

**James KER, *The Deaths of Seneca***, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 411 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-538703-2, hb., £ 45.00.

The death of Seneca was a very special event which, as time goes by, is still vital in literature and art. And no wonder. Its significance is caused both by the ambiguous character of Seneca's final exit (forced suicide) and his possibly comparably ambiguous image as a great stoic sage but also an active politician, the tutor and then advisor at the court of the infamous and cruel emperor Nero. Those two men were close, too close in the case of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, for him to keep his hands clean and his conscience pure. Although many of us, when asked about Seneca's death, will presumably come up with the image of the special glory of a dying old sage resisting an emperor's mad cruelty, such an opinion needs revision. Nevertheless his image being comparable maybe only with Socrates<sup>1</sup> has had a significant influence on next centuries till our times<sup>2</sup>.

James KER (= K.) in his very solid work aimed very ambitiously at analysing the cultural significance of Seneca's death across time. Such a project requires very scrupulous investigations of various areas and disciplines such as art history, ancient historiography, Roman and Greek literature, etc. In my own opinion he is admirably competent in each of them. It also seems that here one should just mention the three-part division of his book in the aspect of the scene of Seneca's dying: (1) ancient historical narratives, (2) the literary projects of death in Seneca, (3) the tradition of reception of his death both in word and image.

The book begins with Chapter I, the historical background concerning Seneca's death in Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio. These three descriptions contain some details not found elsewhere. Each version establishes its own set of conditions and constraints on the interpretation of the sage's death. So we have a vivid description (Tacitus), an analytic catalogue (Suetonius) and finally a polemical anecdote (Dio). It is worth noting that the author tries to materialize Seneca's wife Pompeia Paulina, an ethereal rather than real personality to date.

Chapter II is partially still dedicated to consideration of Seneca's death as part of three stories: life and career, Senecan self-conscious writing and as an unquestionable element of the catalogue of executions and suicides in books XV and XVI of Tacitus' *Annals*. In this third case we may see Tacitus' favourite motifs from his repertoire of describing noble human death. Here, the dying Seneca is pictured as a subject of history and historiography, which treats his death as part of a literary career. Chapter III and the following ones are of special interest as an attempt at elucidating the dying Seneca in his own misgivings<sup>3</sup> and philosophical considerations. K. investigates in detail Seneca's works, such as *Dialogi*, *Epigrammata* (Chapter III) and *Consolationes* (Chapter IV), showing us not only the connections between the historians' descriptions of the sage's death and his own writings, but even searching for a connection to Petronius' *Satiricon* 111.8 f.<sup>4</sup> In my

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<sup>1</sup> There were many heroic lives and deaths, but none were like Socrates'. He is so famous that he even deserves not only a serious elaboration like WILSON's book of 2007 and HERSHBELL's paper of 1990 but also a parody by W. ALLEN, *The Insanity Defense*, New York 2007. In the case of Seneca we should have in mind his request for *testamenti tabulae* (*Ann.* XV 63). That act seems to be the main difference between those two extreme situations. However, in Seneca's own opinion it may in fact have been Cato that was the best example of a noble suicide.

<sup>2</sup> Seneca is still alive although "he died too soon" as Petrarch noted in his letter XXIV 5, 26.

<sup>3</sup> It might be interesting to compare Seneca's and Tacitus' ways of depicting the future. The latter author has been investigated in this aspect by J. PIŁOŃ, *Ze studiów nad technikami narracyjnymi Tacyta. Wypowiedzi proleptyczne*, Wrocław 2004.

<sup>4</sup> It is an evident example of parody of Senecan rhetoric of consolatory therapy.

opinion the end of Chapter IV needs further investigation, as it makes for a somewhat controversial (but very inspiring) mixture of historical facts with literary creativity. I highly value especially Chapter V as an attempt at examining two separate theatrical modes in his philosophical prose and his tragedies and what dramatic role death serves in each. The reader may also learn about the possible influence of the theatricality of that death on Nero himself (Dio and Suetonius). The next chapter, about Seneca's considerations of his own death is also notable, e.g. because of its thorough investigation of the connection between ending correspondence with Lucilius and life.

Chapter VII is more obvious, because it contains a wide spectrum of images of the dying Seneca from the early Christianity until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact is highly optimistic, although we may find among them also banal and imitative pictures. It seems to be another aspect of ambiguity surrounding the sage. The author is highly successful in examining how the tradition of the sage's death has changed and how that death was shaped in new ways for new audiences. We are really given an enormously wide spectrum of literary works and paintings concerning the scene of Seneca's death, always accompanied with intelligent and competent analyses. Chapter IX on Seneca's image in reception is a very useful supplement and extension of the topic, as it also presents several types of shaping Seneca's image (by Lipsius, Rubens, Reni, etc.). Chapter VIII, where the author discusses Seneca's opinions and thoughts concerning the act of suicide as a way to freedom, complete with his inconsistency on the subject, is of both philosophical and social nature. I wish there were in K.'s book the wider background of Romans' opinions on suicide<sup>5</sup>.

The very end of the book is an intelligent examination of where possibly Seneca's death could happen.

It is my personal conviction that the reviewed book on Seneca's death, as touching upon and exploring so many various aspects, is really valuable as a successful and deeply scholarly attempt at reviving his character and his literary and philosophical activity, and at doing so, paradoxically, from the perspective of the moment of his forced but also voluntary final exit. In K.'s view, Seneca has been so popular over the time that he has even become a banal symbol of popular culture. We may ask what he could offer in his entire philosophy to our modern and arrogant times. K.'s book has something to say to that question too: "It is our death's futurity, uncertainty, and singularity that leave the cultural history of death unfinished – indeed unbegun – until we ourselves are ceasing". A truly eminent and unforgettable work!

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<sup>5</sup> Comparably to, though more concise than, E.P. GARRISON, *Attitudes toward Suicide in Ancient Greece*, TAPhA CXXI 1991, pp. 1–34.