

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Seneca Reader: Selections from Prose and Tragedy.* By JAMES KER. Mundelein, Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2011. Pp. lvi + 166. Paper, \$19.00. ISBN 978-0-86516-758-2.

This articulate and helpful book offers four Senecan “scenarios” for students to get a taste of Seneca’s Latin style, philosophical thought, and poetic power. The benefit of offering snippets of the *Consolatio ad Helviam*, *de Clementia*, *Medea*, and *Epistulae Morales* is that one appreciates the generic gymnastics that Seneca was capable of, and one gets a view of the various *personae* he assumed as a writer. The selections offer moments in which Seneca (or characters) advise others on how to overcome adversity and, generally, live according to Stoic ideals. Ker is an amiable guide to the intricacies of Seneca’s Latin and the commentary elucidates quite well the questions intermediate Latin students will have about these texts. Most importantly, Ker answers the question of why one should choose to read Seneca at all, especially in a second/third year Latin course (when we most desire the students to stick around for more Latin!): namely, that his innovative works show that his finger was firmly on the pulse of the exciting literary, philosophical, and cultural developments of the 1st c. CE, and this collection offers us the opportunity to “eavesdrop” (p. lii) on this important thinker and creative author.

The work begins with an ample introduction covering not only what one would expect (Seneca’s life and death, a section on his family entitled “Meet the Senecas”), but also effective summaries of the various genres Seneca explored, and concrete examples of some of the peculiarities of Seneca’s style such as anaphoric repetition, “three favorite syntactic constructions,” and “three words to watch.” The introduction also includes an up-to-date bibliography and strong sections on Seneca’s reception, Stoicism, and the pattern of “misfortune, grief, and the power of the mind” that the excerpts explore. In addition, each scenario has a short introduction with additional germane information about Seneca in exile (introducing the *Consolatio ad Helviam*), Seneca and Nero (*de Clementia*), his tragic style (*Medea*), and significant features of his epistolography (*Epistulae Morales*).

The opening scenario revolves around Seneca's exile in Corsica, consisting of his *Consolatio ad Helviam*, as well as two supplementary passages that expand on Seneca's view of exile. The commentary works hard throughout to explain grammatical and syntactical oddities, with cross-references to Bennett's *New Latin Grammar* for particularly sticky moments. Ker has anticipated many of the problems students will have and goes the extra mile to explain features such as figurative language (e.g. the running metaphor in the *Consolatio* that Seneca's work is a form of quasi-medical care), prose rhythm and Seneca's penchant for *clausulae*, as well as historical details. The second scenario includes sections from the opening book of *de Clementia*, a humorous moment of the *Apocolocyntosis*, and everyone's favorite sketch of anger from *de Ira*, in which Ker gets to gloss passages such as *aperire iugulum* ("to have his throat opened") and *membra diffindere* ("to have his limbs divided"). The use of supplementary passages to shed further light on the primary text under consideration is one of my favorite aspects of this collection, and will grant students a more comprehensive knowledge of Seneca's arsenal of works. The only scenario lacking supplementary passages is the *Medea*, although Ker does discuss a similar "passion-restraint" scene of the *Phaedra* in his introduction to this section. The *Medea* requires an appendix on meter as well as a map pointing out sites mentioned in the play; both are handled with aplomb. The final scenario consists of medley of passages from the *Epistulae Morales* that ruminate on the questions of friendship, travel, and living according to one's philosophical ideals. A final follow-up to these letters is a fragment from Seneca's *de Amicitia* on how to keep an absent friend in mind. The selection as a whole displays the breadth of Seneca's writings, and the commentary offers sure aid to the student approaching the material for the first time.

The primary objection I can see to using this volume as opposed to other Seneca commentaries aimed at this level of student is that there are very few "complete" works included here (only one letter is unedited). From a pedagogical standpoint, this may be problematic for those teachers/students who want to be able to hang their hat on having translated a whole play or a whole dialogue, whereas this collection provides a more kaleidoscopic view of Seneca's output. For Senecan tragedy, there are editions of the *Medea* and *Phaedra* aimed at students of this level, while Williams' commentary on *de Otio* and *de Brevitate Vitae*, and Usher's collection of letters and selections from the *Dialogi* gives more com-

plete examples of Seneca's prose genius.<sup>1</sup> However, if one wants a challenging and rewarding compilation of Seneca's prose *and* poetry for intermediate Latin students, this volume should head your list.

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<sup>1</sup> H. M. Hine, *Seneca: Medea* (Aris & Phillips, 2000); G. and S. Lawall and G. Kunkel, *The Phaedra of Seneca* (Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2nd ed., 2007); G. D. Williams, *Seneca: De Otio, De Brevitate Vitae* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); M. D. Usher, *A Student's Seneca: Ten Letters and Selections from the De Providentia and De Vita Beata* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).