

BOOK REVIEW

Intertextuality in Seneca's Philosophical Writings. Edited by MYRTO GARANI, ANDREAS N. MICHALOPOULOS AND SOPHIA PAPAIOANNOU. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020. Pp. 286, Hardback \$155.00. ISBN: 9780357331511.

[Google Books Preview with Table of Contents](#)

In the midst of explaining the history of mirrors in his *Natural Questions*, Seneca notes how early man would stumble upon his reflection in a “clear spring” (*fons perlucidus*, *NQ* 1.17.5) and pause to gaze upon his own image. This collocation was previously used by Ovid, when he wrote of Actaeon stumbling upon the spring of Diana in the *Metamorphoses* (3.161). Poor Actaeon will soon glimpse his own changed cervine reflection in a pool of water (3.200) before his subsequent slaughter. A parallel suggests itself, as Seneca continues to describe the problematic technological “advancements” of mirrors, which become a locus for greed and vice and, sometimes, even dangerous (just ask Hostius Quadra). In addition to such intertexts, Seneca often quotes Latin poets; in fact, he quotes from Vergil’s *Eclogues* in the following lines of the *NQ* and the positioning of this Ovidian phrase nearby adds to the distorted pastoral world of these early mirror aficionados. The question of how this two-word tag operates as a possible intertext speaks to the primary themes of this impressive volume of essays about intertextuality in Seneca’s philosophical prose. The contributors investigate how such intertexts and quotations function in Seneca’s philosophical works and explore intertextuality writ large in his prose corpus, its impact on Seneca’s philosophical message, and the myriad ways that Seneca reads his predecessors (and expects his own works to be read).

The volume opens with a strong introduction that gives a paradigmatic reading of *Ep.* 108 and the manner that Seneca develops his philosophical and literary message through quotations of Publilius, Vergil and Cicero. In this letter, Seneca displays his ability to read intertextually, if he should desire, but also underlines how poetry is useful for accentuating a larger philosophical message and for serving as a call to action. The editors indicate how the quotations themselves are often rich in intertextual meaning and how Seneca extracts Stoic doctrine from the words of Ennius and Vergil. This deep engagement with both Seneca and his sources as well as the consideration of the larger contexts of both the source and target texts help many of the contributions break new ground in their interpretations. Seneca truly is an interdisciplinary thinker, and he needs readers open to finding connections from disparate fields of study in his works.

Wilcox's chapter takes up Seneca's use of *exempla*, especially those relating to fatherhood, Augustus and the larger trope of parenthood. Wilcox posits a type of "exemplary intertextuality" (24), which relies less on signs of intertextual borrowing (shared words, themes, imagery) and more on the commonality of such truths within the larger web of the *mos maiorum*. What makes an exemplary father and what makes an exemplary *princeps* are shown to be merged in the figure of Augustus, who as *pater patriae* is a merciful and beneficent father to the people of Rome. While Wilcox's close readings of these passages and the manner in which Seneca marshals Augustus' words and actions to exemplify paternal authority and political clemency are exceptional, they did not feel particularly intertextual. She does map paternity, however, upon literary production and ethical development and finds that "(inter)textuality can serve as an analog for the life of philosophy Seneca urges on us" (49); this, certainly, is a true summation of Seneca's philosophical *modus operandi*.

Whereas Wilcox stresses *exemplum* as intertext, the following essay of Smith delves into myth as intertext and features two parts; the first offers an overview of myth in Seneca's prose works with an eye to Stoic acceptance or dismissal of mythic elements, and the second section posits Seneca as a reader of Homer and unravels some of the knotted relationship between text and myth (which Smith compares to the workings of quantum mechanics!). Smith helpfully illuminates some of Seneca's issues with traditional Stoic allegoresis or etymological interpretations before detailing how outlandish poetic inventions make myth problematic for Seneca. Ancient stories about Scylla or Hercules' labors are found to be wanting in as much as they are *contra naturam* or just silly, and Seneca asserts the superiority of Cato the Younger to Odysseus and his ilk (*De constantia sapientis* 2.2.1-2). When Smith turns to Seneca's direct engagement with Homer, he finds fertile ground for Seneca's intertextual prowess in his use of *Iliad* 24 in *De ira* as well as the travels of Odysseus, now overlaid on Italian and Sicilian geography. In those letters in which Seneca travels around the Bay of Naples (*Ep.* 49-57), "Seneca's portrayal of himself as an Odysseus-as-everyman, fighting not against fabled monsters but against one's own failing, undercuts the authority of the Homeric epic even as Seneca exploits the narrative potential of the 'idea' [of] the Ithacan" (74).¹ An appendix of mythical references in Seneca's philosophical works concludes the essay and will be handy for scholars in the years to come.

If mythological dilettantes are to be avoided for the trivial questions they ask, so there is a stigma against Romans who delve into the technical nitty-gritty of abstruse theoretical philosophy. Wildberger shows how Seneca's persona develops in the course of the *Epistulae Morales* – he must straddle the line between displaying the appropriate amount of philosophy for a Roman statesman and vaunting the advanced study of Stoic concepts (found especially in the latter half of the collection). For Wildberger, ethical doxography becomes central to that balance. Wildberger creatively recreates Seneca's lost *Libri*

¹ The irony present here is a point that Papaioannou reiterates in her essay (125-126).

moralis philosophiae as a series of *quaestiones* which allows Seneca to be “an arbiter between different positions in a critical debate” (83) and not present himself as a head-in-the-clouds Stoic theorist. Extensive parallels between the *Epistulae Morales* and Arius Didymus’ *Outline of Stoic Ethics* suggest the way that Seneca takes up specialist Stoic treatises to create a novel comprehensive treatment of ethics from a more professional standpoint than found in the earlier letters. But even as he does so, he is still interested in keeping up appearances as a proper Roman and remaining “aligned with the more traditional roles of his class, such as that of a culturally minded patron listening to the disputes of his hired client intellectuals after dinner” (101). Wildberger’s final claim about the *Libri moralis philosophiae* is, ultimately, unprovable, but she believes it would help to reinforce the authorial stance he takes in the final books of the *Epistulae Morales* of a teacher able to illuminate the thorny issues of academic philosophy while still keeping an engaged Roman mindset.

That Roman mindset can be seen in his decision to write (and think) in Latin as opposed to Greek and to quote primarily from Roman authors.² Of the authors that Seneca quotes, Vergil is most prevalent, and Papaioannou’s chapter argues that Seneca’s ironic reading of Vergil’s *Aeneid* in his letters “is intended to forge an ideological bridge between (Augustan) past and (post-Augustan) future” (108-109). Papaioannou uncovers moments of “incorrect” quotation or literary application of Vergil’s words in Seneca’s letters and traces how this irony complicates the meaning of the *Aeneid* and its application to Seneca’s larger philosophical project. Her six case studies often consider the larger contexts of Seneca’s letter or Vergil’s epic and bring in additional works of Seneca, from his tragedies to *Dialogi*, in order to prove how the meaning of a Vergilian line is reflected and refracted through Seneca’s reapplication of it. The polyvalence of the *Aeneid* is thus exploited by Seneca, but often with a wink at the full-knowing reader, who will pick up on “the ‘true’ meaning and the ‘false’ meaning of statements and ideas” (129).

Another author whom Seneca quotes frequently in his prose works is Ovid, and the following essay by Michalopoulos analyzes the witty Ovidian presence in two of Seneca’s letters (*Ep.* 33 and 110). By cleverly quoting from Ovid’s speech of Polyphemus (*Met.* 13.823), Seneca exposes how both Epicurean and Stoic schools could possibly have Cyclopean tendencies and Michalopoulos flaunts Seneca’s own sophisticated humor (often unnoticed by critics). Because *Ep.* 33 stresses that Seneca wants Lucilius to read philosophical and literary works as a whole (and not just excerpts), this letter especially encourages looking at the larger context of the Ovidian quotation. *Epistle* 110 has a short quotation from Ovid’s Io narrative, and Michalopoulos finds traces of the myth and Ovid’s telling of it within the letter, although this example was less persuasive to me. Garani also discusses Ovidian quotation in her expansive piece on the *Natural Questions*

² Stressed by B. Inwood in his “Seneca in His Philosophical Milieu” *HSCP* 97 (1995): 63-76.

and she expertly explains how the many references to *Metamorphoses* 15 and the important figure of Pythagoras operate in the treatise. The wonders of paradoxography are now presented from a scientific standpoint and with Italian examples by Seneca as he carefully sifts through Pythagoras' account of weird waters to amplify the way these can be understood through Stoic physics. The depth of detail found in this chapter is very impressive, ranging from obscure figures like Nymphodorus, Philostephanus and the Florentine Paradoxographer to more familiar sources like Ctesias, Theophrastus and Callimachus; Garani marshals this material well to prove that Seneca's own erudition and his strong demythologizing response to Ovid's work help to make him "the ideal Stoic *vates* with not only therapeutic ... but also poetic claims" (224).

Berno offers a close reading of the allusions and quotations of *Ep.* 49 in order to bring to light the importance of Aristo of Chios (a 3rd-century BCE Stoic philosopher) for our understanding of the letter. This is a fascinating application of the intertextual material that leads to a surprising conclusion and Berno adeptly scrutinizes the elegiac, tragic and epic sources. Taken together, these references frame Seneca's (and Aristo's) views on Stoic rhetoric and dialectic. Aristo had argued against dialectic and utilized an image of picking up pebbles or shells to embody Stoic "indifferents" and Seneca's letter plays off Aristo's theories and amplifies them for his own purposes.³ A similar deep dive into one letter, *Ep.* 90, is the subject of the following essay by Gazzarri, which finds political resonance in the quotations and intertexts peppering the "Golden Age" society described in that letter. Seneca piggybacks off the thought of Posidonius for political ends: "*Ep.* 90 is an abrasive moral *querelle* against Nero's lifestyle and regime" (167). This can be seen especially in Seneca's description of architecture and buildings (*fabrica*) with its not-so-hidden critique of Nero's *Domus Aurea*. In my opinion, this essay dwells too much on the literary evidence concerning the *Domus Aurea* and loses sight of Seneca's letter and its compelling intertextual ties.

Tutrone sees consolation and not political criticism in his essay on Seneca's natural philosophy. His sophisticated reading of the *Consolation to Marcia* shows the similarities this treatise has with didactic literature, especially Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*.⁴ Tutrone traces the sustained connection with Lucretius' mother cowimage (2.352-366) in this consolation, and he carefully lays out how "Seneca substantially revises the intellectual meanings of Lucretius' exposition" (181) to craft more orthodox Stoic doctrine from it. By de-coupling the emotive power of the analogy from its Epicurean context (a move also

³ I wonder if the setting of this letter, Pompeii, may also help to stress the insignificance of "indifferents" and the obsession with death in this letter, as Pompeii had been severely damaged in an earthquake the previous year (cf. *NQ* 6.1).

⁴ Tutrone mined Seneca's reception of Lucretius also in his impressive essay, "Seneca on the Nature of Things: Moral Concerns and Theories of Matter in *Natural Questions* 6," *Latomus* 76.3 (2017) 186-95.

seen in Ovid's *Fasti*), the image is meant to persuade Marcia (and the reader) that the Stoic conception of parental love and perspective on nature will help ease her suffering.

In conclusion, this volume helps us to judge some of the advantages and limitations of intertextual hermeneutics. Each author sensitively argues for the need to move beyond surface readings of Seneca's philosophical prose to discover a deeper meaning that hinges on his profound engagement with the literary and philosophical tradition. Seneca's ability to transform Greek and Latin material is notable, and obviously he did not consider it to be a breach of decorum or genre to reference anyone (Homer, Posidonius, Cicero or Publilius) when discussing topics as varied as hydrology, mourning a son or Nero's architectural whimsy. This volume makes clear that Seneca truly is a man of many genres,⁵ whose works exploit rhetorical *imitatio* and *aemulatio* for a variety of reasons, but often to further elaborate and enhance his political, poetic and philosophical purpose.

CHRISTOPHER TRINACTY

Oberlin College, ctrinact@oberlin.edu

⁵ My own allusion to the chapter of the same title by J. Ker in *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry, and Politics*, eds. K. Volk and G. Williams. Brill (2006) 19-42.