

BRILL

Review
Reviewed Work(s): Seneca's Phoenissae by Marica Frank
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Seneca's Phoenissae. Introduction & Commentary by MARICA FRANK (Mnemosyne Suppl. 138). Leiden, Brill, 1995. XVII, 268 pp. Pr. Dfl. 148,–.

The fragmentary and incomplete *Phoenissae*, possibly the last play Seneca wrote, has not been given much attention by scholars. This seems due largely to its unfinished state and its obvious compositional shortcomings. The play consists of two very static scenes which do not at first sight seem to fit together; it has no choral lyrics, no prologue and no resolution of the dramatic conflict. Since

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the latest commentary is a mainly philological edition in German of 1989 by Th. Hirschberg, this new English commentary is very welcome.

F. provides readers with all the necessary basic material. The book contains a Latin text, preceded by an exhaustive and clear introduction, and followed by almost 200 pages of commentary and indices. The introduction is well written, convincing and clear. It makes a good case for the unity of the play, notwithstanding its peculiar structure. Furthermore, it analyses Seneca's treatment of the theme and his relative independence of Greek and Roman tragical poets; he appears so original that F. labels the play as an "experiment" (p. 16), mainly because it combines two strands of the legend: it deals with *both* Oedipus in exile *and* the strife between Eteocles and Polyneices (a remarkable achievement in 664 lines!). F. even suggests that Seneca abandoned writing the play as he became aware of the compositional difficulties of his original attempt, and turned to philosophical writing instead. The play is also connected to the social and political reality, but regrettably this is narrowed to the 'violent' Roman culture of the early Empire—by now hardly more than a cliché. Much better is F.'s balanced view on the vexed questions of Seneca's intentions and on the possible staging of the play. Her conclusion is that Seneca's plays are by definition stage plays, but stage plays were not always performed. She acknowledges that Seneca's dramatic technique is far from perfect and that the undramatic qualities of his dramas dominate. It seems that Seneca expected his plays to be known in their entirety in written copies, but that individual scenes might be staged or recited (p. 42)[1]).

The commentary concentrates on literary analysis, so it is mentioned in the preface. Recurrent themes from Senecan tragedy[2]), links and numerous parallels to epic (mostly Vergil and Statius, rather than Lucan), declamation and other literary genres are included. Readers are also given summaries of the content, paraphrases of puns and difficult thoughts, abstracts of scholarly discussions, and many textual and philological notes, with much material from TLL.

This is all very useful, but one wonders whether literary analysis ought to stop at that. Only rarely does F. take up a personal position, for instance when she rejects a Freudian interpretation of the piercing of Oedipus' feet by C. Segal as a symbolic castration ("this is psychological explanation carried beyond the bounds of reason" is the terse comment on p. 148). More often do we find

references to studies by Tarrant, Hirschberg and other authorities without any further positive or negative comment. On the whole, F. remains very cautious and modest.

These are great qualities, but in the end a literary commentary should go further and add 'a little extra'. This might be, for instance, an attempt at unravelling mysteries put in the text by the author, or bringing to light inner inconsistencies or historical realities behind the text. Readers must be equipped with basic material, certainly, but they should also be given substance for further thought and discussion. Of course, a sound commentary like F.'s is an indispensable tool and F. may well be thanked for creating it. However, we may expect more from an expensive book such as this one.

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