
Davis approaches his study of Seneca's choruses with three propositions in mind: first, that stage-performance was always a possibility for the dramas; second, that the choral odes are integral parts of the action and meaning of each play; and finally, that Seneca's tragedies are works of great artistic merit that fully deserve their influential place in the history of European theatre. With these beliefs as guiding principles, Davis analyzes different aspects of Seneca's choral odes in relation to the dramatic action of the plays. Each aspect of Seneca's choral composition is assigned a chapter: Presence, Character, Mythology, Philosophy, Prayer, Drama and Poetry. Davis' analysis achieves varying levels of success throughout the work.

The book opens with a prologue in which Davis reviews the arguments for and against stage-productions of the plays. While, in the end, the question of whether or not the plays were performed is probably unanswerable, I found Davis' critique of some recent arguments against performance rather convincing. For example, Davis points out the absurdity to which Mayer is reduced in his commentary on Phaedra's response to Theseus' curse in Act 4 of the *Phaedra:*

---

"Mayer will have nothing left to the imagination: if Phaedra does not
speak she must either stand impassively, without emotion, or she
must leave. She cannot be allowed to register dismay or distress by
means of gestures, simply because the characters on stage fail to point
it out or perhaps because she fails to utter a word. The principle that
"all stage action must be verbally signalled" is simply unworkable.
Moreover, Mayer demonstrates its unworkability by suggesting an
unsignalled stage-direction: he suggests that Phaedra should leave the
stage. I might add that once a scholar enters into debate about stage-di­
rections he or she has already conceded that a play is meant to be
staged." (7-8)

Davis' common-sense approach to the question of performability is refreshing. I
must admit, however, that since I, too, believe that Seneca intended his plays for
some stage, public or private, I may be more sympathetic to Davis' arguments
than those who favor their identification as "recitation-dramas".

Indeed, the chapters in which Davis considers Seneca's dramatic use of the
chorus are by far the strongest parts of his book. Chapter One, "Presence," and
Chapter Six, "Drama," offer the most interesting and useful treatments of the
Senecan chorus. In Chapter One, Davis systematically establishes the presence
or absence of the chorus throughout the action of each of the seven genuine
plays that have choruses on the basis of four criteria.1 His first two criteria are
straightforward: first, if a character notes the chorus' return, it seems safe to as­
sume that they had been previously absent; second, that if a chorus addresses, or
is addressed by a character, they are present. If the chorus comments directly on
the action, Davis takes it as evidence that they were present during that action,
his third criterion. Davis concedes in passing that the chorus' failure to com­
ment on the action does not necessarily imply failure to witness it. His fourth
criterion is "dramatic appropriateness," that is, his opinion of whether the cho­us' presence would be dramatically appropriate to a particular scene. In Chapter
Six, "Drama", Davis considers how the odes retard or accelerate the development
of the action.

While his analysis in Chapters One and Six offers some interesting ideas to
the reader who is concerned with Senecan tragedy as drama, his ideas are unfortu­
nately buried in a plodding structure that makes his work tedious to read. For
each topic that constitutes a chapter, whether it be "Philosophy", "Mythology"
or "Poetry", he methodically goes through each play from opening line to final
scene and comments upon features of the choral odes that are related to his stated
chapter topic. Each play is discussed in the order it appears in the Codex
Etruscus, although the Phoenissae is omitted because it has no choral odes.
Thus the reader quickly learns that if one is five pages into a chapter, the play
under discussion is most likely Troades (unless Hercules Furens was particularly
rich in material for the subject under consideration). The predictable structure aids
the reader in using Shifting Song as a reference work, especially since the book

1Hercules Furens, Trojan Women, Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemnon and
Thyestes.
has no index; but I don't believe Davis meant this study to be a handbook. His structure is more suited to a dissertation than to an effort of mature scholarship.

Therein lies my first serious complaint against *Shifting Song*. Davis forthrightly informs the reader in his preface that portions of this work have appeared earlier in *Classical Quarterly*, *Ramus*, and *Latomus*. A quick glance at Davis' articles in the aforementioned publications reveals that he has stitched them into his monograph in patches, with very little in the way of transitions or connective devices to smooth the seams. Davis' repetitive chapter structure allowed this reader to predict, with startling accuracy, in which chapters of *Shifting Song* certain paragraphs of an article would appear. What Davis published as a coherent article on "The Chorus in Seneca's *Thyestes*" (*CQ* 39 [1989]: 421-35) is broken up into pieces and dropped into the relevant chapters at the position assigned to the *Thyestes*.

While there is not necessarily anything wrong with recycling one's own scholarship, Davis does so with a remarkable lack of style and grace. Unfortunately, his self-quotation is not limited to previously published articles. In Chapter Two, "Character", he discusses Ode 4 of the *Thyestes*:

"The threefold questions and repetition of quo ('whither', 789, 791) underline the chorus's urgency. The unexplained disappearance of the sun at midday had, not surprisingly, induced a sense of panic. Nature is not following its normal course. The Evening Star has yet to appear, the sun has yet to reach its western goal, the end of the day's third quarter has not yet come, and the ploughman is stunned that mealtime has come before his cattle are weary and yet the sun has disappeared. The familiar ordering of the heavens has been suspended." (62)

These precise words appear again in Chapter Five, "Prayer" on page 212, complete with a note citing the same reference to Tarrant that Davis cited at note 56 here. It is as if Davis had only these words to say about *Thyestes* 789-93 and included them wherever the passage was under consideration.

Perhaps, however, the instance of repetition is merely another stunning example of the absolute lack of proofreading of the volume. It is riddled with typos and misspellings and no one ever bothered to check the cross-references, which direct the reader to "p.000" throughout.

*Shifting Song: The Chorus in Seneca's Tragedies* will find a place on most library shelves because it is one of the few full-length works in English to consider Seneca's dramatic use of the chorus. As a work of literary criticism, it is neither compelling reading, nor particularly insightful except in its treatment of the physical questions of the chorus' place in the plays. It may serve some readers as a ready handbook to determine where in his odes Seneca incorporates the material that forms Davis' chapter topics. One hopes, however, that librarians will leave space on the shelf for a more satisfactory work yet to be written.

Laura Abrahamsen
Cleveland State University

* * * * * *