



On Benefits

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

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Lucius Annaeus Seneca was one of the great Roman Stoic thinkers and is one of only a few philosophers from that era whose work has remained popular in recent times. His writings were known by many of the early churchmen including St. Jerome, St. Augustine and the ancient church writer Tertullian who referred to him as 'Our Seneca'. It was Tertullian who first suggested that Seneca had corresponded with St. Paul and although the letters survive, certain scholars have dismissed them as forgeries in later years. Seneca's older brother Gallio was said to have met St Paul in Achaea. Gallio was proconsul of the senatorial province of Achaea and according to the Bible he dismissed a charge bought by the Jews against the apostle Paul: Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law-settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." So he had them ejected from the court. Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever. Acts 18:14 Despite the skepticism surrounding the letters, it can be seen that the Stoic philosophy that Seneca advocated, paved the way for Rome to make the move to Christianity. Seneca's "Letters from a Stoic" proselytizes about humane and upright ideals and encouraged a spiritual way of life. Many have quoted Seneca over the years; Dante referred to him in 'Inferno' and placed him in the First Circle of Hell, or Limbo, a place of perfect natural happiness where virtuous non-Christians like the ancient philosophers had to stay for eternity, due to their lack of grace (given only by Christ) and required to go to heaven. Chaucer also quoted him, as did Petrarch and Virgil. Seneca wrote extensively during the last three years of his life and 'De Beneficiis' or 'On Benefits' was completed in this period. 'On Benefits' is divided into seven books and in them the author discusses giving and receiving and the views contained within the traditions of the Stoic philosophy. It would seem that William Shakespeare might have been influenced by 'On Benefits' as a phrase from his famous play, "All's Well That Ends Well," bears a striking resemblance to some of the writing in Seneca's book; "Tis pity-- That wishing well had not a body in it Which might be felt: that we, the poorer born, Whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes, Might with effects of them follow our friends And show what we alone must think; which never Returns us thanks." "All's Well That Ends Well," Act 1, Scene 1 - William Shakespeare

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