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Gareth D. Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint. A Study of Seneca's Natural Questions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 416. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-19-973158-9) \$45.00.

Seneca's *Natural Questions* deals with what in antiquity was called *meteorologica*, the study of natural phenomena that were thought to occupy, or be governed by, the middle space between the earth and the heavens: rain, winds, and the weather, but also comets and earthquakes. For us, the *Natural Questions* presents a strange mixture of what looks like science, such as theories about phenomena like rainbows and hail, and highly rhetorical diatribes against the immorality of contemporary life at Rome. For Seneca, physics and ethics seem inseparable, but the relationship between the work's moralizing discussions and technical content has been an important concern in recent work on the text. (See, in particular, F. R. Berno, *Lo specchio, il vizio e la virtù: studio sulle Naturales Quaestiones di Seneca*. Bologna 2003; B. M. Gauly, *Senecas Naturales Quaestiones: Naturphilosophie für die römische Kaiserzeit*. Munich 2004; B. Inwood, *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*. Oxford 2005; D. D. Leitão, "Senecan Catoptrics and the Passion of Hostius Quadra (Sen. Nat. 1)," *Materiali e Discussioni* 41 (1998) 127-60.) Williams engages carefully and generously with recent scholarship on the *Natural Questions* in addressing this relationship; he argues that the *Natural Questions* induces its readers to investigate the workings of nature, not as an end in itself, but as a means of elevating their minds above the sordidness of ordinary life. Seneca's writing encourages his readers towards a "cosmic viewpoint," a liberating perspective that brings them into closer contact with god, who is identified with nature itself, or Herself. Through a series of deft close readings of Seneca's text, Williams builds a convincing case for the *Natural Questions* as a creative and thoughtful work, an important part of Seneca's literary legacy, as well as an innovative contribution to the study of meteorology in antiquity.

The book is divided into eight chapters, several of which are based on articles previously published in journals, but are fully integrated here into a sustained argument. The first two chapters are thematic and introductory. The first situates Seneca's worldview in the context of Cicero and Pliny the Elder's approaches to the study of nature, and explores Seneca's emphasis on the self within the sociopolitical context of Neronian Rome. A key concern of this book is the ways in which Seneca's literary strategies work to produce active readers who engage with nature as a means of liberating themselves from a partial, earth-bound perspective on life, although, Williams argues, the process of self-liberation is far from straightforward in Seneca's account. The *Natural Questions* focuses on meteorology, which is concerned with the intermediary zone between the earth and the heavens; figuratively, Williams suggests, the study of meteorology marks an intermediate step on the reader's journey towards a detached, cosmic viewpoint on themselves and the world. The second chapter on "Seneca's Moralizing Interludes" examines key episodes from across the *Natural Questions* where Seneca presents vivid, tour-de-force diatribes against various vices, the most discussed of which is the notorious description of Hostius Quadra's sexual escapades with mirrors which livens up Seneca's account of mirror effects in nature in book 1. The narrative pull of these episodes stages in

the text the struggle that the reader-philosopher undergoes in trying to escape from the potentially pleasurable constraints of ordinary life. It is the struggle itself, Williams argues, that Seneca emphasizes in his work.

The remaining six chapters each focus on a particular section of the *Natural Questions*, following the revised book order that was established by Carmen Codoñer (*L. Annaei Senecae Naturales Quaestiones*. 2 vols. Madrid 1979) and by Harry Hine (*An Edition with Commentary of Seneca, Natural Questions, Book 2*. New York 1981): book 3 (seas), 4a (the Nile), 4b (hail and snow), 5 (winds), 6 (earthquakes), 7 (comets), 1 (rainbows and other lights in the sky), 2 (thunder and lightning). Throughout, the technical content of the meteorology is discussed where it is important to Seneca's broader point, but the focus here is on the ways in which that content serves a larger ethical goal. So chapter 3 explores the relationship between the cataclysmic flood Seneca describes at the end of book 3 with the more mundane miracle of the Nile's summer flooding in book 4. Chapter 4 probes Seneca's rhetoric and practice of scientific inquiry by examining the dense argumentation in book 4's discussion of theories about hail. In chapter 5, we find human concerns, and the contrast between nature's consistency and human aberrations, at the center of Seneca's treatment of winds in book 5.

The earthquakes of book 6 are explored in chapter 6, a key chapter for Williams's elaboration of Seneca's project and what he calls the Senecan sublime: Seneca is influenced by Lucretius, and employs the techniques of consolatory literature, in asserting a literary and rational control over nature, partly in response to the recent disaster of the Campanian earthquake of AD 62. Chapter 7 returns to the idea of the reader's journey and the impact of book ordering in the *Natural Questions*. In ancient writing, comets occupied an ambiguous position between meteorological and astronomical phenomena, and the comets of book 7 are here seen as the high point in the structure of Seneca's work, where Seneca encourages a higher, intuitive form of knowledge in his readers in contrast to the less elevated vision that dominates Roman life, of which book 1's Hostius Quadra is an extreme exponent. The final chapter reads book 2's treatment of Etruscan divination and Stoic rational explanations for lightning in the context of the cultural revolution that Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (*Rome's Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge 2008) has traced in the late republic and early empire, when experts in specialist fields were seen to usurp the authority of the elite's traditional knowledge.

This is a richly textured book, and this summary does not do justice to the fine detail of Williams's arguments or the many passing insights on particular passages. It is an important contribution to our understanding of Seneca's *Natural Questions*, and, more broadly, the rhetoric of technical literature in antiquity and the place of scientific knowledge at Rome.

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