



4-1-1991

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Roger Wescott
Drew University

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Recommended Citation

Wescott, Roger (1991) "In Response," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 24 : No. 24 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol24/iss24/9>

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IN RESPONSE

ROGER WESCOTT

This is a response to Edmund Leites' article "Seneca's Letter to Lucillus" (*CCR* 22, Fall 1990), which I just received. The article is well written and perceptive. However, the comparisons drawn in it, between Seneca and such later writers as Montaigne, Emerson, and Foucault, are exclusively individual. I still believe, as I said last month in Urbana, that the persistent, and too often unmet, need of our Society is not merely to be comparative but to compare *civilizations*. To be sure, by calling Seneca "the first modern philosopher," Leites implies that Seneca either foreshadowed or initiated Western Civilization (where the term "Western" may be taken to mean "post-Greco-Roman"). Yet implication is not explication: without explicit statements about cultural context, readers can never be sure that what they infer is what the writer intended.

Should we regard Seneca primarily as an epistolographer, and so place him in a European cultural series that began with Horace and Ovid and extended through the Apostle Paul to such 18th century successors as Samuel Richardson and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu?

Should we construe him rather as a philosopher? If so, we could focus on his geographic setting, comparing him with such 12th century successors as the Ibero-Islamic thinker Averroes or the Ibero-Jewish thinker Maimonides. Alternatively, we could focus on ideas and perceive his interest in the tension between the individual and society as anticipating the thought of such 17th century British thinkers as Hobbes and Locke. A compromise might involve comparing him with Spinoza, since Spinoza was Iberian in heritage but post-Medieval in outlook.

Should we, instead, treat Seneca as a dramatist, comparing him with 17th century playwrights like Lope de Vega and Calderon in Spain or Shakespeare and Webster in England?

Or should we avoid categorial strait-jackets and simply call Seneca a writer? We could then compare him to 16th century Iberian writers like Camoes in Portugal and Cervantes in Spain.

Being still more general, we might label Seneca an individualist and put him in a European-American tradition that began with the pre-Socratic Greeks and flowered in 19th century figures like Walt Whitman and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Reversing direction, we could follow the "micro-historians" (as I call that majority of historical specialists averse to what Carroll Quigley called "macro-history") and place Seneca in either of two more restricted groups—Ibero-Roman authors of the first century, including Lucan and Martial, or the coterie of wealthy and powerful intellectuals who advised emperors from Caligula to Nero.

Whichever of these solutions seems preferable, my plea is for cultural context. Not only is no man an island, as Donne held, but no writer, however iconoclastic, is a cultural isolate: each is a microcosm of some civil tradition or social trend. It is our task, as I see it, to try to determine what each individual tells us about some collectivity.

Drew University