BOOK REVIEW


Seneca himself has taught us about the close affinity between buildings and virtue. The title of the first essay in Bartsch and Schiesaro’s Cambridge Companion to Seneca thus puts us on guard: Braund’s “Seneca Multiplex” would seem to presage a locale for shopping malls, movie theaters, and other temples to capitalist enterprise. Companion-books, like the 3-D blockbuster summer movies populating the cineplexes, are often considered easily-digestible, eminently-sellable ventures. Thankfully, Bartsch and Schiesaro’s installment in the Cambridge Companion franchise is not a series of CGI-powered explosions and monsters, but an exploration into a complex man who sought to cut beyond mere appearances.

The volume presents twenty-three new essays, subdivided into four sections: (1) “The Senecan Corpus” provides an introduction to each of the many genres of Seneca’s catalogue; (2) “Texts and Contexts” broadens the scope to the historical, literary, and philosophical milieux of Seneca’s work; (3) “Senecan Tensions” explores some of the most prevalent criticisms of Seneca: ambivalence, duplicity, and incoherence; and (4) “The Senecan Tradition” rounds out the volume with a diachronic treatment of Seneca’s nachleben. I will here forego a summary of each essay, as Bartsch and Schiesaro ably do so in their introduction. The book is laudable for its even treatment of all aspects and genres of such a multifaceted figure.

The collection, written by a veritable who’s who in Senecan studies, is brisk: with 317 pages for twenty-three essays, most submissions clock in at under a dozen pages. The contributors for Section 1, in particular, do a fine job not only


2 The first 10 pages of the 12-page Introduction is available at the CUP website as a “MarketingExcerpt”: http://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/35058/excerpt/9781107035058_excerpt.pdf
of introducing their allotted genre and the current state of scholarship in that area, but also of forwarding their own new observations, to boot—a sizeable task for a dozen pages. Standouts are Christopher Trinacty on tragedy, Catharine Edwards on the letters, and Kirk Freudenburg’s laugh-out-loud funny take on—all of the essays in the collection are up-to-date on scholarship, and many are theoretically-informed, if not explicitly. Rather, many of these essays could be fruitfully paired in the classroom with the theoretical texts from which they draw in order to illustrate the utility and stakes of literary theory to students new to it. To wit, each essay concludes with suggestions for “Further Reading” sensitively selected for those without facility in Latin or various modern languages.

Indeed, accessibility is one of this volume’s best attributes. All Latin is translated.2 Virtually no previous knowledge of Seneca, his works, or their scholarly treatment is assumed. As such this book is ideal for advanced undergraduates or graduate students new to Seneca. In combination with Oxford’s “greatest hits” collection, Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Seneca (with whom it shares contributors), this volume will provide a good foundation in scholarly work on Seneca. The essays in Bartsch and Schiesaro may be read independently of one another, though the relevant chapter from Section 1 would seem requisite for the later chapters on a particular genre or text.

The book’s greatest virtue is that it seeks, as do many in this most recent wave of Senecan studies,3 to understand Seneca on his own terms, rather than in negative comparison to his predecessors, e.g. Greek tragedy, Cicero, Lucretius. The new imago of Seneca that emerges is not of one who attempts to emulate others and fails (though Seneca’s own rhetoric is designed to encourage this misreading), but rather of one who is aware of precedent and chooses nonetheless to do his own thing. The final section of the book, on the reception of Seneca, nicely points up his influence on the western literary and philosophical traditions, and puts our modern, tarnished, “Silver” Seneca in proper context. It is important reading for those approaching Seneca in today’s environment.

A difficulty of this book reflects one in the Senecan corpus itself. Seneca multiplex or perhaps merely duplex has been the oft-repeated chorus of Senecan

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2 In many of the essays the original Latin is not printed. Specialists may quibble with this decision, but decent texts of Seneca are found easily enough.

3 e.g. Seneca and the Self, ed. Schadi Bartsch and David Wray; Reading Seneca by Brad Inwood; The Deaths of Seneca by James Ker. University of Chicago Press’ series of new translations of Seneca’s works also contributes to this revival in Senecan studies.
studies, and this despite Seneca’s own desires to “play one role in life” (as Tri
certainty 37 nicely puts it). Some essays in the volume reinforce these traditional
dichotomies (proficientis/sapiens actual/ideal, past/present, politi
cal/philosophical, tragicus/philosophus). David Wray’s contribution, however,
with his emphasis on pudor as a developing “semivirtue” (which he credits to
Miles Burnyeat) nicely regards the Senecan self as one explicitly in development,
thereby unifying many of the above dichotomies. Bartsch’s “Senecan Selves,”
while pushing on the faultlines in Senecan selfhood, similarly locates the self in
the very inconcinnity between the selves. Indeed, multiplicity seems fitting for a
philosopher whose entire corpus was to some extent dialogic (if not, as Matthew
Roller’s essay observes, in the full Bakhtinian sense): the Apocolocyntosis, trage
dies, dialogi de Beneficiis, Naturales Quaestiones, and letters all embroil another in
dialogue. Perhaps, then, Senecan dialogism is a recognition that philosophy hap
pens best not in an empty room that echoes the sound of one’s own voice, but in
the authentic and sometimes messy interactions of real friends and real life.

It is commonplace in reviews of collections to bemoan that there is not bet
ter engagement among the contributions, and indeed, while the authors and edit
ors have ensured that chapters are cross-referenced (and there are threads on thea
ticality and metaphor that run through the book), there are missed opportuni
ties to discuss the (sometimes discordant) viewpoints on, for example, the
philosophical “view from above,” the use of second vs. third person references,
and the scholarship of Justus Lipsius. Nonetheless, it seems overmuch to demand
such repeated and significant revision from contributor to collection (par
icularly one that does not originate in a conference). Do we somehow expect the
denizens of Seneca multiplex to lunch together in the food court on a daily basis
to confab about their respective domains? Perhaps that task is left to us readers,
who ought to sample from the many different kiosks and tuck into this Senecan
satura.\footnote{A final note about the production of the book: the text is not with out typographical
inconsistencies and errors, but they are so few as to be unproblematic. One error, how ever,
should be corrected for future printings: Harry Hine’s entry in the bibliography has
stripped him of his surname.}

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