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978-1-107-03505-8 - The Cambridge Companion To Seneca

Edited by Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro

Excerpt

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SHADI BARTSCH AND ALESSANDRO SCHIESARO

Seneca: An Introduction

As an object of study, Seneca puzzles. No other philosopher has presented us with so stark a challenge to resolve a life lived under dubious moral conditions with the legacy of his surviving writings. In Seneca's case, of course, the difficulty is heightened by the ethical and didactic content of his Stoic essays and letters, which offer guidance precisely on how to live life both happily and morally and which even in Seneca's time seem to have raised some eyebrows among his peers. Even if we accept Seneca's stance on the philosophical irrelevance of his great wealth and the inevitability of weakness in a mere *proficiens* in Stoicism, there will never be a satisfactory answer to the old question of whether Seneca did more good than harm in taking on the role of tutor to the young Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus – and that of his political advisor when Nero became emperor in 54 CE. Even the question of whether Seneca himself was consistently for or against political participation in such a regime is complicated by conflicting evidence. But if Seneca helped his fellow elite or even the people of Rome by exerting some restraining influence on the flamboyant emperor's acts and policies (as, for example, Tacitus would have us believe), in hindsight it seems to have been his own legacy for which he did no favors, tainting his *nachleben* with the smear of hypocrisy and leading later readers to concoct multiple Senecas to explain the range of his life and work. As such, he provides a noteworthy contrast to other, less fraught exemplars of Roman Stoic thought. Seneca's contemporaries C. Musonius Rufus and L. Annaeus Cornutus left behind little in writing; the political figures Helvidius Priscus and Thrasea Paetus come to us only through their unambiguous actions in the pages of history; the ex-slave Epictetus and the emperor Marcus Aurelius, both of whom wrote in Greek, either present less conflicted personae or never had the power to act hypocritically in the first place.

Fortunately for both Seneca and us, modern scholars have been more tolerant than his own peers in passing judgment on his wealth or his embroilment in the Neronian court. The result is surprisingly rewarding.

I

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For one, as the essays in this volume illustrate, Seneca's corpus provides a rich point of entry into an impressively large collection of philosophical, political, psychological, and cultural conversations taking place in the first century CE – and beyond. After centuries in which his fortunes waxed and waned (on which see Part IV of this volume), Seneca's writings, both his prose and his dramas, have finally been recognized as complex and valuable works in their own right, texts that provide testimonia to Roman Stoic practice in the early empire, to Seneca's modifications of Hellenistic philosophy, and to contemporary cultural and literary concerns a far cry from those of the Athenian tragedians. What this volume ends up illustrating – perhaps despite its “companionsque” brief – is that Seneca is not who we once thought he was. He may be a Stoic, but he modifies Stoicism beyond its received Hellenistic form (see the essays of Konstan, Wray, Seal, and Asmis). He may be Nero's crony, but he is well aware that future generations will value signs of his independence, not his servility (Bartsch). He may be a master rhetorician (so talented, Tacitus says, that Caligula tried to kill him out of jealousy, and Nero had him write a speech exculpating matricide), but in his movement towards dialogic exchange, he at least partly models the practice of philosophical conversation (Edwards, Roller, this volume). Himself inevitably a performer, he appropriates the pervasive theatricality of the Neronian regime to suggest it can impact self-fashioning as well as provide a means of resistance to power (Littlewood, this volume) – as we might expect of a writer who suggests that “style is the man” (Williams, this volume).

Fellow Spaniard Quintilian branded Seneca the maverick voice of his generation, yet we are tempted to say that since the first century, Senecan “contemporariness,” with its bias towards self-transformation, hybridity, and experimental poetics, has never been more in vogue. His philosophical works, in particular, written in vivid, epigrammatic Latin and dealing with timeless issues of the human condition, have enjoyed renewed appeal in recent decades as ancient forerunners of the ubiquitous self-help genre: anthologies of the dialogues are still bestsellers in Italy, under titles that promise guidance on the quandaries of the human condition. Our modern fixation on the miracle of celebrity self-branding and reinvention and our conceptualization of a self constituted by its internal conflicts or contradictions have framed new investigations into Seneca's career, ever in metamorphosis, and the understanding of what it is to be a person. Senecan metatheater, the self-consciousness of his tragic protagonists, and his own self-satirizing, self-policing eye often seem inseparable to us now from the experience of the postmodern, although Seneca himself would urge us to take a good, hard look in his many virtual mirrors and examine such an

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assumption. One upshot of (falsely or not) spying ourselves in the looking glass of Seneca's texts has been the relatively recent resurrection of the tragedies as emotionally and intellectually demanding dramas; their new (or renewed) representability is thanks in part to a cultural and intellectual climate that no longer perceives their quasi-Cubist choppiness, manipulation of linear time, and visceral violence as flaws that limit serious engagement. As this volume documents, evaluations of the literary, political, and philosophical texture of the plays have undergone a major overhaul: scholars have opened our eyes to the juxtaposition or intercontamination of multiple genres and registers that make these texts so vital and dialogic, as well as to the interconnectedness between Senecan tragedy and philosophy, which cannot easily be reduced to a series of flat contrasts or one-way critiques.

Similarly, recent focus on reexamining the question of how Senecan texts interrelate has also begun to alert us to the ways in which tragedy, pantomime, satire, and epic and elegiac poetry – together with their differing cultural perspectives and ontologies – are woven into philosophical works such as the *Epistles to Lucilius*. Several contributors (Freudenburg, Rimell, Ker, Schiesaro, Williams) also discuss the specific Senecan strategy of citation, whereby snippets of earlier texts are imported verbatim into the present – a feature and performance of Seneca's celebrated, razor-sharp sententiousness and of his didactic principle of shocking audiences into questioning received beliefs. Each citation can stop us short, forcing us to ask to what extent the past can be rewritten or must haunt us, how far we can separate out elements (ideas, emotions, reference points), and how we might cope with their tendency to merge. As many of the essays collected here acknowledge, citations can be approached as case studies in how we address the theme of time and timing across the corpus: despite the ideal of the wise man who is not constrained by time and can in a sense rise above it, Seneca's writings are deeply concerned with what it is to be an imperfect mortal in time and specifically in 60s CE Rome. Whether he chooses to elide coordinates in time and space (in the *Epistles* and *Natural Questions*, for example, written in parallel in the years of retirement leading up to forced suicide) or pins a work to a specific occasion (the *Consolations to Marcia and Polybius*, the *Apocolocyntosis*), Seneca's brisk, time-conscious style, which seems to “capture the moment” (Williams), constantly reminds readers of what is at stake in living through this particular period of Roman history and invites us to deliberate the compromises, repressions, and self-discipline required to get through it alive. The extent to which *how* Seneca shapes his texts is never separable from philosophical content is one of the volume's overarching concerns.

Part I of the volume surveys the whole of Seneca's surviving output and grapples with the key question of whether and how we might conceive the

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corpus as a coherent whole or, more specifically, what we are to make of the myriad potential connections and contrasts between individual works written at different times, in different genres, registers, and styles. Susanna Braund's essay, which serves as a second introduction to the companion as a whole, molds itself around Seneca's own uncanny time management and fascination with a future always already lived, retracing Seneca's career not from beginning to end but from end to beginning. Tacitus's account of Seneca's death, alongside that of fellow courtier and literary talent Petronius, is a brilliant, multilayered homage to a life spent regulating performance, rehearsing the inevitability of death in order to be free to live, and staging the socially engaged life of the Stoic through ebullient dialogue with friends, writers, predecessors, and their texts. As Braund shows, it is difficult not to see Seneca's career intensifying in the buildup to what looks like an inevitable last act: after his early ill health and unlikely survival under Caligula and Claudius, Seneca enjoyed immense wealth and power in the first eight years of Nero's reign but fell afoul of fate and was forced to withdraw in 62, apparently producing all his *Epistles* and the *Natural Questions* in the fervent three years before his suicide. Yet despite the temptation, fuelled by Tacitus, to imagine "Seneca" as a single narrative leading to a foreseeable finale, we are also reminded here of how fragmented a figure he has appeared in the Western tradition and of how traditional fault lines – between philosopher and politician, philosopher and tragedian, serious thinker and maverick hypocrite, Stoic and millionaire – continue to stimulate and frustrate.

Christopher Trinacty takes up several of these apparently awkward pairings in his review of the tragedies, suggesting ways in which the plays confront specific political issues (with clear, though ultimately not datable, contemporary relevance). What emerges here is a range of reframed answers to the question of *why tragedy*? Seneca is interested in tragedy, Trinacty suggests, as a medium for doing moral and political philosophy but also as an inherently dialectical and hybrid genre that allows him to intertwine and contrast voices, positions, and reactions and to put debate and interrogation on display. With this perspective comes a renewed emphasis on performativity, on the power of dramatic language to violently shape reality, and hence also on the potential (and point) of actually putting these self-consciously rhetorical, "written" texts on stage.

As Catharine Edwards emphasizes in her piece on the *Epistles*, Seneca is again interested here in the ideology and ontology of literary form. These conversational, daily letters to close friend, fellow poet, and younger "student" Lucilius enact Seneca's philosophical project as a daily praxis contingent on reaching out toward another from within an enclosed retreat that stands for Stoic self-sufficiency. The letter is itself a place of intimacy, allowing full

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immersion in the Stoic program, while the (non)paradox of the Stoic who cultivates psychic self-containment but who is also a social animal deeply connected to his fellow human beings is visualized in the evident absent-presence marking all epistolary writing of this kind. The letter writer conventionally fosters the desire for and illusion of his addressee's presence, a trope that nevertheless highlights distance and separation. Once more, dense allusivity (and the blending of prose with quotes from poetry) comes to be inseparable from the philosophical spur to extend oneself beyond one's immediate niche, to engage in dialogue and self-interrogation. Discussion of the *Epistles* thus leads us smoothly into the following essay on the *Dialogi* themselves, read here alongside the *De Clementia*, *De Beneficiis*, and *Naturales Quaestiones*. Matthew Roller explains why, despite their many differences, it makes sense to group these works together and builds a detailed picture of their *dialogic* character. Seneca's dialogues, he argues, teem with voices that are themselves dialogized and thereby implicated in the protreptic of each work. Yet as we might expect, this well-defined category creates its own pressure to expand and overflow, so that we are tempted to reread the *Epistles* themselves as an ambitious, overgrown collection of *dialogi*.

In the pattern of overlapping treatments of Seneca *multiplex*, Malcolm Schofield's essay on Seneca, which spotlights the "politician and political theorist who was also a philosopher" rather than the "philosopher who happened to be in politics," also tackles the *De Clementia*, alongside the *De Tranquillitate Animi* and the *De Otio*. The *De Clementia*, Schofield suggests, almost becomes an exercise in the political theory of kingship (despite ambiguity in Stoic suggestions that kingship was the best form of *res publica*). Indeed, there is much about this treatise, including the focus on mercy itself, that strikes us as rather un-Stoic, and here, as in the *De Tranquillitate Animi* and *De Otio*, where the issue is defending the apparent paradox of politically active retreat, we see Seneca shaping his own idiosyncratic Stoicism in the context of Roman political discourse.

A wave of editions, commentaries, and studies on the *Natural Questions* (*NQ*) have lately rescued this work from relative neglect. As Francesca Romana Berno shows in her chapter, the *NQ* pursue core Senecan topics and concerns through the detailed and rational effort to understand seemingly incomprehensible natural phenomena that as such confuse and terrify mankind. The *NQ* emerge as a text fully integrated in the corpus, including the tragedies: some of the most notorious examples of vices discussed in its prefaces and conclusions – the sections in which Seneca frames the technical treatment of the book with more general reflections – display the same perverse features of the most successful of Seneca's evildoers, such as Atreus or Medea.

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Kirk Freudenburg's contribution confronts what on first impression has often looked like a monstrous anomaly in Seneca's *curriculum vitae*, unworthy of his authorship. Yet the *Apocolocyntosis* – its presumed, mysterious title a stodgy mouthful perhaps designed to make us stutter like Claudius – is tentatively resituated here at the center of the corpus. The satire puts characteristic Senecan dialogism and time sensitivity on hyperbolic display. More is at stake perhaps at this historical hinge between Claudius and Nero than at any other point in Seneca's career, and his dark, Saturnalian celebration of this anxious transition constitutes one of Seneca's most complex and fascinating meditations on time. Freudenburg focuses here on how the *Apocolocyntosis* summons the model of Lucilius's raging Republican satire and in particular the section of his first book titled *Concilium Deorum* ("Council of the Gods"), with its savage condemnation of corrupt politician Lucius Cornelius Lentulus Lupus. Seneca seizes on this moment, already loaded with satiric tensions, and imports it into a present on the verge of a bright, young future under Nero. The result is explosive and utterly Senecan.

Part II of this volume focuses on pinpointing how Seneca, in the shape of his texts, situated himself in the present as a powerfully modern, political interpreter (and remaker) of his past. The first two essays, by James Ker and Victoria Rimell, work chiasmically to explore how Seneca fashions the meaning of "Augustus" and "Augustan Poetry" and, later, how multiple Augustuses help craft his specular and risky partnership with Nero. As he transforms and fragments the past, Ker emphasizes, Seneca engages with readers' poetic memories and historical awareness, which he filters through evocations of timely moments in Augustan poetry and specific uses of memory by Augustus and his family. In doing so, he tells a self-exposing, self-promoting story about his own astute, creative management of the "book-ends" of Julio-Claudian empire, from Augustus to Nero. Rimell touches on many similar points but hones in on the generational and philosophical tensions that structure Seneca's specular relationship with Nero from the *Apocolocyntosis* to the *Epistles*, where the necessity and problem of dialogue between two in an autocratic regime get remade anew. The dilemma of Nero's extreme youth when he came to power and Seneca's role as older father figure, guide, or even double for the new emperor comes to frame larger, career-long consideration of how modernity appeals to the authority of the past and how the philosopher should inhabit time.

The next essay, by Gareth Williams, begins by discussing the conversational *Epistles* as a showcase text in which Seneca fully activates his philosophical undertaking as always indivisible from his poetics (note the points of contact with Edwards, Roller, and Rimell in particular). Williams's investigation of

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style and form pays close attention to the ideas and even advice embedded in the anatomy of Senecan prose: in brisk, concise, informal, and chromatic writing, Seneca sculpts the urgency to get on and *do*, to enter into philosophy as process, as a way of living your life. Seneca's critiques of past and present writers continually emphasize writing as a performance of the self, yet his reviews of others necessarily turn the spotlight back onto the words – and man – we are reading now. Language becomes a fundamental tool of Senecan philosophy, and for the first time, perhaps, we encounter a philosopher who thinks in Latin, for whom philosophy is an urgent, profoundly political, and culturally specific *Roman* project. This point is also developed in Mireille Armisen-Marchetti's discussion of Seneca's use of metaphor, simile, and metonymy. The kinds of metaphors Seneca employs and theorizes are especially fascinating, not least because they are so often drawn from a Roman military context. Senecan stylistics seize on and dwell in real time, as Williams also suggests, but also – even in texts like the *Epistles* in which the city of Rome and the emperor are largely absent – the bustle, stress, and violence of the contemporary world are vividly brought to the fore.

The final two essays in Part II knit together multiple strands in their discussions of theater and theatricality (Littlewood) and emotions (Konstan). Cedric Littlewood begins by setting Senecan and Stoic self-fashioning in its immediate cultural and larger philosophical contexts. He then maps out Seneca's drive to philosophize the theatrical metaphor implicit in Roman self-construction alongside his detailed, allusive teaching on making subtle but crucial distinctions between positive and depraved acting: with stage-happy Nero shadowing every move, this is an interpretative tight-rope. In this and the following essay, Seneca emerges as a highly original thinker who constantly pushes us to refine and perceive (or sometimes just accept) the subtle contradictions in our perspectives. David Konstan suggests that Seneca's understanding and classification of emotions, which are not merely instinctive reflexes but cognitive processes in themselves, is more nuanced and philosophically challenging than we have often assumed. Seneca's Stoic sage is not icy hearted and emotionless, and his analysis, for example, of the need to replace pity not with lack of concern but with a serene benevolence cultivated inwardly but directed toward one's fellow human beings finds new resonance in light of our own unprecedented exposure to the pain and suffering of others in a globalized, twenty-first-century world.

Part III of the volume explores the most fraught areas of tension within Seneca's thought, illustrating in the process how the meeting places of contrasting points of view often offer insight into what is original *and* problematic about his combined literary and philosophical project. To think of Seneca as a site of tension is certainly not to innovate: the very different tone

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of Seneca's prose and his poetry led some readers, including the fifth-century churchman and orator Sidonius Apollinaris and after him an entire throng of distinguished readers, including Lipsius, Erasmus, Diderot, and Lessing, to speculate that there might have been two or even three Lucius Annaeus Senecas rather than one. But to see the man whole (as the title of the 2006 study edited by K. Volk and G. D. Williams would suggest) has always been something of a challenge – one that these essays take up and develop. In the first one, “Senecan Selves,” Shadi Bartsch suggests that the gulf between the normal self and the idealized Stoic self that Seneca constantly stresses actually *constitutes* the primary characteristic of selfhood as Seneca experiences it: selfhood lies in this gap. Another gulf opens up within Seneca's frequent characterization of philosophical self-control as a form of acting: the self-control of the Stoic sage, who never bats an eyelid at fate's surprises, is curiously reminiscent of the experienced courtier, who knows better than to grimace at a ruler's shenanigans. Bartsch suggests that Seneca's character was defined by the tightrope act he performed between these two performances, one everyday, the other ideal – and that he very much preferred to leave his readers with the “*imago*” of his philosophical self rather than the courtier he had to play at court.

David Wray's discussion of shame in Seneca's writing reminds us that Stoicism is often thought to disallow consideration of factors that cause shame as mere “externals.” Seneca's Stoicism, however, admits talk of shame that sounds (as Wray puts it) “a lot like ordinary Roman *pudor*-talk.” How then are we to reconcile the fact that the author of the letters advocates shaming others into Stoic behavior, while the version of shame he enjoins (unlike the Greek Stoic treatment of *aidos*) runs counter to Stoic orthodoxy? One answer has been to suggest that Seneca cannot shed the language and mores of aristocratic privilege. As Wray points out, however, early modernity read Seneca's shamed dramatic protagonists differently, seeing them as models of heroism and freedom. Perhaps Seneca wants us to feel shame's sting as a marker of our blameworthy characters – and perhaps, in spurring us to suicide, it will provide us with the incentive to exit the arena of shame and rehabilitate our dispositions. Shame, then, would approach virtue “precisely to the degree that its constraints nudge the agent toward the choice a virtuous agent would have made in a given circumstance.”

While this sounds like a drastic remodeling of standard Stoicism, Seneca has already shown he is willing to modify “theory” if he can make “practice” have the right orthodox response. Carey Seal's essay confronts precisely this issue: How does Seneca understand the relationship between “theory”

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and “practice” in philosophy? Physics and logic are subtly intertwined in Seneca’s writing, as the theoretical drive for natural knowledge is repeatedly shown to serve a practical function by giving the agent the cosmic perspective he or she needs to live well and to obtain mental mastery over the chaotic jumble of appearances here on earth. Seneca reminds us that Seneca’s exercises in part derive their force from aspects of Roman social life that seem to have little to do with philosophical argument but may appeal to the traditional values of a disempowered elite. Elsewhere, however, there is an obvious tension between the two sources of moral norms, orthodox Roman (the *mos maiorum*) and Hellenistic Stoic; for example, there are many junctures at which Seneca seems to be aiming to induce moral progress through emotional rather than a purely Stoic intellectual appeal. It is a testament to Seneca’s ingenuity that he is able to defend his practice without retreating from the Socratic link between reason and action.

In the following essay, Elizabeth Asmis examines the interplay of received Stoic orthodoxy with Senecan innovation. Seneca’s willingness to take what he needed from tradition but to combine these elements into a whole with new philosophical emphases defines his original project as a teacher of Stoicism; as he himself announces, he appropriates the materials he inherits by digesting them and making them into something new. Reducing the role that logic played in Hellenistic Stoicism but linking physics and cosmology to the development of the moral self, he further innovates in his description of the *hegemonikon*, adapting Stoic theory to a Platonic-Aristotelian framework. Above all, Asmis argues, while he stresses the importance of a moral guide, he also finds that force of external stimuli is not enough to make the student morally good. He thus offers us a new view of the role of volition; as Asmis puts it, “we must turn our inborn wanting into a deliberate wanting by overcoming the wrong kind of wanting.”

While Stoics are the most often-mentioned school, Epicurus is referred to more often than Socrates, Cato, and Plato even as Seneca voices a doctrine that is largely incompatible, in fundamental respects, with Stoicism. As Alessandro Schiesaro argues, Seneca often privileges Epicurean *sententiae* disconnected from a larger argumentative framework, a strategy of appropriation that limits from the outset the scope for doctrinal contamination, especially as it chiefly focus on moral issues, such as the limitation of desire, the importance of friendship, and the importance of intellectual *otium* where the distance between different schools is in any case more limited. These differences emerge much more emphatically when Seneca turns his attention to physics and the natural world. Here no agreement is possible between a Stoic worldview that regards the wonders of nature as a reminder of divine

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providence and a system that denies the gods any active intervention in natural or human affairs. Similarities in style and occasionally in the explanatory techniques only serve to highlight a substantial chasm: both Seneca and the Epicurean Lucretius, for instance, rely on sublimity as a crucial cognitive tool, but in its Senecan incarnation, striving for the sublime is the ultimate form of admiration for divine agency rather than the means through which human beings can raise themselves to the same level of understanding as the immortal gods.

Seneca's *nachleben* waxed and waned according to the tastes of the cultures that followed him. In antiquity, his collusion with Nero and his wealth worked to undermine the moral slant of his writings; it was his contemporary Musonius Rufus who was identified as the Roman parallel to Socrates (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.6). Seneca himself was additionally tarred by the salacious brush of the historian Dio Cassius, who reported criticism of his ethics and divulged kinky sexual habits. But the first essay in Part IV of this volume, Setaioli's discussion in "Seneca and the Ancient World," makes it clear that there were positive treatments as well, not only in the idealizing *praetexta Octavia* but also in the more balanced assessments of Tacitus. As Aldo Setaioli suggests, it is possible that the lack of reference to Seneca's philosophizing was due to his aversion to abstraction, his choice of language, Latin, and to the fact that Stoicism had yielded in popularity to neo-Platonism by the third century CE. On the literary side, however, we have more clarity about his influence; for example, his nephew Lucan's *Civil War* presents a fascinating case study in its rejection of Seneca's worldview in the prose writings and its points of contact with Seneca's tragedies, which depict a world devoid of a *logos* guiding nature and man toward a rational goal. Most of all, Petronius's *Satyricon* is a parody that humorously desecrates either Seneca's edifying moral teaching or his most pathetic tragic scenes. Even before the early 60s CE, though, Seneca was in vogue – already by the reign of Caligula, as witnessed by Suetonius (*Calig.* 53). The same biographer, however, attests the first of a long series of severe criticisms of Seneca's style.

Chiara Torre's essay explores the reverberations of Seneca's heritage on Christian writers up to the sixth century CE. Starting with the pseudo-correspondence of Seneca and St. Paul, she cautions us against confusing Christian respect for the *figure* of Seneca with respect for his writing. Once we make this distinction, we can eschew the supposed relationship between the positive Christian reception of Seneca and the influence of Stoicism among the Fathers. As one example, philosophically speaking, Seneca excluded anger as a tyrannical passion from the realm of good government, in which