Seneca

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born in Spain, at Cordoba (a city with republican traditions; it had sided with Pompey at the time of the civil wars), of a wealthy equestrian family (his father is Seneca the Elder), in the last years before the common era, perhaps in 4 B.C. He soon came to Rome, where he was educated in the schools of rhetoric, with a view to a political career, and of philosophy. Among his teachers were the Stoic Attalus and Papirius Fabianus, a former rhetorician who was close to the Stoic-Pythagorean school of the Sestii, which was characterized by ascetic tendencies as well as an interest in natural science. Around A.D. 26 he went to Egypt, in the entourage of an uncle who was a prefect. Upon returning to Rome, in 31, he began his forensic activity and political career. He must have achieved a considerable success if it is true that Caligula (37–41), jealous of his oratorical fame, decreed his condemnation to death, from which a lover of the emperor is said to have saved him. He was not saved, however, from the relegation that the new emperor Claudius inflicted upon him in 41, accusing him of involvement in the adultery of Julia Livilla, Germanicus's younger daughter and Caligula's sister; Claudius's actual intention was to strike at the political opposition gathered around the family of Germanicus. Seneca remained in wild, inhospitable Corsica until 49, when Agrippina succeeded in securing from Claudius his return from exile and chose him as tutor for her son by her first marriage, the future emperor Nero. In this role as educator, which he performed jointly with Afranius Burrus, the praetorian prefect, Seneca shared in the young Nero's accession to the throne (A.D. 54) and from then on guided his governance of the state. This is the celebrated period of Nero's good government, based on principles of balance and conciliation between the powers of the princes and the Senate. Subsequently it deteriorated (Nero killed his mother in 59), and the philosopher was forced into serious compromises. Around 62, after the death of Burrus, with Nero now in the hands of Poppaea and beginning the notorious concluding period of his reign, Seneca saw the loss of his influence as a political adviser and gradually withdrew into private life, devoting himself to his studies. Disliked now and suspect in the eyes of Nero and Tigellinus, the new praetorian prefect, Seneca was implicated in the famous Pisonian
conspiracy (April of 65), which he may merely have known about but not participated in, and was caught up in the repression that followed it. Condemned to death by Nero, he committed suicide in the same year, 65 (Tacitus gives a famous account of the death of Seneca in *Annals* 15.62–64).

**WORKS**

Among the works that survive from Seneca’s huge literary output, those of a philosophical character occupy the larger part. Some of these works were collected, after Seneca’s death, in twelve books of *Dialogi* (a title already known to Quintilian, one that does not generally imply dialogue form, but seems due rather to the great tradition of philosophical dialogue extending back to Plato). They are treatises, brief for the most part, on ethical and psychological questions: 1, *Ad Lucilium de Providentia*; 2, *Ad Serenum de Constantia Sapientis*; 3–5, *Ad Nuvatum de Ira Libri III*; 6, *Ad Marciam de Consolatione*; 7, *Ad Gallionem de Vita Basta*; 8, *Ad Serenum de Otio*; 9, *Ad Serenum de Tranquilitate Animi*; 10, *Ad Paulinum de Beatitate Vitae*; 11, *Ad Polibium de Consolatione*; and 12, *Ad Helviam Matrem de Consolatione*. The other philosophical works, transmitted to us independently, are the seven books *De Beneficiis*, the *De Clementia*, addressed to Nero (of the original three books, the first and the beginning of the second survive), and the twenty books containing the 124 *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (we know that there were originally more, since we have notice of a twenty-second book). More properly scientific are the *Naturales Quaestiones*, in seven books, originally perhaps eight. We have, in addition, nine *caturnetae* tragedies of Seneca, that is, ones with Greek subjects (*Hercules Furens, Troades, Phoenissae, Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Thyestes, Hercules Oetaeus*, arranged in that order in the most authoritative manuscript, the Etruscus); as well as the *Ludus de Nuce Claudia* (or *Apocolocyntosis*), a Menippian satire on the strange apotheosis of the emperor, a work that today is generally regarded as authentic. By contrast, many doubts persist about the Senecan authorship of the *Epigrams* (see below).

The lost works are of various sorts: a biography of his father, numerous speeches, various physical, geographic, and ethnographic treatises, and many other philosophical works, among them the *Moralis Philosophiae Libri*, to which Seneca himself refers a number of times. There are also several works of doubtful attribution or certainly spurious; among the latter, the most famous example is the correspondence between Seneca and St. Paul, the product of a legend that contributed to enhancing Seneca’s reputation in the Middle Ages.

**SOURCES**

Seneca himself supplies many autobiographical notices, especially in the *Epistulae* and the *Consolatio ad Helviam Matrem*. Among the other sources, the most important are books 12–15 of Tacitus’s *Annals*, a section of the *Roman History* by the Greek historian Dio Cassius, and the Suetonian biographies of the emperors Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.
I. THE DIALOGI AND STOIC WISDOM

Very few of the Senecan works left to us can be dated with certainty or close approximation, and so it is difficult to trace a possible development of his thought or to connect it to events in his life. Among those that can be dated is the Consolatio ad Marciam, written under the principate of Caligula, perhaps around 40, and addressed to the daughter of the historian Cremutius Cordus, whom it seeks to console for the loss of a son. The genre of the consolation, already practiced in the Greek philosophical tradition, centers upon a stock of moral themes—the fleetingness of time, the precariousness of life, death as man’s inevitable destiny, etc.—that form the basis for a large part of Seneca’s philosophical thought. He refers to this stock again in the other two consolations that are preserved, both from the years of exile. The Ad Helviam Matrem, perhaps from 42, aims at reassuring his mother about the condition of her exiled son and emphasizes the positive aspects of his isolation and his contemplative otium. The other (43?), Ad Polybiem, addressed to a powerful freedman of Claudius in order to console him for the loss of a brother, reveals itself in fact as an indirect attempt to flatter the emperor in order to secure his return to Rome (and it is the work that more than any other has brought down on Seneca the charge of opportunism).

The individual works of the Dialogi are independent treatises on particular aspects or problems of Stoic ethics, which is the general framework for all of Seneca’s philosophical writings. His is a Stoicism that has moderated the earlier strictness of doctrine, following the so-called ‘middle school,’ and eschews dogmatic conclusions. The three books of the De Ira, for instance, written in the first part of his exile but not published until after Caligula’s death, are a kind of phenomenology of the human passions: they analyze the mechanisms of their origin and the ways of checking and mastering them (the third book is devoted to anger in particular). The work is dedicated to Seneca’s brother Novatus; some years later, when Novatus was called Gallio, from the name of his adoptive father, the rhetorician Junius Gallio, he would also dedicate to him the De Vita Beata (perhaps from 58) which addresses the problem of happiness and the role that comfort and wealth can play in achieving it. It appears that in reality, behind the general problem, Seneca wants to meet the accusations that we know were made against him (Tacitus, Ammals 13.42) to the effect that there was an inconsistency between his professed principles and the actual conduct of his life. Thanks to the position of power he occupied at court, he had come to possess an immense estate (through moneylending, among other things). Even though the essence of happiness lies in virtue, not wealth and pleasure (the polemic is directed principally at Epicureanism, or at least its inferior versions), Seneca nonetheless justifies the use of wealth if it proves helpful in the pursuit of virtue. Wisdom and wealth are not necessarily antithetical (nemo sapientiam passuerate damnnavit, "no one has condemned wisdom to poverty" [23]). Seneca for the most part is not attracted to the Cynic mode which he regards as dangerously asocial. The man who aspires to sapient...
The dialogues to 
Serenus and the 
detachment of the 
Stoic sage from 
earthly contingencies 

(an ideal that can never be fully realized) must be able to endure the comfort and well-being that the circumstances of life have brought, without allowing himself to become ensnared in them. The principle, in other words, is that the important thing is, not to forgo possessing riches, but not to let oneself be possessed by them.

The superior detachment of the sage from earthly contingencies is also the unifying theme of the three dialogues dedicated to his friend Serenus, who abandons his Epicurean principles to adhere to Stoic ethics: De Constantia Sapientis, De Otio, De Tranquillitate Animi. The first of these three so-called dialogues, published after 41, glorifies the imperturbability of the Stoic sage, who in the face of injury and adversity is strengthened by inner firmness. The De Tranquillitate Animi, the only work partially in dialogue form, addresses a fundamental problem in Seneca's philosophical thought, the sage's participation in political life. Seneca seeks a middle term between the extremes of contemplative leisure and the engagement proper to the Roman citizen; he proposes a flexible approach, related to the political conditions. The objective to be attained, by withdrawing both from the tedium of a solitary life and from the obligations of the harried life of the city, is always the serenity of a soul that can assist others, if not by public engagement then at least by example and precept. If the tension between commitment and renunciation remains unresolved here (and this is one of the reasons for placing the dialogue shortly before 62), the choice of a withdrawn life, by contrast, is evident in the De Otio. There it is an obligatory choice, made necessary by a political situation so gravely compromised that to the sage, who has been rendered incapable of helping others, it offers no alternative but flight into contemplative solitude, the merits of which are celebrated (the work is to be dated perhaps to 62, the period of Seneca's withdrawal from political life).

The De Brevitute Vitae seems to go back to an earlier moment, perhaps to the years 49–52. Dedicated to Paulinus, the prefect in charge of the food supply and possibly a relative of Seneca's second wife, it deals with the problem of time, with its fleetingness and the apparent brevity of a life, which seems brief because we do not know how to grasp its essence but which we fricter away in so many useless pursuits without fully realizing it. The dialogue that opens the collection, the De Providentia, dedicated to the Lucilius of the Epistulae, ought to belong to Seneca's last years. It deals with the problem of the contradiction between the providential scheme that, according to Stoic doctrine, governs human affairs (a polemic against the Epicurean notion of divine indifference) and the disconcerting recognition of a fate that often seems to reward the wicked and punish the good. Seneca's answer is that the adversities that befall the undeserving do not contradict such a providential scheme, but rather give evidence of the divine will to put the good to the test and exercise their virtues. The Stoic sapiens realizes his rational nature in recognizing the post that is assigned to him in the cosmic order ruled by the logos and in adapting himself to it completely.
2. PHILOSOPHY AND POWER

The *Naturalium Quaestiones Libri VII*, the only scientific work of Seneca’s extant, is also dedicated to Lucilius and written after the author’s withdrawal from public life. It deals with various atmospheric and celestial phenomena, from storms to earthquakes to comets. It is the result of an immense labor of compilation, probably extending over many years, from varied, principally Stoic sources (such as Posidonius). It appears to represent the physical underpinnings of Seneca’s philosophical system, but in fact there is neither integration nor organic connection between the physical investigation and the moral inquiry.

Another philosophical work transmitted independently of the *Dialogi*, the seven books *De Beneficiis*, which is dedicated to Seneca’s friend Aebutius Liberalis, is from more or less the same period (it is finished by 64, as Seneca himself attests in *Epistulae ad Lucilium* 81.3). It treats the nature and the various modes of acts of beneficence, the link they establish between the benefactor and the benefited, the obligations of gratitude that bind them, and the moral consequences that befall the ungrateful (a veiled allusion has been suspected here to Nero’s behavior towards him). The work, which analyzes beneficence principally as a cohesive element in social relations, seems to transfer to individual morality the project for a balanced, harmonious society that Seneca had based upon the ideal of an enlightened monarchy. The appeal to the duties of philanthropy and liberality, addressed mainly to the privileged classes, because it aims at establishing more humane and more cordial social relations, presents itself thereby as an alternative to that failed project; it has a kind of reversed perspective but the same paternalistic approach.

Seneca expounded his notion of power most fully in the *De Clementia*, opportunely dedicated to the young emperor Nero (in the years 55–56) as the sketch for an ideal political program based on fairness and moderation. Seneca does not discuss the constitutional legitimacy of the principe or the openly monarchic forms that it had now assumed; the only power was the power that conformed to the Stoic conception of a cosmic order governed by *logos* (“universal reason”), the power most suitable for representing the ideal of a cosmopolitan universe and for serving as a link and unifying symbol of the many peoples making up the Empire. Seneca’s notion did not take into account that this power had now been imposed upon reality, and it did not seem realistic to place any confidence in that mirage of a restored republican *libertas* that was animating the Stoically inclined circles of the aristocratic opposition. The problem, rather, is to have a good sovereign. And in a regime of absolute power, without any external check, the only restraint upon the emperor is his own conscience, which ought to prevent him from ruling tyrannically. Clemency (which is not the same as pity or unmotivated generosity, but expresses a general attitude of philanthropic benevolence) is the virtue that ought to shape his relations with his subjects. By exercising clemency and not striking fear into his subjects, he
can win their consent and their devotion, which are the securest guarantee of a state's stability.

In this notion of an enlightened, paternalistic princeps, which entrusts good government to the sovereign's conscience, to his moral perfection, the importance of the education of the princeps is evident, as is, more generally, the role of philosophy as guarantor and inspirer of the political direction of the state. Seneca long employed his energies in this noble illusion, which seemed to revive Plato's old project of government by philosophers and which dramatically affected the very course of his life. Moved by the impulse towards the duties of social life, and equally far removed from the extreme positions of intransigently rejecting collaboration with the princeps and of servilely acquiescing in his despotism, he cherished an ambitious project of a balanced, harmonious distribution of power between a restrained sovereign and a Senate secure in its right to liberty and aristocratic dignity. Within this project, as was said, a prominent role is assigned to philosophy, that of promoting the moral training of the sovereign and the political elite, but the rapid degeneration of Nero's government, after the parenthesis of the "happy quinquennium," lays bare the limits of that plan and brings it to naught. Seneca's philosophy then needs to redefine its tasks, loosening its ties to the civitas and emphasizing more its eagerness to work upon the conscience of individuals. Deprived of his political role, the Stoic sage places himself at the service of humanity.

3. THE DAY-TO-DAY PRACTICE OF PHILOSOPHY:
THE EPISTULAE AD LUCILIUM

In Seneca's philosophical development one cannot distinguish clearly between two drives, towards civic engagement and towards meditative otium. The hope of performing a social function, in the forms allowed by circumstances, remains strong even in the late works. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that in the writings composed after his withdrawal from the political scene Seneca is mainly concerned with the individual conscience. The principal work among his late writings, and the one that is unquestionably the most famous, is the Epistulae ad Lucilium, a collection of letters, varying considerably in length (some are as long as an essay) and in subject, addressed to his friend Lucilius. Lucilius is a person of modest origins, slightly younger than Seneca and originally from Campania, who had risen to equestrian status and various political-administrative offices, a man of good culture, and a poet and writer himself. Whether the correspondence is real or fictitious is a question that continues to be discussed. There are no insurmountable difficulties in believing the exchange genuine (various letters reply to letters from Lucilius); and yet this view is not irreconcilable with the possibility that other letters, in particular the longer and more systematic ones, were in fact not sent and instead were added to the collection at the moment of publication. The work has come down to us incomplete, as was said, and may date from the period of political withdrawal (62
to the beginning of 63). In any event, it is unique in ancient literature and philosophy.

The impetus to compose philosophical letters addressed to friends probably came to Seneca from Plato and especially from Epictetus. However that may be, he is fully conscious, and not a little proud, of introducing a new genre into Latin literature. Polemically, he wants to distinguish it from ordinary epistolary practice, even the illustrious practice of a Cicero. The model he strives to match is Epictetus, who in his letters to friends was able to realize perfectly the relation of spiritual training and education that Seneca establishes with Lucilius. His letters aim at being an instrument of moral growth, a diary of spiritual victories along the road towards sapientia. Taking up a topos that is very common in ancient epistolography, Seneca emphasizes that epistolary exchange makes it possible to hold a colloquium with the friend, to create with him an intimacy that, by being a direct example of life, shows itself to be pedagogically more effective than doctrinal instruction. More than the other genres of philosophical literature, the letter is close to the reality of ordinary life, from which it picks up various elements, using them as points of departure for moral considerations and so lending itself perfectly to the daily practice of philosophy. By proposing each time a new theme, one that is simple and easily understood, for the reflection of the pupil-friend (on the model of the philosophical schools), the letter accompanies and articulates the stages of his successful progress towards inner improvement. The same purpose is served by the custom of closing each letter in the first three books with a senentia, an aphorism offering a bit of wisdom to contemplate. Returning to a procedure used in the school of Epicurus, who graduated the various stages along the road towards sapientia, Seneca employs the letter as an ideal instrument particularly for the first phase of spiritual guidance, which is based on the acquisition of certain key principles; with the growth in the pupil’s analytical ability and the enlargement of his knowledge, the teacher will next resort to more demanding and more complex devices of learning. That the literary form conforms successively to the different stages in the process of education is proved by the tendency of the individual letters to resemble a philosophical essay increasingly as the correspondence proceeds. No less important than the theoretical element—Seneca in fact several times polemizes against the excessive logical subtleties of the philosophers, especially the Stoics—is the paraenetic element: the letter tends not so much to demonstrate a truth as to exhort and invite the reader to the good.

Besides being useful for a specific phase in the process of spiritual guidance, the epistolary genre also proves suitable for accommodating a philosophy such as Seneca’s, which is not systematic but is inclined rather to deal with particular aspects or individual themes in ethics. The subjects of the letters, suggested for the most part by everyday experience, are quite varied but generally derive ultimately from the themes of the diatribe tradition. In their variety and occasional nature and in the link between real life and moral thought, they show their affinities with satire, especially Horatian
satire. They center upon the principles by which the sage shapes his life, his independence and self-reliance, his indifference to mundane attractions, and his scorn for ordinary opinions. In the calm, cordial tone of one who is not striking the pose of a stern teacher but is himself pursuing the path towards wisdom, a goal that can never be fully achieved, Seneca proposes the ideal of a life that is directed towards concentration, meditation, and inner improvement and is achieved through an attentive reflection upon the weaknesses and vices of oneself and others. Consideration of the human condition that is common to all living beings leads him to condemn the treatment regularly employed towards slaves, and his tones of intense piety have reminded some of the sentiment of Christian charity. In fact the Senecan ethic remains profoundly aristocratic, and the Stoic sapient who expresses his sympathy for ill-treated slaves also manifests openly his intolerable disdain for the masses of people who have been rendered bruisish by the spectacles in the circus.

In the Epistulae, detachment from the world and from the passions that stir it runs parallel with the attraction to a withdrawn life and with the elevation of otem to a supreme value, an otem that is not inactivity but the active pursuit of the good, carried out in the conviction that spiritual conquests can aid not only the friends committed to the pursuit of sapientia but also others and that the Epistulae can exercise a beneficial influence upon posterity. Once it is necessary for him to give up all expectations in the field of politics, the Stoic sage sets the achievement of inner freedom as his ultimate objective, and along with it the daily meditation upon death, which he can look upon with serenity as the symbol of his own independence from the world.

4. "DRAMATIC" STYLE

If the chief aim of philosophy is to assist inner improvement, the philosopher will need to be concerned with res, not with studied and elaborate language: non pleasent verba nostra sed proatis (Epistulae ad Lucilium 75.5). Such language will be justified only if by virtue of its expressive power, in the form, for example, of sententiae or poetic quotations, it performs a psychagogic function, that is, if it contributes to fixing a precept or moral principle in the memory and the soul. In fact, despite a program of a style laboriosus et facilis (Epistulae ad Lucilium 75.1), Seneca’s philosophical prose becomes virtually the emblem of an elaborate style, both taut and complex, characterized by the pursuit of effects and concise, epigrammatic expression. Seneca rejects the compact classical architecture of the Ciceronian period, which by means of hypotactic arrangement organizes the hierarchy of its inner logic. Instead, he creates a highly paratactic style, which, because among other things it aims at reproducing the spoken language, breaks up the structure of the thought into a series of pointed and sententious phrases, the linking among which is effected primarily by antithesis and repetition; this produces the impression of “sand without lime” with
which the malevolent Caligula reproached him. This prose, which is opposed to harmonious Ciceronian periods and, as Quintilian observed with concern, is revolutionary in taste (and destined to exercise great influence on the artistic prose of Europe), has its roots in Asianic rhetoric—which celebrated its triumph in the schools of declamation with which Seneca was so familiar—and in the preaching of the Cynic philosophers. This style proceeds by a studied play of parallelisms, antitheses, and repetitions, in a rapid series of nervous, staccato phrases (the *minutissimae sententiae* deplored by Quintilian), with a kind of pointillist effect. It gives the impression of considering an idea from all possible angles by providing ever more pregnant and more concise formulations, to the point where it crystallizes the idea in an epigrammatic expression. This pointed and penetrating style, which with its continuous tension does not escape a certain theatricality, is employed by Seneca as a probe with which to explore the secrets of the human soul and the contradictions that torment it and also as a device through which to speak to the heart of men and exhort them to the good. It is a style that is inwardly antithetic and confrontational ("dramatic" is a helpful definition), alternating the quiet tones of inner meditation with the resonant tones of preaching, a style that emblematically reflects the drives animating Seneca’s philosophy, which is torn between pursuing freedom for the ego and liberating mankind.

5. THE TRAGEDIES

The tragedies occupy an important place in Seneca’s writings. Nine are generally regarded as authentic (doubts remain only about the *Hercules Oetaeus*), all on subjects from Greek mythology. And yet we know very little about them, about the circumstances of their actual performance or the date of their composition. In regard to the latter it is impossible to draw inferences even on the basis of stylistic criteria or, still less, of references to contemporary events. Given the impossibility of sketching a plausible chronology, they are listed here in the order in which the most authoritative tradition transmits them.

The *Hercules Furens*, based on Euripides’ *Hercules*, deals with the madness of Hercules, which, provoked by Juno, leads the hero to slay his wife and sons. When, upon recovering his sanity, he is resolved to kill himself, he allows himself to be dissuaded from his plan and goes to Athens to be purified. The *Troades*, the result of conflating the subjects of two Euripidean plays, *the Trojan Women* and the *Heauton*, represents the fate of the captive Trojan women when they find themselves helpless before the sacrifice of Polyxena, daughter of Priam, and of the little Astyanax, son of Hector and Andromache. Based on Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, Seneca’s *Phoenician Women*, his only incomplete tragedy, turns on the tragic destiny of Oedipus and the hatred that divides his sons Eteocles and Polynices. The *Medea*, of course, also goes back to Euripides, but perhaps also to a tragedy by Ovid of the same name, which was successful but is now lost. It is the grim story of the princess from Colchis, who, because she has been abandoned
by Jason, takes vengeance upon him by murdering their sons. The \textit{Phaedra}, too, presupposes a famous Euripidean original (the surviving \textit{Hippolytus} and also an earlier, lost one), as well as, in all likelihood, a lost tragedy by Sophocles and the fourth of Ovid's \textit{Heroides}. It deals with Phaedra's incestuous love for her stepson Hippolytus and the dramatic fate that befalls the young man, who has rejected the advances of his stepmother: she takes revenge by denouncing him to her husband Theseus. Hippolytus's father, and causing his death. The \textit{Oedipus Rex} of Sophocles is the basis of the \textit{Edipus}, which recounts the well-known Theban myth of Oedipus, unwitting murderer of his father Laius and husband of his mother Jocasta, who, upon discovering the awful truth, reacts by blinding himself. Seneca's \textit{Agamemnon}, loosely based on the play of the same name by Aeschylus, represents the assassination of the king, upon his return from Troy, at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. The \textit{Thyestes} takes up the grim tale of the Pelopidae, which had previously been dealt with in lost works by Sophocles and Euripides as well as in early Latin drama and, more recently, in a play of the same name by Varus, the friend of Horace and Virgil. Moved by mortal hatred of his brother Thyestes, Aeneas gets his revenge with a feigned banquet of reconciliation at which he serves to his unwitting brother the flesh of his sons. In the \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} (i.e., upon Oeta, the mountain on which the culminating event of the hero's drama is enacted), modeled on the \textit{Trachinian Women} of Sophocles, Seneca treats the myth of Deianira's jealousy. In order to recover the love of Hercules, who is now enamored of Iole, she sends him a tunic soaked in the blood of the centaur Nessus, which she thinks is a love philter but which is really endowed with murderous power. In hideous pain, Hercules has a pyre erected and hurls himself upon it to end his life, which is followed by his assumption among the gods.

Senecas are the only Latin tragedies to have come down to us complete. Apart from this, which makes them valuable witnesses to an entire literary genre, they are also important as documents of the revival of Latin tragic drama, which took place after the scarcely successful attempts of Augustan cultural policy to promote a rebirth of theatrical activity (one event in this program was the production in 29 B.C. of Varus's \textit{Thyestes}, in which the anti-tyrannical polemic embodied in the subject may have had Antony for its target). In the Julio-Claudian period and in the beginning of the Flavian period, until the Flavians reformed the Senate socially and thereby altered its political attitude as well, the intellectual senatorial elite seems actually to have turned to tragic drama—Persius, Lucan, and others had written tragedies—as the literary form most suitable for expressing its opposition to the regime (Latin tragedy, taking up and glorifying an aspect already basic to classical Greek tragedy, had always been strongly influenced by republicanism and the hatred of tyranny).

The tragedians of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods whom we know of are all people of some importance in Roman public life. We know from Tacitus's \textit{Annals} that under the reign of Tiberius, M. M. Scaurus, who was famous as an orator too, was compelled to take his own life because allusions to the emperor had been noted in a tragedy of his, the \textit{Aeneas}. In the time of Claudius, Pomponius Secundus, who had been consul, was well known; his friend Pliny the Elder would write a biography of him. Pom-
ponius wrote not only tragedies with Greek subjects but also a praetexta entitled Aeneas. One may mention, finally, Curtius Materius, from the time of Vespasian, who was an orator and figured as an interlocutor in Tacitus's Dialogus de Oratoribus. We know various titles of his tragedies, among them those of two praetextae, the Cato and the Domitius.

The lack of external notices about Seneca's tragedies does not make it impossible for us to know anything certain about the manner of their performance. What we do know about the realization of tragic literature in the period before Seneca—tragedy did continue to be performed upon the stage normally, but it could also be limited to reading in recital halls—has led scholars to believe, on the basis of their stylistic peculiarities among other things, that Seneca's tragedies were intended chiefly for reading; this does not exclude, at some times or for some of them, performance upon the stage. This view still prevails, rightly, even if not all the arguments supporting it are equally forceful. The use of machines or the cruel spectacles called for in certain scenes, which were certainly incompatible with the principles of performance in the classical Greek theater, might seem to presuppose rather than give the lie to stage performance in situations where a mere reading would limit, if not destroy altogether, the effects required by the dramatic text.

The various tragic stories are figured as conflicts of contrasting forces (especially within the human soul), such as the opposition between mens bona and furor, between reason and passion. The use of important themes and motifs from the philosophical works (e.g., in the story of Hercules, the theme of the strong man who overcomes the trials of life to rise to a higher freedom) makes clear the fundamental consonance between the two areas of Seneca's writing. It has also encouraged the notion that Senecan drama is only an illustration of Stoic doctrine presented in the form of mythic exempla. The analogy should not be pressed too far, however. For one thing the specifically literary matrix remains strong in the tragedies; this may have offered, as in the case of Euripides, the most popular model, paradigmatic representations of conflicts within the human psyche. In the tragic universe, moreover, the logos, the rational principle to which Stoic doctrine entrusts the governance of the world, is shown to be incapable of restraining the passions and checking the spread of evil. The background to the various tragic tales is in fact a reality of dark, hideous colors, and against this backdrop of horrors is played out the struggle of the malign forces, a struggle that involves not only the human psyche, which is explored even to its most secret corners, often in lengthy, elaborate monologues, but the entire world, which is conceived of, in Stoic fashion, as a physical and moral unit; this gives to the conflict between good and evil a cosmic dimension and a universal bearing. Among the forms in which the emergence of evil into the world is manifested most expressively, the figure of the tyrant is especially prominent. Bloodthirsty, greedy for power, close to moderation and clemency, tormented by fear and anxiety, he provides frequent occasions for an ethical debate on the theme of power, which a
The relation to the Greek models

The preponderant influence of Augustan poetry

Early Latin tragedy and Asinarian rhetoric

The digressions

The Octavia

we have seen, occupies an important place in the thought, as well as the life, of Seneca.

In the case of nearly all of Seneca's tragedies, as was said, we have the corresponding Greek originals; through comparison we can assess his stance towards them. Compared with the stance taken by the early Latin tragedians, Seneca's shows greater independence (after the great age of Augustus, Latin literature no longer limits itself to "translating," but regards itself as equal to Greek, in free rivalry with it), and yet at the same time it presupposes a continuous relation with the original, which Seneca contaminates, restructures, and rationalizes in its dramatic approach. The relation with the Greek originals, even though direct, is mediated nonetheless through the filter of Latin taste and the Latin tradition. The poetic language of the tragedies has its roots in Augustan poetry (Ovid's presence is conspicuous and pervasive), from which Seneca also borrows the refined metrical forms, such as the Horatian lyric meters that he uses for the choral interludes; he also employs the particular type of senarius adopted by Augustan tragic drama, which in its rigid scheme resembles the Greek and Horatian iambic trimeter rather than the freer senarius of early Latin drama. The traces of early Latin tragedy are noted principally in the taste for heightened pathos and in the tendencies towards expressive accumulation (carried out, however, in the manner of Augustan style) and towards the sententious phrase, which is isolated and stands out, although it is the rhetorical taste of the time that chiefly fosters this. The same tendency is manifested also in the fragmentation of the dialogues into closed, stichic responsions (one verse for each character), in a constant pursuit of Asinarian brevitas. Senecan drama in fact bears everywhere the mark of Asinarian rhetoric. It can be perceived in the continuous tension, the declamatory emphasis, the display of weighty learning (e.g., in the geographic or mythological catalogues), and those dark, macabre colors that have contributed to Seneca's success as a tragedian in modern times. The dramatic tension is often enhanced through the introduction of long digressions (ekphrasis), which are excessive in comparison with epic and, particularly, with tragic usage. These affect the pace of the dramatic development and belong to the general tendency of Seneca's plays to have isolated individual scenes, virtually independent pictures, outside of the dramatic dynamic (this supports the notion that such bravura pieces were supposed to be read in recital halls). It is, in short, a style that despite its most unusual features easily fits within the canons of contemporary literary taste, of which it is one of the most representative documents.

In addition to the nine tragedies discussed, the secondary branch of the tradition transmits another, entitled Octavia. It recounts the fate of Octavia, Nero's first wife, whom he rejects once he has fallen in love with Poppea and whom he causes to be killed. It is thus a tragedy on a Roman subject, a praetexta, the only one extant. Its authenticity, however, is generally denied today. The principal reasons for regarding it as inauthentic, apart from the very suspicious appearance of Seneca himself as a character in the play, are,
first, the description of the death of Nero, which took place in 68, three years after Seneca's death, and which is announced ahead of time by the ghost of Agrippina (the description corresponds to closely to the historical reality that it is hard not to believe that the prophecy was written ex eventu by someone who knew precisely how things had turned out); and second, the fact that the author, who shows great familiarity with all Seneca's work, seems to transfer to the tragedy versified passages from his philosophical works. Therefore, the Octavia, which has notable stylistic affinities with the genuine tragedies, must be placed in a milieu close to Seneca and at a time not long after his death, perhaps the decade A.D. 70–80.

6. THE APOCLOCYNTOSIS

A truly unusual work within the vast range of Seneca's writings is the Ludus de Morte Claudii (as it is called in the two chief manuscripts that transmit it) or Divi Claudii Apatheosis per Satanam (according to a kind of gloss in the third), most commonly known under the Greek title Apocolocyntosis, provided by the historian Dio Cassius (60.35). This word would imply a reference to kolokymia, that is, the pumpkin, perhaps as a symbol of stupidity, and according to Dio it would be a parody of the deification of Claudius decreed by the Senate upon his death. Since no reference is made to a pumpkin in the text, and since the apotheosis does not in fact take place, doubts have arisen over the identification of the work mentioned by Dio with the Ludus; today, however, these doubts are almost completely dispelled. The curious term should be understood not as “transformation into a pumpkin” but rather as “deification of a pumpkin, a pumpkin head,” referring to the not exactly flattering reputation that Claudius enjoyed. Other doubts and confusions have been created by the fact that, as we learn from Tacitus (Annals 13.3), the same Seneca had written the laudatio funebris for the dead emperor, which was delivered by Nero, and so radical a contrast in behavior has appeared untenable to many. Given the difficulty of assuming that immediately after the official eulogy Seneca could sarcastically give vent to his resentment against the emperor who had condemned him to exile, some scholars have been led, mistakenly, to push forward the date of composition of the lampoon to around 60. But a lampoon makes sense only if published (even anonymously) hard on the heels of an event, such as the deification of Claudius, which behind the thin veil of official response must have aroused the irony of the same court circles and of public opinion; thus the composition of the work should be placed in 54.

The work narrates Claudius's death and his ascent to Olympus in the vain hope of being admitted among the gods, who instead condemn him, as they do all mortals, to descend to the Underworld, where he becomes the slave of his nephew Caligula and in the end is assigned to the freedman Memander, an appropriate fate for a man who in life had the reputation of having been under the thumb of his own powerful freedmen. Seneca offsets
scorn for the dead emperor with words of praise for his successor; at the
beginning of the work he foretells an age of splendor and renewal for the
new principate.

The work belongs to the genre of the Menippean satire (so called from
Menippus of Gadara, the originator of this literary form [see pp. 215 f.]).
Certain similarities between Seneca’s work and several dialogues of Lucian
point to this genre as the common direct model. It alternates prose and
varying kinds of verse in a remarkable linguistic and stylistic mixture that
juxtaposes the even tones of the prosaic parts with the often parodically
solemn tones of the metrical parts, adding to them vivid, colorful colloqui-
alisms and mocking vulgarisms. The style shows occasional correspond-
ences with Seneca’s philosophical prose and enhances the picture of his
inventiveness and versatility as an artist. The many quotations of verses,
including Greek verses, produce a farcical counterpoint; sometimes they
are famous passages, already exploited by a long Greek comic tradition.
But literary parody reappears, as we were saying, in the constituent ele-
ments of the Menippean genre, which to a considerable extent is repre-
sented for us by the Apocolocyntosis. Thus Ennius, Catullus, Virgil, and Ovid
give opportunity for amusing additions, short literal quotations inserted
into an incongruous context or employed for a different meaning. Other,
longer passages are elaborate literary pastiches, cento-like compositions
that mock the fashionable genres, such as epic and tragedy. In a high-toned
passage in iambic senaria one may even recognize a delightful self-parody
of Seneca as tragedian, with allusions to the Hercules Furens.

7. THE EPIGRAMS

Several dozen epigrams in elegiac couplets, transmitted in a manuscript
of the ninth century, also go under Seneca’s name. They are anonymous,
but since three of them are attributed to Seneca in another manuscript, it
has been proposed to attribute the others to him as well, even though in
many cases the Senecan origin is scarcely tenable. The level is generally
respectable but not particularly outstanding. Some of the epigrams refer to
the philosopher’s experience in exile on Corsica.

8. LITERARY SUCCESS

Throughout antiquity, it was Seneca’s prose philosophical works that
were most popular, despite periodic polemic and controversy (already
Caligula rejected his style as sand without lime). His tragedies, on the
other hand, seem to have been almost completely neglected (except by
Quintilian and the grammarians, who occasionally cite them, and Sidonius
Apollinaris, who distinguishes their author from the philosopher Seneca).
Contemporary Latin prose was profoundly influenced by his pointed, ner-
vous style, but at the end of the first century Quintilian, in the name of a
new Ciceronianism, sharply criticized him and his fashionable imitators,
while in the next century Fronto and Aulus Gellius attacked him from the point of view of the proponents of the archaising style. In late antiquity, however, Christian writers refer to him frequently and admiringly and even occasionally mention the tragedies; they considered him, though a pagan, to be nevertheless a morally serious philosopher, and they were strengthened in this conviction by his notorious correspondence with St. Paul, forged in the fourth century, first mentioned by Jerome and thereafter celebrated throughout the Middle Ages (and perhaps in part responsible for the fact that Seneca's works have reached us). So popular was Seneca that he sometimes even survived in disguise. In the late sixth century, Martin of Braga wrote a De Inv based upon Seneca's treatise of this name and a Formulae Honestae Vitae, which seems to have been largely plagiarized from a lost work of Seneca's, probably his De Officiis, and which enjoyed considerable popularity in the Middle Ages. Indeed, a number of his philosophical works that were most popular in antiquity have not survived: Lactantius quotes from Exhortationes, De Immatura Morte, and Moralis Philosophia Libri, Jerome from De Matrimonio, Augustine from De Superstitione, and Cassiodorus from De Forma Mundi, all now lost. And the lone ancient manuscript of his prose works, written in the third or fourth century and surviving in incomplete form, contains fragments of two other lost works, Quaestiones Amicitiae Continuanda Sit and De Vita Patris. The Letters to Lucilius survived but were split into two groups (1–88 and 89–124), which were transmitted separately for centuries (the former group was the more popular) and not recombined until much later, especially starting in the twelfth century. Even where Seneca's prose works were not themselves known directly, his epigrammatic and jumpy style made him an ideal author for excerpting, and many florilegia contained extracts from these texts, especially from Letters 1–88, De Beneficiis, and De Clementia. One such anthology, called the Liber Senecae or Liber Senecae de Moribus, was already cited as an authority in 567 by the Council of Tours and remained particularly successful through the Middle Ages.

The prose works (except for the Dialogues) reemerged in the ninth century but then faded away again until their popularity increased explosively in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; at this time, too, Seneca's separately transmitted works started to be put together again (the process had been completed by the fourteenth century). The earliest works to reappear were the De Beneficiis and the De Clementia, and these two remained particularly popular through the Middle Ages; including epitomes and excerpts, they are transmitted in three hundred manuscripts of the twelfth century and later. It was such moralistic prose works that were read in medieval schools and that, together with his scientific writings, which were rediscovered in northern France by the early twelfth century, determined his reputation for erudition, wisdom, and rectitude among medieval readers. For Dante he is still "Seneca morale"; and Roger Bacon and other medieval philosophers quote him as an authority more often even than they do Cicero. The Dialogues did not reappear until the end of the eleventh century, at Montecas-
sino, and only became generally available in northern Europe in the second half of the thirteenth century. Roger Bacon discovered a manuscript containing them in Paris in 1266, but already earlier there are traces of acquaintance with them in northern Europe. Later they, too, went on to become very popular: over a hundred late manuscripts transmit them.

But Seneca's poetic works had a more difficult time. The Apocolocyntosis was rare until the thirteenth century and remained one of his least popular writings through the Middle Ages. Of his tragedies, which were not widely known in late antiquity or in the early Middle Ages, some excerpts were disseminated in the Florilegium Thuanium (second half of the ninth century, central or northern France, perhaps Fleury), and one Italian manuscript from the end of the eleventh century has been preserved, but most of the oldest surviving manuscripts derive from northern France in the second half of the twelfth century, and it was not until the early fourteenth century that these works, too, started to be read more widely. But once they did, they too participated in Seneca's extraordinary late medieval popularity: they are transmitted in almost four hundred manuscripts. Particularly important centers for their study and diffusion in this period were Padua (the scholars Lovato Lovati and Albertino Mussato) and the papal court at Avignon (a commentary by Nicholas Trevel); there are marginal notes by Petrarch on one manuscript, which perhaps he discovered in the latter city.

Seneca's prose writings remained popular in the Renaissance, and most of them had already been printed by 1475 (though the Naturalis Quaestiones were not published until 1490). Erasmus devoted two editions to his works (1515, 1529), arguing in the second and much improved one on the authority of Jerome that Seneca was a saint; Calvin wrote a commentary on the De Clementia. Montaigne's conception of philosophical writing was deeply influenced by Seneca; and Seneca's moral treatises have left unmistakable traces on Corneille and Diderot. The Apocolocyntosis, which was not published for the first time until 1513 (in a poor edition, based upon an inferior manuscript which omitted the Greek), rose somewhat in fortune during this period: it inspired Lipsius's satirical Somnium: Luvis in nosvri aevi criticos (1581), which started a fashion for Menippean satires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But in the Renaissance it was above all Seneca's tragedies (first published in Ferrara in 1484) that, for the first time, dominated within the reception of his works. Renaissance tragedy is inconceivable without Seneca. He not only supplied the genre with its only Latin exemplars but filled it out with plots, style, and details that were to become the stock in trade of European tragic drama for several centuries: exaggerated, heroic characters, among them sanguinary kings and treacherous courtiers, lubricious women and virtuous youths; conflicts of power and politics; violent passions, merciless revenge, and terrific carnage; drastically heightened language and wittily pointed epigrams. His influence upon Italian tragedy was massive in the Renaissance and continued to the time of Metastasio (who at the age of fourteen wrote an original tragedy
modeled on Seneca) and Alfieri (whose violent polemics against tyranny are influenced in equal measure by Seneca and by Lucan). The same applies to the French classical tragedy of Corneille (whose Mithile was the only French baroque tragedy whose plot as a whole was directly taken from Seneca), Racine, and later Voltaire, and to German tragedy, from the baroque Trauerspiel through Lessing (who wrote an essay on Seneca’s tragedies) to the Romantics. So, too, in England, where Seneca inspired many of the most familiar figures and themes of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Jacobean tragedians: tyrants (Richard II), ghosts invoking revenge (Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Hamlet), witchcraft (Macbeth), madness (The Spanish Tragedy, The Duchess of Malfi, King Lear), torture and mutilation, corpses littering the stage and murder performed before the audience’s eyes; in Richard III Shakespeare even seems to have experimented with an English version of Senecan stichomythia.

But with the growth of a taste for literary realism and for Greek tragedy and with the decline in courtly culture, especially starting in the eighteenth century, Seneca suffered a sharp decrease in popularity; traces of familiarity with his works during the Romantic period and later are few and far between (an exception is Schopenhauer). But contemporary audiences, especially those of cinema and the novel, seem once again to have become keenly interested in themes and tastes such as those typical of Seneca’s tragedies; and some recent films, for example Peter Greenaway’s The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover (1989), are certainly reminiscent of Seneca, whether or not they were directly inspired by him. Nevertheless, modern philosophy has taken little interest in his moral writings; his scientific works have at most an antiquarian and historical appeal; and his plays themselves, though still occasionally produced, are too remote from modern stage conventions to be able to affect most audiences nowadays as viscerally as they affected readers for centuries.

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