



The Deaths of Seneca

James Ker

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The forced suicide of Seneca, former adviser to Nero, is one of the most tortured--and most revisited--death scenes from classical antiquity. After fruitlessly opening his veins and drinking hemlock, Seneca finally succumbed to death in a stifling steam bath, while his wife Paulina, who had attempted suicide as well, was bandaged up and revived by Nero's men. From the first century to the present day, writers and artists have retold this scene in order to rehearse and revise Seneca's image and writings, and to scrutinize the event of human death.

In *The Deaths of Seneca*, James Ker offers the first comprehensive cultural history of Seneca's death scene, situating it in the Roman imagination and tracing its many subsequent interpretations. Ker shows first how the earliest accounts of the death scene by Tacitus and others were shaped by conventions of Greco-Roman exitus-description and Julio-Claudian dynastic history. At the book's center is an exploration of Seneca's own prolific writings about death--whether anticipating death in his letters, dramatizing it in the tragedies, or offering therapy for loss in the form of consolations--which offered the primary lens through which Seneca's contemporaries would view the author's death. These ancient approaches set the stage for prolific receptions, and Ker traces how the death scene was retold in both literary and visual versions, from St. Jerome to Heiner Müller and from medieval illuminations to Peter Paul Rubens and Jacques-Louis David. Dozens of interpreters, engaging with prior versions and with Seneca's writings, forged new and sometimes controversial views on Seneca's legacy and, more broadly, on mortality and suicide. *The Deaths of Seneca* presents a new, historically inclusive, approach to reading this major Roman author.

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