BOOK REVIEW

The Empire of the Self: Self-Command and Political Speech in Seneca and Petronius.
By CHRISTOPHER STAR. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University
Press, 2012. Pp. viii + 302. Hardcover, $65.00/£34.00. ISBN 978-1-4214-0674-9.

This book constitutes an important addition to the burgeoning body of
scholarship on the self and on Roman attitudes/approaches to self-
shaping and self-articulation in the early Imperial era. Star's particular
objective is to show how Seneca and Petronius "address the problems and possi-
bilities of self-shaping and self-revelation in the new world of empire" (19). This
broad theme is developed from varied angles of approach in six main chapters, all
of which combine sensitive micro-analysis of individual passages and texts with
the patient unfolding of Star's macro-argument. Eschewing an approach which
sets Petronius and Seneca against each other as philosophical and literary oppo-
sites (even opponents), Star sets the two in a dialogue of sorts, both of them con-
tributing in complementary ways to the larger theorization of self-shaping that is
constructed across the six chapters.

The book is in two movements: after an anchoring introduction, the focus in
Part I (Chapters 1–3) is on "Soul-Shaping Speech," in Part II (Chapters 4–6) on
"Soul-Revealing Speech." Star's starting-point in Part I is the familiar idea that
traditional modes of military and political command gave way in the early em-
pire, amidst "the new problem of political autocracy" (3), to an internalizing ten-
dency that prioritized self-empowerment and self-command (*sibi imperare*). In
Chapter 1 Star focuses on Senecan self-apostrophe as a key mechanism by which
self-command is asserted and inculcated—a mechanism already of wide rhetori-
cal application, but Star nevertheless argues persuasively for Senecan improvisa-
tion: he "'theorizes' it, turning this literary and declamatory figure of speech into a
philosophical concept" (59). In Chapter 2 Star turns to self-address in Senecan
tragedy, demonstrating through the examples of Medea, Clytemnestra and Atre-
us how the therapeutic apparatus of self-apostrophe is reapplied to galvanizing
effect as the tragic characters ready for heinous action. As in Chapter 1, Star bold-
ly attributes considerable originality to Seneca (so, e.g., 73–4: "Seneca develops a
portrayal of the passions and the psychology of vice that goes beyond basic Stoic

theories of the passions as simply unstructured and inconstant: he develops a new image of the passions built around the Stoic ideal of *constantia*"); he also smoothly downplays tension between Seneca's philosophical prose and the tragedies ("In his tragedies, Seneca is neither negating, inverting, nor denying his philosophical ideals; rather, *he is expanding them*," p. 83; my emphasis), but (i) without quelling at least this reader's disquiet at the troubling implications of Stoic *constantia* being reapplied in a context of evil, and (ii) without dwelling at greater length on the precise nature of Seneca's tragic "expansion" of his philosophical ideas. In turning to Petronius in Chapter 3, Star continues indirectly to illuminate the function of self-apostrophe in Seneca through contrast with the different trajectory of self-address that he explores in the *Satyricon*: whereas Seneca focuses on interior self-shaping, Petronius "brings Senecan 'command psychology' down to the body" (111) in physicalized counterpoint to the "higher" mode of *meditatio* explored in Chapters 1 and 2.

In turning his focus to self-revelation in Part II, Star offers in Chapter 4 a penetrating analysis of *De clementia*, again with emphasis on the shaping of self. Here, however, the shaping process is external, in the sense that Seneca molds (the projection of) a merciful Nero, he prescribes the conduct to be expected of the young emperor, and he shapes "the populace's capacity for critical judgment of Nero in order to determine whether he is a king or a tyrant" (118); *De clementia* offers, that is, a pattern and paradigm for Neronian self-revelation—a script for him to follow. In the *Apocolocyntosis*, by contrast, Seneca orchestrates self-revelation of a more sordid kind as the feeble Claudius struggles to breathe his last: in Chapter 5 Star predicates his impressive reading of the *Apocolocyntosis* on a two-fold system of comparison, first relating Claudius to Petronius' Trimalchio and to the latter's all too graphic account of his digestive problems (*Sat.* 47.1–7; cf. the excrement with which the dying Claudius dirties himself at *Apoc.* 4.3), and then exploring the *Apocolocyntosis* as a form of comic double to *De clementia*. Finally, in Chapter 6, "Trimalchio's surprising usurpation of the name of Maecenas" (171; cf. *Sat.* 71.12) provides the departure-point for Star's instructive treatment of Seneca's Maecenas in *Letter* 114. If in *De clementia* Seneca "developed his position as Nero's speech-writer in order to stress how the emperor's language could both shape and reveal the mildness of his soul" (177), Seneca's treatment of Maecenas' literary style in *Letter* 114 (written after Seneca's *de facto* retirement from the Neronian court in 62 CE) is very different in import: Maecenas' style "reveals that his manner of living was incongruent with the imperial

power he was granted" (177–8), to the effect that the positive shaping of self that takes place in *De clementia* now gives way to a negative paradigm.

This bare sketch can hardly do justice to the scope and richness of Star's argument in each chapter, to the thoroughness with which he discusses his chosen texts, and to the creativity with which he exploits his simultaneous treatments of Seneca and Petronius. The writing is clear and uncluttered, his chains of reasoning are lucidly constructed, and there are few typographical errors of note (but read "smile" on p. 93: "all the faces that usually create a simile among lovers"). In sum, this book makes a major contribution to the modern bibliography on selfhood and self-formation in the early empire, and it will doubtless generate further debate in so vibrant an area of study.

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