

BOOK REVIEW

Death in Ancient Rome. By CATHARINE EDWARDS. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 287. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-300-11208-5.

Catharine Edwards' (E.'s) latest book is a thoughtful study of dying in the Roman world between roughly the 1st century BC and the first half of the 2nd century AD. The introduction (pp. 1–19) analyzes what constitutes a Roman death and foreshadows the most important conclusions revealed in the remainder of the study. A number of key arguments underlie the analysis. The Roman upper classes, or at least those who wrote about the topic, were pre-occupied and obsessed with dying. Romans viewed dying as an active rather than as a passive process which aimed to reveal, or was believed to reveal, the individual's true character; an honorable death required careful preparation with the aim of communicating a message. Dying, in other words, was a form of communication. It was accordingly a spectacle that required an audience, represented by the process of watching gladiators die in the amphitheater, as well as in the very public staging of political suicides under the Julio-Claudian emperors.

E.'s introduction is followed by eight chapters that focus on specific aspects of dying, including death on the battlefield, the death of the gladiator, the philosophy of dying, the culture of suicide (two chapters, one dealing with political connotations, the other with theatrical aspects), death and the dinner-party, women and suicide, and Christian martyrs. The topics are diverse and challenging, but E. successfully presents them as key areas of concern for Roman writers of the period. There is much to admire in this book, which bristles with careful attention to the latest scholarship, and the chapters on women, theatrical images and martyrs in particular provide interesting new angles on Roman culture. Overall, E. neatly brings out how the Roman literary and cultural imagination developed a set of typically Roman attitudes toward dying. One might argue with some justification that studying the Roman way of dying reveals essential characteristics of what it was to be Roman: the social profile was dominated by a desire for honor, control and agency. Yet not everything in this volume convinces, mainly because E. has preferred to keep her arguments compact and coherent rather than confront a variety of possible interpretations. The following points address this issue.

E. frequently emphasizes that the Roman upper classes were not merely concerned with the issue of dying, but they were preoccupied, fascinated and obsessed with it. A reading of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Tacitus' *Annals* and Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*, to name but a few, suggests that dying and death were indeed important issues, but

BOOK REVIEW

some discussion of what constitutes an obsession with dying would have been helpful. In at least one case E.'s qualification of the Roman obsession with the moment of death is an exaggeration. In her chapter on the death of the gladiator she calls attention to the fact that a popular representation of gladiators on household utensils frames the moment when a defeated fighter waits for the decision of the *editor* as to whether he will receive the final blow or will be granted mercy (pp. 55–9; cf. illustrations on pp. 56–7). E. argues that this scene is predominant among visual representations of gladiators in combat, especially among those on oil lamps. Georges Ville (who was the first to call attention to the imagery) states that it enjoyed extraordinary favor, but that is not the same as arguing that it is the prevalent image of gladiators in combat.¹ Ville uses the evidence to reconstruct a matter of technical significance, the procedure of requesting *missio*, whereas E. uses it to make a cultural statement, claiming that even ordinary Romans who owned such representations could imagine themselves as instrumental in deciding a gladiator's fate (p. 59), thus adding to the argument that the Romans of this time had a strong fascination with the moment of death. It needs to be emphasized that E.'s selection of one type of representation as the focus of her argument is not representative of how Romans viewed gladiators.

Dying had the potential to reveal an individual's character, in the way he or she faced death as well as in how a self-inflicted death was chosen. E. illustrates this throughout the book (p. 5), although the idea is particularly associated with the writings of Seneca (p. 87). But dying out of character appears to have been an equally appealing image to Roman writers. Sallust's portrayal of Catiline (pp. 29–31) could have been an excellent point of departure for such a discussion. Another important case is that of the emperor Otho. E. refers to negative reports in Tacitus about him (p. 38), but without marking them out as a complicating factor. The fact of the matter is not that Tacitus finds Otho's suicide admirable (p. 38), but that his suicide is so out of character. This interest is not unique to Tacitus, even though his account of the Pisonian conspiracy teems with similar examples, including that of the freedwoman Epicharis, whose lifestyle had been consistently non-virtuous until she became involved in the conspiracy, but who died heroically without revealing the names of the other conspirators (p. 204).² In both cases E. acknowledges that a contradiction between life and exit from life exists, but she never uses this material to revisit the question of dying in charac-

¹ George Ville, *La gladiature en Occident des origines à la mort de Domitien* (Rome, 1981) 410–15, with the reference to "faveur extraordinaire" on p. 410.

² For a good discussion of this phenomenon, cf. A. La Penna, "Il ritratto paradossale da Silla a Petronio," *RFIC* 104 (1976) 270–93.

BOOK REVIEW

ter. This raises the question of what constitutes the norm, and how the contradiction should be resolved or at least addressed. This also suggests that E. occasionally misunderstands a key scene. Seneca's dying scene has sometimes been read negatively, but E. prefers to see his death in Tacitus as a model of the admirable suicide. Seneca's death is slow and excruciatingly painful, and he is forced to change strategy several times; an expert on suicide, he is somehow incapable of killing himself.³ In contrast, there is the uncomplicated and almost blissful suicide of L. Antistius Vetus and his family, who share a single sofa and knife between them. Fate observed the right order, with the two eldest individuals dying first (Tac. *Ann.* 16.10–11).

The behavior E. studies in her book, and especially the cult of political suicide under the Julio-Claudians, seems concentrated in a relatively short space of time. This requires an explanation, and E. provides one that in my view does not entirely convince. She argues that the Roman upper class preoccupation with dying and with dying well was the result of the gradual demilitarization, that is, the gradual removal of senators from the battlefield (p. 7). This development was accompanied by a countertrend in which senators are more exposed to the political tensions brought about by the establishment of monarchy. Stripped of the possibility of advertising their glory and earning a reputation on the battlefield, senators were now thrown back on the domestic front. If this is correct, it would mean that in the days of the Republic a man's value was primarily established on the battlefield, as a commander of soldiers, while in the 1st century AD many senators had no battle experience. I am not convinced that in the middle and late Republic the military ideology was so dominant as to shape senatorial identity to the exclusion of other fields, such as rhetoric and politics. Nor do I not know of any way to measure the reduced involvement of senators in military deployment, let alone to examine its impact on the senatorial mentality. In any case, E. never demonstrates that those who committed suicide were excluded from military affairs. The same argument has been used to explain the popularity of the gladiatorial games in the 1st century AD. The similarities between soldiers and gladiators (cf. pp. 51–3) can then be used to explain the rising popularity of the one through the absence of the other. Overall, however, I do not believe that exposure to war had declined between the 1st century BC and AD. What had changed was the political situation with the establishment of a monarch who was more dependent on personal publicity than the regime he had come to replace.

³ Cf. most recently Willy Evenepoel, "The Philosopher Seneca on Suicide." *Anc-Soc* 34 (2004) 217–43.

BOOK REVIEW

This book offers a number of important insights in the cultural world and literary imagination of imperial Rome. It is an engaging study, which builds on a wide range of scholarship and stimulates further thinking about death and dying in ancient Rome. With all the material on suicide, gladiators and attitudes toward dying combined in one volume, the question why the Romans developed their thinking in the way they did becomes even more urgent.

MARC KLEIJWEGT

University of Wisconsin at Madison