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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Una metafora presa alla lettera: le membre lacerate della famiglia. 'Tieste' di Seneca e i rifacimenti moderni by Elena Rossi

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ELENA ROSSI, *Una metafora presa alla lettera: le membre lacerate della famiglia. 'Tieste' di Seneca e i rifacimenti moderni*. Pisa, ETS Editrice, 1989. 149p.

The horrifying tale of Thyestes and Atreus has been dramatized in several ancient tragedies, but Seneca's *Thyestes* is the only one extant that is fully devoted to it. As most of Seneca's plays, it has exerted wide influence on later European drama. Mrs. Rossi's book studies three 18th century plays dealing with the same theme. Two of them are French: *Atreé et Thyeste* by Crébillon (1707), *Les Pélopides* by Voltaire (1772) and one is Italian: *Tieste* by Foscolo (1797).

The first chapter compares the different versions of the myth. As was to be expected, the three 'modern' plays considerably reduce the cruel, horrifying elements so typical of Seneca's play. Several adaptations are made in the story, especially in the motivations of the two protagonists, Atreus and Thyestes. In the second chapter the disposition of the various plays is analyzed. Prologue, choral lyrics and messenger tales have been eliminated in all three modern plays. They differ in other respects, Crébillon remaining most faithful to Seneca, and Voltaire taking the most liberties. Mrs. Rossi also deals with the various ways in which crucial information on the past and present is presented. Echoes and quotations from Seneca's play are the subject of the third chapter, but as such these do not provide a good criterion to prove fidelity to the original as a whole, as the author has to admit. The value of such quotations is largely dependant on the modifications on the thematic level.

A stylistic analysis is conducted in the lengthy fourth chapter. A fourteen page survey of stylistic devices in the ancient play shows how the main theme is reflected in them: for example, chiasms suggest order; antitheses and oxymora loss of borders, similes compare men with wild beasts, and so forth. The modern plays largely use forms of *reticentia* (e.g. ellipse) to suggest the horror of the story, while other stylistic elements of the Senecan original are used to highlight various subordinate aspects or motifs. The final chapter raises the comparison to a higher level, in examining the fun-

damental themes. Apart from all differences between the plays one motif is common to them: the metaphor of the 'lacerated members', embodying laws and social order, which cannot be violated without punishment. In the modern plays the forces of order (innocence in Cr  billon, reason in Voltaire and just government in Foscolo) meet with deceit of the mighty, and are subdued.

Comparative literary studies seem to have gained new popularity due to the growing interest in the reception of ancient texts on the one hand and intertextuality on the other hand. Mrs. Rossi's book is a welcome contribution to it. It is well ordered and thorough. Some exaggerations left aside, its analyses are convincing. Mrs. Rossi does not just compare three specimina of *Thyestes*-plays with Seneca, but also takes into account their intertextual relations. Thus, Voltaire tries to improve the version of his predecessor, while Foscolo explicitly reacts to both Cr  billon and Voltaire.

This does not mean the book always provides good reading. Some of its analyses are tedious and seem rather superfluous (such as the survey of stylistic devices in Seneca, pp. 84-97, or the analysis according to linguistic acts, pp. 39-46), but on the whole, the book is written in a clear style.

In a comparison of several texts, the strong points of each of them clearly emerge before the eyes of the reader. This is, I think, an additional advantage of comparative literary studies. Paradoxically, the Senecan drama, with its extensive display of horror and violence, seems more modern than the 18th century versions, which are more subtle but also less tragic.

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