

Seneca - General Background

Post by "Cassius" of July 22, 2024 at 4:24 PM

This "On The Happy Life" is one of the first and major sources used to turn Epicurus into a devout ascetic:

Yet Seneca's defenders find a way to defend his hypocrisy.

Quote

Seneca's fortune made possible a life style that was lavish by Roman or, for that matter, Hollywood standards. According to Dio, at one point the Stoic ordered "five hundred tables of citrus wood with legs of ivory, all identically alike, and he served banquets on them." In an essay entitled "On the Happy Life," composed around 59 A.D., Seneca addresses the strains between his philosophical commitments and his conspicuous consumption.

"Why do you drink wine that is older than you are?" he demands of himself. "Why does your wife wear in her ears the price of a rich man's house?" Seneca's answer, if it can be counted as such, is metaphorical: "The wise man would not despise himself, even if he were a midget; but he would rather be tall." Around the time that Seneca composed "On the Happy Life," a former consul named Publius Suillius had the temerity to accuse him in public of hypocrisy and of sucking the provinces dry. Shortly thereafter, Suillius found himself exiled.

One way to sort out the contradictions of Seneca's life is not even to try. The art critic Robert Hughes labelled Seneca "a hypocrite almost without equal in the ancient world," and left it at that. Romm and Wilson—and the new wave of Seneca scholars more generally—resist such reductive judgments. It is possible, in their view, to see Seneca as a hypocrite *and* as a force of moral restraint. In the most generous account, Seneca might even be regarded as a kind of Stoic martyr: to prevent worse from happening to Rome, he stayed on with Nero and, by doing so, sacrificed his good name.

Quote

This reading of the plays makes sense but, as Wilson acknowledges, runs the risk of "circularity": Seneca's dramas must reflect a hidden moral anguish, because nowhere else in his writings is this moral anguish expressed. Another way to approach the plays is as genre pieces trafficking in the outré—the Roman equivalent of "Reservoir Dogs" or

“Django Unchained.” In this reading, what the tragedies reveal is how lightly Seneca took his writings. Plays, treatises, speeches—all were to him just clever phrases strung together, so many “words, words, words.”

Quote

Seneca’s own tragic end came in 65 A.D., when he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Nero and install in his place a good-looking nobleman named Gaius Piso. (By some accounts, there was within this conspiracy a sub-conspiracy to kill Piso, too, and make Seneca emperor.) The plotters bungled things, and Nero cut them down one after another. To the end, Seneca maintained his innocence, and he may even have been telling the truth. But, as no one knew better than he, truth was not the issue. He was ordered to commit suicide. He cut his wrists, and when that didn’t work he tried the veins behind his knees. Supposedly, as he died, he called in his secretary, so he could dictate one last speech. ♦