The Literary Legacy of Seneca

SENECA, THE PHILOSOPHER, AND HIS MODERN MESSAGE. By Richard Mott Gummere. Boston: Marshall Jones Company.

TAUGHT by sad experience, the harried champions of classical studies have come to realize that rhapsodic discourses in esoteric circles and dogmatic assertion have failed to persuade a more or less indifferent public that ancient literature, philosophy, and statecraft have still many things of moment to say to ears willing to listen. Both in this country and in England there is a refreshing tendency nowadays among classical scholars to marshal the evidence for their case in a concrete and popular form. So Mr. Gummere's book is the first of a series of little volumes which, under the challenging caption, "Our Debt to Greece and Rome," is designed by the editors, Professor Hadzsits of Pennsylvania and Professor Robinson of Johns Hopkins, to demonstrate to a wide circle of readers how our modern world thinks its thoughts after antiquity.

It is to be hoped that succeeding volumes will find as happy a combination of subject and author as the initial number has found. Mr. Gummere has lived with Seneca for many years. He is the translator of the "Epistulae Morales" for the Loeb Series, and has published scholarly articles dealing with Seneca's influence on modern literature. Small wonder, therefore, that this latest work of Mr. Gummere's pen is the readable exposition of professional enthusiasm which books of this type should ideally reveal.

For Seneca's fame as a man, it is unfortunate that we are so copiously informed by the Roman historians—Seneca's apologists say misinformed—as to the external events of his career. Mr. Gummere follows at any rate a comfortable path in electing to emphasize primarily "how much of value Seneca contributes to the spirit and the intellect." In the biographical chapter with which the book begins, the author is fairly gentle in his treatment of Seneca as "one who made a brave attempt to join a theory of life with a practice of life." However, no uncompromising rehabilitation is essayed. The admission is made that there is no evidence to show that Seneca even protested against the murder of Agrippina; nor does Mr. Gummere shrink from applying the truthful epithet "cringing" to the "Consolatio ad Polybium," that publication *trop fameuse*, as Waltz has described it in his "Vie de Sénéque."

The tale of what Seneca has meant to men through the ages begins with the first century of our era, when the youthful literary secessionists of Rome, to the unfeigned sorrow of the excellent don, Quintilian, were all trying to write as Seneca did. The story does not end until the names of Dr. Osler, Maeterlinck, and Eucken are cited. Now and then Mr. Gummere bluffly states controversial matters as

facts. There are those who would wish to temper his assertion that "we know that in Corsica he composed the tragedies;" even though Waltz assigns the treatises "On Providence" and "On the Steadfastness of the Sage" to the period of exile, there have been many critics who have held different views. On page 97, referring to Petrarch's devotion to Seneca, Mr. Gummere writes: "Seneca comes second only to Virgil in the number of quotations." This is not true of all of Petrarch's works, but of the marginal notes on his famous copy of Virgil, now preserved at Milan. On page 98 there is a sentence that will lead the unwary reader to conclude that the works of Cicero became known to Petrarch only in his forty-first year!

The reader of humane tastes will enjoy Mr. Gummere's book. Perhaps he will even be moved by the author's enthusiasm to join in a Senecan revival which will render anachronistic the late Barrett Wendell's dampening utterance: "Except for students of history and philosophy, his (i. e. Seneca's) volumes grow respectably dusty."

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