

## **An incunable edition of proverbs attributed to Seneca.**

*Proverbia Senece*. [Speyer : Konrad Hist, ca. 1495]. 8 1/4 inches (210 mm), [24] pp.

Oxford had its 20th-century “New Zealand mafia,” with Dan Davin, Kenneth Sisam, J.A.W. Bennett, and R.W. Burchfield presiding over every aspect of the scholarly publishing of the English language. First-century Rome had its own Spanish mafia, staffed by Lucan, Martial, Quintilian, and Seneca to provide every requirement in (respectively) epic, epigram, eloquence, and philosophy.

The Roman philosopher Seneca (ca. 4 B.C.–65 A.D.) is still renowned for his several ethical treatises, his nine tragedies (which had a remarkable influence on later European drama), his collection of 124 letters, the *Epistulae morales* (which are really short essays), and for his stoic death, when condemned to a sort of “emperor-assisted suicide” by his unworthy pupil Nero.

Early Christians were steeped in pagan authors: religion changes more quickly than pedagogy. Wherever possible, such literature had to be rescued for the True Faith. Virgil died a little too early even to have known the Christ child but he could, of course, have anticipated or predicted his coming. The Fourth Eclogue, foretelling a Golden Age, was naturally given the epithet “Messianic.” Seneca, however, was a contemporary of Christ: his great moral force was readily available for co-option—with a little tinkering. A correspondence with Saint Paul was confected. It did not fool all of the people all of the time, but was useful in spreading the legend of Seneca’s crypto-Christianity. Like many another ancient author in an era of greater fluidity of attribution, Seneca also acquired a sizable non-Christian corpus of apocrypha, including these *Proverbia*.

This small collection of maxims first appeared in print in a collective volume of Seneca’s *Opera philosophica* edited by Blasius Romerus and printed in Naples by Mathias Moravus in 1475. The volume included a generous sampling of other misattributions, including the correspondence with Saint Paul. The first separate edition of the *Proverbia*

appeared shortly afterward in Rome, from the press of Johannes Gensberg: the volume is undated. In his edition of 1515, Erasmus re-established the claim of Publilius Syrus to authorship of the proverbs, but they continued to gravitate to the greater name in edition after edition. More than 25 separate editions of the *Proverbia* appeared in the incunable period alone.

Publilius Syrus was (as his name indicates) a Syrian slave, who came to Rome in the first century B.C. and wrote mimes (considered a low form of drama) that survive only in tangential fragments, as here. By the time of Seneca, a century later, the maxims uttered by the various characters in the mimes had been salvaged as sources of conventional wisdom for schoolboys. With Senecan and pseudo-Senecan accretions, they formed a tangled corpus of proverbial wisdom. But a proverb or a maxim is essentially a collective expression: it is one of the few forms of literary composition that is not enhanced by individual personality.

Appropriately for an apocryphal work, the “n” in “Senece” on the title-page (**Spread 4**) is inverted, suggesting the carnival of *il mondo al rovescio*—the world turned upside down—where nothing is what it seems, or ought to be. The great charm of this particular copy lies in its scribal additions—in the flourish of the red calligraphic paragraph marks and initial strokes that cascade down the page like a cadenza of musical notes.

This volume is now in the Cecil H. Green Library, which comprises roughly a third of the Stanford University Libraries’ 8.5 million volumes. The Green Library houses special collections amounting to a quarter million rare volumes; among the rarities are an extensive collection of Aldine editions and numerous incunables.