

Gregor Damschen and Andreas Heil (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. Pp. xii, 883. ISBN 9789004154612, hardback., \$222.00.

This impressive volume (both in quality and sheer weight) provides an overview of the works of Seneca the Younger, devoting equal space to interpretations of his prose as well as poetic works. Damschen and Heil have assembled a truly international group of scholars for this task resulting in a snapshot of contemporary world-perspectives of Seneca (see [Table of contents](#) [via Google Books]). The book is divided into six parts: Life and Legacy, Philosophy, Tragedy, *Apocolocyntosis*, Other Works, and Synthesis, and it concludes with a comprehensive bibliography and an erratic general index.¹ It is a shame that there is no *index locorum*. For the sections “Philosophy” and “Tragedy,” each individual work receives a concise summary including information on date, style and language, content, and sources. These will be helpful for students and scholars who want to know the basic outline of a work, commentaries on that work, and the essential facts (e.g. how does the forceful language of *De brevitate vitae* mirror its primary theme? See Smith’s piece on p.165). Some of these “handbook articles” transcend expectations: Williams on the *Naturales Quaestiones* and Setaioli on *Epistulae Morales* offer substantive readings of these works that highlight Seneca’s insightful explorations of Stoic physics and ethics.

The real meat of the work, however, is in the longer essays. It is impossible to give more than a taste of the rich material contained in the various sections, but I will try to give a selection of the pieces that the readership of *Ancient History Bulletin* may find most relevant and thought-provoking. “Life and Legacy” opens with Habinek’s essay on Seneca’s career, which shows how “Seneca’s life epitomizes the successes and failures of his era” (30). Thus, Habinek provides a judicious view of the early Empire through Seneca’s biography and his writings that address many of the primary concerns (gender, slavery, economics) of cultural, social, and literary historians. Laarman and Schubert on the reception of Seneca *philosophus* and Seneca *tragicus* (respectively) indicate the unpredictable nature of his influence at different periods of history and intimate that, as in the past, “every age to come will create its own personal Seneca” (71).

Contrary to the view of Quintilian that “he [Seneca] was not precise enough in his philosophy” (*in philosophia parum diligens*, *I.O.* 10.1.129), the contributors of the “Philosophy” section of this volume find Seneca’s Stoicism well-argued and representative of his position as a Roman philosopher whose primary interests were ethical self-improvement and, to a lesser degree, cosmology and theology. Edwards (“Death and Time”) and Setaioli (“Therapy, Self-Transformation, ‘Lebensform’”) stress the paraenetic mode of Seneca’s philosophy and the various “spiritual exercises” the *proficientes* must learn to aid their philosophical development. Their essays, and that of

¹ Certain terms (politics, *clementia*) or individuals (Artemis/Diana, Bakhtin, Foucault) are missing, while other items are unclear, e.g. “Epistle”, “epistles”, “Epistulae”, “Epistulae morales”, and “letters” are separate entries.

Wildberger (“Wisdom and Virtue”), stand out for their careful exposition of various tenets of Seneca’s Stoicism and his own erudite and specific take on these issues. Seneca’s evocative survey of Stoic physics, especially in *Naturales Quaestiones*, gets at the heart of concepts such as the body and soul (Smith), the natural world (Gaully) and theology (Setaioli). One leaves the “Philosophy” section marveling at the variety and, ultimately, optimism of Seneca’s Stoicism, but some readers may have hoped for more about works such as *de Clementia* and *de Beneficiis*, whose 252 Teubner pages are given only 11 pages of summary explication.

The third section discusses Seneca’s tragedies, once again opening with short handbook-style essays before delving into more substantial pieces on topics pertinent to Seneca’s dramatic poetry. Certain scholars use their handbook entries to argue for surprising ideas – so Stroh, in a strong article, contends that *Troades* should actually have the title *Troas* (attested in one manuscript tradition), Töchterle maintains that *Oedipus* should have a Neronian date, and Torre underscores the Aristotelian elements in *Thyestes*. The section opens with Liebermann’s prolix examination of the various approaches scholars use in their explications of the tragedies. Is Seneca primarily a philosopher? A poet? A dramaturge concerned first and foremost with performance? Perhaps a politician? Such lenses focus and distort the longer essays of this section. For instance, Schmidt and Heil’s essays offer subtle indications of the implications of issues such as space, dramatic time, and non-verbal acoustic and visual elements for staging and interpreting Seneca’s tragedies. Many of these pieces respond broadly to Eliot’s famous verdict, “In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it.”² Mader deliberates how the characters define themselves in language, especially with an eye toward rationality and irrationality (notably the examples of irrationality outweigh those of rationality), while Mazzoli makes the astute point that Seneca’s choruses’ “connections with the dramatic context are certainly semantic rather than mimetic” (573). The interplay between Greek and Roman material in Seneca’s plays is one of their defining features, and Goldberg ponders whether it is time to reexamine anew the Greek elements that Seneca incorporates in his tragedies. Read together, the essays that make up the “Tragedy” section are uneven – information is repeated, certain pieces clearly are for advanced scholars while others are pitched to an undergraduate audience, and certain English translations are strained or unclear (e.g. Ulixes “has a brainwave” (442) and Cassandra “takes on the role of the great antipodean” (499)).

The fourth and fifth parts of this volume cover Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*, Epigrams, and *de Vita Patris* in three short essays that competently review issues such as the authorship, themes, and aims of these works. Personally, I would have liked to see an additional essay on the *Apocolocyntosis*, an exceptional work that bridges philosophy, poetry, rhetoric, politics, and performance – some of the primary issues of this volume.

² Eliot (1950) 54.

The final section of the volume concerns synthesis, which is vital to our view of this “man of many genres.”³ Von Albrecht approaches the question through Seneca’s language and offers a vibrant enumeration of Seneca’s style in both his poetry and his philosophical prose. One of his primary points is that Seneca is fully aware of the difference between poetry and philosophy (721), and his careful analysis of Seneca’s penetrating focus on language and the shifting meanings of words should be required reading for all who are interested in Seneca’s “literary and philosophical intentions” (699). Fischer’s fine essay on the connections between Senecan tragedy and his philosophical works highlights how Seneca evaluates issues such as poetry, politics, and psychology in his prose and then illustrates those very issues in his tragedies. In doing so, she explains how Seneca consistently problematizes the philosophical ideals in his tragedies and, finally, suggests that there is still more work to be done on this fertile topic. Indeed, this can be said about Seneca in general, as this *Companion* ably attests. Seneca is an author whose works still inspire strong reactions and, in this case, strong essays as well.

Works Cited

- Eliot, T.S. (1950) *Selected Essays: New Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Ker, James (2006) “Seneca, Man of Many Genres.” In *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry and Politics*, edd. K. Volk and G.D. Williams, 19-42. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

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³ Cf. Ker (2006).