

Seneca on the Death of M. Livius Drusus (*Brev.* 6.1-2)

Like earlier philosophers, Seneca the Younger often used historical figures as exempla in his works. Marcus Livius Drusus, the plebeian tribune whose assassination precipitated the Social War, appears as an exemplum in Seneca's *De brevitate vitae* (6.1-2). Here, Drusus supplies a negative exemplum to the audience: he never makes time for *otium* and philosophical pursuits as Seneca urges, but instead works constantly yet achieves nothing.

Seneca is known to stretch the historical facts of his exempla for rhetorical or philosophical purposes (Mayer 1991: 151). In the clearest case, Seneca's love of Cato, Stoic exemplum par excellence, inspires grand claims whose factuality is secondary to the philosophical greatness they substantiate (Alexander 1947). Two questions thus arise for the exemplum of Drusus: how closely does Seneca's exemplum agree with other accounts of Drusus, and what philosophical motive does Seneca have for making any alterations?

Seneca's account largely coincides with descriptions in other ancient sources: Drusus is praised for his speaking abilities and good family, yet has difficulty passing his legislation. The most striking element of Seneca's account is his claim that Drusus may have committed suicide. In all other accounts of Drusus' death, the tribune is assassinated and his death leads to the Social War. Most commentators suggest that the switch to suicide helps dramatically illustrate Drusus' failure to attain *otium* (e.g., Grimal 1966 and Traina 1993). That is, his inability to balance his life between work and philosophy culminates with him taking his own life out of hopelessness and frustration. This interpretation does not adequately take into account Stoic views of suicide, however. Williams does consider Drusus' death in this light, but suggests that it "gives only the illusion of 'true' Stoic action by suddenly (and by no means definitely) committing suicide" (2003 *ad loc.*). This claim still underestimates the significance of Seneca's alteration, however.

In this paper I will argue that Seneca modifies the account of Drusus' death in order to create an anti-Stoic suicide scene, one that strongly and intentionally flouts philosophical doctrine. Seneca uses not only the suggestion that Drusus does commit suicide, but also how he does so, to emphasize how philosophically reprehensible he is. Drusus' mishandled suicide is thus the culminating element of this negative exemplum, and in a more significant way than commentators have realized.

Stoic philosophers, especially Seneca, had strong opinions on death and suicide. Stoicism offered strict guidelines on when choosing to commit suicide was acceptable, while famous models like Cato offered sample templates that others could follow in scripting their own death scenes (Griffin 1986, Edwards 2007: 144-60). Ideally, the affair was lengthy, "performed" in the presence of others, and featured meaningful and quotable last words by the dying. Drusus, though not a Stoic, is nevertheless judged by the criteria of a proper Stoic suicide. He fails to adhere to traditional Stoic guidelines on the circumstances under which suicide may be chosen, using it merely to escape from a life without *otium*. Furthermore, Drusus reverses or ignores all the recommended elements of a Stoic suicide scene: he dies quickly and alone, offering no last-minute inspiration to others. The fact that Drusus' death in other accounts does meet several Stoic requirements further suggests that Seneca made these alterations to ensure his audience would interpret the deed in the way he wished. Drusus thus joins other Senecan figures, such as Astyanax in *Troades* and Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis*, whose deaths are either positively or negatively molded to Stoic guidelines to shape the reader's interpretation of their characters.

In conclusion, Seneca overturns not only the manner of Drusus' death (assassination versus suicide) but also the details common to the other accounts in order to ensure that there is no chance of Drusus' death being seen as philosophically praiseworthy. These alterations render

the historiographical value of Seneca's passage limited, and in fact risk destabilizing the whole narrative of the Social War's inception if mistakenly accepted. But as a philosopher before all else, Seneca is indifferent to this interference. The alterations Seneca has made to the death of Drusus are only philosophically motivated, and when seen in this light they do make a clear statement about how the reader should interpret the exemplum of Drusus.

Bibliography:

- Alexander, W. 1947. "Seneca the Philosopher in Account with Roman History." *TRSC* 41: 23-46.
- Edwards, C. 2007. *Death in Ancient Rome*. New Haven.
- Griffin, M. 1986. "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide." *G&R* 33: 64-77, 192-202.
- Grimal, P. 1966. *Sénèque. Sur la brièveté de la vie*. Paris.
- Mayer, R. 1991. "Roman Historical Exempla in Seneca." In: Grimal, P. (ed.). *Sénèque et la prose latine: Entretiens Fondation Hardt* 36. Geneva. 141-176.
- Traina, A. 1993. *La Brevità della Vita*. Milan.
- Williams, G. 2003. *Seneca: De Otio and De Breuitate Vitae*. Cambridge.