

MIRIAM T. GRIFFIN, *SENECA: A PHILOSOPHER IN POLITICS*, Oxford 1976, pp. XII 504; £ 18.

Philosophy and politics at Rome is a subject of great promise and interest, by no means exhausted. The influence of the Academy on the politics of its adherent, the noble Brutus, still requires consideration; the connection between Cassius' conversion to Epicureanism and the Ides of March is at best tenuous (cf. Momigliano, *JRS* 31 (1941) 151); and the exact importance of philosophy to that model Stoic, the younger Cato, lies probably somewhere between the caricature of the *pro Murena* and Münzer's spider sitting at the centre of an extensive cobweb of dynastic marriages.

Be that as it may, for the last generation of the Republic politics came first and philosophy second. It was only under the Empire and, incidentally, after the triumph of the Stoa over its rivals, that the choice existed. Seneca philosophus is a figure derived from his own writings; the minister depends on outside evidence: 'Without the testimony of Tacitus, Seneca the statesman could hardly exist'. The quotation from Syme (*Tacitus* 552) opens Mrs. Griffin's book, aptly for more than one reason. The final verdict was always the result of the discrepancy between the moralizing essayist and the millionaire behind the throne of a tyrant: the charge of hypocrisy hardly surprising. Yet there is a fallacy inherent in the method. Inevitably a vicious circle is drawn once we try to deduce autobiographical facts from Seneca's writings and bring his political actions in accord with his professed views. Thus the author's approach in trying to reconstruct Seneca's life and political career without assuming implicit autobiographical references in the philosophical works is sound: only with the facts safely established is there room for consideration of the connection between the philosophical tenets and the political practice.

Moreover, with Seneca there exists the special difficulty of the chronology of his works. Mrs. Griffin's attitude to these much discussed problems is typically sober and cautious, preferring 'a safe, if vague,

chronology' thus avoiding 'the risk of prejudging the question of the autobiographical relevance of his works' (p. 395). Of course such a vague chronology gives little to hold on to. It would allow, for instance, the assumption that each and every one of the *consolatio ad Polybium*, *consolatio ad Helviam*, *de ira*, *de constantia sapientis*, *de tranquillitate animi*, *de otio* and *de providentia* could have been written in the two years 49–50. Yet even with a more precise chronology one could hardly expect to remove all the difficulties. It is much more probable that the main developments of Seneca's thought preceded the bulk of his extant writings than that they can be discerned in them.

Part One of the study is a careful reconstruction of Seneca's career, based on the outside sources and the verifiable facts — as opposed to hypothetical deductions — drawn from his own works. Seneca's first fifty years, prior to the period when he attracted the attention of historians, and prior to the great majority of his extant works, can yield little that is new or surprising. His early reluctance to enter a political career seems to have been due to a mixture of motives such as personal disinclination, ill health and a passion for study. The well-known, if far from complete, story of his exile and recall brings us to his sudden rise to power first as tutor to a crown-prince, and soon as minister to the Emperor. It is here that we encounter the central problems of historical interest: how are we to evaluate Seneca's influence on Nero and what was his part in policy-making during the time of his and Burrus' preeminence? It is not the generalized statement of Dio (61.4.2) that carries weight here, but the painstaking examination of the detailed evidence of Tacitus supplemented by Suetonius and Dio. The *amicus principis* had wide responsibilities and opportunities: with Burrus, Seneca had to play his part in the cabals at court, and of course he served as speech-writer and public-relations officer to Nero. Inevitably in a book from the school of Syme the working of patronage looms large. Here the situation is complicated since one has to establish the identity of the protégés of Seneca himself, of Burrus, of Agrippina and, of course of Nero. Moreover the author is duly cautious in not connecting automatically the vicissitudes in the fortunes of the protégés with the fall from grace or death of the patrons. An interesting result is the establishment of Seneca's preference for *equites* — probably due to his uneasiness with senators (p. 96). More complicated is the question of the relations

between Seneca and the so-called philosophical opposition and its most prominent figure, Thrasea Paetus. The links between the two seem to have been tenuous and the evidence is at best circumstantial, though one item at least, the manner of their suicide (see below), should stand beyond doubt. Yet the gap between the minister of the Princeps and the leader of the rearguard action of senatorial *libertas* remained.

On the central problem of 'The Government during Seneca's Ascendancy' (pp. 103 ff) the picture seems clear. The early years saw the fulfillment of the promises summarized in Nero's speech after his accession (Tac. *Ann.* 13.4), which consisted of the redressing of the evils of the former reign rather than in a positive programme of reform. The biting satire of the *Apocolocyntosis* is the counterpart of the crown-speech, ridiculing without restraint the folly and frivolity of the Divine Claudius. But a more serious definition of future policies was needed. Once all the power was concentrated in the hands of one man it was only realistic to appreciate that it was above all the character and behaviour of this man that decided the destiny of his subjects. The *de clementia* designs the course the good ruler — indeed the True King — will adopt, both holding up a mirror to Nero and reassuring the readers about his intentions after the murder of Britannicus.

Mrs. Griffin correctly excludes the *Apocolocyntosis* and the *de clementia*, as expressly political in purpose, from the rule which made her disregard Seneca's writings for reconstructing his political stance; thus it is the more surprising that she fails to discuss another work of some relevance. True, she is in good and large company when denying the authenticity of the *Octavia*, but things have not yet reached a stage where the non-Senecan authorship of the play can be taken for granted without any further comment. In a book of this scope one could expect at least a short Appendix, — there are twenty-five Appendices in the book — even if it would only restate frequently aired views. "It would certainly be very satisfying to discover some proof or disproof of the attribution to Seneca: but if really cogent evidence existed, one cannot help the feeling that some of the scholars who have studied the play so exhaustively would have presented it already" (B. Walker, *CP* 52 (1957) 163).

"The purpose of Part Two is to examine Seneca's views on certain topics relevant to political life and to compare them with what can be

ascertained about his behaviour" (p. 175). In an atmosphere of limited political freedom attitudes to the past often take the place of pronouncing ideologies for the present. In the Early Principate 'Catonism' and 'Caesarism' became foremost criteria of political orientation. Mrs. Griffin's sound and lucid reassessment of Seneca's attitude reveals that he had little inclination to history: thus, e.g., he was interested in Cato mainly as a standard moral *exemplum*. It would be profitable to contrast this with Thræsea Paetus, who apparently spent much time and energy in investigating historical and biographical facts about the hero of the Republic. Not surprisingly Seneca's outlook on the Empire is not different from that on the Republic. Here too, as the author correctly observes, Seneca was more interested in the personalities of the Emperors than in their policies.

From ideologies to practical policies: Mrs. Griffin assesses Seneca's attitude to the government of the provinces in accordance with his being a provincial and a Stoic. The rather disappointing record is hardly a surprise. After all, why should one assume that the fact that Seneca was born in Spain would have a bearing on his attitude towards the government of, say, Judæa? As to Stoics and provincial government it is true that some of the outstanding examples of honest and benevolent governors both under the late Republic and in Seneca's own time had Stoic affiliations, but the exact meaning of this connection is still to be established.

A similar picture arises from the thorough investigation of Seneca's views on slavery: these were indeed progressive, but hardly much in advance of widely accepted views in his time.

After consideration of the paradoxical problem of Seneca's wealth and his views on philosophical participation we arrive at the final, and in many ways most engaging chapter. Whatever the verdict on Seneca's life, his death became exemplary — and followed an example. The death scene of the *Phaedo* became a model and its imitation a declaration of faith: the hemlock was ready when the final message came (Tac. *Ann.* 15.64.3.). (The double herm of Socrates and Seneca from Berlin is a very apt jacket illustration indeed). Equally prominent in Seneca's mind, one should add, was Cato, the hero of Republican *libertas*: and soon Thræsea Paetus, Cato's biographer, was to follow suit. Nothing testifies better for the tradition than the death scene of

Petronius, where the deviation from the pattern was noted by Tacitus. Mrs. Griffin convincingly argues that Seneca was fascinated by death, and not necessarily by the act of suicide. If there was in his suicide a shade of that *iactatio* that seems to have become typical of philosophers (Ulpian *Dig.* 28.3.6.7) it was due to that particular taste of the period for martyrdom that is revealed in such different quarters as the *Acta Alexandrinorum*, the literature of the *exitus illustrium virorum* and the commencement of both Jewish and Christian martyrologies.

This book will for a long time remain not only a standard work on Seneca, but also a foremost study of the reign of Nero and an important contribution to the story of Stoicism in the Roman Empire. It is a pity that the Oxford University Press has decided to price it — even at the present rate of exchange of sterling — beyond the means of most students.

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