

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Cosmic Viewpoint: A Study of Seneca's Natural Questions.* By GARETH D. WILLIAMS. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 393. Hardcover, \$45.00/£30.00. ISBN 978-0-19-973158-9.

Gareth D. Williams' study of Seneca's *Natural Questions*, which is also exemplary because of the range of secondary literature it takes into account, succeeds as no other study has done previously, in my opinion, in bringing this work to life and doing full justice to all its aspects, philosophical as well as literary. By using the view from the universe as a whole, or what he terms the "cosmic viewpoint," Williams provides a unitary reading that makes sense of the work as a whole. His approach requires that we rearrange the ordering of the books as follows, in the wake of work done by Carmen Codoñer Merino and Harry Hine: 3, 4a, 4b, 5, 6, 7, 1 and 2. If we accept this sequence, then we can read Seneca's turn to the heavens, in his discussion of comets in Book 7, as the high point of a trajectory that gradually takes us beyond our ordinary, misguided concerns, and literally puts these into perspective. If the remaining Books, 1 and 2, seem to take Seneca's readers down again, this move serves as a powerful artistic reminder that as human beings we struggle with holding on to such a lofty perspective (335–7); or as Williams puts it, Seneca chooses to focus on "the effort of assent, and not on its ultimate attainment."

One chapter of the study can provide a good glimpse of Williams' approach, the one which treats Seneca's moralizing interludes (Ch. 2). The problem is well-known: how do the more general and philosophical prefaces to the books relate to the work as a whole, and how do Seneca's elaborations of deviant behavior fit in (the section on Hostius Quadra in Book 1; 3.17-18; 5.15 and 7.31-32)? This chapter, rather than dealing with one book at a time, allows Williams to connect threads that run through the work in its entirety, with an "emphasis on tight thematic and verbal linkage between Seneca's moralizing passages and their surrounding contexts" (54). Against the backdrop of a unified view of the world in Seneca's treatment of the continuity of air and colors of the rainbow, with a reference to Ovid, in Books 1 and 2.1–11 (section iii), Hostius Quadra (sections ii and iv) can only be an ironic echo of the Preface of Book 1, as a kind of anti-sage.

In his fragmented and distorted obsession with the reflections of his sexual debauchery in mirrors, he subverts the philosopher's cosmic viewpoint, and in the transgressive application of his energies he mocks the philosopher's attempts at self-liberation. But as such, Hostius is merely an extreme case of an all too literalist mind-set also exemplified by an imaginary interlocutor whom Seneca's addresses in Book 1 (section iv); such an interlocutor can not be teased away from an immersion in phenomena in order to assume the higher viewpoint which Seneca recommends. In mentioning how Hostius was killed off, Seneca, Williams suggests (section vii), may be trying to contain the depiction of vice; but given the power of his graphic and detailed accounts of deviant behavior, vice also threatens at any given moment to challenge this containment and to undermine any attempts to rise above sordidness.

An additional argument one could marshal in favor of Williams' reading of the *Natural Questions* is that Seneca, like Cicero before him, has very definite views of the kind of study of nature that matters. In a passage of the opening of Book 7 of his *On Benefits*, put in the mouth of the Cynic Demetrius, Seneca warns against occupying oneself with a vast storehouse of recondite and useless knowledge of natural phenomena, such as the ocean tides or optical illusions. The Preface to Book 3 on his *Natural Questions*, precisely, puts this criticism in its proper perspective. The right kind of physics has significant moral implications for the way in which we lead our lives, and ethics rightly construed allows one to see oneself as part of the larger whole that is the universe. This order, once it is fully understood, affects all of physical reality, down to its most minute details.

Williams' study is a masterpiece that promises to set the tone of future discussions of this work for a long time to come.

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