

*Seneca*. Edited by JOHN FITCH. Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. vi + 438. Cloth, \$60.00. ISBN 978-0-19-928209-8.

In this collection of critical essays, Fitch (F.) has brought together some of the most important and influential articles about Seneca's life, tragedies, philosophical ideas and reception. The strength of this volume is the variety of theoretical viewpoints utilized in an attempt to come to terms with Seneca's own wide-ranging literary and philosophical output. [n. 1] Critical theories such as New Historicism, Reader-Response and Gender studies are applied to Seneca's prose and poetry with, for the most part, rousing success. While these essays have all appeared elsewhere (two are translated into English for the first time here), their juxtaposition provides an enriching view of the depth and importance of Senecan thought. [n. 2] And by giving a judicious sampling of the scholarship on Seneca of the last 40 years, F. inspires the reader to delve deeper into Seneca's works and hints at the possibilities still available in Senecan scholarship.

F.'s introduction begins with an interpretation of Rubens' "The Death of Seneca," through which he illustrates major themes in Seneca's work (Stoicism, suicide, theatricality). He helpfully provides the criteria for his selection of essays and groups them according to "aspects of the self," "the tragic self," "varied approaches" and "reading in context." F. gives a thumbnail sketch of the major points of each essay and, where necessary, the underlying critical theory.

Griffin's "Imago Vitae Suae" begins the volume and provides the necessary background to Seneca's family, biography, political career and death. Despite the discrepancies between Seneca's Stoic teachings and historical activities, Griffin stresses that the portrait of him as moral instructor found in his letters and dialogues "is rightly judged a more precious legacy than the historical *imago vitae suae*" (p. 58). In the following essays, Edwards and Wilson both investigate the *persona* of Seneca in the letters, admirably elucidating the power of their literary, rhetorical and Stoic exploration of self. Wilson's explication of certain epistles (46, 82) shows how literary motifs and philosophical tenets can be blended together to illustrate Seneca's *maxim talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita* (Ep. 114.1). Edwards demonstrates that the Senecan self is a construction, prone to shifting moods and beliefs, and must therefore be constantly scrutinized and tested. This important essay proceeds to delineate the theatricality of this process and to discuss such role-playing in its historical context. Armisen-Marchetti and Inwood follow with investigations of specific Stoic concepts in Seneca's work (*praemeditatio*, and the will, respec-

tively). Inwood fruitfully explores the concept of the will, and his findings reveal that Seneca's interest in self-shaping and self-knowledge, his focus on self-control and his ability to "zoom in" on moments of decision-making contribute to his idea of the will. [n. 3] As a whole, these five essays function well together to give a view of Seneca's philosophical thought and, in particular, his personal perspective on Stoicism, self-improvement and personal ethics.

F.'s grouping of "the tragic self" includes an essay he co-wrote with McElduff and Segal's psychoanalytical gem, "Boundary Violation in Senecan Tragedy." Segal recognizes that Seneca's characters often engage in the same sort of soul-searching he recommends in his letters, but with decidedly darker ramifications. Seneca identifies psychological aspects of the characters' neuroses, rampant emotions and psychotic impulses. He analyzes primary boundary anxiety ("the concern with the autonomy of our physical being," 149) in the tragedies to show how it increases the dramatic horror, and to comment on the violence and sadism of the Neronian age. F. and McElduff's work observes that the construction of self is imperative for Seneca's tragic characters, and shows how various figures create *personae* in the tragedies. For some characters, the tragedy revolves around a split *persona* (Phaedra) or the development of a disastrously ambivalent identity (Hercules' conquering *persona* cannot distinguish between Lycus and his family), but the authors point out how Atreus and Medea are emblematic of realized selves that are decidedly monstrous. This offers the tragic flip-side to the Stoic self-conception of the letters. There, philosophical principles and *exempla* guide one in the construction of a *persona*, while in the tragedies the *persona* may be guided by the Furies, a taste for revenge, or the mythological and literary tradition. F. and McElduff point out the tragic overtones in the construction of the Senecan self, arguing that it is "always a mis-construction" (p. 180). [n. 4]

Under the "varied approaches" rubric are essays discussing the performance of Seneca's tragedies (Kragelund, Stroh), interpretations of the *Oedipus* (Mastronarde) and the *Thyestes* (Littlewood), and a discussion of the role of the reader in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia* (Leach). These essays are a mixed bag, both in quality and subject-matter. Kragelund and Stroh both argue that Seneca's plays can be performed, and persuasively discuss how performance can help emphasize thematic aspects of the tragedies (*Phaedra* and *Octavia* for Kragelund, *Troades* for Stroh). A single essay on performance would perhaps have sufficed. Mastronarde's piece proves that the poetic language of the *Oedipus* repeats and gradually takes on different meanings as the play progress. His concept of Seneca's

tragedies as “verbal paintings of almost static situations” (p. 223) encourages him to explore the depth of the imagery, and in doing so, he shows how Oedipus’ guilt infects not only the world of the play, but also its words. Littlewood applies features of gender theory to his reading of the *Thyestes*, attempting to show that in their bestial desires, weakness for power and pseudo-pregnancy (Thyestes), both Thyestes and Atreus take on feminine characteristics. I was not entirely convinced by this article, but I am persuaded that the application of gender theory to Seneca’s tragedies is a promising direction. Leach investigates the make-up of Seneca’s readership in order to understand the political ramifications of Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia*. Her essay identifies the “ideal reader” that Seneca creates in these two works, a reader who understands that behind the criticism of Claudius and the praise of Nero, it is Seneca who possesses important political influence.

This political and historical background is important for the final collection of papers (“reading in context”), which focuses on how Seneca’s readership may have received his works, and how the works reflect the culture and views of the Early Empire. Bradley shows how Seneca’s view of slavery, while philosophically liberal and humane, actually speaks to the slave-owners who read his treatises, and is “deeply rooted in the conservatism of the Roman ruling class to which he belonged” (p. 345). Mayer examines the use of historical *exempla* in Seneca’s prose works and finds that *exempla*, much more than *praecepta*, represent true *virtus* for the reader and can help form the moral life of individuals. If one acts consistent with Stoic teaching and gains a reputation for such activity, one may attain *gloria*, the topic of Newman’s essay. Seneca does not stress the political aspect of *gloria*, but focuses instead on the philosophical *claritas* that results from the proper expression of *virtus*. Nisbet tackles the vexed issue of dating Seneca’s tragedies by looking at internal evidence (descriptions of peoples, places and customs anachronistic to mythological time) and themes from the plays (incest, political assassination, exile). His careful weighing of the historical and political context (e.g. would you really want to write an *Agamemnon* in the early years of Nero’s reign?) culminates in a persuasive argument for dating the *Thyestes* to AD 62. Fantham and Boyle close out the collection, offering essays that deal with the issue of reception. For Fantham, Seneca’s heroines derive much of their power from Seneca’s close reading of Virgil’s Dido episode, and she examines how Seneca utilized Virgil’s work, especially in his depiction of Phaedra. As opposed to Seneca’s reception of Virgil, Boyle looks forward to the reception of Seneca’s tragedies in the Renaissance. His sweeping account of Seneca’s influence on authors such as Shakespeare and Corneille

reveals how Seneca's view of tyranny, *furor*, revenge and fate informs the characters, plot structure and motifs of Renaissance drama. This is a fitting conclusion to the collection, inspiring this reader to reflect on how Seneca's tragic outlook continues to be reshaped in contemporary works such as those by Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill and Julie Taymor.

My quibbles are few. Citing constraints of space, F. regrets having omitted essays by Herington ("Senecan Tragedy") and Tarrant ("Senecan Drama and its Antecedents"), but these are foundational for the study of Senecan tragedy, and perhaps some sacrifice should have been made to include at least one. Likewise, no essays are devoted to the *Naturales Quaestiones*, and it is a shame that this fascinating work on Stoic physics is overlooked. But these are small objections indeed. This revealing compilation of essays, admirably treating so many facets of Seneca's philosophical and tragic thought, and offering such a wide array of critical perspectives, is certain to be of great use to students and scholars alike.

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[n. 1] A fact that Quintilian noted (10.1.128–9): *tractavit etiam omnem fere studiorum materiam; nam et orationes eius et poemata et epistulae et dialogi feruntur*.

[n. 2] The question of the usefulness of this series (*Oxford Readings in Classical Studies*), which collects articles and book chapters already published elsewhere, has been an issue of some debate by scholars such as Farrell (*BMCR* 2002.02.11) and Lacki (*BMCR* 2007.09.19).

[n. 3] Inwood discusses the similarity between Seneca's summary "will" and the work of Frankfurt on second-order desires. Bartsch has recently explored this parallel in her discussion of Seneca's *Medea* in *The Mirror of the Self* (Chicago, 2006), and this type of scholarship, which analyzes the cross-pollination of Seneca's philosophy and tragedies in a sophisticated way, is a fruitful development.

[n. 4] Seneca's concept of self is clearly an important topic for this generation of scholars. It is also the subject of a collection of essays forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press (*Seneca and the Self*).