
Tommaso Gazzarri  
*Union College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj](https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj)

**Recommended Citation**
Available at: [https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol43/iss2/9](https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol43/iss2/9)
Peter J. Anderson (trans., with Introduction and Notes)

Seneca: Selected Dialogues and Consolations.


Peter Anderson has produced an agile volume containing translations of a significant selection of Seneca’s philosophical work. The Latin text is not present and problems concerning the textual transmission are purposely not tackled.

The works presented in translation are: De Providentia, De Constantia Sapientis, Ad Marciam De Consolatione, De Vita Beata, De Oti, De Tranquillitate Animi, De Brevitate Vitae, Ad Polybium De Consolatione, Ad Helviam Matrem De Consolatione. The final part of the book is divided in three sections, namely: biographical information for key historical figures, a glossary of the most frequently recurring Latin words and what is listed as an “index of historical persons”, which differs from the previously mentioned “biographical information on historical figures”, because it locates the names of all historical characters that appear in the various Senecan works of the volume, but without any biographical data.

The eleven sections of the introduction provide a viable means for acquiring some basic knowledge about Seneca. Despite the absence of the Latin text, Anderson devotes two sections to Seneca’s Latin. In the first one he describes the unmistakable originality of Seneca’s style. In the second he tackles the issues that every Senecan translator inevitably faces. These issues are hard to grasp for a reader who has no knowledge of Latin or, even more, who approaches the peculiarities of Stoic preaching for the first time. Nonetheless what Anderson attempts to do is not only effective, but necessary. It makes the reader aware that there is a level of comprehension of the text that is simply not within reach, unless one reads Seneca in Latin. More specifically Anderson refers to two main issues. First he underlines how trying to replicate some of the stylistic effect of Seneca’s style could, at times, end up making the English translation obscure. Then he points to the need to break long Latin sentences into short English ones, thus unavoidably losing the “breath” of the original text.

When it comes to some specific philosophical terminology, Anderson opts for translations that he deliberately keeps uniform throughout the various works of the collection. Such terms, with their translations, are: animus (spirit), mens (mind),
virtus (virtue), otium (retirement), bonum (good; a noun), malum (bad, badness, bad things; a noun). These translations are the best possible compromise and, right after introducing the terms, Anderson devotes some space to further explaining the complexity of these key words. I personally cannot envisage a better solution, and yet I sense that a reader approaching Seneca for the first time may have trouble, for instance, in grasping the real meaning of otium which should be intended as vita activa (but again, I am using Ciceronian Latin here!), i.e., a moment of retirement from public duties which is not the same as “not being active”. I wonder if the short explanation provided in the introduction will suffice to remind a reader of the semantic complexity of the term. Another concept that I deem particularly critical is that of virtus. This is because the translation “virtue” leaves out completely the gendered nuance that every Roman reader would have automatically appreciated, nor does Anderson attend to this crucial dimension of the term in his discussion. Virtus is not simply “virtue”, but rather virtue as embodied by the ideal Roman male (vir). This is particularly significant within the context of Roman Stoicism in which, starting with Musonius—and the querelle is very much present in Seneca—a strong debate arises concerning the ability of women to attain an honorable level of education and ultimately virtus. It was not just a matter of semantics, but implied the attendant possibility of a new philosophical discourse running counter to the normative understanding of gendered constructions excluding women from virtus.

With regard to Musonius, one nice feature of this volume consists of the attempt to situate Seneca within the landscape of Roman Stoicism. Too often commentaries and introductions hammer on the sequence: Seneca, then Epictetus, then Marcus Aurelius. For a reader approaching the study of Stoicism for the first time, Seneca may appear to be a solitary figure standing in a vacuum with no preceding tradition. Anderson devotes an entire section of the introduction to situating Seneca within the trajectory of Stoicism, tackling not only Roman Stoicism, but also the Greek roots of the school. Furthermore, when he comes to Hierocles, Cornutus and Musonius, Anderson stresses the concept of Stoicism as a “living tradition”, thus further underlining the complex relation/tension between the Socratic imperative of not relying on writing and the simultaneous production, particularly in the case of Seneca, of a ponderous body of written works.

Anderson discusses oikeiosis and indifferents succinctly but effectively. He succeeds in explaining the notion of pneuma in simple terms and he anchors it to the social dimension of oikeiosis. In less than a page he finds a way to even mention Hierocles’ heterodox and more radical position on the matter. The section devoted to the indifferents insists much on virtue, but perhaps the relation between virtue
and *pneuma* would have required more room; Anderson also seems to hint at the much discussed debate on Seneca’s hypocrisy (being rich is not an obstacle to being virtuous), but I wonder if somebody approaching the study of Seneca for the first time would be able to fully gauge what Anderson is arguing here. Lastly the paragraph on Epicureanism does justice to Seneca’s appreciation of at least some aspects of the Garden.

A list of further readings follows some basic discussion of the chronology and addressees of Seneca’s works. The list contains 16 titles, all fundamental pieces of English-language scholarship; no French, German or Italian scholarship is ever mentioned. The translation is elegant and accurate, while the notes provide some basic but useful information. Overall this volume could be used as an excellent introduction to Seneca both for students and scholars unfamiliar with Latin.

*NECJ 43.2*  
Tommaso Gazzarri  
Union College