked examples of wordplay (e.g. his note on p. 220 that *rudibus.../...annis* at *Thy.* 317-18 may evoke the meaning 'uncooked' as well as 'inexperienced'). Seneca's method of linking the choral odes to the content of the Acts likewise receives profitable attention. There are some innovative ideas, too, that deserve to have been granted greater prominence, such as Boyle's suggestion (p. 130 and 408-9) that *liber dies* (*Thy.* 63) and *festus dies* (*Thy.* 942-3; 970) allude to the Saturnalian conditions of the Roman *ludi* – an exciting and frankly invaluable observation for anyone wishing to examine how Senecan tragedy appropriates and interacts with preceding traditions of *comoedia palliata*.

Equally commendable is Boyle's readiness to report and evaluate textual variants in an accessible, well-reasoned manner. The commentary contains a selective critical apparatus (pp. 80-7), and Boyle draws on an appreciably wide range of earlier editions - Viansino (1965); Giardina (1996 and 2007); Tarrant (1985); Zwierlein (1986); Chaumartin (1999); Fitch (2004) - when defending his own choices. In general, he seems to prefer a 'non-interventionist' approach of privileging received manuscript readings over any potentially unnecessary emendations, even when those emendations have been widely accepted (witness, for instance, his discussion of *captus* versus *cautus* at *Thy.* 486-7). His willingness to consult exegetical studies from other eras, such as Farnaby's 1623 *L. & M. Annaei Senecae Tragoedia*, is also noteworthy, especially when he uses them to supplement or adjust modern assumptions about the play.

Finally, there is Boyle's translation, which comprises a slightly uneven mix of elevated diction, colloquial phrases, and short, sharp rhetorical thrusts. The climactic exchange between Atreus and Thyestes effects an awkward transition from the casually sinister - 'Prepare your arms, / Daddy: they're here' (*Thy.* 1004-5) - to the desperately Shakespearean - 'Canst thou bear / such horror, Earth?' (*Thy.* 1006-7). Either tone could have been appropriate and justifiable, but placed side-by-side, they jar. Other passages are more successful, such as Boyle's bid to capture the alliterative sequences of Tantalus' opening speech: 'Who hauls from hell's abominable pit / the ravenous hunter of fleeing food?' (*quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit / avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?* *Thy.* 1-2). The choral odes are likewise of varying quality: some (e.g. *Thy.* 369-90) feel too 'prosy', while others display the full force of Seneca's, and Boyle's, poetic skill. By way of conclusion, I offer one of the more stunning passages, conspicuous for its language, assonance, and elegant rhythm (*Thy.* 867-74):

Wonders unwashed by the sea will sink
In an all-engulfing vortex.
The Snake which splits the Bears
Gliding like a river will fall,
And at great Draco's little side
Cynosura iced hard with frost
And his Wain's slow watchman,
Arctophylax, now unfixed.

Durham University

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