



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI UDINE

Università degli studi di Udine

Alfredo Casamento, Seneca. Fedra, Roma: Carocci, 2011. Reviewed by Chiara Battistella

Original

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/11390/1030148> since 2016-10-14T11:01:55Z

Publisher:

Published

DOI:

Terms of use:

The institutional repository of the University of Udine (<http://air.uniud.it>) is provided by ARIC services. The aim is to enable open access to all the world.

Publisher copyright

(Article begins on next page)

Alfredo Casamento, *Seneca. Fedra. Classici, 14*. Roma: Carocci editore, 2011. Pp. 275. ISBN 9788843061587. €23.00 (pb).

Reviewed by Chiara Battistella, Université de Genève (Chiara.Battistella@unige.ch)

Writing a review of a commentary should in theory be easy for someone who has already engaged herself with one. Yet, in my case, it has brought the current status of the ‘art’, its methodology and the commentator’s duties even more into question. I do not intend to deal with this here, but it is my belief that nowadays producing a commentary that can satisfy the readers’ expectations is a tough undertaking, not just because the interests of classicists (and their approaches to texts) are growing more and more disparate, but also because for some works several modern commentaries may already exist. This is certainly the case for Seneca’s *Phaedra*, to whose scholarship we can now add Casamento’s volume (cf. p. 261).

It is divided into an introduction, an Italian translation, and a commentary. The text, presented without apparatus, is mainly based on Zwierlein’s edition (Oxford, 1986) and textual variations are duly signalled on pp. 54-5 and discussed (although often too succinctly) in the relevant notes. The translation is useful and I agree with most of the author’s choices, but at some points it might have been closer to the Latin.

I will now offer some brief remarks on the two major sections of the book, namely the introduction and the commentary. In the introduction, which has an essay structure, Casamento provides thorough comments on the structure of the scenes and sets the main dynamics of the plot in relief. He rightly takes into account the incipit’s uniqueness in relation to the Euripidean model, in which Hippolytus is not granted the role of ‘prologizing’ character. Open vs. closed spaces (*silvae* and palace), Artemis vs. Venus, hunting vs. love are the conflicting value systems that the tragedy dramatizes in introducing the characters of Hippolytus and Phaedra and that Casamento persuasively discusses. Moreover, he usefully elucidates the ambiguous role of the *nutrix*, who before yielding to Phaedra’s desire acts as a hindering character and stoically condemns the woman’s *furor*. Further motifs over which Casamento lingers revolve around the physical similarity between Theseus and his son, which seems to represent a typically Latin feature not exploited in the previous versions of the myth and which triggers Phaedra’s ensuing passion (cf. also the commentary on lines 646-656 and p. 200). Analogously, the theme of slander too is treated differently from the Greek model, where Phaedra herself is responsible, while in Seneca the nurse is the character to whom the poet assigns the role of schemer. Casamento goes on with convincing thoughts on Hippolytus’ escape from Phaedra’s seduction, which is ultimately an escape from life too. The paragraphs on the father motif (26 ff.) are also packed with interesting views about the interactions between the pairs Theseus- Hippolytus and Theseus-Neptune on a double genealogical axis; furthermore, the bull that emerges from the water as a result of Theseus’ curse, whose recipient is of course his son, strikingly shares a common background with the well-known Cretan saga (and this is also what links Phaedra’s to her mother’s illicit love for a bull). Casamento makes good points on p. 34 on Hippolytus’ death (a long narrative of horror, to borrow Butler’s words),¹ his body’s dismemberment, and his panicked fusion with nature (a ruinous one, though); on pp. 36-39 he puts emphasis on the destructive role of Theseus’ character, that leads to the annihilation of his own family by inevitably reminding us of Aegeus’ death as part of these genealogical ‘misfortunes’ (the commentator deals with this in his note on 1149-1153 too). Casamento does not engage himself in a conventional kind of introduction: readers will find further information on

general aspects of the work and its author elsewhere. Nevertheless, such a lack of conventionality should not be judged as a flaw, but rather as an attempt to approach the text from a fresh and subtler perspective, which, by uncovering a more nuanced picture of Seneca's play, may make up for the absence of a more traditional contextualising frame. Casamento's introduction proves once more to be part of that seam of commentaries that have made interpretation and literary criticism amongst their major aims.

However, such a fresh contribution is evident to a lesser extent in the commentary itself, in which some notes might have benefited from deeper discussion and some fleshing out; sometimes Casamento's commentary – but this is a general trend in modern commentaries – suffers from so-called 'tralatiousness', in which lemmata are passed down from scholar to scholar, so that any unlemmatized parts remain uncommented or are threatened with extinction.² In general, Casamento's commentary pays relatively scant attention to style and language and puts little emphasis on Seneca's tragic idiom; therefore readers especially interested in these should turn elsewhere. Also, one may register that occasionally some of his notes suffer from an excessively paraphrastic approach that does not let the commentator's individual voice surface. Nonetheless, his commentary attains the depiction of the characters' psychological landscapes and offers an informative and continuous reading of the play that from scene to scene and note to note effectively engages itself with the evolution of the plot and Seneca's tragic texture. Moreover, the readers will certainly appreciate Casamento's choice to place modern and ancient commentaries on the play side by side to have a more complete picture of Senecan readership.

Here are some more detailed remarks on the commentary.

The author properly situates the use and recurrence of *immitis* referring to Theseus and Hippolytus (cf. 226-232; 271-273; 331-337) in relation to the father and son's intimate universe and explores some of the meaningful nuances of the *nutrix*' speech (cf. 413-417; 431-488; 454-460 [but *laeta sata* on p. 183 is neuter, not feminine!]); some of his turns of phrase are particularly effective (such as on p. 187 «la personale geografia di Ippolito»), although I think not all his language choices will be entirely reader-friendly for a non Italian-speaking public who might fail to appreciate them. Casamento makes an interesting point in his note on lines 565-573, where he brings forward a powerful psychological and irrational component in Seneca's Hippolytus that has no real correspondence in the Euripidean counterpart, and the same can be said of note 574-577 and 589-735, where again Casamento delineates a distinction between the two texts and shows how Seneca's scenes are packed with pathos and emotively loaded (cf. also 601-605 on the opposition between *furor* and *ratio*). His note on 609-616 also offers an accurate analysis of Hippolytus' dialogue with Phaedra, which is significantly marked by the climactic sequence *mater*, *soror*, and then *famula*, key-word to the elegiac discourse (and here perhaps Casamento might have spent some words on the related concept of *servitium amoris*). He succeeds in establishing a tight and meaningful connection between the description of Hippolytus' body, praised in all its components, and that of his dismemberment, foreshadowed by it. Nature also plays a major (and sadistic) role in the gruesome depiction of Hippolytus' death: from being his ideally perfect companion, it now actively participates in his dismemberment (see especially notes on 1093-1096 and 1101-1104). Casamento does not miss the sexual innuendo (absent in the Euripidean model) of the *truncus* that passing *medium per inguen* soars to represent the symbol of Hippolytus' repressed virility. As briefly mentioned above, he is also concerned with drawing attention to the destructive role Theseus embraces in the play: both the vertical bonds within his family (Aegeus and Hippolytus) and the horizontal ones (his spouses) suffer from being ruined by his actions. Finally, he effectively portrays the protagonists of the tragedy as liminal characters disputed between life and death and constantly committed, despite themselves, to perverting the normal direction of family relationships (cf. especially pp. 250-255 and comment on *gnatum sequor*, p. 255).

If the dialogue with the Euripidean model is well delineated in terms of analogies and deviations both in the introduction and in the commentary, one may wonder what role Ovid's *Her.* 4 (Phaedra to Hippolytus) plays here. Casamento obviously touches on this aspect, but maybe the contact between the two texts could have been pressed further and given more visibility.

Some of his notes might also have been further integrated in my judgement. Here are a few suggestions:

1-84 the idea of tragic irony and its effects on the text might have been exploited in this note; similarly line 558 *taceo novercas* is tinged with the same type of ironic overtone. 10-12 these lines would have deserved a more detailed grammatical explanation.

81-84 *hac hac pergam qua via longum / compensat iter*: Casamento claims that Hippolytus here wants to start hunting as soon as possible and thus he takes a shortcut into the wood. But might the lines metapoetically gesture towards the Greek model and its much longer prologue (*longum iter*)?

111 *et rigida molli gaesa iaculari manu*: Casamento rightly points to the elegiac overtones of 110-111, but fails to acknowledge a precise source-text for 111 that Seneca seems to have in mind and rewrite for his purposes: cf. Prop. 3.11.20 *tam dura traheret mollia pensa manu* (Hercules seduced by Omphale).

129-130 *Thesea coniunx, clara progenies Iovis, / nefanda casto pectore exturba ocus*: if one believes in the etymological word-play brought to light by Stevens 1995, 132-3 (cf. bibliography below) for the queen's name in *Phaedr.* 385 (*auratae*) and 387 (*removete + purpura*), both *clarus* ('bright, clear') and *exturbare* ('to keep away from') overtly seem to hint at an analogous etymological moment.

240 *didicimus*: Phaedra and her sister Ariadne have in common a similar 'aptitude' for learning that I believe to be gesturing towards Ov. *Her.* 10.98. This textual dialogue invites us to push further the sense of line 240.

336 *Grex Nereidum*: the reader is powerfully reminded of the incipit of Cat. 64 and this might add further authority to the reading *grex* against *rex* (incidentally cf. 64.7 *caerula* and *Phaedr.* 336 *caerulus*, which make the contact between the two texts all the more close and intertextual, whilst Casamento's comment «si allude forse agli amori di Teti e Galatea», which draws on previous commentaries, reduces the conspicuously allusive potential of the passage).

472 Casamento prints *classibus*, which is in the manuscripts. He gives his preference to it instead of Bentley's conjecture *piscibus*, but the reasons he adduces in its defence, apart from the transmission of the text, do not entirely convince, nor does the reference to line 530, out of context in my judgement. Here the text revolves around the topic of procreation, not of civilisation, as Casamento claims. Coffey-Mayer ad loc. rightly recall Ov. *Met.* 1.74-75, which strongly argues for *piscibus*³.

894-900 Hinds 2011, 6 ff. would have deserved a mention here (cf. bibliography below) to underscore the intertextual awareness of Seneca's text(s).

1238 *dehisce tellus, recipe me dirum chaos*: it is worth noticing the bilingual etymological play between *dehisce* and *chaos* that opens and closes the line.⁴

1244 *Theseus, querelis tempus aeternum manet*: might Ov. *Ibis* 241 *tempus in inmensum lacrimas tibi movimus istas* be recalled here to grant the chorus' statement a threatening overtone? This reference may also reinforce Casamento's assertion «prefigurandogli una lunga vita di rimorsi».

Finally, readers may not be very content with the layout of the bibliography, to which incidentally a couple of items might be added (already quoted above): S. Hinds, *Seneca's Ovidian Loci*, *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 9.1, 2011, 5-63; R. G. Mayer, *Doctus Seneca*, *Mnemosyne* 43, 1990, 395-407; J. A. Stevens, *Etymology and Plot in Senecan Tragedy*, *Syllecta Classica* 13, 2002, 126-53.

Also, an evident shortcoming is the absence of both an *index locorum* and an *index rerum*, which would have made the reading of the volume easier.

Ultimately, the author has certainly succeeded in offering Senecan scholars a book «che non annoi, che non tormenti» (p. 53), but such magnanimity occasionally leaves the readers with various unresolved questions.

Notes:

[1.](#) H. E. Butler, *Post-Augustan Poetry from Seneca to Juvenal*, Oxford 1909, 47.

[2.](#) Cf. C. Shuttleworth Kraus, *Reading Commentaries / Commentaries as Reading*, in R. K. Gibson, C. Shuttleworth Kraus (eds.), *The Classical Commentary. Histories, Practices, Theory*, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2002, 17.

[3.](#) M. Coffey, R. Mayer, *Seneca. Phaedra*, Cambridge 1990.

[4.](#) For *hio* and *χόσκω* cf. A. Ernout, A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Latine*, Paris 2001, 295; cf. also Stevens 2002, 126 (quoted above): «Seneca was working in a bilingual environment in which translation between Latin and Greek was commonplace».