

The Death of Seneca as *Ambitiosa Mors* in Tacitus' *Annals*

In a well-known passage in the *Agricola* (42.4-5), Tacitus compares the quiet, moderating effect that his father-in-law exercised on Domitian (*Domitiani uero natura ... moderatione ... prudentiaque Agricolae leniebatur*) with an extravagant, self-indulgent desire for an ostentatious death (*ambitiosa mors*) which he saw active in the charged environment of first century CE Roman politics. This desire, Tacitus writes, was acted out by those who, through antagonizing the emperor with “provocation and empty boasts of freedom” (*contumacia neque inani iactatione libertatis*), preferred to obtain glory in suicide over living with *libertas* diminished. In choosing death they also chose not to live for the improvement of the state—thus they died “for no benefit for the state” (*in nullum rei publicae usum*).

A.J. Woodman supplies the standard, and I think correct, interpretation of the specific group of people whom Tacitus means to criticize in this passage: “it is generally inferred that he has in mind the Stoics, for whom *libertas* was not negotiable” (Woodman, 2014). If this passage from the *Agricola* is indeed a criticism of Stoic philosophy, its adherents in Roman government and the fact that it advocates suicide as a means of obtaining glory, there are powerful implications for readers' interpretation of the most famous depiction of a Stoic's death in Tacitean literature, the suicide of Seneca (15.62-64) in the *Annals*.

Several scholars, citing overwrought dramatic elements [cf. Griffin (1976), Hill (2004), Ker (2009), Wilson (2014)], have already suggested that the account of Seneca's death in the *Annals* falls short of straightforward praise and admiration. Few, however, have connected this passage with the anti-Stoic sentiments from the *Agricola* above, and, once having made this connection, have interpreted Tacitus' presentation of Seneca's last moments as critical, if not derisive. In my paper I will argue that Tacitus does in fact mean not only to criticize Seneca, but

even at times to mock him for his ostentatious, and ultimately inconsequential, act of self-glorification. Though he concedes that Seneca was forced to commit suicide by order of Nero, Tacitus believes that Seneca still had an opportunity—and, thus, a duty—to do the state good even in his death, but chose instead to enhance his own posthumous reputation.

I will approach my examination of this passage with the following two observations. **I.** In Tacitus' account, Seneca fails, rather refuses, to address in a substantial manner the true cause of his suicide: Nero. We might expect that Seneca, a man so intimately involved in Nero's reign for so many years, when finally afforded the chance to speak his mind, would use the opportunity to point out, or even to rail against, the problems within the principate. In doing so, however, he would have been compelled to discuss his own complicity in Nero's career. **II.** Seneca expends in his final moments great effort to record an *imago suae uitae* (15.62.1), a final attempt at creating a legacy worth honoring and imitating. The setbacks that plague him, however, including a wife turned competitor-in-virtue and several botched attempts at suicide, are intentionally included in this passage for the sake of undermining Seneca's final memory. Thus Tacitus criticizes Seneca for his failure to contribute to the well-being of the state in his final moments while also quietly mocking his inability, despite all of his efforts, to control the narrative of his own life.

Bibliography

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